

DRAFT

Meeting of the Parliament

Thursday 13 November 2025

Business until 14:21



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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 13 November 2025

[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 11:40]

General Question Time

Electrofishing Trial

1. Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what evidence it received in relation to the decision to allow the continued use of electrofishing for razor clams beyond January 2025, when the trial that started in February 2018 was due to end. (S60-05139)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): The razor clam scientific trial has yielded promising results that point to the potential for a sustainable commercial fishery, with appropriate management measures in place. A progress report was published in 2024 that presents those findings in detail, including completed stock assessments for two locations—the Firth of Clyde and Firth of Forth trial areas. The trial was extended for a further two years to gather data to update those stock assessments and enable completion assessments for additional areas, giving us confidence that fishing for razor clams with that technique can be achieved sustainably across Scotland's seas.

Mountain: Edward The seven-year pseudoscientific and inconclusive experiment, which the Government said will now end in 2027, seems to be more about protecting a commercial fishery that is worth more than £5.5 million to just over 20 boats. The minister knows that electrofishing for spoots is banned in European Union. Surely, then, in 2027, the Scottish Government, under the UK Withdrawal from the European Union (Continuity) (Scotland) Act 2021, will need to keep pace with the EU and ban electrofishing of spoots, or will it continue the farce of a scientific experiment?

Mairi Gougeon: As with many other areas when it comes to our fisheries, we like to lead by example. An example of that work is the roll-out of our remote electronic monitoring. However, it is important that we consider issues relating to why we had the trial in the first place and the type of fishing that we were attempting to stop. We want to make sure that it is sustainable, and it is important that we gather all the evidence for that, which is why the trial was initiated in the first place and why it has been extended. We want to ensure

that we have as robust an evidence base as possible for any future considerations.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Will the minister give an indication of the importance that the Scottish Government places on further developing a razor clam fishery in future, specifically in areas such as the Western Isles?

Mairi Gougeon: I assure the member that we put a great deal of importance on supporting our fishers in rural and island locations. As I have outlined, the trial that we have undertaken on razor clams was extended to ensure that we have a strong evidence base and that a sustainable and economically viable fishery for razor clams is possible in many areas around Scotland, including the Western Isles.

I am keen—as I know other members will be—to see the trial culminate in a commercial fishery, if the evidence supports that. The science and regulatory background to that is very complex, but it is important that we arrive at the right decision by using the best available knowledge.

Regeneration (South-west)

2. Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what support it is providing to help deliver regeneration in the southwest, including any plans for future infrastructure and housing investment. (S6O-05140)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): We are delivering regeneration across the south-west of Scotland region through our place-based regeneration programmes, including more than £27.6 million through the regeneration capital grant fund. We will publish a new infrastructure delivery pipeline alongside the budget, the Scottish spending review and the draft infrastructure strategy early next year.

This financial year, we have made available more than £34 million in the south-west to support the delivery of the affordable housing priorities of local authorities. We have also committed up to £4.9 billion in housing investment across Scotland over the next four years.

Emma Harper: As the Deputy First Minister will know, communities across Stranraer and Wigtownshire are working and have worked incredibly hard to regenerate and renew the area following the withdrawal of ferries from the town in November 2011. Will the Deputy First Minister advise what funding the Scottish Government has provided over recent years to help that regeneration and directly boost the Stranraer economy?

Kate Forbes: A total of £16 million is earmarked for Stranraer marina through the Borderlands growth deal, and Stranraer and Wigtown will benefit from a share of £20 million in the deal's place programme to stimulate their reinvigoration. More than £700,000 in capital funding this year is helping to deliver priorities in the local place plan, building on the £2.7 million that has been provided for town centre regeneration and the millennium centre. A further £500,000 is enabling capacity building and supported delivery of the place plan. Last week, officials met Dumfries and Galloway Council and the local community to learn more about regeneration plans for the town.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I am sure that the Deputy First Minister is very aware of my decade-long lobbying and campaigning for much-needed investment in the A75 and A77, which, sadly, has been lacking from the Scottish National Party. However, given the importance of all forms of connectivity to economic regeneration, I want to highlight the railway line into Stranraer and the moves to develop the waterfront. I have been working with various parties for the past nine years to upgrade the railway station. What consideration is the Scottish Government giving to improving rail links to Stranraer, and how might that support wider efforts to revitalise the south-west?

Kate Forbes: I mentioned in my previous answer that the Scottish Government intends to publish a new infrastructure delivery plan alongside the budget. It is very important that plans that are included in the infrastructure delivery pipeline can be delivered with the capital budget that is available. We are all watching carefully to see what the chancellor will outline at the end of the month, because that will heavily inform the budget that my colleague Shona Robison can present and the infrastructure and transport plans that my colleague Fiona Hyslop can support.

Glasgow Airport (Rail Link)

3. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the economy secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding the impact on Glasgow's economy, and the wider regional economy, of the absence of a rail link from Glasgow airport to the city centre. (S6O-05141)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): Transport is key to our economic prosperity. The Glasgow connectivity commission and the second strategic transport projects review both identified Clyde metro as a transformational regional project, which we agree with. Development of the metro, which could include a

link to the airport, is being led by Strathclyde Partnership for Transport, supported by Glasgow City Council and Transport Scotland. Through the Glasgow city region deal, we are providing £6.1 million towards the case for investment for Clyde metro, which is anticipated to be completed early in 2027. That will provide a clear route forward for the project.

Pauline McNeill: I am sure that the Deputy First Minister agrees that a rail link from Glasgow city centre to Glasgow airport is not just about getting travellers to the airport but about getting workers there, particularly the 5,000 workers who are in advanced manufacturing in the district around the airport. I am sure that she will agree that another bus service will not cut it; the M8 cannot cope as it is. A rail link to the airport must be in the first phase of the Clyde metro project, which is the position of SPT and Glasgow City Council. I want to confirm that that is also Transport Scotland's position. What financial commitment will the Government make not just for the planning but for the delivery of the project?

Kate Forbes: I agree unequivocally with Pauline McNeill's analysis that the link will not just be about visitors but about workers and many others. It is a transformational project that will address a gap in public transport provision in the region and will allow more effective transport links. That is precisely why the Scottish Government has made the investment of £6.1 million, as I outlined in my first answer. It is important that we have a clear route forward for the project and that we pick up at the right point on how all key partners, led by SPT, can continue to support the delivery of the project.

Transport (Edinburgh Pentlands)

4. **Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what impact its transport policies are having on people in the Edinburgh Pentlands constituency. (S6O-05142)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): Public transport in the Edinburgh Pentlands constituency is primarily delivered by Lothian Buses. In October alone, more than 240,000 card holders in Edinburgh made 3.6 million free bus journeys through the young persons and older and disabled persons schemes. Residents and visitors also benefit from local, active and sustainable travel infrastructure developments and behaviour change projects, with Transport Scotland's investment through the active travel infrastructure fund, the people and place programme and the bus infrastructure fund. The Scottish Government has committed £20 million as part of the Edinburgh and south-east

Scotland city region deal to improve public transport infrastructure in west Edinburgh.

Gordon MacDonald: The United Kingdom Labour Government has recently ruled out introducing free bus travel for under-22s in England and Wales. Further, south of the border, older people are not entitled to free bus travel until they reach 66, unlike in Scotland, where entitlement begins at 60. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the Scottish National Party Government's travel policies are designed to help to reduce barriers relating to age, disability, income and geography, enabling better access to education, employment, healthcare, social activities and essential services?

Fiona Hyslop: I absolutely agree. The member is correct to identify all the various benefits that free bus travel can bring, but he is also correct to point out that the free bus pass for under-22s is available only here in Scotland under the SNP Government and that older people in England and Wales have to wait another six years to receive their free bus pass. That is another example of the SNP Government, at a time when household bills are increasing, providing support for older people, younger people and families, along with all the other benefits that he set out.

International Ferry Route (Rosyth)

5. Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it has made an assessment of the potential economic benefits of the reinstatement of an international ferry route from Rosyth. (S6O-05143)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): I acknowledge the tenacity with which Annabelle Ewing has pursued the issue.

The Scottish Government is clear that a direct trade route between Scotland and Europe could have real economic and social benefits, which is why I have instructed my officials to consult on legislation that will enable the reintroduction of a ferry route, between Rosyth and Dunkirk. Last week, I met the project sponsors of the ferry service proposal to confirm that a short consultation will be launched as soon as possible, with a Scottish statutory instrument planned to be laid early next year.

The proposed changes will increase access to the European Union market for Scottish exports, which have been negatively impacted by Brexit—which we did not vote for—by allowing flexibility on the location requirements for a border control post.

We will do all that we can to ensure that a direct freight and passenger ferry service to Europe is delivered as quickly and efficiently as possible. Annabelle Ewing: As the constituency MSP for Rosyth, and, as the minister noted, having pursued the issue—along with others, on a crossparty basis—for some years, I very much welcome the Scottish Government's now taking the lead on the removal of the Brexit obstacles to the reestablishment of an international passenger and freight ferry route from Rosyth.

However, time is of the essence. In that regard, will the minister confirm when the consultation on the draft regulations will be commenced and how long the consultation will last? When exactly will the regulations be laid in the new year? Will the minister also advise us whether the United Kingdom Government has confirmed a timetable for its dealing with the reserved components of the border control obstacles that remain outstanding?

Jim Fairlie: I am pleased that the work on the consultation has already begun and that it is proceeding at pace. A short consultation will be launched as soon as possible, with time for an SSI to be laid before the Scottish Parliament is dissolved prior to the elections in 2026. The Deputy First Minister has sought confirmation from the UK Government of its willingness to address at pace the components of effective border control that remain reserved. I will instruct my officials to share further details with Ms Ewing as soon as possible.

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, which notes that I am the convener of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers Scottish parliamentary group.

I welcome the Government's consideration of the proposal, which would benefit our international links. However, in its consideration of the proposal, can the minister give an assurance that any operator would have to follow the fair work principles and recognise trade unions, and that we will not see the blatant negation of workers' rights that we witnessed at P&O Ferries, which sacked and replaced 800 seafarers by video message?

Jim Fairlie: The Government will continue to communicate with potential operators in Scotland's main ports and to explore the opportunities for all new commercial ferry services, so that Scottish exports and passengers have more direct routes to and from Europe. All those considerations will be taken into account.

Income Tax

6. Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it plans to increase income tax in the forthcoming Scottish budget. (S6O-05144)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): As is the normal course for any budget, we will outline our income tax policy for 2026-27 in the Scottish budget, on 13 January 2026.

Craig Hoy: Let us be clear: the Scottish National Party has broken its manifesto pledge on income tax and has repeatedly misled this Parliament about how many Scots may pay more tax than they would in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Today's Audit Scotland report shows that more than £1 billion of projected income tax gains from previous tax rises have simply not materialised. If the SNP increases tax again in January, it will only deepen the fiscal doom loop that this Government is presiding over.

Will the cabinet secretary now listen to the Scottish Conservatives and engage in a zero-based budgeting approach to identify the savings that are required to restore sustainability to Scotland's public finances?

Shona Robison: I repeat that, as the Scottish Fiscal Commission has said, the majority of taxpayers pay less in Scotland than they would elsewhere in the UK.

Of course we will look at the Audit Scotland report, but our income tax policy has meant that there is more money for households. Protecting investment in our public services and the social contract would be put at risk by the Tories' unfunded tax policies.

On the day that the two top global credit rating agencies—[Interruption.]

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Let us hear one another.

Shona Robison: —are giving Scotland the highest feasible credit rating that it could achieve, citing our credit strengths as a nation—[Interruption.] Craig Hoy might not want to hear this, but I will say it anyway.

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

Shona Robison: Standard & Poor's said that

"Scotland's economy is strong, with high GDP per capita in an international comparison",

and the other agency said that

"Governance has a positive impact on the rating ... stemming from good budgeting practices, a supportive institutional framework and a good fiscal track record."

I know who the public will believe. It will not be Craig Hoy—it will be the credit rating agencies. That, of course, shows the underlying strength of the Scottish economy and our fiscal management.

ScotWind (Investigation)

7. Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will request that the Auditor General conducts an investigation into the ScotWind offshore wind leasing round, in light of the finding in the Future Economy Scotland report, "Rethinking ScotWind: Maximising Scotland's offshore wind potential", that, on a per megawatt basis, a comparable leasing round in England and Wales is projected to raise up to 40 times more than the £755 million raised in one-off fees in Scotland. (S6O-05145)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, **Affairs** Culture (Angus External and Robertson): The ScotWind leasing round, which was developed by Crown Estate Scotland, was informed by a 2021 review that was based on expert independent advice to ensure long-term value. It is important to take a holistic view of all the economic value that can be derived from ScotWind—not simply initial option fee payments. example, ScotWind developers have committed to investing an average of £1.5 billion per project in Scotland, which is expected to deliver jobs and significant economic benefits.

I note that Mr Ewing has written to the Auditor General to ask for an investigation. Scottish Government officials discuss future audit programmes with Audit Scotland, but, ultimately, any decision will be a matter for the Auditor General.

Fergus Ewing: The cabinet secretary has not answered the simple question, and he seems to take complacency to new, Olympian heights.

The report found that we have lost a sum of between £15 billion and £30 billion. That is between two and four times the whole of the Scottish Government's capital budget in one year. Surely there has to be an investigation into why there was an auction with a cap. Is getting the best price not the purpose of an auction? Whose advice was that decision based on? How on earth was advice not obtained about comparable value figures that were available just south of the border?

Angus Robertson: I am sure that Mr Ewing knows this, but the English and Welsh leasing round 4 is not comparable to ScotWind. It comprised fixed-bottom developments in shallower waters, in contrast with the ScotWind programme, which is comprised of a majority of projects that use floating technology further offshore in more challenging conditions, therefore requiring a higher cost base for projects to be constructed.

As I have already confirmed, reviews have been based on expert independent advice. If Mr Ewing has any suggestions about those, I would be

happy to pass them on to the Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes general question time.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Grooming Gangs Inquiry

1. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): Taylor was a vulnerable child in local authority care in Glasgow. She should have been protected, but she was preyed upon by grooming gangs. Last night, she wrote to John Swinney, telling him that she and her friends were plied with alcohol and drugs and were sexually abused by at least 10 Pakistani men.

Taylor and other victims say that there must be a grooming gangs inquiry in Scotland. They say that it is the only way to uncover the scale of the abuse, establish why it went unchecked and ensure that it cannot continue. Will John Swinney agree to the inquiry that is being asked for by Taylor and other victims?

The First Minister (John Swinney): First, I confirm to Russell Findlay that I have received the letter from Taylor. I express to the Parliament my admiration of her courage to speak out on such an important and very difficult subject. I am deeply saddened to hear of any cases of sexual abuse. As the Parliament knows, I have taken significant action during my term in office as a minister to ensure that the issue has been addressed.

The Government is undertaking work already through the national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group, which is looking at previous inquiries, evidence and practices to establish what further actions recommendations are required. Police Scotland is actively reviewing current and historical child abuse investigations to determine what issues would need to be addressed in any potential inquiry. The Government has remained open to the question of a grooming gangs inquiry, but a series of steps is being taken to explore those issues at the moment.

It is vital that any accusation of criminal conduct is drawn to the attention of the police, as Police Scotland has a duty to address such complaints by making inquiries.

Russell Findlay: Taylor's social work files allegedly show that Police Scotland failed to investigate. She said:

"It made me feel sick to my stomach. It's like they didn't even bother to ask any questions. That's the bit that gets me the most, because it could have been stopped, and it never was."

Another grooming gang victim, Fiona Goddard, was trafficked from England to Glasgow and was

raped by groups of men. She said that, as far back as 2014, police in West Yorkshire were

"well aware of links to Scotland, but clearly no one bothered to investigate further."

Victims do not trust that what happened to them will be fully investigated by organisations that they believe turned a blind eye or even engaged in a cover-up.

Has John Swinney spoken to Police Scotland about those new allegations, and does he believe that the actions of the authorities should be independently examined?

The First Minister: In relation to Taylor's case, Police Scotland has said:

"A complaint about the police was received in September 2025. The complainer was spoken to and we confirmed information had been passed to us, but since no report was made to police in reference to any crime, this complaint did not fit the criteria as a complaint about the police. The complainer was advised she should make a report to police if she had been a victim of a crime. The complainer confirmed she was happy to have the complaint closed with this advice."

I put that on the record simply to say that it is vital that anybody who believes that they have been the victim of a sexual crime comes forward to the police and makes a complaint. My expectation as First Minister is that such a complaint would be taken deadly seriously by the police and would be investigated.

On the question of trust in how such matters are handled, we have seen examples of extensive prosecutions for sexual misconduct and childhood sexual abuse in Scotland. A range of prosecutions have been successfully taken forward by the police and the Crown, which are determined to address the very serious issues that Mr Findlay puts to me. I hope that that gives victims of such crimes confidence that, if they come forward, their concerns will be properly and fully investigated by Police Scotland, which would be my expectation as First Minister.

Russell Findlay: Any attempt to shift the blame on to victims for how and when such crimes are reported is highly questionable. Taylor was a child. The authorities knew about the crimes at the time, on the basis of social work reports.

Of course, grooming gangs are not confined to any one community. Earlier this year, a group of white men and women were jailed for the horrific abuse of children in Glasgow. Last month, a Romanian gang was convicted of abusing 10 young women in Dundee. This is not a historical problem; it is happening today. The number of reports of online child sexual abuse made to Police Scotland has more than doubled in the past year alone.

How can John Swinney hope to stop child abuse now, when he will not support a full and fearless investigation into the industrial-scale abuse of recent years?

The First Minister: First, nothing that I am saying is about shifting the blame—I say that respectfully to the Parliament. I am simply putting on the record factual information that Police Scotland has provided to me.

My parliamentary record demonstrates that I am prepared to ensure that significant efforts are made to address abusive conduct in our society. The Scottish child abuse inquiry was sponsored under my leadership as education secretary and as Deputy First Minister for many years, and it does vital work in making sure that the voices of victims are heard loud and clear in our society.

On the question of online child abuse, I was clear in my answer to Martin Whitfield last week in the Parliament that I want to make sure that every step that the Government and other authorities in Scotland can take to tackle online child abuse is taken. The efforts that have been made at the Gartcosh crime campus, under the auspices of Police Scotland, have been lauded around the world as an example of integrated proceedings involving multiple agencies. We aim to ensure that organised crime networks in Scotland are shattered as a consequence of our efforts. I assure Mr Findlay of our determination to carry out all that activity.

As I said to Mr Whitfield last week, we are also determined to work collaboratively to ensure that a legislative approach is in place that uses the powers of the United Kingdom—powers that the Scottish Parliament does not have—to tackle the culture of online abuse, which is attacking the very fabric of childhood in Scotland today as a consequence of the lawlessness that is perpetrated by online agencies.

Russell Findlay: The First Minister talks about his parliamentary record. That record shows that, just weeks ago, he voted against my party's attempts to instigate a grooming gangs inquiry in Scotland.

In a previous answer, the First Minister said that the national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group is looking at these issues. However, victims such as Taylor are concerned because the same authorities that failed them sit on that Government group, and they fear that it is little more than another Scottish National Party talking shop.

In July, the group discussed Baroness Casey's report on grooming gangs elsewhere in the United Kingdom. The minutes of that meeting state:

"there is no current evidence that the issues identified in Casey are presenting in the same way in Scotland".

In the light of the available evidence, that claim is patently untrue. Does John Swinney agree that grooming gangs are a problem in Scotland, not just elsewhere?

The First Minister: Mr Findlay is not setting out properly the effect of the amendment that his colleague Liam Kerr lodged to the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill, because all that that amendment would have required was the victims and witnesses commissioner, who has not yet been appointed, to undertake a report to consider whether any further action was required in that respect. Therefore, that is not something that could happen today. The commissioner would have to first be appointed and then consider whether it was appropriate to take any action, so it is a complete and utter distortion to say that there was a grooming gangs inquiry proposal in front of the Parliament that was not supported—[Interruption.]

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: The reason why I cited the action that I did is that that action is happening today. The national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group is looking at these questions, and Police Scotland is actively reviewing current and historical abuse investigations. That is happening today, in Scotland, under the direction of the Scottish Government, and we will consider the group's findings.

I reiterate the fact that the Government remains open to the question of having an inquiry into grooming gangs. However, I am satisfied that the police and our judicial system will address these issues, and we will reflect on whether any further scrutiny is required in the light of those investigations.

National Health Service (Winter Preparedness)

2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): Later today, we will hear from the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care about the Government's so-called national health service winter preparedness plan. We have these announcements every year, yet the crisis in our NHS continues. Let us take the example of delayed discharge: this time last year, I called for action on the almost 2,000 hospital beds per day that were being lost because patients could not be discharged. This year, the number is almost exactly the same. Last year, the health secretary admitted that the crisis in the NHS happens not just at Christmas but all year round, so why are we facing another winter unprepared? Why has another year gone by and the Scottish

National Party has wasted it? Why do Scots continue to suffer because of John Swinney and his SNP Government's incompetence?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Over the course of the past year, the Government has focused on doing a number of things to reduce pressure in our NHS system. That is why long waits and waiting lists are now coming down.

The point that Mr Sarwar raises is about the flow of patients through our health and social care system, which I accept is the critical issue. That is why every NHS board now has frailty services in accident and emergency departments, which help with older and more vulnerable patients in particular. The average length of stay for patients is being reduced as a consequence of the introduction of frailty services. That is one thing that has changed materially. In addition, our efforts aim to reduce pressure on the health service through reducing waiting lists to ensure that we have adequate measures in place.

Other interventions include the hospital at home service, and the support that has been put in place through the strong local government settlement that we provided this year to strengthen health and social care partnerships and ensure that more and more people can be supported at home rather than in hospital.

Anas Sarwar: The level of delayed discharge is almost exactly the same as last year, which demonstrates that there has been no progress. Every year, the SNP has a new plan, yet, every year, things get worse. Let us look at two other measures: A and E, and cancelled operations. Last winter, more than 90,000 patients waited for more than four hours in A and E; that figure is well over 4,000 higher than the winter before. However, the A and E performance statistics going into this winter are worse than those for last year. Let us look at operations: last winter, almost 4,500 operations were cancelled, but, in the months leading into this winter, 8,640 have already been cancelled, which is almost 600 more than in the months leading into winter last year.

As I said, every year, the SNP has a new plan, yet, every year, things get worse. John Swinney was supposed to be the guy who steadied the ship and made things better, but it is obvious to everyone that he has failed, is it not?

The First Minister: I do not think that this is a great week for Mr Sarwar to talk to me about steadying the ship, given the chaos that I see in the Labour Government in London.

Let me reassure Mr Sarwar with the fact that, in the past 12 months, there has been an increase in the number of operations that have been performed in Scotland. In September, there was an even higher increase in the number of operations that were carried out. The throughputs—in other words, the activity levels—in the health service are increasing, which is why we are making headway on reducing the waiting lists and waiting times that people are experiencing.

There are enormous pressures on A and E. One issue that I was briefed about on Tuesday by the chief medical officer is the expectation that this winter's flu season will be particularly challenging for us, due to the prevailing strain of flu that is emerging. Therefore, there will be pressure on our emergency services, which is due to other pressures that are the result of wider health considerations.

I assure Mr Sarwar that the Government's efforts to increase the number of general practitioners so that we have more access to healthcare, to expand the number of frailty units, and to reduce waiting lists and waiting times are all focused on ensuring that our health service can meet the needs of the people of Scotland.

Anas Sarwar: The truth is that every part of our NHS is at breaking point—all because of the Scottish National Party Government.

Let us look at John Swinney's record. On his watch, the NHS is now in permanent crisis. Hundreds more operations have been cancelled this year than were cancelled last year. Thousands more patients are facing unacceptable A and E waits. Ambulances are waiting for hours outside A and E. Thousands of people are being forced to remortgage their homes or to borrow from family in order to go private. Hundreds of thousands are waiting in pain and anxiety on NHS waiting lists.

To put it simply, our NHS is not safe in John Swinney's hands. This is not a winter crisis—it is an SNP crisis, and it is putting lives at risk. Does that disastrous record not show that we must make this winter the last in which the SNP is in charge of our NHS?

The First Minister: As I have set out to the Parliament, a whole series of examples of progress has been made in the national health service—not least the fact that the number of new out-patient waits lasting for longer than a year has fallen for four consecutive months. The total numbers on waiting lists for out-patients, inpatients and day cases have decreased, so progress has been made in that respect.

Activity in the national health service has increased, with extra appointments being made available in a whole range of disciplines. Operation numbers are up. A record number of hip and knee operations have been delivered as a consequence of interventions that I have made. In preparation for winter, we have frailty services in A and E departments the length and breadth of the

country to ensure that people's needs are being met.

Since I became First Minister, I have focused on ensuring that I strengthen the national health service to meet the needs of the people of Scotland. If anybody is looking around and wondering what a Labour Government in Scotland might be like after the elections in May, they will see the very disappointing spectacle of the United Kingdom Labour Government. Look at the behaviour and performance of the UK Government over the past 15 months. [Interruption.]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: There has been a cut to winter fuel payments for pensioners, no action on the two-child limit, and the chaos of the past few days, in which the Prime Minister's team has been briefing against his health secretary and Labour Party politicians have been fighting among themselves. The people of Scotland can rely on having, in me, a First Minister who fights for the people of Scotland. I will leave it to the Labour Party and its failed UK Government to fight among themselves.

Primary Schools (Class Contact Time)

3. Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I declare an interest in that my wife is a primary school teacher and a member of the Educational Institute of Scotland.

When John Swinney was Cabinet Secretary for Education, the Scottish National Party made a manifesto commitment to cut teachers' class contact time. The SNP promised to deliver an hour and a half less of time in front of classes each week so that there would be more time to do lesson prep, marking and all the other things that teaching involves. Now, nearly five years on, that has not happened, and teachers are so angry about it that they could strike by the end of January. Why has the First Minister not delivered on the SNP's manifesto commitment to our teachers?

The First Minister (John Swinney): That is an important issue, and I am determined to make progress on it. When we negotiated our budget agreement with local authorities last year, one of its provisions was to make progress on exactly that issue. There were a number of other commitments in the agreement that was reached with local authorities, and various obligations were placed on the Government on financial support for local authorities, to enable there to be no restrictions on council tax and for a variety of other issues. Every single one of the commitments that the Government made has been honoured and

fulfilled, but we await progress from local authorities on class contact time.

I have made it very clear to the president of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities that I am not prepared to tolerate a situation in which we move at the pace of the slowest local authority, which is what the Government is being presented with just now. I will have the opportunity to discuss the issue when I address the COSLA annual conference in St Andrews later today.

It is an important issue on which I want to make progress, because I do not want education to be disrupted by industrial action. I do not believe that there is a need for that, because we could be making progress on the issue. There are sufficient teachers in the system to reduce class contact time in the way that Mr Cole-Hamilton puts to me, but it needs progress from our local authority partners, which the Government will insist on.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: It is a pretty pathetic excuse for the First Minister to pin this on councils, when so many of the same councils are run by his party. Let us get all this straight: the SNP Government is blaming SNP councils for preventing the SNP from keeping SNP election promises. With that kind of contortion, the First Minister must be attending some kind of secret yoga classes.

Teachers do not want to strike; they just want the Government to keep its promises. Strike action a couple of years ago caused pupils to miss up to a dozen days of school. It caused havoc for working parents. Will the First Minister give families a cast-iron guarantee today that there will be no strikes in the new year?

The First Minister: Mr Cole-Hamilton raises with me the logistics of how these changes are made. I cannot instruct Scottish councils to reduce class contact time. I need to do it by agreement, because the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 gives operational responsibility for the running of our schools to councils. Normally, Mr Cole-Hamilton is at the front of the queue to demand that I respect local authorities and local decision making, and here I am doing exactly that.

The point that I have made to the Parliament is that the Government reached an agreement with local authorities about reducing class contact time. I have kept my side of the bargain. I want local authorities to keep their side, which is about reducing class contact time.

I do not want there to be any disruption to education. We have just managed to negotiate a pay deal for teachers; it has been accepted by teachers, so there will be no disruption due to pay as a consequence of that negotiation by the Scottish Government and local authorities. I want to make progress on class contact time, which is

exactly what the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills and I are focused on doing.

"Independent Report on Regional Economic Development in Scotland"

4. **Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP):** To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to the report on regional economic growth by former University of Glasgow principal, Professor Sir Anton Muscatelli. (S6F-04452)

The First Minister (John Swinney): All contributions by Professor Muscatelli are worthy of consideration, and the Scottish Government will consider this one. On the report's main topic of regional economic structures, I note that we are already committed to increasing regional empowerment and will provide further information on our plans in the coming weeks.

We note that Professor Muscatelli also identifies the requirement for a "supportive immigration policy" to contribute to economic growth and the need for the Scottish Government to "influence" the United Kingdom Government's broken system. We need an immigration system that supports Scotland's distinct demographic needs, and I urge the UK Government to finally recognise that.

Kevin Stewart: It was Anas Sarwar who said:

"Read my lips: no austerity under Labour".

Now his Westminster bosses threaten to inflict more than £1 billion of cuts to Scotland's budget. The cuts would fly in the face of the economic growth that Scotland needs, as outlined in Professor Muscatelli's report. Does the First Minister share my view that that threat proves, beyond doubt, that decisions on Scotland's finances should be made here in Scotland, with a fresh start with independence, and not by a Westminster Government that fails Scotland at every turn?

The First Minister: I agree with Mr Stewart on the fundamental points. Many of those points were made by the credit rating agencies, which indicated that we have in this country a "strong" economy, "prudent financial policies" and budgetary planning with the ability to adjust where necessary in a "timely" manner, and that our

"economy is strong, with high GDP per capita in an international comparison."

That demonstrates that, where we are able to exercise self-government, it is successful for Scotland. I want us to be able to exercise more self-government with independence and to pursue the economic opportunities that would be right for an independent Scotland.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Sir Anton Muscatelli's report is damning on the impact of Scottish National Party tax rises. Perhaps Anas Sarwar can pass that on to Rachel Reeves before she inflicts yet more damage on the Scottish economy.

Will the First Minister now stop playing the daft laddie on income tax and concede two points: first, that he has broken his manifesto pledge to freeze income tax; and, secondly, that he has repeatedly misled this Parliament, as have his ministers, on how many Scots are now paying more tax than they would if they lived in England?

The First Minister: We have maintained our manifesto commitments in relation to taxation. On the issue of the tax paid by people in Scotland, the Scotlish Fiscal Commission's briefing paper, which was published on Tuesday, indicated clearly that the

"majority of Scottish taxpayers pay less"

in taxation than they would if they lived in the rest of the United Kingdom. [Interruption.] That is what I have always said to the Parliament, and I will keep on saying it. Mr Hoy might not like that, but I am going to keep on saying the things that are the case.

The Presiding Officer: Let us ensure that everyone gathered here can hear what is being said.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I welcome the interest in this important report from Scotland's leading economist Professor Sir Anton Muscatelli, which was commissioned by Scottish Labour. Let us try having a supplementary that is actually on the detail of the report.

The report comes out in the same week as an Audit Scotland report identified that the Scottish Government has £1.1 billion less to spend because earnings are growing less quickly in Scotland than they are in the rest of the United Kingdom. Does the First Minister agree with the observation in both Muscatelli's report and Audit Scotland's report that there has been a failure to identify the substantial economic levers that are available to the Scottish Government, and to march with them? In particular, does he agree with the detail in the Audit Scotland report that there has been a failure to focus on policies that could grow earnings and wages in Scotland? After all, that is not only right for the Scottish economy; it is also right for Scottish workers, is it not?

The First Minister: There are several points in what Daniel Johnson has said to me. In relation to the question of wealth generation, since 2007, under this Government, gross domestic product per person in Scotland has grown by 10.2 per cent, compared with growth of 6.8 per cent in the

United Kingdom. Meanwhile, productivity has grown at an average rate of 0.9 per cent per year in Scotland, compared with the UK average of 0.3 per cent. That debunks the point that Mr Johnson has put to me.

Of course, there are structural inequalities in the United Kingdom in terms of economic activity and wealth, which the Scottish Government is trying to counter with the limited powers of devolution. We could do more with the powers of independence, which would give us more scope to act in that respect.

What should be causing much more cheer and optimism in the Parliament today is the reports of the credit rating agencies, which demonstrate that Scotland has a large and well-diversified economy that supports tax-generation capacity. They also demonstrate that we have governance that has a positive impact on the credit rating, stemming from good budgeting practices, a supportive institutional framework and a good fiscal track record. It is pretty obvious that the Opposition in this Parliament cannot cope when anything good is said about Scotland or about the performance of the Scottish Government. This is a day for Scotland to be proud of our economic track record.

Income Tax

5. Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Government will maintain its manifesto commitment to freeze income tax rates and bands. (S6F-04455)

The First Minister (John Swinney): As in the normal course of any budget, we will outline our income tax policy for 2026-27 in the Scottish budget, on 13 January 2026.

Rachael Hamilton: I have it here:

"Freeze income tax rates and bands, and increase thresholds by a maximum of inflation".

It says it in the manifesto. However, Labour is set to do exactly what John Swinney wants: Rachel Reeves will break her manifesto commitment and raise taxes for hard-working Scots. According to Audit Scotland, the Scottish Government will face a £1 billion shortfall. [Interruption.]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Ms Hamilton.

Rachael Hamilton: John Swinney seems set on breaking his promises, too. Can he tell us how much that will cost Scottish taxpayers?

The First Minister: Obviously, there is a lot of talk about tax at the moment, and there is a lot of uncertainty about the UK Government's position, which may well have implications for us. The Scottish Government will take the opportunity to

consider those issues and will set out in an orderly fashion the approach that we will take on tax, given that we may well have a different tax landscape to consider. That is what the people of Scotland would expect us to do.

Peatland Restoration

6. Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Government is still on track to restore 250,000 hectares of peatland by 2030. (S6F-04446)

The First Minister (John Swinney): Through peatland action, our peatland restoration programme, we have restored around 90,000 hectares to date, including 14,860 hectares in 2024-25. This year, we are on track to deliver more than 12,000 hectares of restored peatland.

In the draft climate change plan that was published last week, we included a proposal to expand and extend our programme to restore 400,000 hectares by 2040. That reflects an increase in our ambition. Protecting, managing and restoring degraded peatlands is a vital part of mitigating and adapting to the climate and nature emergencies.

Ariane Burgess: Eighty per cent of our peatlands—approximately 1.6 million hectares—are degraded. That means that they are one of our largest single sources of emissions. They cannot support nature restoration or provide solutions to issues such as flooding.

It is vital that we urgently step up restoration efforts, but, in the new draft climate change plan, the Government is slowing things down. Increasing restoration by 10 per cent a year represents a major deceleration compared with the previous 2030 target. First Minister, why is your Government going backwards on that key policy at the same time as pledging to do more for climate and nature?

The Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

The First Minister: As I set out in my earlier answer, we are taking a number of steps to extend our commitments on peatland restoration. That is one part of the programme for climate action that has been set out to Parliament. By the end of this year, we will have set out the planning that will be necessary to achieve the 2040 ambitions.

I agree with Ariane Burgess on the importance of taking such action to help us on our journey to net zero, and that is exactly the focus of the Government's climate change plan.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): In Midlothian, peat is still being extracted. It is dug up

commercially through a licence under the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997, which requires only 50-year periodic reviews of licences for mineral permissions. The issue is one that I have pursued for some time. Given that it seems bizarre and even counterproductive for that legislation to allow peat extraction to take place over 50-year periods while the Scottish Government is pledging to restore peat, will the Government undertake to review it?

The First Minister: I hope that it gives Christine Grahame some reassurance to learn that national planning framework 4 includes provision whereby development proposals for new commercial peat extraction, including extensions to existing sites, are not supported, except in relation to use in the whisky industry.

We continue to work towards delivering our commitment to ban the sale of horticultural peat, and we are currently exploring all legislative options for establishing new restrictions. I hope that that gives Christine Grahame some reassurance, but I would be happy to engage further on that question.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind): The 14,860 hectares of peatland that were restored last year accounted for a reduction in carbon emissions of approximately 282,000 tonnes. However, an initial estimate suggests that one wildfire at Dava and Carrbridge in July this year accounted for 590,000 tonnes of carbon emissions, which is more than twice as much as the total reduction that was achieved through peatland restoration.

Given that the aim is the overall reduction of carbon emissions, would not true greens—true greens like myself—wish to see a little more money being spent on tackling wildfires effectively? Perhaps the money could come from the peatland restoration budget.

The First Minister: I do not think that Mr Ewing has put an either/or question to me. I do not want wildfires to happen in Scotland. They are happening because of climate change. We have to take the long-term climate action that is required to reduce the temperature of the planet.

As Parliament knows, I have been in Malawi and Zambia and have seen at close quarters the ferocious damage of climate change in those communities. It is happening here in Scotland: the wildfires are a symptom of the problem and we have had water scarcity in the north-east of Scotland right up until early October.

We cannot ignore the effects of climate change in our society. We have to take action, which is why the Government is committed to peatland restoration, and it is why, as Mr Fairlie set out in his statement to Parliament, the Government is committed to undertaking effective collaborative work to tackle the risk of wildfires in our society.

The Presiding Officer: We move to general and constituency supplementary questions. There is, as ever, much interest, so concise questions and responses are appreciated.

Housing Provision (Motor Neurone Disease)

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill Springburn) (SNP): My constituent Chelsea was diagnosed with motor neurone disease in 2024. With her condition now worryingly deteriorating, finds she herself in wholly unsuitable accommodation with her husband, who is her fulltime carer, and her four children. A larger, appropriately adapted property would afford Chelsea and her family quality of life in the remaining precious time that they have together.

Despite the best efforts of MND Scotland and the representations that I have made to various housing providers, the size of the property that is required has been a stumbling block. First Minister, I know that a new property for Chelsea and her family is not in your gift, but in such circumstances, families quite rightly look to us all for a solution. Will the First Minister consider the plight of Chelsea and her family and use his office to see whether a solution to this dreadful situation can be identified?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am sorry to hear of the case that Mr Doris brings to my attention on behalf of his constituent Chelsea. I send Chelsea and her family my very best wishes.

One of the important issues here is the ability to adapt properties to meet the needs of individuals or, potentially, to construct new-build properties. That cannot be done overnight. We have increased the budget for adaptations to £20.9 million. One of the reasons for doing that was to make sure that we had suitable accommodation for cases such as Chelsea's. If Mr Doris would like to share details with me, I will use whatever endeavours I can in my office to try to resolve the situation.

While I am speaking about MND, I also pay tribute to Sheriff Alastair Carmichael, a sheriff in Dundee who is very courageously continuing to work as a sheriff with adaptive technology and has shared his case publicly with us all. I wish to express my admiration for Sheriff Carmichael and for the courageous example that he sets for us all in the face of the challenges that he is experiencing. He is an example to us all, as I know that Chelsea and her family will be.

Supreme Court Judgment (Sexual Offences Trials)

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Yesterday, the United Kingdom Supreme Court issued a judgment in the cases of David Daly and Andrew Keir, which, while upholding their convictions, raises serious issues about the conduct of trials involving sexual offences. Legal experts say that the judgment could trigger multiple appeals by those who are convicted of sexual offences.

The courts have a difficult task in balancing the need to protect complainants—usually women—from intrusive questioning about their behaviour, while also guaranteeing the accused a fair trial. How will the Scottish Government respond to the judgment?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Supreme Court judgment gives detailed consideration to the complex issues that are involved in the admissibility of evidence in sexual offences trials. It is clear from the judgment that there is no requirement for a change in the provisions in the law that specifically regulates those matters, which are sections 274 and 275 of the Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995.

The Supreme Court said that it is for all judges in sexual offences cases to reflect the ruling as they would any other Supreme Court ruling that was relevant to them in the handling of such cases. It is therefore a matter for the courts, which, as Mr Fraser will know, operate independently of the Government. I know that the judiciary will consider the issues that arise as a consequence of the Supreme Court judgment, but there is no requirement for us to change the law.

Supreme Court Judgment (Sexual Offences Trials)

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): In addition to the issues raised in Murdo Fraser's question, Parliament recently passed the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Act 2025, which looks to make the experiences of victims and witnesses easier. What assurances can the First Minister give to women who are now concerned about the risk of having to go through an appeal process? What does the Supreme Court decision mean for evidence in future rape and sexual assault cases?

The First Minister (John Swinney): My substantive point was that there is, in my view, no requirement for legislative change because the decision is about court procedure. Claire Baker's question highlights important issues relating to the conduct of court cases, which can have a bearing on the type of questions that are asked and on the type of evidence that is given and can cause

enormous distress to the victims in those cases, who are invariably women.

The Government will carefully consider the implications of the ruling in the course of time and the courts will have to reflect on those issues. It would be deeply regrettable if there was any return to some of the court practices that were deeply distressing to the victims of sexual crime and I set out today my desire to ensure that that is not the outcome of the Supreme Court judgment.

Energy Bills (Social Tariffs)

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): New modelling by the Scottish National Party Government shows that a social tariff on energy bills could lift more than 200,000 Scottish households out of extreme fuel poverty. Although the powers to compel energy companies to act remain at Westminster, the Scottish Government must do all that it can to encourage progress, especially because the United Kingdom Government has broken its promise to reduce bills by £300. Can the First Minister outline how much households could expect to save under a social tariff? Will he outline what engagement his Government is undertaking to make a social tariff a reality for those who need it most, including those in the Highlands and Islands?

The First Minister (John Swinney): We shared the final report of our social tariff working group with the UK Government in March this year, asking it to act on the recommendations. Analysis this week shows that, if those recommendations were implemented, around 660,000 households in Scotland would see their bills go down by an average of £700 under a targeted bill discount, lifting more than 150,000 households out of fuel poverty. We continue to seek engagement with the UK Government on that work and our position remains that it must take urgent action to protect households and to deliver on its promises, which it has singularly failed to do to date.

Killer of Keith Rollinson (Early Release)

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Keith Rollinson died in February 2024 after being brutally attacked while working as a bus driver in Elgin. His killer received a sentence of only four years and four months and his family have now been told, through the victim notification scheme, that he could be released as early as next year.

Keith's widow, Sue Rollinson, has called that "disgusting" and said that she feels

"broken-hearted to think that Keith has not had justice".

She also said:

"I don't think he should be released early. We've been let down totally".

Sue Rollinson is right, is she not?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I have every sympathy with Mrs Rollinson for the loss that she has suffered, and I pay tribute to her husband, who should not have experienced what he experienced in the course of his responsibilities.

Issues of sentencing are taken forward independently by the judiciary, and it would be inappropriate for me to question sentences that are set out. Various legislative issues have to be considered before anyone is released, and that process will take its course, but I take the opportunity to express my sympathy to Mrs Rollinson on the heartbreak that she suffered in the loss of her husband and the anxiety that the issue will be causing her today.

Ferry Disruption (Isle of Lewis)

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Ferry passengers in Lewis have been experiencing incredible disruption due to the MV Isle of Lewis being unable to carry any vehicles since last week. That has been particularly difficult and trying for those travelling to and from hospital appointments, because, even if they can get an alternative booking, that adds more than three hours' drive to their journeys. All road haulage is also disrupted.

It feels as if this is the start of another winter of constant disruption with no end in sight. What alternatives have been put in place for Lewis? What alternatives will be put in place for Barra when that ferry returns to its normal route at some point, possibly next week? What steps will the First Minister take to ensure that islanders are never left in this situation again?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I understand the difficulties that have been experienced. I understand that cars are now able to be taken on the MV Isle of Lewis, which is the ferry operating on the Ullapool to Stornoway route. In addition, CalMac has put on additional sailings of the MV Hebrides between Uig and Tarbert. I accept that that involves a longer journey for travellers from Lewis, but CalMac has provided additional capacity on that route.

We are going through the winter maintenance period and operating to a winter timetable where there are fewer sailings. However, CalMac will be working—and the Cabinet Secretary for Transport is deeply engaged in all these questions—to make sure that effective and sustainable services are available to all island communities. The Government will be actively working to ensure that that is the case.

The Presiding Officer: We will have two further brief supplementary questions.

Economy and Employment

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): This week saw another example of SNP Scotland and the Labour United Kingdom being on different trajectories. While unemployment in Scotland continues to fall, in the rest of Britain it has risen to its highest level since the pandemic. This morning, we saw that UK growth in the last quarter was at a pitiful 0.1 per cent. Will the First SNP Government's Minister outline the commitment to growing Scotland's economy and supporting people into work, particularly our younger generation?

The First Minister (John Swinney): It is a key focus of my Government to improve economic opportunity. We are now seeing very distinct patterns of unemployment between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom. We continue to have substantial success in growing the economy and attracting investment.

The credit rating score that we achieved last night from Moody's and Standard & Poor's, which is the best rating that we could possibly have achieved, is a tribute to the strength of the Scottish economy, the strength of this Government's fiscal management and the strength of the institutions that we have at our disposal. It is good news for Scotland, and it is a proud day for our country.

Violence in Schools

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Ten years on from Bailey Gwynne's tragic killing in Aberdeen and promises of action from the Government, hard-hitting figures show that incidents of pupil violence in Aberdeen schools have quadrupled while, across the city, the number of crimes recorded in schools is rising year on year. However, let members be in no doubt: the issue is not confined to Aberdeen. For years, the Government has promised but failed to stem the violence in our schools. When will the Government start taking real action, such as anti-weapon lessons in classrooms, and finally stop these horrific incidents?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Let me make it clear that there is absolutely no place for violence in our schools in any way, shape or form. The Government's behaviour guidance, which has been constructed in collaboration with local authorities and trade unions, is designed to enable us to address those issues. Many of the techniques that Mr Kerr talked about—education on violence and the danger of carrying knives, for example—are taken forward in our school system. The mentors in violence prevention programme and the steps that are taken in relation to the no knives, better lives campaign are all shared in our schools.

I reinforce the importance that the Government attaches to education and measures of that type to ensure that pupil behaviour does not result in tragedies such as the loss of Bailey Gwynne, which is at the heart of Mr Kerr's question.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I fear that the First Minister may have misled Parliament again today, so I seek your advice on how we can invite him to correct the record. The SNP manifesto quite clearly committed to freezing income tax rates and bands, yet in the budget of 2023-24, both income tax rates and income tax bands rose above inflation. The First Minister has yet again misled not just the Parliament but the public who are watching. I seek your advice as to how we can finally get the truth from the First Minister when he appears in this Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. Mr Hoy will be aware that the content of members' contributions is not a matter for the chair. There is of course a mechanism, which all members will be well aware of at this stage in the session, whereby any inaccuracies or otherwise can be corrected.

Before we move to the next item of business, I will suspend the meeting briefly to allow those who are leaving the chamber and the public gallery to do so.

12:49

Meeting suspended.

12:51

On resuming—

Tourette Syndrome

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-19389, in the name of Sarah Boyack, on supporting Tourette Scotland and greater awareness and inclusion for people with Tourette syndrome. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated.

That the Parliament recognises what it sees as the vital work of Tourette Scotland in providing support, advocacy and education for individuals and families affected by Tourette syndrome across Scotland; welcomes the release of the new documentary film, I Swear, which shines a powerful light on the lived experiences of people with this condition and challenges and stigma surrounding it; notes, with concern, reports from parents, educators and young people, including in the Lothian region, that many pupils with the condition are not receiving adequate educational support or understanding in schools; further notes the view that there is an urgent need for national guidance and consistent training for teachers and school staff to ensure that pupils with Tourette syndrome are supported to reach their full potential; notes the calls for the inclusion of Tourette syndrome-specific content in the Scottish Government's wider Additional Support for Learning (ASL) framework and mental health strategies; highlights what it sees as the importance of British Sign Language (BSL) and communication inclusion guidelines to ensure accessibility and understanding for those with the Tourette syndrome and co-occurring conditions, and notes the calls on the Scottish Government to work with Tourette Scotland to develop a national plan, increase funding for support services, and raise awareness across education, health and social care and the wider public.

12:51

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I feel privileged to open this debate on a condition that affects many people in our communities. It is difficult for us to imagine what it is like for your body to act without your say-so and for words to leave your lips that you did not intend to say, but that is the daily reality for tens of thousands of Scots.

Although it is estimated that one in 100 Scots may have Tourette syndrome, for too long it has an undiscussed and underresourced condition. An example of those barriers is clear in the case of my constituent Finn. He was prescribed comprehensive behavioural intervention for tics—CBIT—therapy to help with his Tourette's, only to discover that no one in north Edinburgh was trained in how to do it. It got worse, because on inquiring whether he could receive the treatment anywhere else in Scotland or in Edinburgh, he was told no. It surely cannot be, in a country as well resourced as ours, that patients are still unable to receive the treatment that is recommended by child and adolescent mental health services.

Far too many people who face Tourette's go through the process of diagnosis only to find that support on the other side is lacking. That is equally true for their families. It is hard for parents to know, when their child is at an early stage, whether they are suffering from Tourette's and how to cope with a child who is not fully in control of what they say or what their body does. Far too many parents feel helpless in trying to balance all the life changes that are required with a Tourette's diagnosis. Often, one parent has to give up work to look after their child with Tourette's due to disruptions at school, leaving a family with less income and stalled careers.

Wonderful organisations such as Tourette Scotland provide a range of services and support to parents and to people with Tourette's. My constituent Tyler would not be where he is today without the support of Tourette Scotland. In his second year at school, he was noticed by someone who was running the first chances project. She helped Tyler to find a goal and showed him that he is able to achieve the things that others can. With the right support, Tyler was able to thrive, first at college, and then at university, where he graduated with a joint degree. That was only thanks to the amazing support and grant funding to help manage his Tourette's. This summer, Tyler went to the USA to take part in Camp America for three months, helping to support kids with disabilities as a camp counsellor.

Tyler's story should stand as an example of how Tourette's does not have to be a barrier to life. With the right support, those with the condition can achieve great things, but it should not only be the role of third sector organisations or the national health service to provide that support. We need to foster an environment that allows those with Tourette's to thrive, wherever they are in life. I am pleased that my office has already been in touch with the Scottish Parliament's engagement office to introduce it to Tourette Scotland, in a bid to make our Parliament a more Tourette's-friendly environment. In many environments, Tourette's can still be a challenging hurdle to overcome.

A constituent of mine, Alan, shared the experience of his son, Frankie, with me. Frankie first-hand experience had οf the misunderstandings that Tourette's can bring in education settings. He was often punished for things that were outwith his control, as no one recognised his condition. It is hard to state how disruptive that can be for a child's education and their confidence with managing Tourette's. It can have a major impact on a child's mental health due to the punishments that they receive for their uncontrollable actions, or the humiliation that they are subjected to because of a lack of understanding of the condition. Even when a diagnosis is made, schools are often ill equipped to deal with it effectively due to a lack of training and resources. However, it does not have to be that way.

When I spoke to Alan about his son, he told me about the practical steps that he believes are vital for ensuring that those with Tourette's receive the necessary support. There should be clear National Institute for Health and Care Excellence and intercollegiate quidelines guidance for Tourette's diagnosis; a national training programme for schools, so that school staff and teachers are properly equipped to support those suffering from Tourette's; and early recognition and intervention in schools for students, so that we can support kids from an early age to ensure that they have positive outcomes despite their condition. Those are not fairytale policies—they are achievable. We just need the political will to achieve them.

I am glad that we are joined in the public gallery by constituents who have Tourette's. Every single one of them will have had to overcome challenges relating to their condition. It is vital that we use that momentum to deliver lasting change so that, for future generations, a Tourette's diagnosis does not need to carry the burden that it once did.

Last week, I went to see the wonderful film "I Swear", which illustrates the challenges of living with Tourette's across the world. It is emotional and inspiring, and gives everyone an insight into the challenge that people with Tourette's face. I think that everyone should go and see it, because it is a call for action. No child should see their educational attainment crumble in front of them because of a condition that they cannot control. No parent should have to give up work because the education system is unable to deal with their child's Tourette's. No patient should have to go through the ordeal of a diagnosis just to find that treatments are thin on the ground or non-existent.

That is why I will finish by calling on the Scottish Government to work with Tourette Scotland to create a national plan to increase funding for support services and to raise awareness across all parts of our society. We are not asking for utopia—rather, it is the standard that Tourette's patients and their families should expect and, more importantly, deserve.

12:58

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): This is the first time in my 25 years in the Parliament that Tourette's has been discussed. I thank the member for securing the debate in the chamber,

and I welcome those in the gallery who are listening to this significant—I would add milestone—debate on Tourette's.

The main symptom of the syndrome is tics, which can be vocal or motor. They can include whistling, sniffing or clearing your throat, repeating a sound or phrase and occasionally swearing. A person cannot control them—they just happen. The syndrome usually develops in early childhood, and it is even estimated that one in every 100 Scots has Tourette's. Sometimes it is so mild that it cannot be identified. There is no known cure, but the condition can be managed. Most important of all, I believe, is for the public to be educated to understand the condition so that we can remove the stigma.

John Davidson, who lives in Galashiels, is a constituent of mine who has Tourette's. I first met John—although he will not remember it; I do not expect to be remembered all the time—many years ago while visiting Langlee community centre in Galashiels. I was there for a meeting and, in the near distance, I could hear shouting and swearing. Like many, I was taken aback, but then I was told, "It is only John," and that he had Tourette's. I had heard of it, but I had not encountered it, so that was a first.

Not much is widely known about the condition even now, so it is much misunderstood. People think that it is a sign of terrible rudeness and express their distaste one way or another, but John has worked his whole life to change that. I think that he became a reluctant poster boy for Tourette syndrome when he was just 16. The little-known condition, which had previously been described as "a wild madness", caused him to spasm, jerk, swear uncontrollably and shout explicit sexual phrases.

To this day, John still works at Langlee centre. He has also been the subject of not a few documentaries. 1989 including the BBC programme "John's Not Mad", which enabled him to bring Tourette syndrome into the living room in a way that had never been done before. That approach has continued, turning into a lifetime of advocacy to further publicise and increase understanding of the condition. In 2002, at the age of 30, he appeared in "The Boy Can't Help It"; and, in 2009, when he was 37, he was in "Tourette's: I Swear I Can't Help It". Latterly, as has been said, the new film "I Swear", which is based on his life, is a powerful piece of storytelling that reflects not only the challenges that he has faced but his determination and humour.

John has made Scotland, and, indeed, the United Kingdom, a more understanding place—I hope—for people living with Tourette's.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): John Davidson presented at the famous Wigtown book festival this year. Does Christine Grahame agree that his book, "I Swear", along with his television work and his appearance at the book festival, are other ways in which to raise awareness of Tourette's?

Christine Grahame: They are, indeed.

What John has accomplished was done not for reasons of self-aggrandisement but because of a determination to sweep away the misconceptions around the condition, to help others in the same position and to support their families and the wider public. John's life is an example of how personal experience shared bravely and honestly can shape public attitudes for the better. I have no doubt that it has been tough for him—and for others—and will continue to be so. He is still dealing with the condition and, certainly, there is still public opprobrium, but the new film that I referred to will ensure that his message reaches a whole new public.

I thank John and others for what they have achieved and will continue to achieve, and I say this: only he could have done it in this way, with determination, dignity, authority and humour.

13:02

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I thank Sarah Boyack for bringing this important debate to the chamber. I am aware of her long-standing support for and commitment to Tourette Scotland, and I am delighted to make a contribution on the subject.

For decades, Tourette Scotland has been a lifeline for many, providing support, advocacy and education for individuals and families who are affected by Tourette syndrome across our country. From peer support groups to school training sessions, its work is tireless and transformative. Despite those efforts, we know that many children and young people with Tourette syndrome still face significant barriers, particularly in education.

My eldest son, Hugh, suffered from a facial tic. I know that, at the time—from his mid-teens up to his late teens—it was very distressing for him. However, my wife, Jackie, who is a councillor in Dumfries and Galloway, told me that, when Tourette Scotland delivered training in a local school, only a handful of staff turned up. The following statistics suggest that such training should perhaps be mandatory.

Recent data suggests that around 1 per cent of children and adolescents globally are affected by Tourette syndrome. In Scotland, that translates to thousands of pupils, many of whom also live with co-occurring conditions such as attention deficit

hyperactivity disorder, anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder. However, according to Audit Scotland, more than 284,000 pupils—40 per cent of our school population—require additional support for learning. Despite that, funding and training remain inconsistent and, in many cases, inadequate. That is not just a failure of policy but a failure of compassion.

Bravery can take many forms. It is not always about physical endurance. Sometimes it is about confronting and overcoming a mental condition. Performing live before tens of thousands of music fans at Glastonbury takes incredible courage at the best of times, but when someone takes to the stage months after revealing that they have Tourette syndrome takes that courage to a completely new level.

Step forward, Scots singing sensation, Lewis Capaldi. He admitted publicly that stress and anxiety can worsen the tics that are now a constant part of his life, albeit he is learning to manage them. Few will forget watching him during his 2023 gig, when he stood alone on stage, unable to sing the words to his classic song, "Someone You Loved". If he was looking for an answer, he only had to listen as the crowd helped him to finish the song. That moment was powerful, not just for him but for everyone living with Tourette syndrome.

Capaldi chose to go public to prevent speculation, such as people thinking that he was on drugs before shows. Before his diagnosis, he feared that he had "some horrible degenerative disease". Since then, he has undergone treatment and learned coping strategies. Importantly, he has become an advocate, inspiring thousands and highlighting the condition that affects nearly 300,000 people in the UK.

Similarly, we have just heard the remarkable story of John Davidson MBE from Galashiels. Many will remember the 1989 documentary, "John's Not Mad". John was just 10 when his tics first appeared. He was misunderstood, bullied and even hospitalised. He faced unimaginable challenges. Yet, through resilience and optimism, he transformed his life and became one of Scotland's leading voices for Tourette awareness.

His new book, "I Swear: My Life with Tourette's", has been turned into a feature film, as we have heard, and shines a light on the lived experience of those with Tourette syndrome and how it challenges stigma and misconception. I know that Rachael Hamilton attended the cinema in Gala to see it; everybody was laughing and crying, and it received a huge round of applause at the end.

We must do more. We must have national guidance and consistent training for teachers and school staff. We need Tourette-specific content in

our additional support for learning framework and mental health strategies. We must ensure that communication is inclusive, through British Sign Language and other accessible formats, because those who have Tourette's often have co-occurring conditions.

Crucially, we must work with organisations such as Tourette Scotland to develop a national plan. That means increasing funding for support, better integration across education, health and social care and a public awareness campaign that reaches every corner of Scotland.

Let us honour the work of John Davidson, Lewis Capaldi and the many families who have fought for recognition, and ensure that every child with Tourette syndrome is supported to their full potential.

13:07

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank my colleague Sarah Boyack for bringing this important and, indeed, milestone debate to the chamber, as Christine Grahame has pointed out.

I also thank Tourette Scotland for providing support, advocacy and education for people living with Tourette syndrome and their families, including in my region of Glasgow.

As has already been said, with one in 100 school-age children affected by Tourette's, the issue affects every part of society. However, as yet, it is not fully understood. That is why debates such as this are important.

One thing that is not commonly understood about the syndrome is that it rarely comes alone. As other members have mentioned, most people who have a Tourette's diagnosis also have other complex conditions, such as ADHD, OCD, anxiety or autism spectrum disorder, to name but a few. As with many conditions, it can be difficult for people to consider that more than one issue can affect people at any one time.

We are, of course, all multidimensional, and we need our systems and services to recognise and support that in all of our diversity. That includes the education system. However, for young people with Tourette's, including in the Glasgow region, the system falls below what we would expect. Some pupils do not get the additional support in schools that they need, which has a huge impact on their life.

Although many young people with Tourette syndrome have no additional difficulties at school, some may struggle. The form that that takes can be wide-ranging and includes the discomfort of holding tics in, which uses up a lot of energy and concentration and can distract from school work. It can also make it really difficult to maintain

concentration. It is crucial that we support young people to relax, to be themselves and to help others to understand when and how their condition affects them, so that they get the best possible chance at learning.

There are also specific adjustments that can be made at school that will help pupils. Writing can sometimes take a little longer for those with Tourette syndrome, and simple solutions can help, such as the provision of worksheets, rather than having to copy things down, or a list of tasks, rather than having to remember what is being asked. Assistive technology can help, too.

Tourette Scotland and others have highlighted those issues and believe that there is an urgent need for national guidance and consistent support for teachers and school staff to ensure that pupils with Tourette syndrome are supported to reach their full potential. The Scottish Government is reviewing wider additional support for learning, so perhaps it could consider specifically the needs of that group of young people when it does so.

Another solution to support people who live with Tourette syndrome is inclusive communication. That must be a feature of all of our Government's work, so that everyone can enjoy the right not only to learn but to participate in every aspect of society. If the Government were to agree to the calls from Tourette Scotland to deliver a national plan for support services and to raise awareness across education, health and social care and the wider public, inclusive communication could be a key feature of such a plan.

We are shining a light today on the experience of families who are living with Tourette's, not just because of the work of organisations such as Tourette Scotland, the campaigners and activists who we have heard about today and my colleague Sarah Boyack, but because of the release of the new film "I Swear", which sets out, as films so often do, to help others to see the beauty in difference, as well the challenges and stigma that surround it. Such films are important—I want to see more and more films on our screens that tell the story of disabled people and people living with conditions such as Tourette's.

I thank not only the film producer, but the executive producer, John Davidson, who the film is about, for making the film and for sharing the story far and wide. It is worth noting that the actor Robert Aramayo, who plays John Davidson, said that John was his most important resource in playing that role. However, his importance in the role of executive producer extends beyond that, because having more people living with those conditions both on screen and working in screen is crucial. On this occasion, the involvement of the Tourette's community in the film shows real leadership by those who made it.

I will end with words from John Davidson. In a BBC article about the film, John said that the

"film raises awareness but ... also gives people the grit and determination to keep going".

He then asks people to

"fight on for their kids, go to schools, go to your local MPs",

because

"We need people to stand up and listen."

His words have now been said in Parliament and are on the parliamentary record. It is incumbent on us all to do as he asks—to stand up and listen, so that people can understand a little more about Tourette syndrome and how we can all work to improve the lives of people who are living with it.

13:12

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I thank Sarah Boyack for bringing this debate to the Parliament. I very much welcome the chance to take part in it.

Many people talk about the good old days, when everything was better than it is today and we did not have the problems that we have now. However, I believe that society has come on in leaps and bounds in many areas, particularly when it comes to removing stigma from medical issues and allowing the public to understand the once-not-talked-about conditions that many people suffer from.

know, Tourette syndrome is a As we neurological disorder that causes involuntary, sudden and repetitive sounds and movements called tics. Initial symptoms are typically tics, which can include motor movements such as shoulder shrugs, or vocal sounds such as throat clearing, which usually appear in childhood. The condition can be associated with other conditions, such as ADHD and OCD. Tics can be triggered by different things, including stress, excitement or tiredness. Symptoms of Tourette syndrome usually start around the age of six and can get more noticeable around the age of 10. For some people, the condition improves with age. The syndrome, which is more common in boys than in girls, is not curable but can be relieved by following guidance on wellbeing and relaxation.

Tourette Scotland is a fantastic organisation that informs and supports the estimated 300,000 children and adult sufferers throughout the UK. I completely agree with Sarah Boyack's motion that people with Tourette's should be supported in schools as part of the wider additional support needs framework, and I agree with others who have spoken about the lack of guidance and support on the issue. I look forward to hearing the minister's remarks in that regard.

I mentioned earlier, as have others, the importance of removing stigma from the condition. One way to do that is through the creative arts. High-profile figures such as Lewis Capaldi and David Beckham have been quite open about their condition, which is to be greatly welcomed.

The film that we have all been talking about, "I Swear", has taken the world by storm. My young constituent Scott Ellis Watson, of Bishopbriggs, is a rising star, and his debut performance in the film has been widely acclaimed. I was proud to lodge a parliamentary motion to congratulate him, and I look forward to presenting him with it shortly. The film topped the box office as the number 1 film in Scotland and across the UK in its first week of release. Much credit is due to Scott's family-his proud parents, Julie and Jimmy, and his siblings, Stella and John—for their encouragement. The fact that the film, which was produced by StudioCanal, has been such a success is fantastic news for sufferers, because it means that people will better understand what they are going through, which can only be a good thing.

Scott plays teenaged John Davidson and, as has been widely referenced, his performance is so John's real-life experiences of impressive. challenges with Tourette navigating daily syndrome are powerfully captured in the production. By working closely with John, Scott was able to highlight how the condition can impact young people, both educationally and socially, at a time in their lives when life can be difficult enough. Scott portrays John just as he is in real lifedignified, funny and clever—as we have heard. That is why the film is so important. Tourette's is a human condition that is often hereditary, and we should know that the people who are affected are just like us, with their own personalities and emotions.

I hope that the debate and that important film will lead to greater understanding of Tourette's among the public and our educational and clinical institutions. That is the very least that people deserve.

13:16

The Minister for Drug and Alcohol Policy and Sport (Maree Todd): I am delighted to respond to the debate on behalf of the Government as we discuss the support that is available to people with Tourette syndrome and the awareness of the condition. I thank all members who have spoken for their thoughtful contributions. In particular, I thank Sarah Boyack for this important and—as my colleague Christine Grahame said—milestone motion.

My colleagues have mentioned a number of their constituents. It is heartening to hear about some of the immense successes. For example, Tyler, despite having a challenging diagnosis and there being a lack of support available to him, has achieved huge success. It is inspiring and meaningful for people to hear about such stories. It is also great to be reminded of Lewis Capaldi, David Beckham and other high-profile people who have spoken about their diagnosis, because it is a diagnosis that is widely misunderstood.

The condition has been around for a very long time. Georges Gilles de la Tourette described it in 1885, but it took us until the 1960s and 1970s to understand the neurological processes that influence the condition, instead of seeing it simply as a behavioural condition. Our understanding has continued to grow ever since.

Sarah Boyack made a number of healthcare asks. There are barriers to achieving a Tourette's diagnosis in Scotland, but the situation has significantly improved recently. There has been a 16 per cent increase in the number of neurology staff at all grades in NHS Scotland over the past 10 years, as well as a 47 per cent increase in the number of neurology consultants, so we are increasing capacity. We have also increased our capacity for imaging, which is part of the diagnosis process, by providing 13 mobile MRI and four mobile CT scanners to help people to get the diagnostic tests that they need. Some boards now deliver additional activity seven days a week, 12 hours a day, to reduce diagnostic waits.

As a junior health minister, I recognise the challenges in accessing treatment. I am keen that we pick up issues relating to access to therapies with colleagues in the health ministry, because that would be useful. I recognise how debilitating Tourette syndrome can be, and I assure members that we are committed to ensuring that everyone who lives with Tourette syndrome in Scotland is able to access the best possible care and support.

The Government has a vision of a Scotland that is free from stigma and inequality, where everyone fulfils their right to achieve the best mental health and wellbeing possible. Some of the stories that we have heard during the debate clearly illustrate that we need to do a great deal more to achieve that vision. I want the stigma around the condition to end, and I want our young people to be supported to reach their full potential. I commend the tireless efforts of Tourette Scotland in supporting people through the physical and emotional challenges that the condition brings.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills has committed to a review of additional support for learning, and she convened a cross-party round-table meeting to engage with members and local government. They discussed priorities and their thoughts on the scope of the review to improve support for children and young people who require

additional support for learning in school. I understand that the education secretary is considering the next steps following that productive session. I strongly encourage Tourette Scotland to engage with the education secretary on that process to ensure that its asks are heard within that general review of ASL.

Sarah Boyack: I very much welcome the minister's comments about the action that she has committed to. When I left the screening of "I Swear", I reflected that the condition affects not just the NHS and education but every part of our lives, including transport and the police. There is a big issue around public sector education and learning, and there is also a need to promote wider awareness among the public, so that we all understand the condition and think about what we can do to support people. We also need awareness so that we do not react in a way that makes somebody's life worse.

Maree Todd: I absolutely understand the point that my colleague has made. The film "I Swear" will probably do more for public understanding than anything that the Government can do. I commend the creative effort that went into the film. Sometimes, creative projects such as that can shift public understanding in a way that Government campaigns cannot. I am confident that my colleagues across the Government would be content to engage on the issue to see whether there is more that we can do.

There was record investment—more than £1 billion—in additional support for learning by local authorities in 2023-24. The budget for 2025-26 set out an additional £29 million for additional support for learning, which includes an allocation for local and national programmes to support the recruitment and retention of the ASL workforce, ensuring that we build on the work being delivered through the additional support for learning plan. That funding will be used to improve outcomes for all children and young people with ASN, in line with the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004, and it will build on existing spend on inclusion to ensure the broadest possible reach.

All teachers undertake ASN training during their initial teacher education, which is a requirement to meet the professional standards for registration with the General Teaching Council for Scotland. We remain committed to exploring options for initial teacher education, and we are considering further steps to improve the support that is available for teachers in other areas.

There is a wide range of free professional learning opportunities set within the Scottish context, which individual educators, establishments, local authorities and unions can use and adapt to suit their context. They are

provided by a range of organisations, including Education Scotland, professional organisations, unions, health bodies and third sector organisations. We work with third sector organisations such as the national autism implementation team to produce materials that support professional learning and development for those working with autistic learners.

As Pam Duncan-Glancy said, the condition is often diagnosed alongside others. We are working with partners to develop that work further and to improve the support that is available. Teachers have access to an inclusion, wellbeing and equalities professional learning framework via Education Scotland, as is outlined in the most recent additional support for learning action plan update.

I thank everyone who has contributed to the debate, Tourette Scotland and the individuals who have come along to hear the debate for highlighting the needs of people with Tourette syndrome. We will continue to work with people with lived experience, third sector partners and education providers to improve the lives of people with Tourette syndrome across Scotland.

13:24

Meeting suspended.

14:00

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Education and Skills

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon. The first item of business this afternoon is portfolio questions, and the portfolio on this occasion is education and skills. I remind members who wish to ask a supplementary question to press their request-to-speak buttons during the relevant question.

University Tuition Fees

1. Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how many university students have benefited from free tuition since the Scottish Government abolished tuition fees. (S6O-05147)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Ben Macpherson): Analysis of data from the Student Awards Agency Scotland, otherwise known as SAAS, shows that approximately 740,000 students—that is around three quarters of a million—have benefited from free tuition fees on higher education courses between 2007-08 and 2024-25.

Kevin Stewart: It is gratifying that 740,000 people have benefited from free tuition here, when students in England and Wales are about to face tuition fees of £9,535 per year. Will the minister assure me and my Aberdeen Central constituents that university tuition in Scotland will always be free under the Scottish National Party?

Ben Macpherson: The Scottish Government is resolute in its commitment to free tuition, which ensures that higher education in Scotland is based on the ability to learn and not on the ability to pay. Free tuition is a policy that we stand by, and tuition fees will not be reintroduced under the SNP Government.

Free tuition helps learners not to accumulate as much debt through their studies. For example, through free tuition, undergraduate students in Scotland do not accrue a potential additional fee debt of around £28,000. The fee debt in other parts of the United Kingdom is significant. For example, in England, around £53,000 of debt is accrued. We have the lowest average debt in the UK, and we also have impressive rises in widening access. Collectively, state-funded investment in higher education is to the benefit of us all.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): What consideration has the minister given to equity within the current loan-based system? According to the 2024 London Economics report entitled

"Examination of higher education fees and funding in Scotland", under that system, graduates who learn earn less over their lifetime pay more back in interest than graduates who earn a lot more money—a situation which predominantly benefits men, to the detriment of less well-paid female graduates.

Ben Macpherson: Miles Briggs raises points about debt that is accumulated through SAAS student loans. As I mentioned, as Scotland does not have tuition fees, such debt is much lower for students studying in Scotland than it is in other parts of the UK. As I stated in my previous answer, and according to a Student Loans Company publication in June 2025, average student debt in Scotland is still the lowest in the UK, at around £17,990, compared with £53,010 in England. I take the point that we need to continue to consider how those loans are repaid, but every Scottish student starts on the basis of having less debt on average.

Curriculum (Artificial Intelligence)

2. Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how Al might shape the future curriculum in Scotland. (S6O-05148)

The Minister for Higher and **Further** (Ben Education Macpherson): As Government, we are committed to ensuring that children and young people are equipped with the skills and knowledge to live in a world in which Al is ubiquitous. To that end, the curriculum improvement cycle, led by Education Scotland, is continuing at pace. That will ensure that our curriculum remains relevant and better supports teaching and high-quality learning, examining the skills. knowledge and understanding that children and young people will be required to develop. That work will include consideration of the place of AI in the curriculum, with specific academic expertise feeding into that process.

Willie Coffey: The minister might be aware of the discussion on Al that has been taking place at the Economy and Fair Work Committee. The opportunities for the use of Al in education in the areas of lesson planning, marking, research and materials preparation are very attractive, but there are clear risks, too. Will the Government's revised strategy, which is due in spring next year, embed a clear sense of responsibility and ethical standards in any Al framework for our schools? Could the minister see the day when young people at school will be able to use their own personalised Al assistants to help them on their learning journey?

Ben Macpherson: Willie Coffey is right to emphasise the work of the Economy and Fair

Work Committee. I also pay tribute to the work of the Education, Children and Young People Committee. Indeed, a number of the Parliament's committees have been looking at the issue and, as I said, the curriculum improvement cycle is looking at the issue from a Scottish Government perspective in terms of the curriculum and our young people.

Across Government and society, we need to think carefully but rapidly about how we respond to the technological revolution of Al. The economies that will succeed in the 21st century, through all reasonable and objective analysis, will be those that utilise Al effectively, so we need to get to a place where our young people and other people in our economy know how to use Al, and how to use it ethically, responsibly and productively.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): My supplementary question is on the bit of the question about the continued development of the curriculum. Exams play a role in that, in gauging not just how students have done but whether the curriculum has been set properly.

I want to ask the minister about a Scottish Qualifications Authority report, "Exploring Perspectives on National Qualification Marker Recruitment, Retention and Experiences", which is detailed in today's Herald. It is about on-going serious concerns in relation to the 2024 higher history exam. In the report, markers have been critical about the exam, how it was set and how it Some was marked. markers are now "discouraged" from marking on behalf of the SQA. They say that

"the standards ... were inconsistent and lacking transparency"

and that leaders who were part of the markers meeting spoke to people in "unprofessional" ways.

I have tried time and again to get answers from the Government on the issue. Will the minister commit to going back to his department and asking for a full review of the 2024 higher history result? Markers are still raising concerns, and some of them will not take part in future.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is not relevant to the original question. However, if the minister has anything to add, I am happy to allow him to do so.

Ben Macpherson: I appreciate that Mr Ross has put that on the record in the Parliament's *Official Report*. As ministers, we will consider what has been raised, and I will inquire with officials about whether and when an official ministerial response can be issued to Mr Ross on those matters.

School Buildings (Asbestos)

3. Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it last met with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities or the education trade unions to discuss concerns about the presence of asbestos in school buildings. (S6O-05149)

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes): Local authorities hold the statutory responsibility for managing and controlling asbestos in their schools. However, the Scottish Government continues to closely engage with COSLA, local authorities and the Health and Safety Executive on the issue. Furthermore, the cabinet secretary met NASUWT representatives last year to discuss asbestos in schools.

It is important to note that health and safety is not a devolved matter, and that the HSE holds United Kingdom-wide responsibility for enforcing the Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012.

Marie McNair: The potential for exposure to asbestos in situ can be avoided by its removal. The Educational Institute of Scotland, other trade unions and many campaigners support the phased removal of asbestos from schools and other public buildings. Will the minister request that the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills meet me and the Clydebank Asbestos Group to discuss how we can take forward such a policy in Scotland?

Natalie Don-Innes: We absolutely recognise the concerns about asbestos in schools and other public buildings. Since this Administration came to power, more than 1,150 school infrastructure projects have been completed, and significant investment by local authorities and the Scottish Government has helped to reduce the amount of asbestos in the school estate. However, as I mentioned in my original answer, local authorities hold the statutory responsibility for managing and controlling asbestos in their schools. For that reason, I encourage Marie McNair and the Clydebank Asbestos Group to raise the matter directly with the local council.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): As was highlighted in the chamber earlier this year during the debate on the action for mesothelioma day, Scotland has one of the highest rates of mesothelioma in the world. Statistics show that, between 2011 and 2018, 94 female teachers in the UK lost their lives from an asbestos-related condition. The total figure for the general female working population is only 1,800, which means that teachers represent 5 per cent of that number. The issue is critical to them and it will be critical going forward—as has been mentioned by the EIS.

I understand that the Scottish Government feels that the responsibility lies with councils, but what can the minister say about the Government's responsibility to all the people of Scotland in relation to asbestos, which is an insidious and horrendous product that causes long-lasting painful periods before death?

Natalie Don-Innes: appreciate the seriousness of the issue that Mr Whitfield raises. The Scottish Government recognises the hazard of asbestos. We expect local authorities to provide a safe environment for all school users. As I have already mentioned, the Health and Safety Executive has United Kinadom-wide а responsibility for enforcement of the control of asbestos regulations. However, recognising the seriousness of the matter, we continue to engage with COSLA, the Health and Safety Executive, local authorities and other interested parties to explore setting up a working group, to see what further progress can be made.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 4 was withdrawn.

Higher and Further Education and Apprenticeships (Funding)

5. **Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North)** (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it has revised the funding model for higher and further education and apprenticeships, to ensure it reflects current requirements. (S6O-05151)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Ben Macpherson): The Scottish Government is investing more than £2 billion to give people access to education, training and other activities that help them prepare to succeed in life. The Scottish Funding Council and Skills Development Scotland are responsible for the details of how that investment is distributed. The work that is under way to reform the skills landscape seeks to ensure that we have the most effective structures in place to meet our post-school training, education and skills needs in the future.

We continue to work closely with our agencies and stakeholders across the economy to respond to the challenges that the sectors face. I am aware that there are specific challenges affecting some institutions and sectors, and if it would be helpful, I would be happy to meet Mr Gibson to discuss any of those issues in relation to his constituency interests.

Kenneth Gibson: I thank the minister for that helpful answer and would be delighted to meet him.

Not all courses are the same. Delivering an engineering course costs, on average, £10,000 a year; for health sciences, the cost is £8,000; for

information technology, it is £7,000; and for business, it is £6,000. Does the minister agree with Audit Scotland that core funding should reflect the true delivery cost of a course and that targeted funding for science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects and capital investment in advanced infrastructure are vital if we are to provide greater opportunities for young people and secure the economic growth that is essential to Scotland's future prosperity?

Ben Macpherson: We are grateful for the report from Audit Scotland that was published a few weeks ago and for what Audit Scotland relayed to the Public Audit Committee this week.

We are seeking to deliver an interconnected series of reforms that will make the post-school education system simpler, more responsive and more agile. We are also improving careers support, creating new national skills planning arrangements alongside colleagues in the economy directorate, enhancing apprenticeships, modernising qualifications and seeking to ensure that funding is targeted at the right opportunities.

There are great examples in Scotland in which business and higher and further education are working together to make sure that we fulfil the economic need in the regions and make sure that we provide opportunities that people can benefit from. Those examples include Ayrshire College, which I visited this week, and the City of Glasgow College, which I was at this morning.

There are situations where the need for consideration of funding is greater, and I am grateful to the member for raising the issue.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Trade unions have highlighted major concern about engagement during the Government's reforms to skills. This week, they have contacted me specifically to say:

"It is clear that decisions affecting the workforce are being made in forums where neither staff nor representatives have a voice."

They have requested representation on project boards but that has not been prioritised. They are also unclear whether the changes will result in compulsory redundancies.

Does the minister believe that the trade unions should be represented in the process, including on the project boards? Will he take the opportunity now to guarantee that there will be no compulsory redundancies? Will he publish a detailed workforce impact assessment before any changes take effect?

Ben Macpherson: I thank the member for raising those important points. In the short period of my tenure in this role, I have sought to engage proactively and reactively with trade unions. For

example, this week I have met the University and College Union and the Educational Institute of Scotland, and this morning I attended a Scottish Trades Union Congress event. I want to engage with trade unions on the issues that come under my responsibility. On the specific points that the member raised, if either she or the trade unions—or both—want to write to me about those matters, I will consider that correspondence carefully.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Data from His Majesty's Revenue and Customs shows that, between 2020 and 2024, £875 million was raised by Scottish employers from the United Kingdom-wide apprenticeship levy, but research has found that, during the same period, Scottish National Party ministers spent just £704 million on apprenticeships. What investigation is the new minister implementing to find out what has happened to the £170 million that has not gone to apprenticeships, even though that is what the levy is meant to deliver? Will he look at how the greater transparency that is needed can be provided through the bills that are going through Parliament?

Ben Macpherson: On the apprenticeship levy and how the revenue from that is spent in Scotland relative to how it is spent in other parts of the UK, we need to consider the particular technicalities and nuanced arguments that have been set out to Parliament several times. I have relayed that to stakeholders, including members of the business community, in my tenure in this role so far.

Engaging with employers on the apprenticeship levy and the provision of apprenticeships in Scotland is a key priority for me and the Government. Of course, we are delivering a record number of 25,000 modern apprenticeships. Is there more demand for apprenticeships in our economy and our society? Yes, there is. Are ministers determined to help to increase the number of apprenticeships where we can, with the resource that we have, in order to meet the needs of the economy and to help our young people—and, crucially, those who are retraining—to learn and succeed? Yes, we are—that is a priority for us.

I thank the member for raising an important point, on which I look forward to having further engagement with him, stakeholders and the business community.

Poverty-related Attainment Gap (Local Authority Support)

6. Michael Matheson (Falkirk West) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what support is currently provided to local authorities to improve literacy, numeracy, and outcomes for young

people, while tackling the poverty-related attainment gap. (S6O-05152)

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes): Over the past decade, through the Scottish attainment challenge, £1.75 billion has been invested in closing the poverty-related attainment gap in literacy and numeracy. We are seeing an impact, as the literacy attainment gap in primary, and the literacy and numeracy gaps at level 3 in secondary, are the narrowest that they have ever been

We are determined to make further progress. As well as providing the attainment challenge funding, we continue to fund our read, write, count with the First Minister and reading schools programmes, as well as the school library improvement fund.

Michael Matheson: The minister will recognise that pupil equity funding and strategic equity funding are central to helping to support schools and local authorities to tackle the child poverty-related attainment gap. Falkirk Council has recorded a further narrowing of its numeracy attainment gap due to actions that have been taken by schools and education teams through the support of strategic equity funding. Given the importance of that funding, what impact data is being gathered in order to guide future decisions on the use of SEF?

Natalie Don-Innes: With the support of pupil equity funding and strategic equity funding, the poverty-related gap in positive initial destinations for school leavers reduced by two thirds between 2009-10 and 2024. The poverty-related attainment gap at national 5, higher and advanced higher levels narrowed in this year's results, and the poverty-related attainment gap in primary school literacy is at a record low.

It is clear that that funding is having a hugely positive impact, which is why the cabinet secretary has been very clear in saying that it will continue to be provided through 2026-27, to provide certainty to schools and local authorities.

School Provision (Robroyston)

7. **Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with Glasgow City Council regarding reports of a lack of sufficient local school provision in Robroyston. (S6O-05153)

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes): Although it is the statutory duty of local authorities to manage their school estate, Scottish Government officials have been engaging with Glasgow City Council on this matter.

It is also worth noting that, through the £2 billion learning estate investment programme, the Scottish Government continues to provide substantial support to the council for its school estate, including funding for a new Gaelic primary school and Linburn academy.

Paul Sweeney: In 2009, Glasgow City Council identified Robroyston as a community growth area and approved massive family-oriented housing developments, under the condition that extended primary and secondary school capacity would follow. That was to be funded through the community growth fund.

Young families have moved in under the impression that that extra capacity would follow, but we are now at the end of 2025 and there is still no new school provision, with Smithycroft secondary school now being at full capacity and the plan to install modular accommodation being wholly unsuitable. I have spoken to dozens of parents who are now looking to move elsewhere.

Robroyston is right at the limit of the catchment area, and the walking route that Glasgow City Council suggests children take from Robroyston to Smithycroft is through an unlit graveyard, which is clearly an unsafe route. Will the minister join me and families from Robroyston to walk the route to Smithycroft secondary school to see the conditions and hear the families' concerns for herself?

Natalie Don-Innes: It is, of course, disappointing and concerning to hear the families' concerns. As I have said, we have been engaging with the local authority on the matter and have provided funding to support the school estate in the area. Obviously, I am answering questions on behalf of the cabinet secretary today and I am more than happy to share the member's concerns and the request for a meeting with her.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): Can the minister outline how the 2025-26 Scottish budget, which Paul Sweeney did not vote for, is supporting schools and local authorities to respond to the needs of Scotland's children and young people?

Natalie Don-Innes: The 2025-26 Scottish budget saw significant investment in our schools and local authorities to support our children and young people. It provided local authorities with £186.5 million to maintain teacher numbers, alongside continued funding of up to £200 million for the Scottish attainment challenge to close the poverty-related attainment gap.

Additional support for learning was strengthened with an additional investment of £29 million to improve outcomes for all children and young people with additional support needs, in line with the Education (Additional Support for Learning)

(Scotland) Act 2004. That will build on existing spend on inclusion to ensure the broadest possible reach.

I hope that that assures the member that those on-going considerations and the work on the previous budget support our school and learning estate and, most importantly, our children and young people.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 8 was withdrawn. That concludes portfolio questions on education and skills.

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