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Wednesday 3 December 2025

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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 3 December 2025

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

Portfolio Question Time

Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, and Parliamentary Business

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The first item of business is portfolio questions, and the first portfolio is constitution, external affairs and culture, and parliamentary business.

Alcohol and Tobacco Duty (Devolution of Powers)

1. **Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with United Kingdom Government ministers regarding the devolution of additional powers to the Scottish Parliament, including those over alcohol and tobacco duty. (S6O-05227)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): I begin by paying tribute to Richard Demarco, one of Scotland's greatest cultural figures. Together with Clare Adamson, the convener of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee, I attended an event at the Scottish Parliament yesterday at which he was recognised as the Scottish European of the year. I am sure that I speak for all members and parties in the Scottish Parliament in congratulating him and paying tribute to his remarkable contribution to culture in Scotland and Europe. [Applause.]

To answer Kenneth Gibson's question, ultimately, we believe that Scotland should be an independent country with full control over all the powers that we need to grow our economy. Decisions that affect Scotland should be made by the people who live here.

Scotland contributes a disproportionate amount of alcohol and tobacco duty to the Treasury relative to the rest of the UK. Although we have not had discussions specifically on the devolution of alcohol and tobacco duty, we have consistently called for a full devolution of income tax and VAT, alongside national insurance contributions and capital gains tax, to be considered as a priority.

Kenneth Gibson: I would add corporation tax to that list. Scottish ministers previously suggested

devolving alcohol excise duty in the Scotland Act 2016, but that was ignored by the UK Government. The Office for Budget Responsibility estimates that alcohol duties will raise £13 billion across the UK this year, and £8.1 billion will be raised by tobacco duties. As the cabinet secretary said, a disproportionate amount of that will be collected in Scotland. Does the cabinet secretary agree that devolving such duties would allow Scottish ministers to have greater resources to mitigate the damage that is inflicted on health and the economy by tobacco and alcohol?

Angus Robertson: I agree with Kenneth Gibson. It is clear that devolving additional tax powers would give the Scottish Government greater resources to tackle the health harms that are caused by tobacco and alcohol, which remain a significant health challenge. Disappointingly, our calls for the disparity in alcohol duty to be addressed in this budget went unheard. Greater control over taxation would ensure that the Scottish Government could design a system that better tackles public health challenges while supporting Scottish businesses and industry where it is appropriate.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests in relation to the Scotch Whisky Association.

I agree with the cabinet secretary's remarks about Richard Demarco, whom I congratulate on his well-deserved award.

On the substance of the question, although I agree with Mr Gibson about the negative impact of the chancellor's increase in alcohol duty on the Scottish economy, which was very unfortunate and unwelcome, I am not sure that the Scottish Government's track record is so tremendous when it comes to supporting the spirits industry, given the introduction of minimum unit pricing and the plans for alcohol marketing. For example, distilleries would have been unable to advertise tours due to the Government's draconian proposals. Can the cabinet secretary update us on where exactly we now stand with that?

Angus Robertson: I note that Murdo Fraser did not raise one of the most significant challenges that the whisky industry faces, which relates to tariffs. I hope that he will join the Scottish Government in endorsing the work of the First Minister and in hoping that the United Kingdom Government does all that it can in its discussions with the US Government on tariffs. He mentioned the scotch whisky industry which, along with American colleagues in the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States, is working very hard to ensure that we reduce the threat from tariffs.

A balancing act is to be struck when judging questions around alcohol duties and public health harms. I think that the Scottish Government has got that balance right, and we will do all that we can to deal with threats of tariffs to the likes of the whisky industry. We would be grateful to have the support of all parties in the chamber on that.

Freedom of Information Requests (Appeals)

2. Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how many freedom of information requests that it has received during the current parliamentary session have subsequently been appealed by the requester. (S6O-05228)

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey): The Scottish Government has received approximately 25,000 FOI requests during the current parliamentary session. Our records show that we have been notified by the Scottish Information Commissioner of approximately 310 appeal cases arising from those requests, which represents less than 1.5 per cent.

The Scottish Government currently responds to more than 95 per cent of requests on time. That performance has been recognised by the commissioner and has been achieved against a backdrop of rising request numbers. The number rose from approximately 4,500 in 2022 to more than 5,500 in 2024, and that figure has already been surpassed for the current year.

Edward Mountain: A lot of people feel that getting information from the Scottish Government is difficult. For example, after asking the Scottish Government numerous times the simple question of when the Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy agreed to visit Japan, I was directed to Scottish Enterprise, a Government body. Scottish Enterprise was evasive and refused to answer the question, so I have had to appeal its response. I asked the question—to ascertain when Gillian Martin agreed to visit Japan—52 working days ago. Will the minister prove me wrong by providing an answer? Failure to do so will further prove that the Government has an evasive nature when it comes to the release of information.

Graeme Dey: I do not accept the general premise that Edward Mountain has advanced. The numbers that I have cited relating to the Scottish Government's responsiveness to FOI requests—I could cite others—do not bear out the point that he has made. However, I undertake to look into the specific issue that he has raised and come back to him.

Edinburgh (Support for Major Annual Cultural Events and Royal Visits)

3. Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I associate myself with the warm congratulations to Ricky Demarco.

To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the culture secretary has had with the finance and local government secretary regarding providing support to Edinburgh in dealing with the pressures of holding major annual cultural events and royal visits, including reintroducing the capital city supplement. (S6O-05229)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government and I regularly discuss financial matters relating to local government and the culture sector, which is on track to receive an extra £100 million by 2028-29. This year, councils, including the City of Edinburgh Council, received a record £15.1 billion, which represents an increase of 5.5 per cent in real terms.

Since 2008-09, Edinburgh has had additional funding for its capital city status, and that funding now amounts to £3.9 million a year. From summer 2026, the tourism visitor levy will provide significant new revenue to help the city to manage the pressures of major cultural events and royal visits.

Miles Briggs: As a fellow Edinburgh MSP, the cabinet secretary will be acutely aware of the extra pressures that Edinburgh is under due to annual cultural events such as the Edinburgh festivals, royal week and other national civic events. Will he agree to organise a funding summit with all interested partners to consider the growing pressures that the capital faces? He will be acutely aware of the complaints about refuse not being collected and of the need for better planning of public services during such events.

Angus Robertson: That is a very interesting idea. As Miles Briggs is aware, I have convened a standing strategic partnership involving Scotland's festivals, including a number from Edinburgh, because some of the challenges that exist in Edinburgh are also felt in the rest of the country. I have also had recent dialogue with the City of Edinburgh Council on festival matters.

I am open to suggestions. We are approaching the setting of budgets so, if Miles Briggs has any specific proposals, including details on how we would pay for them, I am open to receiving them. I look forward to receiving such contributions from him in the weeks ahead.

Israel (Cultural Institution Boycotts)

4. Humza Yousaf (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking in partnership with cultural institutions following the Parliament agreeing motion S6M-18686 on 3 September, which called for boycotts targeted at the state of Israel. (S6O-05230)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): We take the motion of 3 September very seriously. Although a ceasefire has been agreed since the motion was passed, that has not yet brought the peace that will end the bloodshed. That is why we continue to take very seriously the terms of the motion on matters such as boycotts.

Clearly, our cultural institutions are independent of Government, but I am clear in my expectations that all institutions in every part of Scottish public life should abide by the intent of the motion that was passed by the Scottish Parliament in September. The Scottish Government has implemented a range of economic and humanitarian measures in direct response to the motion, as that is the most direct and effective response that is available to us within our delegated powers.

Humza Yousaf: One hundred and thirty-six—that is how many children have been killed in Gaza since the so-called ceasefire was announced in October, according to Amnesty International. In the West Bank, summary executions, settler violence and land theft continue with absolute impunity. Israel is operating as a rogue state with no respect for—let alone adherence to—international law. As the question rightly says, we need action, not simply statements of condemnation. Will the cabinet secretary do everything in his power to ensure that cultural institutions do not collaborate with the state of Israel under the Netanyahu regime and that we treat Israel as we once treated the apartheid regime of South Africa?

Angus Robertson: The continued bloodshed—not least that of 136 Palestinian children—is absolutely abhorrent. Members will be aware that the First Minister has called on the United Kingdom Government to join South Africa's case at the International Court of Justice. Although cultural institutions are clearly independent bodies, I fully expect all publicly funded bodies to act in accordance with published Scottish Government and related regulatory frameworks that place respect for human rights and the rule of international law at their core. We will continue to give our voice to calls for a two-state solution, so that we can have a peaceful future for Palestine and for Israel.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): If we want to be consistent and are going to have boycotts against Israel, should we not have boycotts against other countries? I am thinking particularly of China, which has an appalling human rights record against Christians, Muslims and Tibetans—the list goes on and on. If we do not, are we just picking on Israel because it is small and it is Jewish?

Angus Robertson: No, I do not agree with that comparison. I think that all members of the Scottish Parliament have condemned Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The United Kingdom Government's position, which is supported by the Scottish Government, is that there should be a boycott of Russian firms. It is therefore clear that this is not aimed at just one country. It is a statement of fact that there are other parts of the world where such issues should be considered. Should Mr Mason want to draw any such issues to the Scottish Government's attention, I would be grateful for that.

Energy Efficiency Support (Cultural Institutions)

5. Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the culture secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding support available to cultural institutions for energy efficiency measures, in light of reports that Dundee Rep, and other similar cultural bodies that operate as wholly owned trading subsidiaries, have been unable to access the SME loan and cashback scheme. (S6O-05231)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): With the recent publication of the draft climate change plan, ministers have discussed energy efficiency measures and carbon emissions reductions across all sectors of Scotland's economy. I welcome the efforts of Dundee Rep theatre and other similar organisations to reduce their carbon emissions and to contribute towards meeting Scotland's net zero targets. The SME loan and cashback scheme continues to support many businesses across Scotland in all sectors. We are currently reviewing the scheme's terms and conditions to make sure that support is as widely accessible as possible.

Michael Marra: I welcome that. The cabinet secretary knows that Creative Scotland requires building-based charities such as Dundee Rep to adapt their premises in order to improve energy efficiency. However, Dundee Rep is currently prevented from accessing the scheme because of the situation that I have described. I do not believe that that effect was intended by the Government in establishing the scheme. The on-going review of

eligibility criteria is absolutely essential to make the change that will allow Dundee Rep to make the investment that it wishes to make. Will the cabinet secretary give a commitment that those who review the criteria will take that strongly on board and make sure that institutions such as Dundee Rep—there will be institutions across the country in the same situation—can access the scheme in order to make the necessary changes to its premises?

Angus Robertson: I unequivocally give Michael Marra that assurance. I know that he has been in correspondence with my colleagues and that this is not the first time that he and other members have raised the issue. He makes a good point in saying that unintended consequences sometimes play a role in things. As I said, I assure him that we are currently reviewing the terms and conditions of the scheme to make sure that support is as widely accessible as possible. The timing of his question is very good, because it will help those who are looking very closely at any potential changes—they will be encouraged to look at examples such as Dundee Rep, to see whether it is possible to make any necessary adjustments.

Arts Participation (East Dunbartonshire)

6. Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it supports cultural initiatives in East Dunbartonshire, such as Acorn Shed Music, to expand opportunities for participation in the arts across all age groups. (S6O-05232)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): In 2025-26, Creative Scotland provided £30,000 from the youth music initiative to We Make Music instrument libraries to establish a new instrument lending library in East Dunbartonshire and to allow children and young people to develop their music making outside school. We value culture in all its forms, which is why we increased the culture budget by more than £34 million in 2025-26 as part of our commitment to an additional £100 million per year by 2028-29.

Widening access to culture is central to the culture strategy. The Scottish Government supports community-based participative arts activities, including through the youth music initiative.

Rona Mackay: Acorn Shed Music in East Dunbartonshire is a fantastic organisation that shows how storytelling and songwriting can connect people of all ages, including those living with dementia and their carers. How will the Government ensure that innovative community arts organisations such as Acorn Shed Music

receive sustainable support, so that their impact is not limited by short-term funding?

Angus Robertson: I can give Rona Mackay the assurance that a central ambition of the culture strategy is for everyone to experience the transformative potential of culture. The Culture Collective and creative communities Scotland programmes support community-engaged creative activities that are driven by the communities where they are based, to shape the future cultural life of Scotland. Applications for the £3 million Culture Collective fund for 2026 and the £320,000 creative communities Scotland fund for 2026 are currently being assessed, and the five national performing companies, which are funded directly by the Scottish Government, work with local communities across Scotland.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): As an MSP representing East Dunbartonshire, I have met representatives from many amazing organisations specialising in the arts, such as Creative Spark Theatre Arts, Kirky Cinema and many more, which do fantastic work involving people of all ages.

One key theme is the need for long-term sustainable funding. Will the cabinet secretary commit to establishing a stable, long-term funding framework instead of relying on short-term, project-by-project allocations that sometimes fail to generate sustainable benefits?

Angus Robertson: That is the driver behind the introduction of multiyear funding, the point of which is to fund more organisations and to do so on a longer basis than an annual application process. There are other pots of funding that can be accessed, as I have outlined. However, if there are organisations that might be in a position to access multiyear funding, I would advise the member to communicate that. I am sure that they are aware of that multiyear funding, but my hope is that more cultural organisations in all parts of the country will make use of it. I believe that its introduction is transformational for the culture sector, and I have no doubt that organisations in the member's region will be keen to make use of it.

European Union-United Kingdom Trade and Co-operation Agreement (Impact on Touring Artists)

7. Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): My apologies to the Parliament for being late today.

To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the impact of the EU-UK trade and co-operation agreement on touring artists in Scotland, including any plans for discussion with the UK Government on this matter

in advance of the forthcoming review of the agreement. (S6O-05233)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): Stakeholders have been clear that the lack of mobility provisions for touring artists in the TCA is making it harder to reach new audiences, harder to generate income, harder to collaborate across borders and harder to showcase internationally. It is critical that an agreement on cultural mobility is prioritised. I have frequently pressed for it to be prioritised in UK Government negotiations with the European Union, and I will continue to urge my UK counterparts to use the review, existing TCA structures and wider negotiations to seek progress on the issue, including at the next culture and creative industries interministerial group meeting.

Clare Adamson: There has been a dramatic impact on small artists in particular—not the big-arena artists, but smaller touring artists—and on our national performing companies. We have lost so much since Brexit—which, of course, Scotland did not vote for. Although there are possibly some opportunities ahead, does the cabinet secretary agree that the only way back to the full benefits of the EU is as an independent Scotland in Europe?

Angus Robertson: Yes, I agree. Member states of the European Union enjoy the benefits of free movement of people, including in the culture sector. The value of cross-border cultural exchange cannot be overestimated. The creative Europe programme, for example, represents one of the best means of facilitating it, given its unique focus on transnational cultural connections. It is therefore disappointing that the UK Government has not sought participation in that valued programme.

On Monday, when I was in London, I raised the issue directly with Ian Murray at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. I would hope that the UK Government will understand the advantages of the UK again being part of the creative Europe programme. Of course, there is no substitute for being an independent member state of the European Union.

“Independent Review of Creative Scotland”

8. Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the recently published “Independent Review of Creative Scotland”. (S6O-05234)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): I welcome the review and the opportunity that it provides for Creative Scotland to deliver on the ambition of the evolving sector with more efficiency, transparency and impact.

Consideration is being given to the recommendations, and the Parliament will be updated in due course. Ensuring that the support infrastructure for the culture sector is as effective as possible is vital while the Scottish Government continues to deliver on our commitment to increase the culture budget by £100 million. I am grateful to Angela Leitch and her team, and to all those who contributed views to the review, for their work.

Liam Kerr: Creative Scotland receives almost £90 million of taxpayers’ money each year. The independent view points to excessive bureaucracy, weak leadership and no effective performance monitoring. The cabinet secretary has been in post for years. When did he become aware of the systemic failures occurring in a body that is directly within his ambit, and, having failed to involve himself thus far, what remedial action is he taking?

Angus Robertson: First, I pay tribute to Creative Scotland for introducing multiyear funding. It is a transformational shift in the culture sector—and I think that Liam Kerr agrees that that is a good thing. Having done that, Creative Scotland is now in a position to take seriously the suggestions that have been made as part of the review. More than 450 people and organisations took part in it; if Liam Kerr did, I am sorry that I have not seen his contribution of suggestions. If he has any contributions that he passed on to the review that he would wish me to look at closely, I would be delighted to see them.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I join the cabinet secretary and Mr Fraser in congratulating Richard Demarco for his well-deserved award and recognition.

In relation to the Creative Scotland review, I met representatives from the creative sector who raised concerns about the fact that the series of consultation events took place during the summer, which meant that many people could not participate in them due to being on holiday. Concerns were also expressed to me that there was a lack of representation from marginalised groups, such as people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, and that a request for a further consultation event was refused. Is the cabinet secretary aware of those concerns and that feedback, and what steps will he take to ensure that the most marginalised voices are not excluded from decisions on the future of Creative Scotland?

Angus Robertson: I am aware of the issues, which were shared with me at the same time, no doubt, as they were sent to Mr Bibby. I am also aware that Angela Leitch and her team added extra events so that people could take part in the review process.

I give an absolute assurance that marginalised groups who think that their voices have not been heard or who want to make additional suggestions can do so while Creative Scotland, the Scottish Government and our partners—such as our enterprise companies—are considering the contents of the review. I encourage them to pass on their suggestions through Mr Bibby and through other members of the Scottish Parliament, whether those suggestions are made in the formal part of the process or afterwards. We are thinking about the culture sector more broadly, not just about Creative Scotland, and I give Mr Bibby the assurance that their views will be taken very seriously.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on the constitution, external affairs and culture, and parliamentary business.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): On a point of order, Deputy Presiding Officer. I apologise for not giving you prior notice of this point of order. I seek your guidance. Members who ask questions must be in their place at the start of portfolio question time. If they are not, even for a small amount of time, they must apologise—as we heard Clare Adamson do. They also have to remain in the chamber for the entirety of the portfolio questions.

Today, the Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans, Graeme Dey, answered a question from Edward Mountain and then walked out midway through the item. Do the same rules apply to ministers as apply to back-bench MSPs, so that they should remain in the chamber for the entirety of the item during which they are answering questions?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I had just noticed that the Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans had vacated his seat, notwithstanding the fact that portfolio question time had not completed. I have had a word with the clerk about looking into the matter further, and that is what we will now do. I hope that that responds to Mr Ross's question. *[Interruption.]* Excuse me—I am losing my voice.

Justice and Home Affairs

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to questions on the justice and home affairs portfolio. I remind members that, as questions 6 and 7 are grouped together, I will take any supplementaries on those questions after both have been answered.

Greenock Police Station (Replacement)

1. Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on any progress that is

being made to replace Greenock police station and increase police officer numbers in Inverclyde. (S6O-05235)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): The future of Greenock station and custody provision for the area remains under consideration by Police Scotland as part of its wider estates master plan, which we have supported by increasing the capital budget to £70 million. Police Scotland recognises the need for a local policing service for Greenock, while also recognising that the current police station is not fit for modern policing.

Decisions on the deployment of police officers are a matter for the chief constable. As of 30 September 2025, K division, which covers Renfrewshire and Inverclyde, had 618 officers. That is 18 more than in the previous quarter and 17 more than at the same point last year.

Stuart McMillan: Earlier this year, I was informed that the finance was available for a new station, but that the clear stumbling block related to the custody suite capacity, which has been and remains crucial to maintaining a fully functioning police station locally.

Will the cabinet secretary press the chief constable to make a decision on the location of a new police station for Greenock urgently, as serving officers are working in a facility that is not fit for purpose? Will she also impress on the chief constable—notwithstanding the figures that she has just provided—the need to have more police officers operating in Inverclyde as a result of the demands that have been placed on a stretched workforce?

Angela Constance: I very much recognise the member's on-going diligent advocacy for the addressing of concerns about the provision of a new police station to serve Greenock and surrounding communities.

It is important that Police Scotland delivers the correct solution for Greenock, which includes appropriate custody provision for the Inverclyde area, as well as delivering on its overall estates master plan to ensure that appropriate solutions are delivered for communities across Scotland.

Although I respect those operational responsibilities and boundaries, I will raise the member's concern about Greenock police station with the chief constable at our next meeting, as we regularly discuss the estates master plan, which has identified Glasgow and the west of Scotland as a priority.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): I am glad that the cabinet secretary seems to agree that we should have a police station in Greenock. As she

said, one of the concerns that has been raised is about the loss of the custody suite.

More generally, does she agree that it is important that we continue to have custody suites in local areas? Will she use the opportunity of her meeting with Police Scotland to raise that issue and to impress on the organisation the importance of having local custody suites to reduce the time that is spent escorting people when they are taken into custody?

Angela Constance: I reassure the member that, in my discussions with Police Scotland, it has always conveyed to me that where custody suites are located is a key strategic decision. We all know that there will not be a custody suite in every community, but we must have the right spread of custody suites, in the right locations across the country, for the practical reasons that the member has outlined.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD): Police Scotland wrote to me to confirm that, if the Scottish Government was forthcoming with financial resource, it would direct that investment into a new police station. That was in December 2023. Is it the case that the Government has provided the financial resource but it has not been delivered by Police Scotland, or has the financial resource that Police Scotland asked for—and needs—not been forthcoming? If so, why not?

Angela Constance: As I outlined in my original answer, in this financial year, the Government increased the capital resource provision to the Scottish Police Authority. Where Police Scotland deploys that is entirely an operational matter. We are in the middle of planning for the Scottish budget, which will be announced at the start of the new year. However, I point out that the capital allocation from the United Kingdom Government is far from generous.

Fatal Accident Inquiries (Legislation)

2. **Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on whether the legislation that gives the Lord Advocate discretionary powers to instruct fatal accident inquiries, in certain circumstances, into the deaths of persons normally resident in Scotland who die overseas, is operating as intended. (S6O-05236)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): The Scottish Government considers that the legislation is operating as intended. It provides the flexibility for an investigation and an FAI into the death of a person who is ordinarily resident in Scotland when the death occurs outwith the United Kingdom. Its purpose is to allow an FAI when the Lord

Advocate considers it appropriate and in the public interest.

Fatal accident inquiries into deaths overseas were always expected to be rare and none have been held since 2017. Significantly, however, the Inquiries into Fatal Accidents and Sudden Deaths etc (Scotland) Act 2016 has enabled the Crown Office to conduct inquiries that were not previously possible, including post-mortems and the gathering of evidence, which gives families meaningful answers and reassurance.

Bob Doris: I acknowledge that the Lord Advocate has indicated that the 2016 act has allowed various investigative matters to be undertaken following overseas deaths, as the cabinet secretary has indicated. That has perhaps included post-mortems, statements from witnesses based in Scotland, and the requesting of information from abroad about inquiries that have taken place into the findings of investigations there. That is welcome.

However, to date, not a single FAI using the Lord Advocate's discretionary powers has taken place. When I campaigned with my constituent, Julie Love, that was not the situation that we intended. Given that fact, will the cabinet secretary outline whether the Government will consider reviewing the impact of the 2016 act on overseas deaths and whether any legislative or non-legislative improvements could be desirable in the future?

Angela Constance: I acknowledge the tireless campaign—led by Mr Doris's constituent, Julie Love—which was instrumental in securing the change in the law, so that fatal accident inquiries could be held following the death overseas of a person ordinarily resident in Scotland.

Of course, it is a discretionary power that rests with the Lord Advocate and was viewed at the time as a historic change that provided the legislative basis for the Crown to investigate and enabled the Lord Advocate to instruct an FAI when the circumstances, in her view, had not been sufficiently established and there was a real prospect that an inquiry would do so.

The issue is close to my heart and my constituency, and I assure Mr Doris that, as with all legislation and non-legislative measures, we keep the law under regular review to ensure that it continues to meet its intended purposes and operates fairly and effectively in the public interest.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I note the cabinet secretary's position that the 2016 legislation is operating as intended, as we have just heard. However, no FAIs into deaths overseas have happened so far. Families such as that of Montrose man, Davy Cornock, have been told for

years that the issue will be sorted, but nothing has been delivered.

I acknowledge the point that has just been raised, but does the cabinet secretary believe that it might be time for a committee-led, post-legislative review of the 2016 act to ensure that it was—and remains—fit for purpose?

Angela Constance: That would be a matter for the relevant parliamentary committee. The Government would stand by to give evidence on that as required.

When the 2016 act was going through Parliament, it was acknowledged by Lord Cullen, who did the review that underpinned the act—and in evidence that the Scottish Government gave and in some of the contributions of members in the chamber—that an FAI into a death overseas would be rare. The reason for that is that, without the co-operation of the domestic authority overseas, formidable hurdles exist. Of course, we cannot compel witnesses who are outwith the United Kingdom to participate. I hope that I have articulated those formidable hurdles accurately and fairly to those who have lost someone, such as Mr Cornock.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Things that are rare do happen, but the cabinet secretary has conceded that these fatal accident inquiries do not happen—indeed, none have happened. In a letter to me on 19 November, she said that

“there are currently no plans to amend the legislation.”

I think that we are making some progress today on the idea that a review might take place—the question is how. The First Minister said to a journalist on 10 October that he entirely understands the concerns of my constituent in that area and that he

“would want to see those addressed.”

Yes, a committee review would be one option, but what is the Government doing, in its own time and capacity, to address the issue of review? It cannot be satisfied that the legislation is meeting the needs of ordinary Scots.

Angela Constance: I accept that rare things do, indeed, happen on occasion. I have been up front and candid with Parliament that we have no current plans between now and the end of the parliamentary session to review the legislation.

Irrespective of whether an FAI is permissible under the 2016 act, there are formidable hurdles that would be difficult for any Parliament to overcome. Those relate to the primacy of investigation lying with the jurisdiction where the offence took place. Meaningful investigations by either the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal

Service or Police Scotland are virtually impossible without the co-operation of the other jurisdiction.

I reassure members that, both as cabinet secretary and, indeed, as a constituency MSP, I have shaken the issue up and down and I always try to look at it. However, I believe that we all need to keep an open mind.

Adult Education Services (Safety and Security)

3. **Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of reported protests outside a primary school in Glasgow, what support it is offering to Police Scotland, local authorities and other agencies to ensure the safety and security of those using adult education services. (S6O-05237)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): No one in a school community—children and young people, school staff, families or other visitors—should experience intimidating or racist behaviour. Early in 2026, we will publish new guidance that supports a whole-school approach to addressing racism and racist incidents, which includes guidance on responding to parents, carers and families who experience racism in a school setting.

The right to peaceful public assembly and freedom of expression should never be used to justify any form of hateful, violent or otherwise criminal behaviour. We support Police Scotland in taking appropriate action in response to any criminal offences that are being committed at, or around, protests.

Emma Harper: Those who are not content with intimidating asylum seekers in temporary accommodation and threatening those who offer their solidarity have now turned their attention to primary schools that are offering ESOL—English for speakers of other languages—classes.

Will the minister assure me, the chamber and the communities that are being targeted by those with extreme views, that every step will be taken by Police Scotland and the judicial system to ensure the safety of individuals and guarantee their right to education? What discussions have taken place with the United Kingdom Government about its role in fanning the flames of hatred with its recent rhetoric?

Siobhian Brown: There is absolutely no place for prejudice, discrimination or racism in Scotland. The First Minister reinforced that message at the weekend, at the Scottish Trades Union Congress St Andrew's day march and rally to stand up against racism, when he committed this Government to tackling prejudice, rooting out racism and leaving no community marginalised, isolated or vulnerable.

I am sure that Ms Harper will be pleased to hear that the Scottish Government and the STUC have launched the united workplaces project, which is backed up by £200,000 of Government funding, to support trade unions to promote equality and diversity in the workplace, to challenge discrimination and to build stronger links with communities.

I will ask the Minister for Equalities to write to the member regarding conversations with the UK Government.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): As the minister probably knows, Dalmarnock primary school is in my constituency. Will she confirm that parents going into school to visit teachers or attend ESOL classes do not need to be part of the protecting vulnerable groups scheme, and that parents should be able to access all schools?

Siobhian Brown: My understanding is that that is correct.

Transgender Prisoners Policy (Court Proceedings) (Scottish Government Question Responses)

4. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government for what reasons it is choosing not to answer any questions on the court proceedings in relation to its policy on transgender prisoners, which allows biological male prisoners to be housed in women's prisons, despite the Supreme Court's recent ruling, in light of section 5 of the Contempt of Court Act 1981 allowing matters of general public interest to be discussed. (S6O-05238)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): It is the Scottish Government's long-held position that it would be inappropriate for the Scottish ministers to comment on live court proceedings. In all cases, we have an obligation to uphold the independence of the judiciary. We do not ever want the Government to be seen as interfering in the work of our independent courts. The appropriate forum for discussions on live litigation is the court, and that ensures that the proper respect is afforded to the judiciary and also to the litigants.

Douglas Ross: The cabinet secretary spoke about respect, but where is the respect if she and her Government are going to court to demand that biological men should still be housed in women's prisons when the Supreme Court ruling was crystal clear? They should respect the Supreme Court ruling.

Let us be very clear that that is not part of a long-standing convention. The First Minister said outside the chamber that, legally, he was not able to speak about the issue, and that was also the position of the cabinet secretary. We had to find

out the actual reason why they could not speak from their special advisers and press spokespeople, who said that ministers are choosing not to speak, rather than being legally barred.

Will the cabinet secretary find a backbone and tell us exactly why the Government is taking the matter to court? Will she be honest with the public, who want answers, about why taxpayers' money is being used to defend the Scottish Government's position, rather than it respecting the Supreme Court judgment?

Angela Constance: It is the long-held position of the Scottish Government, which mirrors that of United Kingdom Governments past and present, that it would be inappropriate to comment on live court proceedings.

On Mr Ross's more general point about compliance with the law, the Scottish Prison Service, as a public body, is required to comply with the Equality Act 2010 and other legislation, as are ministers. The SPS is clear, as are Scottish ministers, that we need to uphold the rights of all individuals while they are in custody.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Until the Scottish Prison Service recognises the Supreme Court ruling on the meaning of sex and the Equality Act 2010, it will not be complying with the decision. That means that it implements a policy that assesses those with a history of violence and manages that at its discretion. We have seen today that Girlguiding and the Women's Institute have already complied, so why not the Scottish Prison Service?

What mechanisms are in place to monitor and review the current application of SPS policy on the admission of transgender prisoners to women's prisons? Will the Government publish data on how often that policy has been applied?

Angela Constance: I will certainly consider the detail of Ms McNeill's question, but I hope that she can be reassured, at least in the short term, that there is, right across Government, a clear commitment to comply with the law, which includes equality legislation.

The Government has clearly stated that it accepts the ruling from the Supreme Court. As previous updates by colleagues have confirmed, a breadth and depth of work is taking place to review policies and practices across the piece, which is obviously applicable to the justice system. For example, work has already taken place with Police Scotland on its interim code on stop and search, and there has been a change to guidance in schools and to gender representation on public boards.

Scottish Prison Service (Transgender Women Prisoners)

5. Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what it considers to be an acceptable risk of harm as defined in the Scottish Prison Service policy on the admission of transgender women to women's prisons. (S6O-05239)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): When placing a transgender person in the estate, the SPS adopts an individualised approach to assess and manage all known risks that supports the health and wellbeing of everyone living and working in our prisons.

The operational guidance states that a transgender woman will be considered for admission into the women's estate only when

"she does not meet the violence against women and girls criteria"

and

"there is no other basis to suppose that she poses an unacceptable risk of harm to those housed in the women's estate."

That does not mean that there is any acceptable risk, but all risks are assessed and there is consideration of how they can best be managed in a prison setting.

The SPS manages some of the most complex and vulnerable people in our society, and I both recognise and appreciate the unique skills and wealth of operational experience that it utilises daily to keep our prisons safe.

Michelle Thomson: I put on the record that the policy is about placing biological men in women's prisons. Risk has two components: first, the chance of harm, and secondly, the nature of that harm. Most violence against women goes unreported. A male prisoner may have been convicted for certain offences, but any other history is not known. Does that constitute an acceptable risk? Many women in prisons suffer from trauma caused by male violence. Does fear and anxiety, halted recovery or retraumatisation constitute an acceptable risk? Does the removal of a female prisoner's right to safety, privacy and dignity constitute an acceptable risk?

Unless the Government is happy to tolerate harm to women, it must inform the Scottish Prison Service to remove the notion of acceptable risk of harm from its policy. Even better, it should surely be told to obey the law as confirmed by the Supreme Court.

Angela Constance: I will not repeat the answers that I have given to other members, but I again clearly state that there is an obligation that

all known risks must be considered and assessed. The point about unknown risks was reflected in the change to admissions procedures as part of the policy, because it was recognised that, when prisoners are being admitted to prison, the organisation can be time and information poor. There are additional layers of assurance to manage risk.

Decisions about risk are taken by risk management teams. They ensure that decisions are evidence based and focused on public protection and safety. Those teams are multidisciplinary and they bring together expertise so that there can be reliability in decisions that are very much focused on keeping everyone safe.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): The Supreme Court ruling was clear, and men should not be in women's prisons. Will the cabinet secretary outline what review mechanisms are in place once an individual is transferred into the female estate? In particular, how are any emerging risks identified and acted on? What criteria would trigger any reassessment or removal from the women's estate?

Angela Constance: As I have intimated, the SPS has formal risk management processes with partners. It utilises its experience of managing risk when placing a transgender person, and known factors such as convictions and behaviours—past, present and pending—are all assessed. When the SPS does not feel that it has received sufficient information about a transgender individual's history or past behaviours, that is also taken into consideration to inform appropriate placement.

Adapted E-bikes and E-scooters

6. Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with Police Scotland regarding the illegal use of adapted e-bikes and e-scooters. (S6O-05240)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): Ministers and officials regularly meet Police Scotland and others to discuss the impact of the illegal use of e-bikes and e-scooters on local communities and the powers that are available to tackle the crime. That has informed action, including our campaign in the summer to encourage anonymous reporting through Crimestoppers. The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity, Jim Fairlie, and I met His Majesty's chief inspector of constabulary on the issue two weeks ago, and we continue to engage with the United Kingdom Government, which has the powers relating to off-road vehicles, including vehicle licensing.

Craig Hoy: In recent weeks, I have knocked on doors in towns including Dumfries, Annan and Lockerbie, and residents have repeatedly raised

concerns about the illegal and growing use of e-scooters and souped-up e-bikes on roads and pavements. One elderly constituent in Annan said that she was scared to leave her house in case she was involved in a collision with youths who are often clad in hoodies or balaclavas. Those concerns are shared by Police Scotland and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, which I met recently to discuss the problem. Will the minister now ensure that the police in Dumfries and Galloway have the funding, the manpower and the support to tackle this mounting problem before someone is killed?

Siobhian Brown: I am aware of Dumfries and Galloway's community policing unit, which was out recently leafleting residents about the dangers of e-scooters. We support Police Scotland and its partners in dealing with the misuse of vehicles. Last week, Police Scotland confirmed that anyone who is found riding a non-compliant e-bike or e-scooter on public roads is likely to have it seized by officers.

It is important to highlight that, this year, we have increased police funding to £1.64 billion, which is an increase of £90 million, in order to support police capacity and capability. I note that Mr Hoy did not support that budget or vote for it.

E-bike Users (Antisocial Behaviour and Criminality)

7. **Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to respond to the reported increase in antisocial behaviour and criminality associated with people using e-bikes. (S6O-05241)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): As I said earlier, our focus is on supporting the police to tackle that issue effectively. Enforcement is a matter for Police Scotland, and local policing teams are best placed to identify misuse and work to prevent future incidents. That has informed action, including a campaign to encourage anonymous reporting through Crimestoppers.

I was pleased to note that, last week, Police Scotland partnered with the Royal hospital for children and young people to launch an awareness campaign that urges parents and carers to consider the dangers that e-scooters and e-bikes present before purchasing one for a child this Christmas.

Sue Webber: I thank the minister for that response and for the letter that I received on Monday. She has used some of the content of that letter to respond to me and to Mr Hoy this afternoon.

Local authorities are already strained in trying to provide funding for youth work, and police budgets

are stretched. Although I welcome the initiatives and operations that local authorities and the police are conducting, gangs and criminals have unlimited resources, and we need more than the occasional police operation—we need a serious plan that is targeted at this growing threat to public safety on our streets. Will the minister commit to prioritising that?

Siobhian Brown: Police Scotland has advised that the current powers under the Road Traffic Act 1988 and the Antisocial Behaviour etc (Scotland) Act 2004 are sufficient to respond to the misuse of off-road vehicles. I know that the member has attended several of our meetings in the past year and is aware of all the work that the Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity, Jim Fairlie, and I are doing.

I highlight a really good example that is going to committee at the City of Edinburgh Council tomorrow, of which the member might be aware. Council officers have proposed a targeted package of actions to address the misuse of quad bikes, dirt bikes and other non-compliant vehicles. That would be run through a cross-agency community interest partnership with Police Scotland, which would deploy mobile closed-circuit television in hotspot areas. We know that the problem exists across Scotland, but the situation in rural areas is very different from that in cities. That package of actions, if it is approved, will be a really good example, and other local authorities could follow suit.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I apologise to those members whom I was unable to call, including the member who lodged question 8, but we have run out of time and I need to protect the rest of the afternoon's business. That concludes portfolio question time on justice and home affairs.

Social Care

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-19977, in the name of Jackie Baillie, on crisis in social care. I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now or as soon as possible.

14:53

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): My constituent Charles McGarvey was an English teacher, but in 2018, his life changed forever. Following an accident, he became quadriplegic. He cannot use his arms and legs and must rely on support from carers. Life being paralysed is challenging enough, but in the past year, the specialist team that has supported him has disappeared, and he learned only through word of mouth that his overnight care would be terminated.

Mr McGarvey's care needs have not changed. What has changed is the relentless drive for cuts in social care, and his story is typical of many of those who receive social care across Scotland. The United Kingdom Labour Government has delivered more than £10 billion of additional funding for Scotland since 2024, but it is up to the Scottish National Party Government to spend it.

So, where has the money gone? It has not gone into social care. For years, the SNP has underfunded health and social care partnerships—the local bodies that are responsible for the delivery of social care—and now the system is on the verge of collapse. There is a black hole in their budgets of almost £500 million in this financial year, so it is no wonder that they are being forced to make cuts. At least £90 million has been cut from services, at least £72 million has been cut by reducing social care capacity and at least £68 million has been cut from staffing budgets—the list goes on.

Social care providers in the voluntary sector are in danger of going to the wall and care homes are closing. Across Scotland, it is the poorest and most vulnerable who are paying the price. We are now funding only crisis care and only those who require critical care will get support. Everyone else who asks for help will have to fend for themselves.

In North Ayrshire, £500,000 has been slashed from the care at home service. There were cuts of £200,000 to residents' care packages and £200,000 to day care. They did not want to do that, but the Scottish Government is underfunding them.

In Aberdeenshire, there are eight projects closing and there is reduced eligibility for day care

centres, while the number of activity hubs for older people has halved. They did not want to do that either, but it is down to the Scottish Government underfunding them.

There have been 145 jobs lost in Glasgow to cover a £42.5 million gap. That has led to the loss of a supported living service for elderly people, including people with dementia, and the loss of a counselling service for victims of sexual assault. They did not want to do that, but it is down to a lack of Government funding.

In West Lothian, there is currently a consultation on cuts of £14 million, including a reduction in the number of adult day service support days. Care hours have been capped in Argyll and Bute, where the health and social care partnership is funding only critical care at the same time as closing day services and a care home. In Edinburgh, the health and social care partnership is cutting almost all funding to community mental health services. None of them want to cut services, but they are forced into doing that because they do not have the budget that they need.

Every few months, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care stands up in the chamber to say that we need more preventative care in the community—and I agree with him. However, that is not the reality on the ground. The reality is that preventative services are being slashed, leaving families to struggle on until they are in crisis. Experienced social care staff are losing their jobs at a time when the sector is struggling to recruit. For example, despite increasing clinical need, there are 28 per cent fewer registered nurses in care homes for adults compared with in 2013.

A recent survey by the Coalition of Care and Support Providers in Scotland found that 82 per cent of its members are funding shortfalls in contract costs themselves—that has been going on for years. More pressure is being piled on unpaid carers, who are yet to see the breaks that they are legally entitled to. As the story of my constituent shows, even those who have the highest care needs are having their support downgraded.

The SNP Government's neglect of Scotland's social care shames us all. It wasted £30 million and years of Government time on the so-called National Care Service (Scotland) Bill, which was a mess, and failed to pay for a single extra carer. The Government promised to scrap non-residential care charges, but we are still waiting for that. To add insult to injury, the £20 million that was recently announced to improve social care capacity over the tough winter period is being given to health boards rather than being directed at social care.

In the meantime, our population is growing older and sicker. The number of people who are waiting for a social care assessment is 30 per cent higher than at the same time last year, and nearly 2,000 people every month are stuck in hospital because of delayed discharge, which is mostly due to a lack of social care packages. We simply cannot afford for this to continue any longer.

At best, social care is delivered locally by a range of partners—by the public, private and voluntary sectors working together. That delivery is informed by the views of those who are being cared for and their families. Social care helps people to remain in their own homes without needing to go into hospital, but we are reversing that because of the serious lack of funding. The Scottish Government needs to stop patting itself on the back and spinning the amount of money that it is putting in, which simply fails to match the level of need that is evident and required.

I ask the Government, in all sincerity, to just implement the recommendations of the Feeley report, which the Government commissioned, and to raise the minimum wage for social care workers to £15 an hour, so that doing a challenging job—caring—does not pay less than stacking shelves at Aldi. For five years—I am nothing if not consistent—I have asked the SNP to do that but, for five years, it has said no. For years, the Government has blamed its failures on absolutely everybody else—it is never its fault—and it continues to do so today in its amendment, instead of facing up to and dealing with the crisis.

Scotland has a record budget settlement. This is the opportunity to make deep and meaningful change. The SNP Government must learn the lessons of the past two decades and prioritise social care. It must close the funding gap, prioritise the needs of vulnerable people and show that it values our vital social care workforce before it is too late.

I move,

That the Parliament believes that the Scottish Government's failure to prioritise social care has fuelled a crisis, harming some of Scotland's most vulnerable people, and calls on the Scottish Ministers to work to close the funding gap facing health and social care partnerships and value Scotland's care workforce.

15:00

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): I start by thanking those in our incredible social care workforce for all that they do. Their hard work and resilience ensure that those who need care receive it with dignity and respect, including members of my family and those of colleagues across the chamber.

I do not hide from the issues facing the social care sector that lie in Scotland and for which the Scottish Government holds responsibility—far from it. I know that there are complex challenges that require long-term action. That is why my amendment specifically references the need for the Government to continue to work closely with partners across the sector, including funding local government and the community and voluntary sector, to continue making improvements for the social care workforce and all those whom it supports.

We need a sustainable and fair approach to funding the sector—on that, we can all agree. That is why, despite what Jackie Baillie said, our investment in social care has reached record highs. Our amendment references the 2025-26 budget, to which the Greens and Liberal Democrats contributed and which includes more than £15 billion for the local government settlement and almost £2.2 billion for social care and integration, exceeding our commitment to increase funding by 25 per cent early and by nearly £350 million.

We continue to invest in our workforce through the real living wage, with an estimated £950 million that enables adult social care workers in the community and private sectors to be paid at least the real living wage. We have committed to establishing voluntary sectoral bargaining arrangements in Scotland, and we have been working through the fair work in social care group to progress that. No one should have to wait for care assessments, families should not be in any distress and their loved ones should be supported and provided with the appropriate care package. I recognise the need for the Government to do more, collectively and in partnership with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and social care providers, to make improvements.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Neil Gray: If I can get the time back, Presiding Officer, I will take an intervention.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You can get the time back, cabinet secretary.

Paul Sweeney: On collaboration and co-operation, the cabinet secretary might be aware of my constituent six-year-old Brie McCann, who is urgently waiting for a transfer to Great Ormond Street hospital for a heart transplant. Is he aware of that case, and is he doing something to expedite it? It is a matter of hours that we are talking about, which is why the issue is so urgent.

Neil Gray: That is not directly related to social care, but of course I am aware of the issue. I spoke about the issue on BBC Radio Scotland's "Breakfast" programme this morning. I understand

the situation, and I have asked for proper collaboration to happen between Great Ormond Street and NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde to ensure that Brie can get the treatment and support that she needs.

I do not shirk the Government's responsibility to work to improve social care. We are delivering on the commitments of the Care Reform (Scotland) Act 2025, which was passed by the Parliament, and we will establish a national social work agency by spring 2026. I am very open to working collaboratively on the issue with anyone in the chamber who wants to do so.

Despite Labour's claims of what it would do in power, I note that, far short of £15 an hour for social care workers, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rachel Reeves, did not mention social care once in her budget speech last week.

Vic Rayner, the chief executive of the National Care Forum, said that

"the truth is that the cupboard is bare"

and that the

"budget which neither recognises the contribution or the real cost of adult social care"

feels like

"a missed opportunity".

I must point out the glaring hypocrisy that is on display from the Labour Party today. Jackie Baillie spoke about recruitment challenges, but it is her party that has presided over some of the most restrictive migration policies that are delivering a hammer blow to social care.

Jackie Baillie: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Neil Gray: I know that Jackie Baillie does not want to hear that, so instead I will share with her some comments from the sector. In May, Donald Macaskill of Scottish Care said:

"When the United Kingdom Government, without consultation and engagement with the care sector ... unilaterally decided we can no longer recruit from abroad, they did so with little appreciation of just how damaging their actions could be."

In November, he then urged Scottish Labour to challenge the latest migration proposals on settlement, after 15 years of branding them

"insensitive to Scotland's distinct needs".

He went on to say:

"Their impact especially in Scotland's remote and rural communities is incalculable. They also send a damaging message that the invaluable contributions of migrant care workers are not fully recognised or valued."

Does Jackie Baillie support the UK Government's approach to migration that is

undermining our communities? I will take her intervention.

Jackie Baillie: That is fantastic. This challenge has been on-going for years now. Year after year, there have been vacancies in social care that the Government has been unable to fill because you do not pay them enough and because your terms and conditions are rubbish. Migration has been a recent phenomenon in the past two years—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Gray.

Jackie Baillie: You had the power to do something about it, but you have failed.

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

Neil Gray: I challenge Jackie Baillie to defend her Government's approach to migration, which, in the words of the industry, is undermining our approach to recruitment and retention. She failed to do so because her leader describes it as "brave". There is nothing brave about sacrificing our critical services for our people, in the cause of supporting a Faragist approach to migration.

We came to expect the draconian and Faragist approach to immigration from the Tories, but under a Labour Government, we have seen an even more severe approach, with a 77 per cent drop in the year ending June 2025 in the number of health and care visas granted by the Home Office. Labour went even further and closed the social care worker visa entirely, completely undermining our ability to provide care to the most vulnerable members of our society.

Labour will undoubtedly say today that its focus is on supporting jobs for Scottish care workers, but the reality is that the demographics of our ageing population mean that we do not have enough workers in Scotland. We not only need international workers to bolster our workforce; we also deeply value the contribution that they make.

Those international workers make up an estimated 26 per cent of our social care workforce. It is not brave—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude.

Neil Gray: —to undermine our critical services; it is a disgrace.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): *[Made a request to intervene.]*

Neil Gray: I think that I need to conclude.

Scotland has many talented and compassionate social care workers who have settled here and who call our communities home. We are

determined that they will be allowed to remain in Scotland, making a difference in the lives of our most vulnerable.

I move amendment S6M-19977.1, to leave out from “Scottish Government’s” to end and insert:

“UK Government must reverse its hostile and damaging migration policies, which have led to a 77% drop in the number of Health and Social Care visas granted, which in turn is having a devastating impact on the social care sector across Scotland; welcomes the valuable contribution that international workers make to Scotland’s care sector, communities and economy, and notes that the Scottish social care sector has called for the reversal of these harmful policies; reiterates that Scotland is a welcoming nation and that the Scottish Government must continue to ensure that those who have chosen to make Scotland their home can continue to do so; calls for a reversal of the increase in employer national insurance contributions, which has placed an additional £84 million pressure on the sector; recognises that the 2025-26 Budget includes over £15 billion for the local government settlement, including almost £2.2 billion for social care integration, but agrees that the Scottish Government must continue to work closely with partners across the sector, including funding local government and the third sector, to continue making improvements for the social care workforce, and all of those who they support.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I discourage members on the front benches from carrying on a conversation while someone else is on their feet.

15:08

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I declare an interest as a practising NHS general practitioner.

Scotland’s social care system is in crisis—not by accident but because this SNP Government has failed to prioritise it year after year. When a range of organisations as broad as Scottish Care, Age Scotland, Alzheimer Scotland, COSLA, the Accounts Commission and the Scottish Fiscal Commission all use the same language—“breaking point”, “unsustainable”, “a perfect storm”—it should shake the Government out of its complacency, but alas, no. Instead, ministers behave as though acknowledging reality would somehow be disloyal to their own mythology, created in their ivory towers, surrounded by quangos telling them how great they are.

That is exactly what Neil Gray’s amendment is—another exercise in SNP exceptionalism and an attempt to airbrush out 18 years of failure by blaming anyone and everyone else. It is, to be frank, extraordinary. At a time when delayed discharge is at record levels, when one in five care homes has closed and when thousands wait months for assessments, we are presented with an amendment that is so self-congratulatory it reads like the greatest hits album of an SNP campfire song.

Neil Gray: I recognise that there will be differences in viewpoint on the issue between us and the Conservatives, but I hope that you can see quite clearly that I have set out in my amendment the need to work more with local government and our care providers. It is acknowledged and it is our responsibility to do so.

I had also hoped that there might have been consensus on the point in the amendment around the need for the UK Government to scrap the increase in employers’ national insurance contributions, which are costing our social care providers £84 million.

Sandesh Gulhane: It is very clear that the Labour budget was damaging to our social care sector and our charities, but we cannot get away from the fact that the SNP has had 18 years in which it could have funded councils appropriately and done the right thing by social care.

The SNP seems to be a legend in its own mind. This Government wants to tell us that the crisis is all caused by UK migration policy. Let me be clear: international carers make an invaluable contribution, but the idea that Scotland’s social care crisis began this year or last year is simply delusional. We have had a workforce crisis since 2015 because the workforce has shrunk. The number of nursing staff in care homes has fallen by 28 per cent in a decade and providers are relying on financial reserves just to stay afloat—none of that was caused by a visa rule change.

What was caused by this SNP Government was the waste of £30 million on the now-abandoned national care service—money that could have employed 1,200 care workers or delivered 1 million hours of care, all squandered. When that collapsed, what did we get? Another talking shop that was boycotted by trade unions and that cost thousands more. That is not reform; it is panic and drift.

Meanwhile, delayed discharge has become the norm. In October alone, nearly 2,000 people were trapped in hospital despite being medically fit to go home. More than 61,000 bed days were lost. Every delay that is backed up into accident and emergency or cancelled operations grinds staff into the ground. Let us not forget the human cost beyond the NHS. There are 627,000 unpaid carers, nearly half of whom are cutting back on food and heating, and a third of whom have been driven into debt, with only 13 per cent receiving a break. If that does not sound the alarm bells, I genuinely do not know what will spark ministers’ action.

We must close the funding gaps in health and social care partnerships, properly fund councils, establish a real workforce plan and finally recognise the workforce’s value—not with press

releases but with pay, training and respect. Scotland does not need more excuses or more constitutional diversions; it needs competence, honesty and a Government that is willing to fix the system that it has allowed to deteriorate before our very eyes.

I move amendment S6M-19977.2, to leave out from “, and calls” to end and insert:

“; recognises the significant impact that delays to social care packages and inadequate community-based social care provision have on the NHS, including longer avoidable stays in hospital; condemns the waste of £30 million for developing the now abandoned plans for a National Care Service; urges the Scottish Government to address record levels of delayed discharge and rising waiting times for social care assessments, and calls on the Scottish Ministers to close the funding gaps faced by health and social care partnerships by ensuring councils are appropriately funded, establish a proper workforce plan for social care to improve recruitment and retention of staff, and make sure that the value of Scotland’s care workforce is properly recognised.”

15:12

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I pay tribute to the social care staff and unpaid carers of all ages who work so hard to take care of people under often very difficult circumstances. Low pay, understaffing and a lack of access to proper breaks from caring have all placed enormous pressure on people who give their all day in, day out, and it is not an exaggeration to say that the sector is in crisis. Historic underfunding has led to long waits for care and support, which is too often only available, if at all, when people reach crisis point.

We can all reflect on the real experiences of our constituents and our own families. Parents are denied social care for their son when a package would transform the lives of everyone in the family. A grandfather is trapped in a hospital bed, waiting for social work and the NHS to finally agree a package so that he can return home. Despite the passage of the Care Reform (Scotland) Act 2025, fundamental reform of the sector is still needed, because the ambitions of the independent review of adult social care have not yet been realised.

For example, we are yet to achieve ethical commissioning, which would recognise the value of the third sector as equal partners in delivering social care. Representatives from the sector are clear that the current commissioning model is harmful and unsustainable. According to Scottish Action for Mental Health,

“Ethical commissioning should be based on partnership and cooperation between commissioners, social care providers and people in receipt of social care, rather than the existing model of competition which prioritises cost.”

In their closing speeches, I want to hear from ministers about what steps they are taking to

ensure that genuine ethical commissioning is taking place in the sector.

In 2021, the Scottish Government committed to ending non-residential social care charges, but no meaningful progress has been made since then. As a report that the Joseph Rowntree Foundation published last month highlighted,

“disabled people face deepening poverty and rising costs”.

Disabled people’s access to social care support is critical to the realisation of their human rights, but they are all too often denied those rights by a system that brutalises them and fails to meet their basic needs. A Glasgow Disability Alliance survey that was conducted last year revealed what that means in practice for disabled people—93 per cent were worried about money, 71 per cent could not meet their needs on their income and 67 per cent could not access social care that actually met their needs.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation report found that, at the same time as disabled people and their households are facing rising costs, local authorities are making decisions to increase non-residential social care support charges and raise eligibility thresholds for accessing support. The report is clear that the Scottish Government and COSLA should work together, without delay, to deliver a clear timeline for removing non-residential care charges.

The SNP’s amendment is right to note that the UK Government’s hostile immigration policies are starting to have a “devastating impact” on the sector. Scottish Care has warned that UK Labour’s proposal to extend the qualifying period for settlement for legal migrants, particularly the increase from five to 15 years for those on health and social care visas, will have a “profoundly negative impact” on care services across Scotland. We cannot afford to lose those hard-working people from the sector. I urge Scottish Labour to acknowledge the impact that those policies will have, and are having, in contributing to the crisis that exists in the social care sector.

Jackie Baillie: Will Mark Ruskell take an intervention?

Mark Ruskell: I am in my closing sentences.

I urge the Scottish Government to redouble its efforts, using all the powers that it has, to fund and reform a social care system that is genuinely fit for the 21st century.

15:17

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I am grateful to Labour for making time to discuss this important issue. As we convene in the chamber this afternoon, any number of our

constituents might be waiting for an ambulance, either in their home or, worse still, in the street; any number of our constituents might be in an ambulance waiting to get into an accident and emergency department or trying to leave an accident and emergency department to get into the wider hospital; and any number of our constituents might be receiving a dispiriting telephone call to say that the elective orthopaedic surgery that they were expecting to have tomorrow has now been cancelled. That is all for want of capacity in our hospitals.

The crisis in our health service is not caused by a deficiency in emergency care or in orthopaedic surgery; it is caused by the fact that, on any given night in Scotland, 2,000 of our fellow Scots are trapped in hospital, well enough to go home but too frail to do so without a care package for them to receive at home or a care bed in a local care home. That reality causes an interruption in flow throughout our whole health sector.

This week, it was revealed that that is not the case just in our hospitals.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Will Alex Cole-Hamilton take an intervention?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am afraid that I have a lot to get through.

It has been revealed that, notwithstanding the people I have just talked about, more than 11,000 people are currently waiting on social care assessments and care-at-home packages. Those figures are a stark reminder of just how badly things have been allowed to drift.

Make no mistake—bad policy choices are driving the crisis. The funding gap that health and social care partnerships face is widening, and the care workforce—the very people who hold the entire system together—is still not properly valued and not paid enough.

Research that my party conducted found that 476 care homes for older people have either collapsed or been sold off since 2015. That includes 56 in Glasgow, 46 in Fife, 43 in Edinburgh, 36 in South Lanarkshire and 24 in the Highlands—that means that the care offer in the Highlands has been decimated. Behind those numbers are uprooted residents and families panicking about where their loved ones will go and how they will travel the distance required to see them. Many of those care homes were forced to close because they simply were no longer financially viable, and some had to close because they could not recruit staff.

The sector is under impossible strain, and care providers feel that they are on their own. It is clear to see why. The SNP wasted four years and £30 million of taxpayers' money chasing a bureaucratic

takeover of social care that it eventually abandoned. That money could have paid the annual salary of 1,200 care workers. It makes people want to cry. That is four lost years, when the gaps in home care were glaring, costs were soaring and homes were closing month after month.

The UK Labour Government has not covered itself in glory, either. It has hammered care providers with a hike in employer national insurance contributions, which has made recruitment and retention all the harder.

Jackie Baillie: Will the member take an intervention?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am afraid that I must make progress. I am in my final minute.

The care crisis is interrupting the flow of the whole NHS. As I said, it is one of the biggest reasons why A and E departments cannot move patients on into the wider hospital.

When social care fails, the NHS fails. How do we solve that? Ultimately, Scotland needs a change of Government next May. The Scottish Liberal Democrats are the party of care: we introduced free personal care for older people, forced the ill-fated centralisation of social care out of this year's budget and created a new pipeline of care workers into Scotland's colleges. For unpaid carers, who too often are overlooked, it was our party that secured the right of family carers to earn more from this year on and that passed the Carer's Leave Act 2023 into law, which gave new rights to 2.4 million carers to help them to better balance work and caring responsibilities.

We need to value the care workforce. We need to make care a profession of choice again and pay workers a living wage that they will find attractive. That is the fastest and simplest way to attract new staff and to stop existing workers leaving the profession entirely. Only by fixing social care can we fix our NHS, protect our communities and ensure that people in Scotland get the dignity and support that they deserve.

15:21

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I extend my gratitude to all health and social care staff, who provide an extraordinary level of care and service to so many across Scotland.

Having listened to others' contributions so far, it is clear to me that the value of social care and its workforce cannot be overstated. Social care provides invaluable and tailored support to thousands across the country; it improves quality of life and allows as many as possible to lead an independent life. However, we know that many are missing out.

Social care forms an integral part of our health system. However, as in many other areas of healthcare, a crisis has been growing in social care for quite some time. It seems as though, for 18 years, that has been blanked from the minds of the Scottish Government. With increasing demand, funding constraints and workforce pressure, the question of how we value and invest in social care has never been more important, but the question of how the Scottish Government values and invests in social care needs to be answered.

A failure to prioritise has fuelled challenges and, despite repeated warnings to the Government, health and social care partnerships now face serious budget shortfalls. That has led to local communities' care packages being cut—"viciously cut", as one carer described it—which is forcing people to wait months for necessary support. Integration joint boards' finances are at risk of collapse, and the continued trajectory of overspend, depletion of resources and reliance on one-off, rather than recurring, savings has, according to Audit Scotland, left a £457 million funding gap.

The lack of funding for health and social care partnerships is not a new phenomenon—it has been a problem for some time. Year after year, the Scottish Government chooses to ignore it. The Government might cite the rising demand in the sector or in other areas as evidence that care is becoming more complex, but that has been exacerbated by a lack of funding in the first instance—the funding has just not kept up with demand.

Underfunding is not an isolated issue; it is a systemic problem that is seen right across Scotland. In my South Scotland region, South Ayrshire IJB faced an end-of-year overspend of more than £2 million, which has left the IJB with concerningly low reserves. That significantly limits its ability to respond to unexpected budget pressures. Levels of delayed discharge in South Ayrshire already sit well above targets. That is a symptom of overspend and a reduction in the funding that is available. There is a need to look at the root causes of that.

Emma Harper: Will the member give way?

Carol Mochan: Of course.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Very briefly, please.

Emma Harper: I will be very brief.

Does Carol Mochan welcome the work that is being done by the frailty unit that has been established in Dumfries by NHS Dumfries and Galloway and the work that is being done at the Garrick hospital in Stranraer to get people out of

hospital faster and into their homes in a safe and timely way? That really is a good example of Scottish Government-led priorities.

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

Carol Mochan: Thank you. The reality is that we might talk about these initiatives, but when we talk to our constituents, we find that it is very difficult for the funding to follow. The crisis is such that, even though there are small pockets that we can talk about positively, they are not replicating themselves across Scotland, so many of our constituents sit waiting for care.

In closing, I make it clear that the long-standing underfunding of social care in Scotland is not a new problem. It is a direct result of mismanagement and, I think, a lack of leadership by the Scottish Government. Thousands are waiting for social care assessments and support; delayed discharges remain stubbornly high; and, as we have heard, the number of care homes has plummeted.

In the summer, I did a piece for the Scottish Parliament on whether we value social care in Scotland. This will be my last word—that the conclusion from not just me but the sector and carers is that we do not value it in Scotland. It is time that this Government valued social care, and the money should come forward for it.

15:26

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I would like to give the debate some context, of which members will be well aware.

Covid still casts a long shadow over health and social care services—that is true across the UK. It has not only caused delay; there is no doubt that, because of the restrictions during the pandemic, some people found their health deteriorating even more. That has brought additional pressures on the NHS and care sector. Of course, we must add to that our increasingly ageing population, of which I am one.

Much of that can be attributed to the UK's economic climate. Funding has been mentioned, so I will talk about that. We have had the continuation of decades of austerity, exacerbated by the damaging actions of Liz Truss; we have had continuing inflation of food and energy costs; and we have had the financial impact of increased employer national insurance contributions. All of those have affected the health, care and voluntary sectors, including hospices. Finally, we have Brexit, and now damaging migration policies. All those things are at the hands of Westminster.

The national insurance increases are costing the NHS £191 million each and every year for its directly employed staff, and a further estimated £40 million for contracted services such as GPs, dentists, optometrists and pharmacists. We are seeing an additional recurring burden of £84 million to the care sector and £75 million to the voluntary sector year on year. No wonder hospitals are under threat.

Jackie Baillie: Will the member give way?

Christine Grahame: I am afraid that the member has chosen to have a very short debate about what she calls an emergency, so I am going to continue.

The Scottish Government has introduced a 21.5 per cent increase in the independent living fund, which provides crucial support to disabled persons to enable them to live fulfilling and independent lives. The Government has increased the voluntary sector short breaks fund by 62.5 per cent to £13 million, giving short-break support for adults and young carers. It is expanding hospital at home services. We have free personal care and no prescription charges, neither of which is available in England. That is all preventative spend—and I should also point out that there is no resident doctors strike here.

Against that, we have Westminster's hostile approach to immigration, which, as has been mentioned already, could spell disaster for Scotland's care sector. According to Scottish Care's latest workforce survey, from May 2025, international staff make up at least 26 per cent of the current care workforce, and international workers make up more than 90 per cent of the workforce at some organisations. More than 6,800 of those workers are on visas, and they would be directly affected by proposed changes to UK immigration policy by the current Labour Government.

It is all about funding, migration and the economy, and nobody on the Opposition benches wants to attribute any of those issues to the difficulties facing the public sector throughout Scotland and in other parts of the UK.

Jackie Baillie: Will the member give way?

Christine Grahame: I am in my last minute.

The international staff I have referred to are not just filling labour gaps—they are the backbone of care in many communities in Scotland.

All these issues have been neatly dodged by Dame Jackie Baillie. I will quote my favourite man, Wes Streeting, who himself has said that

"all roads ... lead back to Westminster".

He has also said that

"The NHS is in crisis"

and that the

"decisions that are taken in Westminster don't just affect England, but Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland."

I could not say it better myself.

15:30

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak on an issue that is close to my heart. If it was not for the incredible women who work with me, I would not be here today. Most days, members see them racing around this place doing their job brilliantly. What members do not see, though, is that, on top of all of that, they get out of their bed hours before I do, to help me get out of mine, and they go to their bed hours after me, because they had to help me get into mine first. They help me to the toilet, put my clothes on, do my hair and put on earrings; they give me pain relief, cook, clean, fix my wheelchair and help with shopping—the list goes on. Then, they attend the Parliament. Like the almost 200,000 other people who work in care in Scotland, they work their socks off and, in the process, I am empowered to work my socks off too. I say to them on the record today, "Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for your service."

However, we do that together not because of the social care system but in spite of it. The social care system has been plunged into crisis as a result of years of mismanagement and neglect under the SNP, and it is a crisis that leaves tens of thousands of people fighting for their care, only to end up without the care that they need. It sees unfair charging policies that leave working-age people in households with very little income, masks unmet need and causes significant financial hardship. It sees social care staff fighting day in, day out for better wages.

Despite what its wildly out-of-touch amendment says, it is the SNP that has presided over the workforce crisis because it refused to deliver a wage of £15 per hour. It is the SNP that has cut £38 million that was meant to deliver fair work in social care and that wasted £30 million on its botched national care service plan. All the while, this crisis, which is of the SNP's making, leaves a yawning gap in funding for social care. In Glasgow alone, that gap in the integration joint board's resource is £42 million, and it is triggering cuts, increased charges and, possibly, 145 job losses. Investing in social care is not a cost—it is an investment.

Good social care systems support people into employment and help users sustain jobs; at the same time, they also deliver for carers—who, predominantly, are women. Good social care systems are critical to the realisation of equality

and human rights for disabled people, yet today, on international disabled people's day, countless disabled people are left fighting for the basics. For example, a woman from the north of Glasgow has not had a shower in weeks because she does not get allocated enough care. I say to the Government that providing so little funding, leading to only a meagre 30-minute visit, certainly does not make caring an attractive job to apply for. It is that and the Government's choices that are driving the workforce crisis—a fact that, sadly, is entirely ignored in the SNP's amendment.

Another example is the young woman who lives with her mum, who works part time and who fought tooth and nail for care to be able to do so. When she finally got care in place, she was told that the council would charge her more than £100 a week from her wages to pay for it. Her mum said:

"If we had this kind of expendable income, we most certainly wouldn't be living here. I seriously don't know how we can meet this bill."

It is not right that disabled people should have to fight for care to live, and it is certainly not right that they should have to pay for essential care—care that means that they can work. Taking wages from disabled people to pay for their care is asking them to do the same job as a non-disabled person for less money. In other spheres, that is called an equal pay claim. This Government said that it would end those charges, yet my constituent is left facing them.

Good social care can help people contribute to society and lead ordinary lives. That was the shared ambition on independent living that the SNP Government signed up to in 2009. Where are we now, 16 years later? We are deep amidst the social care crisis, and our Government's contribution to recognising that is an amendment that, as usual, denies reality and blames someone else. That is a disgrace.

I have no doubt at all that the SNP Government will take no responsibility for the policies that have led to this crisis. I wrote a speech on social care that was almost exactly the same as this one, back when that ambition was signed up to in 2009. Nothing has changed; in fact, things have got worse.

The SNP has had nearly two decades, and it has failed the people who needed it the most. It does not deserve more time, and I am pretty sure that, in May next year, the people of Scotland will not give it more time.

15:34

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): Across Scotland, social care is in crisis, and nowhere is that clearer than in my home city of Glasgow. Day

in and day out, I hear from families, unpaid carers, care workers and members of community organisations who are simply exhausted. They are doing everything that they can, but they are being failed by a system that is underfunded, overstretched and increasingly unsafe.

Glasgow's social care system is not just creaking—it is breaking. Local authorities are struggling with unprecedented pressures. The Accounts Commission has already warned that councils face a £650 million black hole, which is being driven in large part by rising social care costs. In the past five years, Glasgow City Council alone has spent almost £100 million on overtime and agency staff simply to keep services afloat. That is not a sustainable workforce model—it is a crisis response that is becoming the norm.

Charities know that, too. Two hundred and forty organisations, including Age Scotland and Alzheimer Scotland, have already warned the First Minister that the sector has been "pushed to breaking point". Those words were not used lightly.

However, instead of fixing those problems, the SNP Government ploughed ahead with its disastrous national care service and spent £30 million on a plan that everyone told it would not work, before being forced into a humiliating climbdown. That £30 million could have delivered 1 million hours of care or paid for 1,200 care workers. Instead, it was just squandered.

While ministers wasted years on an unworkable centralisation project, the real issues were left to spiral. In Glasgow, we are seeing the consequences every single week. Older people are waiting months for basic care assessments, and families are begging for care-at-home packages that simply do not exist. Carers have told me that they are leaving the profession because they cannot cope with the pressure, the hours or the pay. Charities have told me that they are using reserves just to stay open, and 67 per cent of not-for-profit providers have said that they will not survive for more than four years without change.

We are not talking about a functioning social care system. We are talking about a system that is held together by overstretched staff and unpaid carers, the majority of whom are women, who are being pushed well beyond breaking point.

Glasgow deserves better than that. Our city has one of the highest levels of health inequality in the whole of the UK. We have an ageing population and a growing number of people who are living with long-term conditions. Those pressures are not going away, but the support to address them has gone away.

If the Government was serious about improving social care, it would start by listening, not to consultants or central Government committees, but to the workers on the ground: the carers, the nurses, the home support teams and the charities and volunteers who keep Glasgow going every single day. It would listen to the families who tell us that they are at breaking point. They are tired of being passed from pillar to post and tired of hearing promises while their loved ones have to wait for months for help that should be available within days.

Labour's motion rightly highlights the scale of the crisis, but we need more than warm words. We need the Government to finally admit that its approach has failed and that the people of Scotland cannot wait any longer for meaningful action.

I say to the ministers: stop wasting money; stop defending the indefensible; start funding local care properly; start valuing care workers as the essential professionals they are; and start treating Glasgow's vulnerable people with the dignity and urgency that they deserve.

Glasgow's social care crisis is not abstract—it is real, it is immediate and it is harming people right now. The Government must finally get serious about putting it right.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Jamie Hepburn, who will be the final speaker in the open debate.

15:38

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): I very much welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate in support of those who rely on Scotland's social care services and—just as crucially—those who work in the sector.

These matters are important to those we represent. Indeed, just last weekend, when I was out and about doing my usual canvassing, I met a constituent who told me about the quality of the social care provision that her mother receives, but who also expressed concern about the support that social care workers receive. It is right that we reflect on such matters.

We are fortunate to have a social care workforce that is made up of dedicated, skilled individuals who support people to live with independence, dignity and security. Their contribution towards a fully functioning society is essential. Across Scotland, social care staff assist people with an array of complex needs, providing vital daily support and helping to prevent unnecessary admissions to hospital. They sustain independence in the community and strengthen our health system by easing pressures on acute

care. That is an important area for us, and it is right that we debate it.

I express some reservations about the motion that the Labour Party has lodged, which asserts that the Government has failed to prioritise social care and is fuelling a crisis. I cannot accept those charges. The 2025-26 budget provides £21 billion for health and social care, £15 billion for local government—both record levels of funding—and £2.2 billion for social care integration, which the cabinet secretary has already mentioned.

Sandesh Gulhane: Will the member take an intervention?

Jamie Hepburn: I am afraid that I am not able to give Mr Gulhane the time—I have only four minutes.

We all recognise that there are pressures on the sector; we know that there are recruitment challenges, demographic change and rising complexity. However, ignoring the sustained efforts that have already been made, including the investment to ensure that social care workers are paid at least the real living wage, does not help us find solutions.

Jackie Baillie reiterated the call that we have heard from her previously for a £15-an-hour minimum wage for social care workers, although I could not help but notice that her motion is silent on that matter. We can all understand and recognise the aspiration for higher pay—who could not? However, aspirations must be matched by costed and credible funding plans. On that point, Labour has been consistently silent.

Jackie Baillie: Will the member give way?

Jamie Hepburn: I am afraid that four minutes is not enough time for me to be able to do so.

By contrast, the Scottish Government has taken an approach that has ensured that the living wage, as a minimum, is in place for social care staff, delivering a real and affordable uplift for tens of thousands of workers.

I very much support the Government's amendment. It rightly highlights the severe harm that has been caused by the UK Government's restrictive migration policy, which has resulted in a drastic fall in health and social care visas and has placed real strain on recruitment. Although it has been interesting to hear that problem diminished by some Opposition members, it is a problem—we have heard that very clearly from Donald Macaskill, and it has already been articulated in the debate.

I reflect on the fact that, if someone is a migrant who has come here to work in social care, how can they feel that they are a valued care worker if they are unsure whether they continue to be

welcome in this country? In contrast to the practical impact of the migration policy—and to the Reform UK-lite rhetoric that we are now hearing from the Labour Party and the harder rhetoric that we might hear from the Conservative Party on these matters—the Government’s amendment recognises the enormous value of our international workforce and references the challenges that are being posed to the sector through the increase in national insurance contributions. The amendment is worthy of support for those reasons.

I am glad that we have had this debate. Although I recognise that there are challenges, I reject some of the siren calls that we have heard about the crisis in the sector. I will support the Government’s amendment.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the wind-up speeches.

15:43

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I rise to close on behalf of the Conservatives. It is disappointing that this has been such a short debate. As my colleague Sandesh Gulhane said, we should have discussed how the 700,000 unpaid carers interact with healthcare, because we have certainly not got that right. Similarly, we could have discussed social work, palliative care and the role of the third sector, all of which are important topics for debate in their own right.

I listened to the cabinet secretary and SNP back benchers use the usual excuses of visas and migration for the lack of places in our social care service.

Neil Gray: Will the member give way?

Brian Whittle: I will give way in a second.

Meanwhile, in my constituency, Ayrshire College had to turn away 71 applicants for apprenticeships in social care because the funding was not there. I have already raised that matter in the chamber. If you are going to have a debate on staffing in the healthcare service, you must recognise your own failings, and that is one of them, for sure.

I give way to the cabinet secretary.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind the member to speak through the chair. Please be brief, cabinet secretary.

Neil Gray: It is not just me saying that. I was quoting the sector and sector leaders, who have referenced the fact that migration policy at Westminster is destroying our ability to employ staff in the social care sector.

Brian Whittle: I do not think that those are quite the words that were used. If we are going to debate social care and its funding, we must

recognise our own failings, and responsibility for the way in which we fund training in the social care sector lies at the feet of the Scottish Government.

The failings that we are talking about today are consequences of a whole series of decisions that successive Governments have taken over the years, not merely on social care but on health and healthcare. They have failed to think for the long term and see that social care is on a par with healthcare, and they have failed to properly integrate health and social care. Although we may have spent years correctly identifying the issues in the social care workforce, we have failed to take the necessary steps to address them.

In the context of the NHS, successive Scottish Governments have prioritised ever-greater inputs, with more staff, higher salaries and more money, while ignoring outcomes and solutions such as interoperable and integrated technology. The term “interoperable” was unfamiliar to the then Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport when she declined to support my stage 3 amendment during consideration of the farcical Care Reform (Scotland) Bill because she did not understand it and did not like the Google definition.

That is why the SNP has achieved record-high spending but record-low outcomes, despite the incredible efforts of our healthcare professionals. The Scottish Government has let down both patients and our health professionals.

In social care, the situation is, if anything, worse. The stress on the system, with a lack of investment, is starving essential services. The irony is that that eventually creates problems in our NHS. Delayed discharge from hospitals will never be solved if the sector that provides post-discharge support is fighting just to keep its head above water.

Fantastic innovations are under way. Some health boards are using care home spaces for more appropriate step-down care for patients so that they do not have to languish in hospital beds waiting for care packages. That must be considered more formally for those areas in which that solution is appropriate.

However, there can be no solution to the crisis in social care if we do not address the workforce challenges. Proper workforce planning is not simply about how many staff are in particular roles, where they are located, or who is leaving and who is coming into the profession. It is also about ensuring that there is career progression so that we can attract new staff and retain the vital knowledge and experience of existing staff.

I want to look at the revolutionary potential of technology as an example. What would health and social care look like in a world in which the patient’s entire medical history could be analysed

by software and used to predict what care they are likely to need both before they arrive in hospital and once they are discharged? How much more accurate could that history be if their social care package included data from sensors in their home on how often they get up in the night, the temperature in their home or how frequently they lose their balance? The technology to do all of that exists—it is not even complicated—and with that information we could transform patient care and deliver more effective workforce planning. All that seems to be lacking is the political will to make it happen.

Health and social care are inextricably linked yet, today, they are fragmented rather than aligned. They are spending time competing for scarce resources rather than co-operating to put them to their best use. That must change, because neither can survive without the other.

15:48

The Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing (Tom Arthur): I thank members for their speeches in the debate. I put on the record my profound appreciation and gratitude to all those who work in the social care sector across Scotland, and particularly our 700,000 to 800,000 unpaid carers, without whom we could quite simply not function as a society. They are unsung heroes who deserve our everlasting praise and gratitude—and not just our words, but our actions.

I am about six months into my ministerial post, and I listened carefully to the speeches of members across the chamber, which has built on my many engagements since my appointment. It has struck me that discussions about social care tend to fall into one of two broad areas: the question of funding or resourcing and the question of structures. In addition, there are specific issues to do with workforce and the recruitment and retention of social care workers from overseas. In this afternoon's debate, the questions of resourcing and of our hugely valued social care workers from overseas both featured strongly.

I will touch on funding first. It is profoundly important, and it would be remiss of me not to recognise the significant pressure that exists across the system and the decisions that are being taken locally by integration joint boards. If we are to engage with the matter seriously, it is incumbent on us all to understand the nature of the financial challenge that we face. We have been through a profoundly challenging economic period in the past decade and a half, with a global financial crash, austerity, Brexit, a pandemic and a war on the European continent that precipitated an energy and cost of living crisis. That has placed strains on the public finances that none of us could have contemplated.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Will the minister take an intervention?

Tom Arthur: I need to make some progress. If I have time, I will give way to Mr Cole-Hamilton later.

Prior to the election, inflation was running at around 0.4 per cent and the Bank of England's interest rate was 0.1 per cent. Within 18 months, inflation was in double digits and interest rates were at 3 per cent.

Brian Whittle: Will the member take an intervention?

Tom Arthur: I need to make some progress to articulate my point.

That has placed significant pressures on the public finances.

It is important to recognise that, during the 26 years of this Parliament, there have been only five years in which one party has commanded an outright majority. On every other occasion, it has been necessary for at least one other party to engage in relation to each piece of legislation and each budget vote. When we consider questions of resource, it is therefore incumbent on Parliament to work towards and build consensus and not simply to make proposals. Parliament also has to have the honesty and integrity to state how those proposals would be paid for.

Jackie Baillie: Will the minister take an intervention?

Tom Arthur: I need to make some progress. I have limited time and I have barely made any progress. I listened patiently to everyone else.

If members wish to ask for additional resource on top of the £15 billion that has been given to local government this year, the £21.7 billion that has gone into health and social care overall, the £2.2 billion that has gone into social care and the £125 million uplift to enable payment of at least the real living wage, it is incumbent on them to engage and not simply to abstain and sit on their hands.

Jackie Baillie: Will the minister take an intervention?

Tom Arthur: I am afraid that I have only a minute remaining.

Otherwise, it is just rhetoric. This does a disservice to those working in the social care sector and to unpaid carers.

Jackie Baillie: It does.

Tom Arthur: Come the budget, we will see what happens. [*Interruption.*]

I am hearing members on both sides chuntering from a sedentary position. One party has consistently voted against every Scottish budget and the other party either votes against the budget or does not bother engaging in the first place.

The second important issue at the heart of the Government's debate is that, despite all the systemic challenges that we face with the public finances, we have seen actions from the UK Government that have exacerbated and compounded them. It is pandering to the worst instincts of the populist and reactionary right and pursuing a reform-light agenda—which is becoming a full-fat-reform agenda—on immigration. It is a disgraceful approach, and the sector has rightfully highlighted the devastating impact that it has had.

That is why the Scottish Government is taking action, and it is why I am delighted to confirm that the Scottish Government's £500,000 fund to help to remove employment barriers is now open. Eligible employers can apply from today for targeted support with the cost of hiring international social care workers impacted by UK Government changes to immigration policy.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must conclude.

Tom Arthur: Much more could be said on the subject, but it is incumbent on all of us in the Parliament to work constructively with partners in the sector. If there is an ask for new resource—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. I call Paul Sweeney to conclude the debate. You have up to six minutes, Mr Sweeney.

15:53

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): We have spent this afternoon discussing a system that is in crisis, but there is precious little in the way of a systemic approach from the Government. During the past near two decades of the Government's rule, there has been increasing fragmentation, a system characterised by low pay and, indeed, a complete failure of political leadership, which has led to a social care system—if it can even be called that; it is a social care structure—that is harming some of Scotland's most vulnerable people, who are reliant on it. That is a national scandal that affects almost every household in Scotland.

All the while, our hard-pressed social care staff struggle heroically to keep up a vital public service, despite low wages and poor working conditions. The minister was certainly right to praise unpaid and paid carers in the sector, but it is cold comfort when the system that exploits them

and does not advance their interests is being defended by the minister.

Neil Gray: Paul Sweeney points to low pay, and I recognise that, of course, we want to do more to support our critical social care workers. As I said, this Government has invested £950 million to ensure that at least the real working wage is being applied. Will Paul Sweeney confirm whether Labour-controlled Wales or, indeed, Labour-controlled England has gone any further than that?

Paul Sweeney: The minister will know that the Employment Rights Bill, which is going through the UK Parliament just now, will result in a massive uplift in the rights and the bargaining power of care workers across the system. It will improve rights to sick pay and drive up wages. The cabinet secretary may also want to consider that he has been talking a lot about sponsored care workers in the system, but they are on £12.82 an hour or £25,000 per annum, whichever is higher. The minimum wage for adult social care workers in Scotland is £12.60 an hour. I do not know how the cabinet secretary can stand there and justify paying overseas workers almost £500 more than staff who are domiciled in Scotland are paid, or how he can echo calls from exploitative capitalist employers so that they can rinse more out of the system. That is utterly shameful.

We might also want to consider what the cabinet secretary is doing to advance the training pipeline for people who are seeking employment in the sector. Glasgow Kelvin College, in my region, said that there were 1,200 applicants for 300 places in the care system, so people are being denied the chance to get into the sector. Only one in four people who want to get into the sector are getting that chance.

We have heard time and again in the debate that this problem has nothing to do with the Scottish Government—that it is a hapless bystander or a well-meaning administrator and that the malevolent force is somehow outside Scotland.

Sandesh Gulhane: I was shocked that the social care minister was too scared to take an intervention. Does Paul Sweeney agree that the crisis started in 2015, that it is a crisis of the SNP's making and that the SNP is blaming everyone but itself?

Paul Sweeney: We have had a decade-long decline. I was interested in Dr Gulhane's observation that 2,000 people are currently trapped in our acute hospitals, at great expense to the public, although they do not need to be there for any clinical reason and cannot be discharged only because of a lack of social care capacity. He also noted that, over the past decade, the number of social care beds has been reduced by 2,100.

Registered social care places have been reduced by almost the exact same amount as the number of people who are stuck in our acute hospitals. If I were the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, I would have those two numbers stuck up on the wall in my office in St Andrew's house and would be asking my officials every day, "Why are you not driving that number down into balance? Why is that not happening with the pace and urgency that it needs to?"

As Carol Mochan said, it is because of a lack of leadership. It is much easier to simply point to recruitment agencies overseas and say that we cannot hire enough people from overseas. This system and model imports people from overseas to work in the social care sector, cruelly promising them a better life in this country but then not paying them the same as Scotland-based workers and burning them out through low pay and poor working conditions. As soon as they get the opportunity, they move out of the sector into retail unless they are, in effect, trapped by their visa conditions.

There has already—rightly—been a crackdown by the UK Government on exploitative rogue care providers, which has released around 40,000 posts in the UK for new visa sponsorships. Why is the Scottish Government not going further to absorb those 40,000 people in the system who are looking for new sponsors? There are around 650 in Scotland alone. It is not a matter of loading more people in; it is a matter of absorbing the people who are currently looking for visa sponsorships in the UK and bringing in more of the people who are applying for social care courses. I am sure that the minister will start to see that a systemic approach is needed here. It is simply not good enough to stand and point the finger elsewhere.

We are talking about 18 years of government. Surely some responsibility needs to be taken on board. Instead of creating an economic model of solidarity in which structural gaps in funding are addressed, a wage of £15 an hour is the norm and working conditions are improved, the Scottish Government hopes that there will always be a steady stream of people who are desperate to come in, to depress wages further. We should be training people here, in Scotland, and employing them under improved conditions, which is what Labour aims to do with the Employment Rights Bill.

There has also been an evisceration of local care. As members across the chamber will know, health and social care partnerships are lumbering under huge cuts. Every year, a depressing litany of services are unnecessarily and painfully curtailed or cut altogether because of the £0.5 billion gap in funding for local provision. That is

causing all sorts of disastrous situations—for example, with the Scottish Huntington's Association, which is an amazing charity that Glasgow city's health and social care partnership is planning to defund from the start of next year.

We are seeing cuts coming quickly and regularly as a result of those funding gaps, which means that demand is piling up in our A and E departments. A couple of weeks ago, I met an A and E nurse at Glasgow Royal infirmary who had just come off shift. She said that there are already beds piling up in the corridors and that, just across the road from where she stays, there is a care home that cannot admit new patients because of a lack of communication with the social work department in Glasgow as a result of cuts. Again, there is system breakdown. The care homes cannot admit, the hospitals cannot discharge and staff are burning out. It is introducing more cost to the system, and the solution somehow appears to be just to import more labour into the system to exploit—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Sweeney, could you bring your remarks to a close, please?

Paul Sweeney: It is shameful that the Government has used that framing in its amendment, and it should be rejected by the Parliament. We can do so much better than that as a country.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Sweeney. That concludes the first debate this afternoon.

Group-based Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-19980, in the name of Pauline McNeill, on transparency in tackling group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse. I invite those members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons, and I call Pauline McNeill to speak to and move the motion.

16:01

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Grooming vulnerable children for sexual exploitation is one of the most heinous crimes that can be committed, but for that to be compounded by systematic failures by institutions that are meant to protect those children—after crimes that have been conducted for so long and on such a scale—is unforgivable, and a scar on our society.

The scale of those crimes in Rotherham and Rochdale was unprecedented. Hundreds of vulnerable girls, many of them in local authority care, were systematically groomed, plied with drugs and alcohol, and trafficked. Professor Alexis Jay, who produced the “Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham” report, said that there were 1,400 victims in Rotherham alone, and that a common thread in Manchester and South Yorkshire was the catastrophic failure of agencies, including the police, local councils and social services.

What made the Scottish Government so complacent about the situation in Scotland? What made the Scottish Government think that it could dismiss calls for an independent review? What made the Scottish Government believe that it could dismiss a proposed amendment to the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill, justifying its position by misusing a quote by Professor Alexis Jay, who serves on the national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group? The Government was complacent.

The Government has got itself into a complete mess. Today, it has had to cave in and do now what it should have done in the first place: announce an independent review.

Despite that, Scottish Labour welcomes the last-minute announcement that Professor Jay will lead a review of the handling of complaints against grooming gangs, which could lead to an inquiry. We want full and unfettered access for Professor Jay to all the data, and the review must be done urgently. We want there to be independent oversight of Police Scotland’s review of historical

and current cases so that it is not, in effect, marking its own homework.

We know that Scotland is not immune to organised grooming gangs. Many of us have seen the interview that was given by Taylor, who relayed a horrific account of what happened to her, aged 13. She said that she was sexually exploited by grooming gangs. ITV’s Peter Smith reports that Taylor’s care records showed that

“staff at the care unit described her as disruptive”

and that

“she was encouraged to wear less fake tan and make up”

and stop “drawing attention to herself.” That is utterly shocking.

Taylor went on to say, importantly, that she was added to a list, kept by Police Scotland, of 45 other children who were vulnerable to sexual exploitation, but no one yet knows what happened to that list or whether further action was taken. In fact, Taylor said that no one at the care unit asked her any questions about it, despite her records clearly documenting that there were concerns that she was being sexually exploited.

Does anyone need any convincing that, from what we have learned in recent weeks, there are similar threads to what happened in Rotherham and Rochdale?

There must be transparency on exactly what we know about the scale of the problem in Scotland. There must be an assessment of how we are protecting children in care, who are the most vulnerable children in our society, and we must ask what changes we need to make to ensure that children’s protection is paramount.

In June this year, Baroness Casey told the Home Affairs Committee that

“People do not necessarily look hard enough to find these children, in particular ... it is clear that it is still happening.”

She said that we do not have enough data in Scotland. We urgently need to change that, because we know very little.

As Joani Reid MP, who has been championing this cause, has said, we need independent experts to look at the case files—whether they are open or not—and to interview victims and speak to the social workers and educational establishments that have supported children and young people when they have made accusations.

This summer, the previous Home Secretary, Yvette Cooper, said that the law on rape would be tightened so that adults cannot use consent as a defence against the charge of raping a child who is under 16. Baroness Casey’s report concluded that too many grooming gang cases have been

“dropped or downgraded from rape to lesser charges”

because a 13 to 15-year-old was perceived to have been “in love with” or “consented” to sex with the perpetrator.

As Baroness Casey said, “children are children.” If we also believe that in this Parliament, I would like to draw the Scottish Government’s attention to the reforms that the Parliament made in 2009. Looking back, I think that those reforms were wrong, because the rape of a child who is aged 13 or 14 is no longer considered statutory rape. I ask the Scottish Government whether it will look at those provisions.

As I have said, we must take similar action in Scotland, and so I turn to the amendments. We have one disagreement with the Tory amendment, which is that we believe that there should first be a review, but we recognise that that could lead to a public inquiry. Apart from that, we support what the Conservatives say in the amendment.

We recognise the work that Police Scotland and the National Crime Agency have carried out. However, we ultimately need to show victims—past and present—that we will bring perpetrators to justice, that this Parliament and this Government are not afraid to look behind difficult issues and that we will do everything that we can to show the victims that we brought independent oversight. We must do the right thing and show that, in Scotland, we are not complacent about the exploitation of children in our country.

I move,

That the Parliament believes that there should be independent oversight of the Police Scotland review into group-based sexual exploitation of children, and calls on the Scottish Government to urgently clarify whether it will conduct an inquiry into grooming gangs in Scotland.

16:07

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): The sexual exploitation and abuse of children and young people in Scotland is, sadly, not a historical issue. As we have heard, it is a challenging and complex issue and, in recognition of that, maturity is required in this debate. I am also mindful that we have a relatively short debating slot this afternoon. Therefore, I will set out a number of actions that we are taking and, in her closing remarks, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs will provide further detail on the parallel work by Police Scotland that is already under way. However, I intend to return to the chamber, prior to the Christmas recess, to provide a more detailed update to Parliament.

In setting out those actions, I am particularly mindful of the needs of survivors of exploitation and abuse—those brave young women who have come forward to share their horrific experiences of

having been exploited in the past. They should not have had to relive their trauma in order to have their voices heard. I know that it will be difficult for many to hear the Parliament debating these matters today, and that it will reopen old wounds that they had hoped were long closed. As a Parliament, we must therefore ensure that the matter is treated with the sensitivity and seriousness that it deserves and demands of all of us.

This may not come as a surprise to members today, but it remains the case—shockingly—that children in Scotland are far more likely to be abused in their own homes by someone that they know. Our child protection data indicates that, in about eight out of 10 cases of child sexual abuse or exploitation where such information is recorded, the main abuser is a parent. That context is important.

However, we know that the tactics that are used by non-familial perpetrators of child sexual exploitation and abuse mean that such harm is often hidden. To better protect children now and in the future, I hope that we can agree today that the Parliament must urgently understand the extent and scale of child sexual exploitation and abuse in Scotland.

That is the collective view of the national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group, which brings together expertise on the issue from social work, police, education, healthcare, academics and the third sector, as set out in the minutes of its meeting on 25 November. They state:

“A number of Group members stated that they did not feel there was enough information or data at present to inform a decision about whether an inquiry should take place. It was reflected that further work is needed to identify the nature and scale of the issue in Scotland so that an informed position can be taken on whether or not a public inquiry is required”.

That is also the view of Professor Alexis Jay, with whom I spoke yesterday. Professor Jay told me that, at the current time, we do not have an accurate picture of the nature or extent of child sexual abuse in Scotland, as is the case elsewhere across the United Kingdom. She went on to state that establishing that picture would allow us to make an informed choice about the necessity of an inquiry.

I am therefore pleased to confirm to Parliament today that Professor Alexis Jay has accepted the role of independent chair of the national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group. Professor Jay will oversee the group’s on-going work to enhance the capacity and capability of Scotland’s collective response to child sexual abuse and exploitation.

I also announce that ministers will be directing the Care Inspectorate, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland and Health Improvement Scotland to conduct a national review to scrutinise—

Pauline McNeill: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Jenny Gilruth: Yes. I am happy to give way.

Pauline McNeill: I appreciate that, given the time.

Can the cabinet secretary confirm that she regards the process as an independent review, given that Professor Jay, whom we welcome, will chair the group? Will Professor Jay have unfettered access to all the data that she requires from all the agencies?

Jenny Gilruth: I give Ms McNeill my assurance that the inspectorates are independent of ministers, so that is my understanding. I reassure Ms McNeill that Professor Jay has had sight of the planned independent review, and I am pleased that she has agreed to provide her expert advice on developing the methodology that will sit alongside that and at key stages of the review process.

The national strategic group will also consider the findings of the review, and it will provide expert advice to ministers as it reports its progress. That work will be accompanied by the Police Scotland activity, which, as I have set out, is already well under way and which the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs will set out in her closing remarks. The justice secretary and I are clear that that work must be undertaken at pace, with ministers being provided with iterative updates, but we also commit to regularly updating Parliament on the review's progress.

As part of that approach, I have today written to Opposition leaders and spokespeople to offer a briefing with Professor Alexis Jay and Police Scotland on that work, which is to take place early in the new year.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Does that mean that the Government will reject Russell Findlay's amendment calling for a grooming gangs inquiry?

Jenny Gilruth: As I have set out to Parliament today, the Government has to analyse the evidence that is put before us. As Alexis Jay has said, and as we have heard from Ms McNeill, we do not yet have the evidence base to substantiate that decision. However, I reassure the member that that is under active consideration.

I highlight that we should not forget that, in Scotland, we have a live public inquiry, which is

already hearing directly from survivors of child sexual abuse. Although it is, quite rightly, a matter for Lady Smith and the Scottish child abuse inquiry to determine how to take into account potential group-based sexual abuse, in cases where any conduct that constitutes grooming is alleged, the inquiry can, if the circumstances allow it, consider whether those cases are within the inquiry's terms of reference.

The national review that I have announced today, alongside Professor Jay's leadership of the national strategic group and Police Scotland's ongoing work, will provide a more accurate and focused picture of the scale of and response to group-based sexual harm in Scotland. That will ensure that informed and evidence-based decisions can be taken on the need for further independent inquiries and reviews.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please conclude, cabinet secretary.

Jenny Gilruth: Above all, we must remember that this is about better protecting Scotland's children and young people from abuse. I hope that Parliament will support the Government's approach and the amendment in my name.

I move amendment S6M-19980.2, to insert at end:

“, and, in doing so, to give consideration to the continuing work of the statutory Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry, which is considering the abuse of children in care in Scotland, the effects of that abuse and if changes to the law, policies or procedures are needed; recognises the independence of Police Scotland and that the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012 stipulates that the Chief Constable is responsible for the policing of Scotland, and is accountable to the Scottish Police Authority, and acknowledges that the information and data being gathered by members of the National Child Abuse and Exploitation Strategic Group is necessary to ensure that informed evidence-based decisions are taken on the need for further independent inquiries or reviews.”

16:13

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): A “conspiracy of silence”—that was the phrase that was used by journalist Andrew Norfolk, who, in 2011, uncovered what became known as the grooming gangs scandal. Initially, he was squeamish on hearing allegations of vulnerable white girls in Rotherham being targeted by gangs of predominantly Pakistani Muslim men, but he went on to lay bare the epic scale of those heinous crimes in Yorkshire and beyond.

He established that the authorities often knew what was going on but covered it up. Police officers and social workers, fearful of being branded racist, looked the other way, and those who did try to speak out were silenced.

Children in local authority care were targeted, stupefied with alcohol and drugs, trafficked and gang raped. Some were as young as 10 years old. In the words of Mr Norfolk:

“They were treated like sub-human species for the pleasure of these men”,

yet those poor children were often branded as troublemakers, even as prostitutes. Victim blaming has never been so obscene.

The crimes were abhorrent; the conspiracy of silence was shameful. Fourteen years after Mr Norfolk’s first report, I believe that there is a risk of history repeating itself. There is growing evidence that so-called grooming gangs—although I think that “rape gangs” is a much more accurate description—were active across Scotland. However, just as we saw elsewhere, there is also evidence that some sought to cover it up.

This week, I spoke with former residential social workers who suspected what was going on in the early 2000s in Glasgow. They were told to keep their mouths shut. I have spoken with victims such as Taylor, whose case files confirm a conspiracy of silence.

What shocked many is that there are two tiers of child abuse victims in Scotland. The Scottish child abuse inquiry is closed to many due to its remit, which was set by Scottish Government ministers and which they have consistently refused to broaden. Locked out are young footballers such as Peter Haynes and Stuart McMillan, who were targeted by paedophiles. Locked out is Susie Henderson, whose lawyer father allowed her to be raped by members of the legal establishment. Locked out are many of Scotland’s grooming gang victims. Yes, some victims might be able to engage with the Scottish child abuse inquiry, but they have no faith in an inquiry that has already cost taxpayers more than £114 million. They question why the inquiry granted anonymity to abusers at some of Scotland’s leading private schools, yet refused anonymity to abuse victim Kevin Sutherland. His family blamed the inquiry’s refusal for his suicide one year ago.

The victims who I have spoken with also have no faith in the Scottish Government’s strategic group on child sexual abuse. They see it as a talking shop that is controlled by the very same authorities that failed to protect them. They are angered at the justice secretary misrepresenting the views of grooming gangs expert Professor Alexis Jay, who today spoke publicly about the need for urgent action. I believe that the justice secretary’s position is no longer tenable.

I will end by paying tribute to Mr Norfolk, who passed away six months ago, and to all of Scotland’s child abuse survivors, who are still not being heard.

John Swinney can and should instruct a robust and independent grooming gangs inquiry without any further delay. End Scotland’s conspiracy of silence.

I move amendment S6M-19980.1, to leave out from “clarify” to end and insert:

“establish an inquiry into grooming gangs in Scotland.”

16:18

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland)

(Green): As the cabinet secretary said, the issue that we are debating—the sexual exploitation and abuse of children and young people—is not only an historic issue; it is happening now, in our communities and in ways that we often fail to recognise. Because it is happening now, our responsibility is immediate, urgent and profound.

We must do better to recognise the signs of abuse in children and young people. That means ensuring that our teachers, social workers, health and social care staff and all other professionals who work with children are properly supported and confident in spotting, reporting and acting on concerns. It means doing more to support children and young people to stay safe, both online and offline, through our wider children’s rights works, to ensure that they know how to respond when they feel unsafe. It also means that, where sexual exploitation of anyone is identified, whether by individuals or groups, our justice system must respond robustly and consistently.

There must be no doubt that we do not tolerate such abuse. However, those important measures come mostly after abuse has already begun. If we are serious about eliminating child sexual exploitation, we must also confront its root causes—gender inequalities, power imbalances, social and economic inequalities and a failure to listen properly to children whose voices have been dismissed or ignored.

Disabled children, care-experienced children, migrant children and other marginalised young people face disproportionately high risks. Yet, as the Centre for Excellence for Children’s Care and Protection at the University of Strathclyde has shown, disability and other protected characteristics are underrecorded in child protection data. We cannot tackle what we do not fully understand, so improving reporting and data collection must be a priority.

That brings me directly to the motion before us. Transparency in how we investigate and understand group-based child sexual exploitation is essential. I welcome the motion and the Scottish Government’s amendment. Taken together, they recognise the independence of Police Scotland, which has clear statutory responsibilities under the

Police and Fire Service Reform (Scotland) Act 2012. They call for independent oversight of the current Police Scotland review, which is important not because we doubt the professionalism or integrity of individuals in the police, but because transparency strengthens trust.

Police Scotland's work with the National Crime Agency and its participation in the national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group are crucial parts of that effort. Those partnerships allow Scotland to share intelligence, respond to cross-border offending and build a clearer national picture of the risks that children face now and what they have faced in the past. The data gathered through the strategic group is essential in order to determine what next steps, including a potential inquiry, are needed. Once all that evidence is analysed, the Scottish Government must clarify as soon as possible whether an independent inquiry will take place. That is an important question, but it must be extremely carefully handled and discussed.

Child exploitation by anyone in any context is abhorrent. However, debates around grooming gangs have too often been distorted by racism, religious prejudice and xenophobia. We have seen unfounded and prejudiced claims—even claims that have been disowned by those who initially made them—repeatedly invoked, and they continue to circulate, fuelling division and hatred. Such words have very real consequences for migrant communities, people seeking safety and MSPs and for the cohesion and trust that we need to keep all our communities safe.

We must do better at prevention, protection, data collection, transparency and ensuring that our institutions are equipped to act, but we must do so without providing ammunition to those who would use the issue to stoke hatred and fear. Our task is clear: to protect children, to confront exploitation wherever it exists and to build a Scotland where abuse is not hidden, minimised or weaponised but eradicated.

16:22

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I thank Pauline McNeill and Labour for enabling this debate to happen. Some of the issues that we are discussing were touched on in yesterday's debate on violence against women and girls, but it is good that we have an opportunity to focus specifically on this topic, which is certainly challenging.

Group-based sexual exploitation of children, which involves targeting often incredibly vulnerable young people, subjecting them to horrific abuse and isolating them from support systems, is surely one of the most abhorrent crimes imaginable. We were all horrified by the

experiences of Taylor, whose heart-breaking testimony shows that there are victims of group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse across Scotland, and for the most part, their stories go untold. They have been let down by a lack of joined-up working between agencies and a failure of safeguarding, and the perpetrators have seldom faced justice. We have a duty to those young people to act.

The motion appears to have been successful in prompting an overdue response from the Government. I welcome the news that Professor Alexis Jay has been appointed to carry out a review and hope that it will lead to wider investigation. Police Scotland has reviewed historic and on-going child sexual abuse in Scotland since 2013. The results of that will be integral to any associated inquiry. Although duplicating Police Scotland's work serves nobody's interests, the case for increased transparency and independent oversight is reasonable. The investigations that were carried out in England and Wales by Professor Jay and Baroness Casey show that institutional failures of the police and other public agencies often prevented victims from coming forward to report abuse, delayed appropriate investigation and hindered the eventual prosecution of perpetrators. A subsequent failure to acknowledge those failings has since delayed access to justice for survivors.

Concerns have also been raised about Police Scotland's approach to data collection in relation to group-based child sexual exploitation. Questions remain as to whether the methods appropriately identify the risk factors in current and historical cases. Pauline McNeill was right to underline concerns that a remarkably low number of children have been recorded on the register of those at risk of sexual exploitation across Scotland in the past year. Can we really be confident that the system is reliably identifying those who require support?

Police Scotland is certainly to be commended for its response to many of the reports of group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse that we have heard about. However, if we are to build a complete picture of the scale and nature of the problem in Scotland, independent scrutiny needs to be built into any review. As the NSPCC warns, Scotland lacks that clear understanding at present.

The Scottish Government points to the Scottish child abuse inquiry and the national child abuse and exploitation strategic group in relation to adopting an evidence-based approach to the issue. Both are undoubtedly important, but they are limited, compared with the approach in England and Wales, in allowing a proper analysis of the extent and scale of group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse in Scotland. Indeed,

Baroness Casey told a House of Commons committee that it would be a “missed opportunity” if the national inquiry did not extend across the entire UK, given the importance of a joined-up approach. She also warned that gangs that are identified in England and Wales might very well be operating across borders, including in Scotland.

Even if Scotland is to go down the route of having its own inquiry, there is a strong argument for close collaboration with the on-going inquiry in England and Wales. Such collaboration will be needed if we are to be effective in tackling these abhorrent crimes, ensuring prevention and protection, and doing justice to the needs of some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Scottish Liberal Democrats will support the motion.

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

16:26

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): It is a pleasure—unfortunately—to take part in the debate and to see how far the Scottish Government has moved. I thank the previous speaker for articulating the abhorrent history of the issue and the abhorrent nature of the experiences that our young people have had to face. That has led us to discussing the subject today, and I note the hard work that has been done by people outside the Parliament to provide support when that has been necessary.

In their most recent comments, Professor Alexis Jay and the NSPCC are unequivocal about the need for an independent review of child exploitation. Indeed, as my Scottish Labour colleague Joani Reid MP noted,

“Scottish government ministers were willing to quote”

Professor Jay

“as the final word in the argument when they mistakenly thought she was opposed to an independent investigation, and so they would be nothing more than hypocrites if they failed to act now.”

To be fair, based on the cabinet secretary’s opening speech, the Government is starting to act now. However, unfortunately, it appears that we will need to wait until some point before Christmas before we get a statement that will allow us to dig into the challenges relating to data and who will take control.

I welcome the appointment of Professor Jay as the independent chair of the strategic group. That represents a very sensible move forward.

Those who are watching the Parliament from outside still have many questions that need to be answered, so it is disappointing that it has taken an Opposition debate to get the Government to

move its position. I find it very challenging, as was said earlier, to think why it has taken so long to reach what most mums, dads, brothers and sisters would have thought would be the most obvious answer. There has been a failing that needs to be looked into.

I thank the cabinet secretary for drawing on global statistics regarding the sexual abuse that young people face. Sadly, the majority of such abuse is faced within the family. That must be noted, but it is not an excuse for failing those who have suffered abuse and manipulation at the hands of strangers or for not addressing the lifelong challenges that have been caused by the abuse that young people have faced. Nor does that mean that we should, in any way, move our eyes away from supporting young people and mothers who face such abuse within families. Here we are during the 16 days of action, and we had a very powerful debate about that yesterday. Those people absolutely deserve and require the support of the Parliament and the Scottish Government.

I return to the subject matter of today’s motion and to the facts that have led to it being lodged. There are heart-wrenching examples of abuse of children who were meant to be protected by a system but were let down and then cast aside by it. Putting our head in the sand to avoid facing those failings is not acceptable.

I must address the remarks made by the cabinet secretary, Angela Constance, when she told us in the chamber that Professor Jay was against the review and then, sadly, ducked the scrutiny when that turned out to be false.

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): I am grateful to Martin Whitfield for giving way. I advise him and others that, when I look at the *Official Report* of those remarks, I cannot see that I stated at any point that Professor Jay was speaking directly about Liam Kerr’s amendment to the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill. I have never ducked anything in my life, and I am more than happy to answer questions at some point about why I was not in the chamber that day. It is because I was travelling on Government business to the European Union in Brussels in order to engage on matters of serious organised crime, including online harms and child sexual exploitation.

Martin Whitfield: I am very grateful for that intervention, but, again—and I say this with respect, because I have huge respect for the cabinet secretary—that is not an answer to the questions that were posed when the cabinet secretary was not in the chamber.

I go back to my opening remarks, to the previous contribution, to the opening of the debate and to the opening from the Opposition. We are talking about women and girls who have suffered the most horrendous abuse. We owe them a level of honesty—and, frankly, a level of kindness—that they have not seen.

I am conscious of the time, so I will finish my remarks. Again, I will quote my colleague Joani Reid, who said in an interview this week that Scotland has

“a system that is not looking”

and that

“is not willing to look”.

If we cannot have, at an absolute minimum, a proper, full and independent review of the evidence of child sexual exploitation in Scotland, then Joani Reid MP has been proved right.

16:32

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I begin by acknowledging the cabinet secretary’s update on the appointment of Professor Alexis Jay as independent chair of the national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group, which will work on a national review on group-based child sexual exploitation.

I very much support the Government’s motion this afternoon. However, it is important to reflect on the range of work that has already been undertaken to start informing how we shift the dial in this very complex space. In her national audit report on group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse, Baroness Casey said:

“The ... public are rightly appalled when they hear of group-based child sexual exploitation and expect it to be investigated thoroughly, offenders brought to justice and punished severely.

They, undoubtedly, also expect ... the right systems in place to understand child sexual exploitation ... and who is perpetrating it ... so that we can prevent it from happening in the first place.”

That audit made 12 recommendations in relation to tightening the law, bringing perpetrators to justice, data collection and use, and applying best practice across safeguarding agencies.

We have also heard today about the Jay review of criminally exploited children, which looked at the scale and nature of the criminal exploitation of children. It was an excellent review, with recommendations spanning across policy and practice at the local and national level, investment and whole-system learning. It said:

“What is required is a new system designed with the explicit purpose of tackling the criminal exploitation of children.”

I note that, during a members’ business debate earlier this year, which was secured by Michael Matheson MSP, on the review, no calls were made to hold an inquiry. It is important to highlight operation Beaconport, which is overseen by the National Crime Agency. That operation is bringing policing partners together south of the border in order to develop a more effective response to group-based child sexual exploitation. I hope that that will provide a platform for Police Scotland to do further work to examine relevant cases, past and present.

That is a crucial piece of work, and I especially welcome the update on self-assessment across key areas of practice within Police Scotland, including data analysis, investigation, disruption and resources. I anticipate that that work will inform the inquiry that has been announced today. At this point I commend officers and specialists in Police Scotland for their work in this specialist area of investigation. I know from personal experience that the work is harrowing, sensitive and very complex.

On the Police Scotland response and what Pauline McNeill’s motion relates to, I note the cabinet secretary’s response to Ms McNeill’s question about independent oversight. I point out that Police Scotland is one of the public bodies in Scotland that attracts the most scrutiny, not least from the Scottish Police Authority, His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland, various commissioners and, indeed, the public. I absolutely agree that a significant piece of work is required to further enhance our response to group-based sexual exploitation of children, so I am pleased to hear the update from the cabinet secretary regarding the appointment of Alexis Jay. I very much look forward to supporting that work.

I am pleased that there is now an opportunity to move forward collectively on the issue, thereby demonstrating our commitment to the public across Scotland that we are united in addressing it together, once and for all.

16:36

Davy Russell (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab): As colleagues have already noted, this issue is fundamentally about transparency and clarity.

We have seen from the Casey report in England and Wales that there were systemic problems in the protections from grooming gangs. For example, victims were not believed because they were young or from a particular social background, they were often blamed by the police for what had happened to them and there was systemic underrecording of key data, notably around race, so as not to appear biased.

That is why I am glad to hear that the Scottish Government will not be leaving it up to the police to assess their own work, because that would not be acceptable. Some may try to turn this into another culture war, but that would be counterproductive and would detract attention from the voices of the victims.

The primary goal of an independent review should be to establish whether further investigation and, ultimately child protection measures, are needed, with the bonus that it will help to build public confidence in the Government and the police, improving their ability to detect and protect. I am glad to hear that the Scottish Government is going to hold a review, putting to bed already festering mistrust in the background among the public. That will reduce the space for malign groups to profit and sow the seeds of hate.

Any review should have a wide remit to find the scale of abuse, to establish what risk factors were prevalent and to ascertain what actions were taken by public bodies.

Let us face it: sexual exploitation of children by grooming gangs—or by anyone, for that matter—is a vile, heinous crime, and it should carry the most severe punishment. It deserves our full attention. If we do not protect children, who will?

The police must be unencumbered in their ability to record data on victims and alleged perpetrators, and to react to the data gathered—not just around race, immigration status or language but on indicators of poverty, social class and even household income. Basically, no stone should be left unturned for the sake of political correctness. After all, the protection of children comes first, and this issue is about the protection of children from sexual violence and public confidence in the police and the Scottish Government. The Government's belated decision to use its existing powers to take action on the matter is welcome, however.

I see no justifiable reason why all members should not support the motion.

16:39

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): This is a subject of considerable importance. When the Government voted down our amendment to the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill that would have introduced a grooming gangs inquiry, the cabinet secretary told us that, if we believed that an inquiry into grooming gangs was necessary, we should “go and make the case for one”. We did exactly what she asked. We gathered what evidence we could, and what we found was deeply troubling.

In recent days, the Scottish Information Commissioner has ordered the Scottish Government to release vast amounts of material that it wrongly withheld in relation to the Salmond inquiry. Clearly, the Government has learned nothing from that and is continuing to make the same mistakes—only, now, they touch on the sensitive matter of child sexual exploitation and grooming gangs.

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs has repeatedly stated in the chamber that there is no need for an inquiry because the national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group delivers the necessary coverage and oversight. Today's announcement shows that, in its current format, the strategic group is not up to the job and never was. The Government announced that Alexis Jay will lead a review of complaints—essentially, what we asked for in our amendment that the Government voted down. We need a fresh start. We need a full public inquiry, independent of the Government and of that group. Frankly, we do not believe that anything related to that group will achieve justice for victims.

Our recent freedom of information request on the strategic group and its work on grooming gangs was met with a response that had sweeping redactions and vast sections that were blanked out. Those sections included material that would have shown whether the group ever meaningfully considered grooming gangs and whether it understood how to track them. Under the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002, when the Government chooses to withhold important material from the public, it is legally required to provide a clear and compelling rationale for doing so, especially when there is a strong public interest in disclosure.

What was the Government's strong justification for withholding key information on its strategic group? It was the impact on marine planning. That is right—marine planning was in official Scottish Government documentation about grooming gangs. That was clearly a lazy copy-and-paste job: a poor, sloppy reason that demonstrates that the Government has still not learned the lessons of the Salmond inquiry. It is continuing the same patterns of excessive secrecy, casual errors and careless redactions. Victims need transparency. What the Government has been producing is not good enough.

The concerns about the group go beyond its scope or the secrecy. They also touch on ministerial oversight, which is probably the most concerning aspect. We saw that the cabinet secretary had to be corrected on vital information that she presented to the Parliament about the views of members of the group. Clearly, ministerial engagement is poor, but we did not realise how

bad it was until we submitted parliamentary questions about ministerial involvement with the group. Shockingly, we discovered that no relevant minister had attended any of the key meetings of the strategic group—not the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs, not the Minister for Victims and Community Safety and not the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise.

Given the collapse of the inquiry in England and the recent harrowing testimony of victims, it is astonishing that ministers did not think it necessary to attend any meetings of the strategic group to ensure proper oversight. If ministers are not in the room, victims are not represented—it is as simple as that. On the matter of grooming gangs, the group lacks transparency, it lacks leadership and it has given us no reason to believe that it can tackle this sensitive issue head on. We certainly do not have any assurance about the review.

We were challenged to find evidence; we did. We asked for openness; we were blocked. We looked for seriousness; we found errors. We sought ministerial accountability; ministers did not turn up. We do not have confidence in the strategic group or the review to deliver full justice for victims. We need a national inquiry.

16:44

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I thank the Labour Party for securing this important and topical debate.

At any level, sexual exploitation of children is one of the most abhorrent crimes that can be committed. It is a complex and insidious form of child abuse that involves manipulating and coercing children to participate in criminal activities, and it creates lifelong trauma for victims. That is why I am reassured that protecting children from harm is an absolute priority for the Scottish Government. As someone who has been convener of the cross-party group on violence against women and children since my election in 2016, I find the reports of increased exploitation incredibly troubling, as, I know, do all members.

The issue of grooming gangs is very complex, but I am very pleased that the Scottish Government has committed to an independent review of the handling of complaints, which is to be chaired by Professor Alexis Jay.

The Scottish Government's on-going approach is absolutely informed by data and evidence. The intensive work of Police Scotland and the national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group will help to inform the Scottish Government's approach and, of course, the review. I was sorry to

hear the Tories running down the experts in that group, who have done so much work.

A vast amount of work is being done to combat the scourge of child sexual exploitation and abuse. That work, which extends across all areas, includes the on-going work of the statutory Scottish child abuse inquiry, which is considering the abuse of children in care in Scotland.

Russell Findlay: Will the member take an intervention?

Rona Mackay: No, thank you.

That is a hugely important piece of work for many people, despite what Russell Findlay says.

It is always important to recognise the independence of Police Scotland and the chief constable in dealing with operational matters, as that can often get lost in the narrative.

The crucial information and data that is being gathered by members of the strategic group is necessary to ensure that informed, evidence-based decisions are taken on the need for further independent inquiries following the review that we are now committed to. The group is already working at pace to identify abuse, to understand its prevalence and to improve data collection and the co-ordination of responses by all agencies to this abhorrent crime.

The First Minister, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, and the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise have met Police Scotland regularly, and the NCSAE group, to discuss the prevalence of these issues in Scotland. I was pleased to receive an invitation from the education secretary, along with members of the Criminal Justice Committee and the Education, Children and Young People Committee, to meet Professor Jay and Police Scotland in the new year.

The Labour motion calls for us to clarify our position on grooming gangs, and I hope that it now has that clarification. The Conservative amendment makes an outright call for an inquiry, but it has not outlined what shape or form such an inquiry should take.

To be clear, the UK Government is not carrying out a national inquiry into grooming gangs; rather, it is undertaking a targeted regional inquiry, in which five local investigations are being conducted into areas of concern. In February, the UK Government established the national audit on group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse—the Baroness Casey review—to evaluate the scale, nature and drivers of exploitation. It reported in June 2025, and that led to the UK Government announcing an independent commission on grooming gangs. The commission

has not yet been established, and a chair has not yet been appointed.

As we know, Liam Kerr lodged an amendment to the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill that provided for the victims and witnesses commissioner to carry out research into group-based child sexual exploitation. He likened the proposed research to the Casey review and said that it would help to build a national picture of what is known about grooming gangs in Scotland.

Our rejection of that particular ask has been portrayed by the Conservatives as a vote by my party against tackling grooming gangs. That misinformation has been incredibly troubling to all of us who care about the welfare of children. Nothing could be further from the truth, and I really regret the extent to which the issue has been politicised. Surely we should be working together—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members.

Rona Mackay: Surely we should be working together to eradicate this vile crime and gather much-needed evidence, rather than squabbling and scoring political points.

I look forward to hearing about the progress of the independent review and its vital work to protect children.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise members that we have a little bit of time in hand, so I can be a wee bit generous with members' times.

I call Liam Kerr to close the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives. You have around four minutes, Mr Kerr.

16:49

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I have been shocked and stunned listening to the debate, partly from hearing some of the horrific details of this most heinous and vile of crimes. Russell Findlay told us about victims Peter Haynes, Stuart McMillan and Susie Henderson. Pauline McNeill and others reminded us of Taylor, who spoke out so courageously recently, including about terrible institutional failures. Russell Findlay also spoke of Kevin Sutherland, who ultimately took his own life.

We must also not forget that, in October, five members of a grooming gang in Dundee were jailed after raping and sexually abusing 10 women—some as young as 16—and that, last January, seven were jailed after findings that three victims under the age of 13 had been subjected to horrific sexual abuse and violence in Glasgow over a seven-year period.

I was also shocked by what we have heard about the appalling lack of data and evidence on

things such as the scale of the problem, how cases are handled and where the system is failing victims. Pauline McNeill and others reminded us that Baroness Casey said that there is insufficient data. According to the minute of a meeting in October, the Scottish Government's own chief statistician said that the point that the data on those crimes was "incomplete or inaccurate" was "a good starting point".

The child sexual abuse and exploitation workforce deep dive report confirms that by stating:

"There is a lack of robust data on the scale of child sexual victimisation in Scotland".

Just today, Professor Alexis Jay was on record as saying:

"we do not have a clear or reliable picture of what the present situation is in Scotland"

and

"we do not know enough of the scale of child exploitation in Scotland".

Despite that, as Sharon Dowe told us, the cabinet secretary has repeatedly stated in this chamber that there is no need for a full inquiry, because the national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group delivers the necessary coverage and oversight. That assertion is found wanting. First, a freedom of information request to find out what the group was doing was responded to with sweeping redactions and vast sections blanked out, including material that would have shown whether the group was meaningfully considering grooming gangs. Secondly, today, the Scottish Government has asked Professor Jay to review the handling of complaints against grooming gangs. Although, as Martin Whitfield pointed out, we lack details, surely that is an admission—if ever one were needed—that, as we always suspected, the strategic group is not covering what is required.

However, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills is right—we must understand the extent and scale of this. I am truly stunned that, after hearing harrowing testimony; hearing about the lack of data on the scale of the problem and the lack of knowledge of victims' experiences; hearing about where institutions are failing; and hearing yesterday's reports that Professor Alexis Jay thinks that, ultimately, there could be a full grooming gangs inquiry, Scottish National Party MSPs will vote against Russell Findlay's amendment, which simply instructs there to be a full grooming gangs inquiry in Scotland.

It appears that, having been presented with another opportunity to launch a grooming gangs inquiry, those MSPs will again reject it, simply because something far short of an inquiry has

been floated today, without our having been given any details about it.

Audrey Nicoll: Will the member give way?

Liam Kerr: I will not take an intervention, because I am running out of time.

Decision time is still 10 or 12 minutes away. There is still time for those MSPs to reconsider. I urge them to do what is right, and not what they have been told to do. That means voting for the Conservative amendment to establish an inquiry into grooming gangs in Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet Secretary Angela Constance will close on behalf of the Scottish Government.

16:53

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): I am pleased to participate in today's debate with my education colleagues who lead in child protection. However, of course, every Scottish Government minister has a duty and a role to protect our children, as we all do as parliamentarians. One member from the Opposition benches earlier made the important point that people need to work together, not just on the ground in our communities, but here in Parliament at a national level.

In a moment, I will speak to the justice contribution to what is a sensitive and complex issue, which has, at its heart, the protection of children now and in the future, and the voices of survivors and victims in the past.

The Scottish Government, like others today, recognises that the sexual abuse and exploitation of children are abhorrent crimes with devastating impacts on the victims. We know—I know—that, throughout time and society, there have been individuals who seek to abuse children and will use every means available to do so. That is why we should all rightly be concerned about the current threats and challenges, including the 20 per cent year-on-year increase in reported online child sexual abuse.

As justice secretary, I want to address the role of Police Scotland. Oversight of its work is through the Scottish Police Authority. That is set out in legislation, which I know that all members are aware of. Just last week, Police Scotland provided a comprehensive update to the SPA on its activities in relation to group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation. That highlighted Police Scotland's response to the establishment of operation Beaconport in England and Wales, and the chief constable confirmed support for a UK-wide law enforcement approach. Police Scotland is taking a co-ordinated approach aligned to that being taken by police forces in England and Wales

as they respond to the findings of Baroness Casey's audit on group-based sexual abuse.

Police Scotland is reviewing past investigations and, if evidence of group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation is identified, cases will be referred to the National Crime Agency, which is providing another layer of additional independent oversight. If the conclusion is that further investigation is required, Police Scotland would lead that work.

In a meeting with ministers last week, Police Scotland highlighted that we have strong foundations to tackle those harms, including the ability of the police to take a national approach through the national child sexual abuse investigation unit.

It is essential that we await the outputs from that work and from Police Scotland's further activity to develop an overview of the demographics of suspects and offenders in those crimes, to identify any key patterns or trends before any decision can be made on a national inquiry into the issue.

The only point that I would make with regard to Mr Findlay's amendment is that it pre-empts the work that Ms Gilruth and I will oversee—work that we want to take place at pace. Our position has always been that this is a matter to which we would give the most serious and careful consideration.

Russell Findlay: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Angela Constance: Perhaps in a moment.

I have consistently agreed with the point that members have made—it was directly raised by Mr Kerr and mentioned by Mr McArthur and Mr Whitfield—about the importance of data. Child protection has grown in breadth and complexity, so we need new and improved data to understand the scale and nature of the evolving threat. That threat to our children exists now. We have to recognise—we do recognise—that harm is hidden and that sometimes those risks are not immediately in front of us.

Liam Kerr: What is the cabinet secretary's objection to a full grooming gangs inquiry, then?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you back your time, cabinet secretary.

Angela Constance: We have taken advice from Alexis Jay and from the national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group. We are looking at the work that Police Scotland is doing. The view that is coming back is that right now we need to do work to get a more comprehensive picture in order to consider the matter further.

I emphasise to Mr Kerr that our position has always been that we are giving the matter serious

and detailed consideration. I also note the importance of the work that the various inspectorates will now do with regard to that review. That work is crucial, because it will help to inform our view about the need for any further type of inquiry. Crucially, it will also inform our view about what needs to be done in our services on the ground and in our communities today and tomorrow to protect our children.

The on-going work is about what we can do to actively intervene in the lives of our children in the here and now, but we are deeply alive to the lessons of the past that we can and must learn from.

17:00

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): Scottish Labour lodged the motion because we believe that there must be accountability, transparency and justice, and we believe that the Scottish Government has been complacent on group-based sexual exploitation and abuse. The individuals, organisations and public bodies that fail to protect children and young people, especially girls, must be held to account for their failings, and we believe that victims and survivors must have confidence in that process.

We need full transparency from the Government, police, local authorities and other relevant bodies about how and why those failings have occurred. Children and young people who are subjected to such appalling abuse and exploitation deserve justice, including a commitment from the Parliament and the Scottish Government that all steps will be taken to ensure that such crimes never happen again.

I welcome the announcement from Police Scotland last week that there will be an audit to identify any child grooming gangs that have been reported to the force since 2013. We know that there are significant problems with child abuse and grooming in Scotland, and the audit will be key in helping to identify patterns, trends or concerns in relation to the demographics of suspects and offenders. It will be vital in helping to build a clearer picture of the scale of such abuse and exploitation across Scotland, and it will contribute to the on-going work of the National Crime Agency's operation Beaconport, which forms a broader UK law enforcement approach to the issue.

If the audit identifies any potential cases for reinvestigation, that will hopefully lead to convictions for those who have engaged in such crimes. However, members have rightly questioned whether the audit will inspire the confidence and trust of victims. After all, Police Scotland has been accused of failing victims of

group-based sexual exploitation and abuse. That is why Scottish Labour believes that independent oversight of the audit is vital if Police Scotland is to have the confidence and trust of victims. Independent oversight is not uncommon or inappropriate in relation to Police Scotland reviews and audits. The Scottish Police Authority already stands—

Audrey Nicoll: Will the member give way?

Katy Clark: Yes, I will take an intervention from the convener of the Criminal Justice Committee.

Audrey Nicoll: I want to highlight the points that I made earlier with regard to the scrutiny that already exists above Police Scotland from the Scottish Police Authority. Police Scotland is accountable to the SPA and a range of other organisations. I am not sure that there is a lack of scrutiny, although I accept the point that the member is making about independent oversight.

Katy Clark: I disagree with the member on that, but she is absolutely correct to say—as I said—that the Scottish Police Authority already stands as an independent governance body for policing in Scotland. However, having served on the Criminal Justice Committee for more than four years with the member, I still say that there is a need for far greater scrutiny of policing in Scotland. The committee is very aware of that.

The Scottish Government has previously commissioned independent reviews into police complaints, such as those that were undertaken by Lady Elish Angiolini. Police Scotland has also established independent oversight bodies such as the equality, diversity, inclusion and human rights independent review group. We believe that independent oversight of the audit is appropriate and that it would not undermine the operational independence of Police Scotland. We welcome the appointment of Professor Alexis Jay and reiterate our view that that role needs to be independent and have full, unfettered access to all information and records.

Pauline McNeill and Rona Mackay spoke about the audit that was undertaken by Baroness Casey in relation to group-based abuse and exploitation of children and young people in England and Wales. Although we recognise that many of Baroness Casey's recommendations apply to other parts of the UK, we think it appropriate that the Scottish Government look at that work and provide an update to identify what can be implemented in relation to any recommendations in Scotland.

I understand that the First Minister previously stated that the Scottish Government is doing work on child protection policies and practices through the national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group. It would be helpful if he could

clarify how survivors and other relevant stakeholders are being engaged in that work to ensure that there is no further exploitation of vulnerable children and young people in the future.

Members have rightly highlighted the recent powerful testimony of Taylor, the care-experienced survivor of human trafficking and child abuse, and have talked about many other children. All the bodies that we have spoken about in the debate have, in the past, failed to take the necessary safeguarding and reporting actions. Taylor herself has called on the First Minister to establish an inquiry, and Scottish Labour supports her in that call. We believe that an inquiry is vital if we are to establish why there has been a lack of intervention and investigation into cases such as Taylor's.

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children has rightly stressed the need for ministerial leadership to establish the true scale of child abuse and exploitation, particularly in relation to group-based abuse. Although we think that the Scottish Government has been slow to call for an inquiry and show leadership on the issue of group-based sexual exploitation and abuse, we believe that the review can help to determine the extent of grooming in Scotland and the remit of any inquiry. That is why we believe that the review is required and we will support the Scottish Government in that work. However, we believe that it is likely that the review will lead to an inquiry.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): That concludes the debate on transparency in tackling group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Business Motion

17:07

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-19992, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 9 December 2025

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions

followed by Public Audit Committee Debate: The 2023/24 Audit of Ferguson Marine (Port Glasgow) Holdings Limited

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Support for the Veterans and Armed Forces Community in Scotland

followed by Motion on Legislative Consent: Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill – UK Legislation

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.30 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 10 December 2025

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Deputy First Minister Responsibilities,
Economy and Gaelic;
Finance and Local Government

followed by Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.10 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 11 December 2025

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Climate Action and Energy, and
Transport

<i>followed by</i>	Ministerial Statement: Progressing a Just Transition at Grangemouth
<i>followed by</i>	Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee Debate: British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015 Inquiry
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time
Tuesday 16 December 2025	
2.00 pm	Time for Reflection
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Topical Questions
<i>followed by</i>	Stage 3 Proceedings: Dog Theft (Scotland) Bill
<i>followed by</i>	Stage 3 Proceedings: Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill
<i>followed by</i>	Committee Announcements
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
6.00 pm	Decision Time
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business
Wednesday 17 December 2025	
2.00 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.00 pm	Portfolio Questions: Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands; Health and Social Care
<i>followed by</i>	Committee Business
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business
Thursday 18 December 2025	
11.40 am	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
11.40 am	General Questions
12.00 pm	First Minister's Questions
12.45 pm	Portfolio Questions: Social Justice and Housing
<i>followed by</i>	Stage 1 Debate: Contract (Formation and Remedies) (Scotland) Bill
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.40 pm	Decision Time
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 8 December 2025, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[*Graeme Dey*]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:07

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of four Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motions S6M-19993 and S6M-19994, on approval of Scottish statutory instruments, motion S6M-19995, on committee meeting times, and motion S6M-19996, on committee membership.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Energy Performance of Buildings (Scotland) Regulations 2025 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (Notification Requirements) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2025 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that, under Rule 12.3.3B of Standing Orders, the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee can meet, if necessary, at the same time as a meeting of the Parliament during Members' Business on Wednesday 3 December 2025.

That the Parliament agrees that Paul O'Kane be appointed to replace Rhoda Grant as a member of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee.—[*Graeme Dey*]

The Presiding Officer: The question on the motions will be put at decision time.

Motion without Notice

17:08

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 11.2.4 of standing orders, that decision time be brought forward to now. I invite the Minister for Parliamentary Business to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time be brought forward to 5.08 pm—[*Graeme Dey*]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

17:08

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are seven questions to be put as a result of today's business. I remind members that if the amendment in the name of Neil Gray is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Sandesh Gulhane will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-19977.1, in the name of Neil Gray, which seeks to amend motion S6M-19977, in the name of Jackie Baillie, on crisis in social care, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division. There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:09

Meeting suspended.

17:11

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We come to the vote on amendment S6M-19977.1, in the name of Neil Gray, which seeks to amend motion S6M-19977, in the name of Jackie Baillie, on crisis in social care. I remind members that if the amendment in the name of Neil Gray is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Sandesh Gulhane will fall.

Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My application would not connect. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Marra. We will ensure that that is recorded.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)

Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Fulton MacGregor]
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)

Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-19977.1, in the name of Neil Gray, is: For 68, Against 55, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The amendment in the name of Dr Gulhane falls.

The next question is, that motion S6M-19977, in the name of Jackie Baillie, on crisis in social care, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)

Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Fulton MacGregor]
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)

Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Doney, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Abstentions

Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-19977, in the name of Jackie Baillie, as amended, is: For 67, Against 51, Abstentions 5.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament believes that the UK Government must reverse its hostile and damaging migration policies, which have led to a 77% drop in the number of Health and Social Care visas granted, which in turn is having a devastating impact on the social care sector across Scotland; welcomes the valuable contribution that international workers make to Scotland's care sector, communities and economy, and notes that the Scottish social care sector has called for the reversal of these harmful policies; reiterates that Scotland is a welcoming nation and that the Scottish Government must continue to ensure that those who have chosen to make Scotland their

home can continue to do so; calls for a reversal of the increase in employer national insurance contributions, which has placed an additional £84 million pressure on the sector; recognises that the 2025-26 Budget includes over £15 billion for the local government settlement, including almost £2.2 billion for social care integration, but agrees that the Scottish Government must continue to work closely with partners across the sector, including funding local government and the third sector, to continue making improvements for the social care workforce, and all of those who they support.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-19980.2, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, which seeks to amend motion S6M-19980, in the name of Pauline McNeill, on transparency in tackling group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)

McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Fulton MacGregor]
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)

Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Abstentions

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-19980.2, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, is: For 67, Against 55, Abstentions 1.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-19980.1, in the name of Russell Findlay, which seeks to amend motion S6M-19980, in the name of Pauline McNeill, on transparency in tackling group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed. I am aware of a great deal of a conversation this evening; I would be grateful if members could be courteous.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)

McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Fulton MacGregor]
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-19980.1, in the name of Russell Findlay, is: For 50, Against 73, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-19980, in the name of Pauline McNeill, on transparency in tackling group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: The motion is therefore agreed—

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: I am afraid that it was probably a quiet no from where I am sitting.

There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Ind)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)

Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Fulton MacGregor]
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)

Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Abstentions

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-19980, in the name of Pauline McNeill, on transparency in tackling group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse, as amended, is: For 95, Against 27, Abstentions 1.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament believes that there should be independent oversight of the Police Scotland review into group-based sexual exploitation of children and calls on the Scottish Government to urgently clarify whether it will conduct an inquiry into grooming gangs in Scotland, and, in doing so, to give consideration to the continuing work of the statutory Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry, which is considering the abuse of children in care in Scotland, the effects of that abuse and if changes to the law, policies or procedures are needed; recognises the independence of Police Scotland and that the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012 stipulates that the Chief Constable is responsible for the policing of Scotland, and is accountable to the Scottish Police Authority, and acknowledges that the information and data being gathered by members of the National Child Abuse and Exploitation Strategic Group is necessary to ensure that informed evidence-based decisions are taken on the need for further independent inquiries or reviews.

The Presiding Officer: Unless any member objects, I propose to ask a single question on four Parliamentary Bureau motions. The question is, that motions S6M-19993 and S6M-19994, on approval of Scottish statutory instruments, motion S6M-19995, on committee meeting times, and motion S6M-19996, on committee membership, all in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Energy Performance of Buildings (Scotland) Regulations 2025 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (Notification Requirements) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2025 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that, under Rule 12.3.3B of Standing Orders, the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee can meet, if necessary, at the same time as a meeting of the Parliament during Members' Business on Wednesday 3 December 2025.

That the Parliament agrees that Paul O'Kane be appointed to replace Rhoda Grant as a member of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Bereavement Support and Awareness

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-18847, in the name of Elena Whitham, on bereavement support and awareness. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises that everyone in Scotland, including those in Carrick, Cumnock, and Doon Valley, will experience a bereavement, and notes the view that good bereavement support is needed to guide people through what can be a difficult time; understands that frameworks have been put in place by the Scottish and UK governments that set out guidance on how proper bereavement care should be offered across society; notes the 2022 report from the UK Commission on Bereavement, *Bereavement is everyone's business*, which provided policy recommendations for the Scottish and UK governments to adopt; understands that a stigma exists surrounding bereavement and its discussion; notes research from Sue Ryder, which suggests that bereavement costs the UK economy an estimated £23 billion each year in lost Gross Value Added, and the UK Treasury an estimated £8 billion in reduced tax revenues; acknowledges the view that this could be improved with better support and care, and notes the belief that a better understanding of grief and bereavement is required by all, particularly among young people.

17:23

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I thank the colleagues from across the chamber who signed my motion, securing today's important debate. Every person in this room will have experienced loss, and how we react to that loss varies from person to person. We are all individuals, and all responses are valid and should be respected accordingly. Today's debate is about emphasising the importance of strong, compassionate bereavement support at every level of society—support that guides people through one of the most difficult experiences that any of us will face.

This week marks national grief awareness week, which is organised by the wonderfully supportive Good Grief Trust. This year's theme is "Growing with Grief", which highlights that, even though the loss of someone marks an end, it can also become the ground from which something new begins. A bereavement changes us as an individual but, with an ear to listen to us and a shoulder to lean on, we have the opportunity to grow into someone new who is shaped by love, memories and resilience. The pain might always remain, but hope eventually returns.

On 11 August 2021, I had just arrived at my mother-in-law's house in Carlisle, after a weekend out in the camper van with my husband, when my

phone rang. I saw that it was my grandpa's house phone and, when I answered it, I heard the grief in my aunt's voice as she started to speak. I do not remember this, but apparently I shouted, "No, don't say it," as I knew that she was going to tell me that he had died. Even though he was in his 95th year, given how hale and hearty he was, it somehow felt like he would be with us forever. I was wholly unprepared for the visceral grief that overtook me in a whole-body reaction at the loss of that giant among men. He was a teller of tales, the bestower of a solid moral compass and a deep believer in social justice. He helped to make me who I am today. I felt as if my arm was cut off—and maybe a leg, too.

We immediately left for home, and in a very surreal twist, we were caught up in a major accident on the motorway that saw us serving hot drinks from our camper van and letting folk use the loo as kids played kick-about on the deserted tarmac for hours. At the time, being prevented from getting home was indescribable. However, in retrospect, I now see the value and the serendipity of our camper being right where it needed to be in that moment. I know that my grandpa would have wanted me to be a helper in such a crisis. Although I alternated between sobbing—and I mean viscerally sobbing—and helping, I felt him close by.

I therefore want to focus today's debate on what those in power can do to create a whole-systems approach that fosters a national understanding of grief, supports people through all its stages and enables hope to re-emerge. Earlier this year, I was contacted by L&M Therapeutic Services, whose expert team offers counselling support to my constituents. I am pleased that its representatives were able to make it to the Parliament today to listen to our discussion. They raised with me the lack of easily accessible bereavement support at national and local levels and highlighted the stigma that exists for those who experience grief.

In 2011, following the publication of the "Shaping bereavement care" report, the Scottish Government issued a framework for action for national health service boards to improve their bereavement care. Fourteen years down the line, each health board should now have a well-developed plan and implementation should be well under way.

In 2021, the UK Commission on Bereavement was established to investigate the key issues related to bereavement and to make recommendations on improving support for bereaved people across the UK. Its report suggested that the Scottish Government should adopt a

"cross-departmental bereavement strategy that recognises support following bereavement as a human right",

paying particular attention to those with protected characteristics and those facing disadvantage. I would welcome the minister's confirmation that those policies are now in place and an explanation of what further improvements are in train.

Grief can have a devastating impact on our ability to work and to work well. Although I acknowledge that, for some, work can be a welcome distraction, for many of us it feels as though the rest of the world is continuing to turn as our lives are forever changed. In the UK, there is no general statutory right to bereavement leave for employees, except for parents who lose a child aged under 18 or who have had a stillbirth after 24 weeks of pregnancy. For all other situations, employees must rely on their employers' discretionary compassionate leave policy, take sick leave or use holiday time. That leaves large groups of people with no legal right to paid time off. In turn, it forces people back into the workplace when they simply are not ready.

Bereavement support charity Sue Ryder estimates that bereavement

"costs the UK economy an estimated £23bn a year in lost Gross Value Added (GVA) and costs the UK Treasury an estimated £8bn in reduced tax revenues, increased healthcare costs and income support payments."

We can translate that to the impact on our devolved income generation and social security payments. Clearly, if we support people through their grief, we can support them back into work and support our economy at the same time. However, care and support alone are not enough. If we want meaningful improvement, we must also confront the stigma that still surrounds grief.

It can be easier to understand someone's grief when they lose a person who is very close to them, but grief is much more complex than that. People can grieve for many different kinds of relationships, even for those that were complicated, distant or unresolved. Grief does not follow a timetable. In the immediate aftermath of a death, people are consumed with paperwork, funeral arrangements and visitors. Those distractions can delay the emotional impact, causing grief to surface months later and leaving the grieving person adrift without understanding or support from others. That stigma can make them feel that their emotions are somehow less valid, less legitimate or even a nuisance when everybody else has moved on.

We must improve education around death and encourage open, honest conversations about it from a young age. In March this year, I wrote to the Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport, who confirmed to me that the current curriculum framework includes learning skills and strategies to support children and young people in challenging times, particularly in relation to change

and loss. That is welcome, but we need to go further. My neighbouring constituency of Ayr saw Gaby Williamson launch her let's bletcher bereavement boxes, following the death of her father. Those boxes contain resources that help children with their grief, and they are available to all primary school pupils in South Ayrshire, which is part of my constituency. That is a fantastic initiative, and I would love to see it replicated everywhere.

Seven minutes is nowhere near enough time to explore a subject as complex and as personal as bereavement, but I will close with this. We need clearer messaging about what support already exists. We need a stronger understanding of where the gaps are and a plan to address them. We need to talk openly about death and dying, creating a culture in which death is not a taboo but a shared human reality. If we do that, we will build a country where everyone is supported through loss, encouraged to grow and able to find hope again.

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

17:30

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I thank Elena Whitham for bringing a debate on this subject to the chamber, and I express to her my admiration for the way in which she insists that we tackle subjects that are extremely difficult to raise, all the time.

As Elena Whitham indicated, bereavement comes along in very different forms and, more importantly, there are different ways in which we deal with it. Inevitably, as we get older, we lose people. There is a circle of life, as she indicated. We usually lose our grandparents first, and older members of our family, and eventually our parents. However, as we age, it is likely that we will lose people—people whom we feel that we should not lose.

I am sorry, Deputy Presiding Officer.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Would the member take an intervention?

Brian Whittle: Please.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Clare Adamson.

Clare Adamson: Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer. I had not intended to speak this evening, but listening to Elena Whitham made me think of an organisation in my constituency: the Miracle Foundation. It was founded by Mariam Tariq—who I nominated as my community champion this year—specifically because her family had suffered

a bereavement from a tragic accident and she felt that there was no support for the children.

Just a few years later, she is engaging with the NHS and with hospices, and is working really hard. I offer that as another example of the great work that is being done across our constituencies in Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you. I call Brian Whittle.

Brian Whittle: Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer.

It is more than 12 years since we lost Todd Bennett—one of the great indestructibles. I still have his number on my phone, and I still have all his social media and his texts. Earlier this year, I lost somebody really close to me. I still have her number and all her social media and her messages. I have photographs and reminders that pop up in my social media—just when I feel safe, there is that jab in the stomach again.

People say that time is a real healer and that we eventually get over our grief, but I do not think so. To me, when it comes to grief, we actually learn to carry it, and to accommodate it, but it is never away. How we accommodate that grief is, perhaps, what we are discussing, and where the role of bereavement care comes in.

What I really wanted to talk about was the grief of losing a child, especially in childbirth. One of my first-ever constituency cases involved a gentleman by the name of Fraser Morton and his partner, June. They lost Lucas in childbirth. The hospital said that he was stillborn; Fraser and June disagreed. They needed to know that Lucas had been there, even for the briefest of moments, and that they could register him and get a birth certificate.

It was a fight, which included meetings with the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport and the chief medical officer, and a Health Improvement Scotland investigation, before it was accepted that there had been a failure of the NHS and that the neonatal unit had been 24 staff short.

A couple of weeks ago, Fraser posted on social media that Lucas would have turned 10. I cannot imagine a loss such as Fraser and June experienced or how it affects you, with no chance that it will ever go away. As Elena Whitham said, bereavement care is supposed to be in place in all NHS boards, but there is evidence, as Fraser Morton's case suggests, that that is not the case across Scotland.

A couple of weeks ago, as it happens, I spoke to the Sands charity about the lack of bereavement services. My daughter is a midwife, and midwives often do not have the time to deliver the bereavement care that they are trained to provide.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): On that point, I have a meeting coming up with Sands, too, and I have also had the pleasure of engaging with the Held In Our Hearts charity, which works with families who have lost young children, had late miscarriages and so on. As Brian Whittle mentioned, that is a really important issue. The charity works with four or five local authorities, but there is an issue in trying to extend that across the whole of Scotland.

The likes of Held In Our Hearts and Sands play an incredible role. I have family members who went through such an experience, so I am glad that Brian Whittle raised that important issue. I am happy to work with him on any such issues that he raises in the future.

Brian Whittle: I thank the member very much for his intervention. The role of Sands is incredibly important—there is funding through the Scottish Government, and Sands is leading on that in particular.

The Marie Curie briefing for members talked about the right to bereavement support. As Elena Whitham said, that support is supposed to be in place, but we still have quite a bit of work to do on that. I thank Elena Whitham once again for bringing the debate to the chamber and I look forward to hearing what other members have to say.

17:36

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I congratulate my colleague on securing this debate on what can be a taboo issue: grief and bereavement, which are two sides of the same coin.

Grief can be immediate; it can be there even when your loved one is still alive, in the last, sometimes painful, days, or even weeks, of life—bereavement can begin even then. Of course, at funerals, memorials, anniversaries, Christmas and new year, grief can be anticipated, but it can pop up even years later; a certain melody, or the scent of a flower and, out of the blue, you are heavy with sadness. These days, those we have lost are immortalised in our social media, and that is also tough.

It is wrong for someone to say, "It's been nearly a year—you'd think they'd have moved on." Some do; others do not. Some drink their way out of grief—that does not usually work. Some throw themselves into work or projects. Sometimes that works, but sometimes it is grief deferred. The loss of a child through an accident can bring parents together, but it can also tear a relationship apart. With the suicide of a loved one, there is guilt. There is no script, and no road map that will suit

everyone. That is where individual bereavement counselling services come in, and I will refer to two such services.

It was humbling to view the “Lothians speak their name” quilt memorial in Parliament. The quilt was hand-crafted, to remember loved ones who took their own lives, by a group of 49 friends and family members. I heard about how those who helped to create that beautiful memorial found strength in the new community that they had formed. Sitting together chatting, just incidentally, led to starting conversations about the loved one they had lost to suicide and about mental health, their own wellbeing and how to cope—sharing with others in the same boat as themselves. The quilt tours the Lothians, helping to start conversations about mental health and suicide, in the hope that it will help those who have lost a loved one and perhaps also save lives.

Recently, it was my privilege to meet two Borders widows who are members of the Scottish Borders widowed community, which is a peer-to-peer support group that offers long-term compassionate support to men and women across the Borders who have lost a partner. As the only group of its kind in the region, it provides a much-needed space for people to connect with others who truly understand what it means to be widowed. The group meets monthly in person in Galashiels, with on-going private online support available at any time, including on difficult days such as anniversaries or in those moments of grief that arise quite unexpectedly.

Members also organise social activities such as walks, cinema outings and coffee meet-ups—simple but powerful opportunities to find connection and presence amid profound loss. The group is entirely volunteer run, and all members of the team are themselves widowed. Over the past three years, the group has grown to nearly 480 members, offering a lifeline to many who are facing isolation and continual heartbreak. Its approach is centred on providing sustained support over the long term, not just in the immediate aftermath of bereavement.

One of the group’s aims is to encourage more open conversations about death, not just emotionally but in practical and mental terms, with an emphasis on preparedness and reducing the silence that often surrounds grief and loss. The group’s motto is “Life grows around your grief”. That is a kind and compassionate thought. Although it is a difficult path, with steps forward and many steps back, those organisations and others help to keep folk on a forward path.

17:40

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I, too, thank Elena Whitham for bringing this important debate to the chamber. As the motion says, and as other members have noted in their contributions, bereavement is not always an easy subject to discuss, but all of us in the Parliament, and our constituents, will experience some form of bereavement at various times in our life.

Bereavement is a complex and very personal experience. Everyone is different and there is no single way to grieve. We will all know personally, having had our own experiences or from seeing family and friends grieving, that everyone experiences it in their very own way and that people have their own beliefs, rituals and plans to help them to deal with death. However, we also know that people struggle. People experience things that they never imagined they would, and life is not always kind when those moments strike us. Sometimes we are prepared, and sometimes we are utterly unprepared. It is for those reasons, and for many other reasons that members have mentioned, that we need good bereavement support to guide people through what is often a very difficult time.

From my research for the debate, it is clear that people need both practical advice, as other members have mentioned, and on-going emotional support. Registering a death, following the rules for burial and dealing with costs can be both practically very difficult and emotionally draining. The time that follows, grieving in the longer term, is complex for many people. As other members have said, there is no timeframe—people have to deal with bereavement and grief in their own way and in their own time.

We know from the UK Commission on Bereavement’s report, “Bereavement is everyone’s business”, which the motion mentions, that, although we might imagine that people have support networks, the data tells us that the situation is quite different. According to the report, 28 per cent of the adults who responded to the consultation said that they received no support from family and almost 46 per cent said that they did not get support from friends following bereavement. In addition, 61 per cent of the adults who responded said that they had difficulty with at least one practical or administrative task following bereavement. That makes us think: these things will happen, and people need support in place. Finally, more than 40 per cent of the adults who responded said that they had wanted formal bereavement support but did not know how to go about receiving that support.

People find the subject of death so difficult. My own story is that I remember once dropping off my kids at school and going over to another mum to

say how sorry I was about the death of her father. In that moment, I could see that she was very upset, and the reason was that people were avoiding her, which was so difficult for her to deal with, on top of all the grief. She really wanted people to recognise her bereavement and to say something about the loss of her father, but clearly so many people were finding it difficult, and their reaction was to walk away and say nothing.

Many of my thoughts in this debate are about how we support people to be a support to their family, friends and colleagues when they are experiencing bereavement and grief. We will all experience the death of a loved one, and it is incumbent on us all to try to support people. I am pleased to see in the update to the report that there has been some positive work across the four nations. That includes looking at how we support people in employment with bereavement policies and how we do work in schools. The Scottish Government has done some work on a palliative care strategy, including bereavement support. There are also the organisations that other members have mentioned. People tell us how important those organisations are and, as a Parliament, we must make a commitment to them.

All the measures that have been mentioned are very welcome, but, as always, more needs to be done. That is why the debate is so important. It is important that we talk about bereavement in order to understand its impact and the profound changes that bereaved people can face in dealing with the practical and emotional consequences. I welcome the debate, and I thank all members in the chamber for contributing to it.

17:45

The Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing (Tom Arthur): I thank Elena Whitham for securing this debate on the important issue of bereavement, which will affect everyone at some point in their lives and commands our collective compassion. I also thank colleagues for their speeches, which included profound, deep and meaningful personal reflections.

People can feel particularly vulnerable during bereavement and grief. Grief can affect our physical and mental health, and it is often accompanied by feelings of loneliness, anger, anxiety and sadness. It is important that people know that they are not alone, that it is perfectly normal to have such feelings and that sources of advice and support are available to them.

We want people to feel that they can openly discuss bereavement and its impacts, to remove any stigma surrounding the issue and encourage people to access support if they need it. Given the wide-ranging impacts that bereavement can have,

it is important that the public sector works across boundaries and with third sector partners to ensure that the right support is available.

The Scottish Government welcomed the UK Commission on Bereavement's report in 2022 and the focus that it brought to improving the experience of people who are affected by grief. The report covered a range of issues, which reflects the range of impacts that bereavement can have on different aspects of our wellbeing, and it highlighted instances in which people might particularly benefit from support following a bereavement.

One thing that everyone might benefit from is basic access to advice. That is why coping with bereavement and grief is an important theme in our mind to mind online portal, with advice and videos from a range of individuals describing their experiences. I thank those who contributed. Such resources demonstrate what an intensely personal experience it can be, affecting us all differently, but that range of support and coping strategies can help.

Bereavement support is also an area of focus in our communities mental health and wellbeing fund for adults, in which we have invested £81 million since 2021, with a further £15 million committed next year. The fund supports several grass-roots community projects with a sole focus on supporting those who are experiencing bereavement. Peer support can be invaluable.

The third sector is a key partner in the delivery of support, so I am pleased that Cruse Scotland is one of the beneficiaries of the Scottish Government's fairer funding initiative, which provides multiyear investment in key front-line support.

Although we will all experience bereavement, it is important to recognise that some instances can be particularly traumatic. As the motion highlights, it is especially important that we support children and young people who experience bereavement. Schools play a key role in supporting children's mental health and wellbeing, and Education Scotland provides a range of materials and resources that are specifically focused on bereavement to aid teachers in delivering sensitive and effective learning on the topic.

We have provided £16 million a year to deliver our commitment that all children aged 10 and above have access to a school counsellor. More than 2,000 children and young people benefited from the support of a school counsellor to deal with bereavement between April 2024 and March 2025.

Outside of school, since 2016, the Scottish Government has funded Child Bereavement UK to provide support for children and young people who

are experiencing bereavement, as well as their families.

The loss of a baby or a child can have a profound impact on parents. I offer my deepest sympathy to anyone who has experienced that.

Christine Grahame: I agree with what the minister has said about the loss of a baby or a child, and I am pleased to say that we now recognise that there is a lot of grief attached to miscarriages, which used to be talked about as something natural—of course they are not—and that we support people through miscarriages and their grief for their loss.

Tom Arthur: Christine Grahame makes an important point, which is fully recognised and considered as part of the Government's policies.

For most parents who have suffered a pregnancy loss, bereavement and grief support will be provided by their health board or by third sector organisations and they will not require specialist services. Our funding for Cruse Scotland and Child Bereavement UK facilitates a range of support, care and advice to families who have been bereaved, including those who have lost a child.

The Scottish Government also funds the baby loss charity Sands, which was referenced earlier, to support NHS boards to implement the national bereavement care pathway for pregnancy and baby loss in Scotland. I am pleased that all 14 NHS boards have signed up to the pathway.

The grief that is experienced by those who lose a loved one to suicide can also be particularly profound. Bereavement support is therefore an important strand of "Creating Hope Together", which is the joint Scottish Government and Convention of Scottish Local Authorities suicide prevention strategy. We greatly value not just the pilot projects that we have supported in NHS Ayrshire and Arran and NHS Highland but the great work that is being done elsewhere by health and social care partnerships.

Support with prolonged or complicated grief and bereavement is also integral to our new palliative care strategy, which highlights the importance of support and training for staff.

Although the effects of bereavement are most notably felt on a personal level, it is important to acknowledge its wider impacts. In addition to the impact on a person's wellbeing, bereavement can place a financial burden on them. Our funeral support payment is helping to alleviate the burden of debt that many people face when paying for a funeral and is likely to contribute towards reducing funeral poverty.

The motion rightly points out the impact that bereavement has on the wider economy. We know

that workplaces that support and promote good mental health benefit individuals and employers. That includes supporting people who are affected by bereavement. That is why we have worked in partnership with Public Health Scotland to develop a platform for employers that signposts them to a range of mental health and wellbeing resources, including support for employees who are affected by bereavement.

The "Bereavement Charter for Scotland" was launched in 2020 by the Scottish Partnership for Palliative Care. Charter mark status is given to employers who demonstrate that they are working to make their community a place where people who are bereaved feel supported by their employer and people around them.

As we have heard today, bereavement can have a wide-ranging set of impacts on an individual and across society. The Scottish Government remains committed to working with partners to enable a joined-up approach in which people are signposted to advice and support that meets their needs.

Again, I thank members for their speeches and Elena Whitham for securing this important debate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate.

Meeting closed at 17:53.

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