



# Meeting of the Parliament

Thursday 4 December 2025

Session 6



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# Scottish Parliament

Thursday 4 December 2025

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

## General Question Time

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):** Good morning. The first item of business is general question time.

### Moray FLOW-Park Project (Community Engagement)

**1. Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on how it is engaging with communities based near the Moray Firth regarding the proposed Moray FLOW-Park project. (S6O-05243)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin):** The Scottish Government manages our seas in line with the national marine plan and promotes sustainable development that accounts for existing sea users and protection of our marine environment.

I am aware of the strong public concerns about the proposed Moray FLOW-Park, and I recognise the importance of engagement with local communities and the fishing industry. As we have previously explained, the project remains at an early stage, with exploratory activities being undertaken by the developer. I understand that that involves the developer engaging with the local community and other interested stakeholders.

Although no marine licence applications have been submitted by the developer or any other party, any future application would be subject to the relevant rigorous regulatory processes, which include pre-application consultation and formal public consultation. That will ensure that, should an application be submitted, local communities and stakeholders will have an opportunity to provide their views, which will be taken into consideration as part of the application process.

**Tim Eagle:** Local people are furious about the proposed project and its proposed location, and freedom of information documents that have come out recently make it clear why that is the case. They show that the Scottish Government was behind the proposal from the start, with Scottish Enterprise bankrolling Offshore Solutions Group with a £1.83 million grant. More than £800,000 of that has already been spent, despite the fact that no consent has been given, no environmental assessments or procurement processes have

been undertaken, and there has been no meaningful community engagement.

Scottish Enterprise even said that the project had to be pushed forward at pace, because any delay in delivery would be a critical risk to the Scottish National Party's renewables plans. Imagine how that sounds to local residents and fishermen, who were never asked about the project.

Given the seriousness of the issue, I will request a ministerial statement later today. Can the cabinet secretary explain to my constituents why their livelihoods and public money were put at risk before communities were even consulted?

**Gillian Martin:** I make it clear that, when Scottish Enterprise gives funding or advice to any developers, that has absolutely no implications for the planning process. Scottish Enterprise does not need planning permission to be in place before it can engage with developers or, indeed, any companies; it makes its own decisions about when to give funding and for what reasons, and it does that in relation to a range of developments.

I suggest that, if a marine licence application is submitted, that will be the point at which local communities and stakeholders will have an opportunity to air their views. Regardless of specific examples, any developers that want to submit an application should engage with the community thoroughly before doing so.

### Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder Assessments (Glasgow)

**2. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government how it is tackling the increase in demand for ADHD assessments in Glasgow. (S6O-05244)

**The Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing (Tom Arthur):** The Scottish Government recognises that demand for ADHD assessment and support has increased significantly in recent years. We also understand that a diagnosis can be helpful for people who are seeking support with ADHD. However, that should not be a substitute for providing support to people based on their specific needs.

We are working closely with national health service health boards and local authorities to improve services and support for neurodivergent people. Although the responsibility for ensuring that funding is used to provide the highest quality of care and support sits with NHS boards and health and social care partnerships, the Government is playing an active role in supporting that work nationally. For example, we fund the national autism implementation team to support health boards and HSCPs to redesign

neurodevelopmental services and develop stepped-care pathways for ADHD and autism.

**Pauline McNeill:** A 23-year-old constituent of mine was on the ADHD waiting list in January 2023, and was told that she would have a wait of around 18 months. Since then, there has not been much contact with her. Last week, she called to find out when she would be seen, and she was told that she would certainly not be seen before 2027. We are talking about a period of at least three years of her life.

Will the minister help me understand why the waiting time has expanded so much? He can correct me on this, but I think that patients are taken in order—no priority is given and there is no triaging—so I am wondering why it has expanded so much. Is the minister concerned that my constituent is not getting a straight answer and can he assure me that there will at least be transparency so that NHS patients can understand when they will be seen?

**Tom Arthur:** Long waits are not acceptable, and if Pauline McNeill wants to write to me with the details of her constituent, I will be more than happy to look into the matter, come back to her in writing and follow up with a meeting, if that would be useful.

More generally, we are seeing significant demand for neurodevelopmental assessment support. The issue is, of course, not unique to Scotland. Members might be aware of the announcements that have been made south of the border that reflect the significant pressures being experienced in England, and the picture is similar in Wales.

The Government is doing a lot of work at the moment. Parliament has also been engaged, with the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee undertaking an inquiry, and I look forward to reading the report that it will produce. Invitations to a cross-party summit have also been sent out to respective party spokespersons, and I look forward to that summit taking place.

The issue is complex and challenging. It has been characterised as a wicked problem, and we will have to work constructively to identify long-term solutions, but it has to be based on need. I must stress how important it is that a diagnosis should not be required to access support, and I am committed to working constructively with our partners to make sure that that is a reality.

Again, if Pauline McNeill writes to me with the details of the specific case, I will be happy to get back to her.

### **Metro Mayor (Greater Glasgow Region)**

**3. Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the Centre for Cities' recent report, which recommended having a directly elected metro mayor for the greater Glasgow region. (S6O-05245)

**The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes):** Growing the economy is a top Government priority and we agree with the Centre for Cities that further empowering regions is key to delivering that. As the First Minister announced last week, we will introduce legislation in the next parliamentary session to enable regional partnerships to establish legal status and unlock new powers. Our approach will be dynamic and we will work with regions to design structures that suit them.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution. Indeed, new research from the University of Glasgow centre for public policy recommends moving away from the assumption that appointing mayors is the best approach.

**Paul Sweeney:** At last Friday's state of the city economy conference in Glasgow, the First Minister promised that the Government would introduce enabling legislation in the next parliamentary session to allow regional partnerships to seek legal status, unlock new powers and design delivery models tailored to local priorities. With further details yet to be provided, that seems to be one of the biggest changes to government in Scotland since the creation of the Parliament, finally filling the strategic gap that has been present in Scotland since the abolition of the regional councils in 1996.

Does the Scottish Government plan to facilitate a greater level of democratic mandate for this new city-region tier of governance, or are we going to end up with a feeble version of England's combined authority system, with some executive powers but none of the democratic accountability?

**Kate Forbes:** I welcome Paul Sweeney's recognition of the steps that the First Minister has laid out. In my first answer, I said that there is no one-size-fits-all solution, and there does need to be a more dynamic approach. It is interesting to see what lessons we can learn from some of the greater authorities—Manchester is often referred to in that respect—but it is quite clear that their approach to development and planning is dynamic. That is the approach that we want to adopt, too, instead of being drawn to taking a single democratic or constitutional approach to those areas.

We will therefore lay out more steps, but the approach needs to be flexible; after all, the

approach taken in Glasgow might not be the same as that taken in, say, Aberdeen. We are keen to see that dynamic approach adopted.

**Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP):** My question is in a similar vein to Paul Sweeney's. In implementing the Scottish Government's legislative plans, might the Deputy First Minister consider enabling the city region to look at the establishment of a directly elected council or assembly to ensure better democratic oversight and governance for the region?

**Kate Forbes:** We will work with regional partnerships to establish governance structures that work for them. I know that this is outside Jamie Hepburn's area, but I would point out as an illustration that some regional partnerships are already aligned with a single local authority, which makes it easier to match the governance structure with the regional partnership. That might look different in areas such as Glasgow, and, as I said in my original answer, it does not necessarily mean appointing mayors.

The views of local government will inform any future changes to local government structure or governance arrangements, in line with our commitment to respecting the democratic mandate of local government as part of the Verity house agreement.

#### United Kingdom Government Budget

**4. Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the UK Government budget announced on 26 November. (S6O-05246)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison):** The UK budget process has been chaotic and failed to deliver for Scotland. We needed the UK Government to prioritise investment in public services, support for jobs and industry in Scotland and serious action on energy bills. Instead, Scotland was again treated as an afterthought, with families left to pay the price.

Abolition of the two-child limit is, of course, welcome, but it is long overdue. This Government has already taken forward plans to mitigate it in Scotland.

We are looking carefully at what the UK budget means for Scotland and our budget, which will be published on 13 January.

**Keith Brown:** Given the warning from the Institute for Fiscal Studies that the budget—the Labour budget—bakes in austerity for the years ahead, what assessment has the Scottish Government made of the pressure that that will place on Scotland's public services, especially

when the so-called funding uplift does not cover even half of the cost of the national insurance rise that was forced on employers this year?

A real-terms increase of only 0.8 per cent was granted

*"because Anas Sarwar asked us to".—[Official Report, House of Commons, 26 November 2025; Vol 776, c 388.]*

Does the cabinet secretary agree that that demonstrates not influence but ineffectiveness and a complete lack of ambition on the part of Anas Sarwar, that he asked for far too little and that Scotland has once again been treated, as the cabinet secretary said, as an afterthought by the UK Government?

**The Presiding Officer:** Please answer on devolved responsibilities, cabinet secretary.

**Shona Robison:** I absolutely agree with Keith Brown. The UK Government has made much of the very limited additional funding that has been provided, but that stretches across five years and, as Keith Brown pointed out, it is less than half the shortfall in funding as a result of the increased cost of employer national insurance contributions that is being faced by our public services, which is estimated to be about £2 billion across the five-year period.

I called for significant investment in public services and infrastructure, but the UK budget failed to deliver the scale of funding that we need. That means that we continue to face a very challenging outlook as we head into the Scottish budget.

#### Visitor Levy (Impact on Hospitality and Tourism Businesses)

**5. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what recent assessment it has made of the impact of the visitor levy on businesses operating in the hospitality and tourism sectors. (S6O-05247)

**The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee):** The Scottish Government recognises the importance of supporting Scotland's visitor economy while enabling councils to invest in local services. The Visitor Levy (Scotland) Act 2024 requires local consultation with businesses before any scheme is introduced.

Responding to feedback from industry and others, earlier this week, we lodged a Government-initiated question signalling our intention to introduce a bill early in the new year to provide additional flexibility, such as allowing flat-rate models as an alternative to the current percentage-based approach. If passed, the bill will further enable councils to design fair and practical schemes that protect the competitiveness of our

hospitality and tourism sectors and generate revenue to support local tourism economies.

**Murdo Fraser:** I welcome the dramatic U-turn from the Scottish Government to allow councils extra flexibility in future, following sustained pressure from the Scottish Conservatives and the tourism industry. In the meantime, however, councils are continuing to progress plans for a visitor levy. In Perth and Kinross, in the region that I represent, a public consultation disclosed 68 per cent opposition to a visitor levy, with just 29 per cent in favour. Given that overwhelming rejection of the notion of a visitor levy in Perth and Kinross, will the minister join me in calling on Scottish National Party and Liberal Democrat councillors on Perth and Kinross Council to ditch those plans and join Conservative councillors in calling for them to be put in the bin, where they deserve to be?

**The Presiding Officer:** Please answer on matters of devolved responsibility, minister.

**Ivan McKee:** I salute Murdo Fraser for being a trier, if nothing else.

The Government listens to and engages with the industry on an on-going, regular and thorough basis. As a responsible Government, we listen to concerns and make changes to legislation when that is in the best interests of all concerned, including those in business and local government.

It is up to local authorities, as it should be, to take forward proposals that they believe best suit their local economies and local tourism sector, following engagement with businesses and other interested parties. It is not the Government's role to tell local authorities how best to run that process. We are making a range of options available to them, and they can decide on the best way to proceed based on local circumstances.

### Corran Narrows Crossing

**6. Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government when the Cabinet Secretary for Transport last met with local communities over the future of the Corran Narrows crossing. (S6O-05248)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop):** I last met local stakeholders and community members in August 2023 at Ardgour hall, in Ardgour, along with the local MSP, Kate Forbes, to discuss Corran ferry matters, including on-going issues and impacts at the time.

The Corran ferry is the responsibility of Highland Council, which runs the service. At the council's request, the Scottish Government agreed to include funding for the ferry replacement vessel in a revision to the Inverness and Highlands city region deal. Transport Scotland and Scottish

Government officials continue to engage regularly with Highland Council and other partners on the investments in vessel and port infrastructure.

**Jamie Halcro Johnston:** The Scottish Government cannot just wash its hands of the issue. The ferry route is one of the busiest in Scotland, and local communities are losing faith in the Scottish Government and Highland Council, which is led by the Scottish National Party. The MV Corran has experienced serious reliability issues, and its back-up vessel, the MV Maid of Glencoul, is so old that she has just been added to the register of historic vessels.

I was in Fort William last week, and local people were clear that the impact on their communities is significant. They do not care whether the vessel is electric; they just want a reliable new vessel as soon as possible—even if it is a replacement diesel ferry—and a fixed link in the longer term. Why is the SNP not listening to them?

**Fiona Hyslop:** I am not sure that Jamie Halcro Johnston listened to my first answer. The Scottish Government has taken on board the request from Highland Council and has ensured that there is funding for a replacement Corran ferry. As part of that, Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd is developing the concept design and has prepared for the new electric ferry with a tender specification that is ready for submission to a shipbuilder.

Far from not being involved, Highland Council and the Scottish Government have taken on their responsibilities. I look forward to the Corran ferry being one of the first vessels in phase 2 of the small vessel replacement programme.

### United Kingdom Government Budget (Impact on North East Scotland)

**7. Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the UK Government budget regarding how it affects the North East Scotland region. (S6O-05249)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison):** The UK budget has failed to deliver for Scotland and will have detrimental effects for the North East Scotland region.

We are deeply disappointed and concerned that the UK Government has failed to reform the energy profits levy, ignoring our warnings and those from industry. That places jobs, investment and the energy transition at risk.

Distilleries in the north-east are crucial to the whisky industry, which contributes more than £5 billion in exports and supports more than 20,000 jobs. The disparity in alcohol duty has been

ignored again, with the increase in rates resulting in an 18 per cent rise in just three years.

**Jackie Dunbar:** Days after the budget was published, Harbour Energy announced the loss of another 100 jobs in Aberdeen. The energy profits levy is taxing a windfall that no longer exists and is devastating Aberdeen's economy. What is the Scottish Government doing to encourage the UK Government to rethink the EPL?

**Shona Robison:** I share Jackie Dunbar's concerns about the job losses that were announced at Harbour Energy in Aberdeen and about the approach that was taken to the reserved North Sea fiscal regime in the UK budget. The Chancellor of the Exchequer has not heeded the clear warnings from across the energy industry on the necessity of making the transition from the energy profits levy to a fairer and more stable regime as soon as possible. The impacts are being felt acutely in the north-east. They include the further job losses that Jackie Dunbar highlighted. Those impacts extend across the energy sector, including in relation to renewables and supply chains. We will, of course, continue to relay those concerns to the UK Government in the strongest possible terms.

**Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con):** The UK budget was a hammer blow to the north-east of Scotland and the oil and gas industry. However, it is now nearly three years since the Scottish Government announced its presumption against oil and gas developments. In that time, it has refused to support Rosebank, Cambo and Jackdaw. The Scottish National Party Government is complicit in thousands of jobs being lost in the north-east, so will it commit to publishing its energy strategy and just transition plan before the end of the year and finally show some support to our oil and gas workers?

**Shona Robison:** We did not support the extension, under the previous Tory UK Government, of the energy profits levy until 2029, nor—[*Interruption.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** Let us hear the cabinet secretary.

**Shona Robison:** I am not sure that members quite heard that, Presiding Officer. Let me say it again: we did not support either the extension of the levy to 2029 under the previous Tory UK Government or the further extension to 2030 and the increase in rate that were confirmed in last year's UK autumn budget. That is having a devastating effect on the sector in North East Scotland and in the rest of Scotland. The levy needs to be scrapped, and it needs to be scrapped now.

**The Presiding Officer:** That concludes general question time.

## First Minister's Question Time

12:00

### Grooming Gangs Inquiry

**1. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con):** Less than three months ago, my party asked the Parliament to instigate a Scottish grooming gangs inquiry. We did so because we knew that it was necessary—we knew it then and we certainly know it now. Our amendment to the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill was the only legal mechanism available to us to do it. However, the Scottish National Party voted the amendment down.

In doing so, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs cited the leading expert, Professor Alexis Jay. Angela Constance said that Professor Jay

"shares my view and has put on the record and stated to the media that she does not support further inquiries into child sexual abuse and exploitation".—[*Official Report*, 16 September 2025; c 31.]

Does John Swinney think that the justice secretary's statement was honest?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** Yes, I do. It was a reflection of the general comment that was being made about the issues at the time. As Mr Findlay knows, the Government was looking at a range of different issues in relation to the examination of the issue of childhood sexual abuse—which is building on the work that we have already undertaken in establishing the inquiry into those issues that is chaired by Lady Smith. In the debate on the issue yesterday, the Government set out further steps that we are taking. I welcome the participation of Professor Alexis Jay in the work that the Government is taking forward.

**Russell Findlay:** Absolutely incredible. At no point did Professor Jay say that there should be no further inquiries into grooming gangs in Scotland. The justice secretary misrepresented Professor Jay, she misled the Parliament and she misled the public—and then she went absent without leave. On 19 November, she was not here to answer urgent questions about her misrepresentation. On 25 November, she put up a junior minister to answer urgent questions on the lack of knowledge about grooming gangs in Scotland. On 26 November, again, she sat here in silence when we challenged her failure to answer questions. Yesterday, the justice secretary finally broke her silence, but she made no apology and did not accept any wrongdoing whatsoever. The misleading of Parliament must be investigated by the independent advisers on the ministerial code. Will John Swinney support an investigation, and, if

it finds against the justice secretary, will he sack her?

**John Swinney:** I am satisfied with the way in which these matters have been conducted. I am also satisfied with the steps that the Government set out yesterday to the Parliament, which are that there will be an independent national review of the response to group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation in Scotland, led by the Care Inspectorate, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland and Healthcare Improvement Scotland. I welcome the fact that Professor Alexis Jay has been appointed as the independent chair for the national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group. All of that work will be drawn together and assessed independently, further advice will come to ministers and the Parliament will be updated.

**Russell Findlay:** John Swinney says that he is satisfied, but victims have no faith in this Government and no faith in this justice secretary. The mother of Taylor, who was gang raped as a child in care, told me that there is

“no substance to anything that Angela Constance says”

and that

“she cannot oversee anything.”

I wonder whether the First Minister has concluded the same thing in private. Yesterday's announcement of a grooming gangs review was made not by the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs but by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills. It looks as if the responsibility for that inquiry and for the decisions made on its findings will not be held by Angela Constance. Has John Swinney, too, realised that she cannot possibly oversee that review—and does that not show that he, too, has lost confidence in his own justice secretary?

**The First Minister:** No—that is not the case. The reason why the education secretary made that announcement yesterday is that she carries Cabinet responsibility for child protection issues, of which all that material is comprised. On Tuesday, the education secretary led the discussion at Cabinet, which involved all Cabinet colleagues, including the justice secretary, about the steps that the Government is taking, which I set out to Parliament last week in response to a question from Pam Gosal. All of that is the responsibility of the Government, and it is led by the education secretary. I have set out to Parliament the steps that we are taking.

**Russell Findlay:** It sounds as though the justice secretary will not have responsibility for a review into mass organised criminality, but the First Minister suggests that there is nothing unusual

about that. The Scottish National Party has been shamed into launching a grooming gangs review, but it is a review that victims believe will mean public bodies marking their own homework and the Government controlling the findings. We still do not know whether the justice secretary, who did not want the review to happen and who dishonestly twisted the words of an academic and misled victims and the Parliament, will be in charge of the review. All of that is why a review simply is not good enough and an independent inquiry is necessary. Victims do not trust Angela Constance, the SNP or the authorities that have already failed them. They deserve answers and justice, and that can be achieved only by a free, fearless and independent inquiry. Why on earth cannot John Swinney see that?

**The First Minister:** I recognise the significance and seriousness of the issue. It has been treated as such by my Government, which is why we have taken careful steps to do all the explanatory and investigative work and come to the right conclusion about whether an inquiry of the nature that Mr Findlay put to Parliament yesterday is appropriate and necessary.

Mr Findlay said that a collection of different organisations are marking their own homework. The organisations that I referred to were set up by statute and have to operate independently of Government. That is what the law requires of them. They are the Care Inspectorate, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Healthcare Improvement Scotland. It is really important that I, as First Minister, make it clear, openly to the public in Scotland, that I have absolute confidence in the independent decision making and scrutiny of those organisations, because that is vital for public confidence.

In recent weeks, we have seen reports from Healthcare Improvement Scotland that have challenged and been very critical of health boards in this country. That is because HIS is exercising independent and fearless scrutiny, as will Professor Alexis Jay as the independent chair of the national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group. That gives me confidence that we are going about the process in a serious and detailed fashion, to ensure that the perspective of victims is properly addressed as we consider this significant and serious issue.

#### “NHS in Scotland 2025: Finance and performance”

**2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** Audit Scotland has today published yet another damning report on the Scottish National Party's mismanagement of our national health service. It

is grim reading for John Swinney, but more devastating for patients and staff.

The report found that

“despite more money ... and more staff ... NHS Scotland’s performance has not improved in line with commitments made by the Scottish Government.”

It says that NHS boards are

“struggling to break even, with seven ... requiring ... Government loans”

and it exposes an “implementation gap” between SNP announcements and the reality for patients. Is it not a damning indictment of John Swinney that, despite his promises, long waits persist, and that, in his hands, the NHS is, in Audit Scotland’s words, “unsustainable”?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** Anybody who observes these exchanges at First Minister’s question time will understand that I am the first to accept that there are challenges in ensuring that the NHS recovers from the disruption of the two years of the Covid pandemic. I accept that that challenge exists, but significant progress is being made. For example, the number of planned and performed operations in Scotland represents the highest level since January 2020, before the pandemic. In the 12 months to October 2025, 297,014 operations were planned, which is a 4.5 per cent increase from the previous 12 months, and 271,328 operations were performed, which is an increase of 4.6 per cent. That demonstrates that, although there are challenges, progress has been made, and the plans that I have put in place to focus on long waits are beginning to take effect.

**Anas Sarwar:** The NHS needs to recover from John Swinney and the Scottish National Party. That is the problem that we have across the country. His predecessor promised to end waits of more than a year by September 2024—he failed. John Swinney has promised to end waits of more than a year by March 2026, but, right now, more than 11,000 patients have been waiting for more than two years. What is the result? Figures published this week show that a record number of patients are being forced to go private, with 13,455 private admissions between April and June this year. People in pain are being forced to remortgage their homes and spend life savings to get the treatment that they need.

The founding principles of our NHS—that it is free and available at the point of need—are being destroyed by the SNP. Why is John Swinney doing what even Margaret Thatcher failed to do, which is to privatisate healthcare in Scotland?

**The First Minister:** It is interesting that Mr Sarwar has shifted the ground of his argument on private treatment. Some months ago, Mr Sarwar put to me a figure that was a much more

significant accusation on the amount of private treatment that was under way. I cannot remember the exact proportion, but it was of the order of something like one in six of the population, which was absolutely a ludicrously nonsensical figure. Mr Sarwar has changed his ground.

Let me give Mr Sarwar some reassurance about what is happening about long waits. Between April and October this year—[*Interruption.*]

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

**The First Minister:** Between April and October this year, new out-patient waits of more than a year reduced by 17.9 per cent—that is just since April. In the same period, the waiting list size for new in-patient and day-case procedures waiting more than 52 weeks has reduced by 26.1 per cent.

I say to Mr Sarwar that I accept that there are challenges in the national health service as a consequence of the Covid pandemic, but this Government is delivering on the progress that I said would be made.

**Anas Sarwar:** I think, on the basis of that rambling response from the First Minister, that he needs some time off and a wee rest. SNP-run Scotland was the only United Kingdom nation where there was an increase in private admissions during the period that I cited. The truth is that Scots are paying the price for John Swinney’s incompetence. Thousands are forced to go private to get the treatment that they need, remortgaging homes or borrowing money to pay, for example, £15,000 for a knee replacement, more than £14,000 for a hip replacement or £3,000 for cataract surgery. That means that Scots have been forced to pay at least £59 million of their own money, on top of their taxes, for cataracts and hip and knee replacements in the past year alone.

That breaches the founding principles of our NHS that healthcare is free and available at the point of need and that access is not based on the ability to pay. People who cannot raise the money are left to wait in pain and anxiety. Why is John Swinney forcing Scots in need to choose between paying the financial cost and paying the human cost of his incompetence and failure?

**The First Minister:** I simply remind Mr Sarwar that our national health service was disrupted for a period of two years because of Covid, and there is a backlog in treatment. We are working hard to ensure that we reduce that backlog.

To reassure Mr Sarwar, the amount of hip and knee operations reached an all-time high in 2024. As I have just recounted, we are now performing more operations in the national health service, and we are now back to performing at the pre-

pandemic level, which is an indication of the effectiveness of the reforms that I have put in place and of the plans that are being delivered for people in Scotland. On that basis, the Government is absolutely focused on ensuring that the national health service meets the needs of people in Scotland as we recover from Covid and delivers on the expectations of the people of our country.

### National Health Service

**3. Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** I am sorry to say that the First Minister has had his head completely in the sand about the crisis in our NHS. Everybody knows somebody who has been let down. Anas Sarwar rightly talks about the human cost; let me tell the First Minister what that looks like.

Isobel and Martyn Knights were travelling down the dual carriageway near Aberdeen when Isobel had a violent seizure and stopped breathing. With nowhere to pull over, Martyn had to use every ounce of his police training to get her heart going again while the car was still moving. The car screeched to a halt at the front door of the accident and emergency department and Martyn explained to staff what had happened. However, after moving their car, Martyn was not allowed to return to Isobel's side; A and E was just too busy. She was left alone in a corridor for six hours—remember, her heart had only just been restarted. When she was eventually seen by a doctor, it was obvious that that crucial information had been overlooked. If someone can turn up at accident and emergency after having stopped breathing for minutes and not be seen for hours, what does that say about the state of our NHS?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** First, I am very sorry to hear of the details of the experience of Isobel and Martyn Knights. I am happy to explore the exact circumstances of the case that Mr Cole-Hamilton has put to me. The purpose and focus of accident and emergency is to provide immediate intervention for those who are in the gravest of conditions, and it is my expectation that that should happen in all circumstances.

**Alex Cole-Hamilton:** Martyn and Isobel are absolutely clear: they are not having a go at the hard-working staff who looked exhausted that day in A and E. Emergency departments are backed up because hospitals are rammed and because there are so many people who are stuck there who should be in care homes or being looked after at home. That is what the Auditor General told us this morning.

Let us put it into perspective: when the Scottish National Party first came into power, in a single month, only a handful of people ever waited more than 12 hours in accident and emergency—it hardly ever happened. Despite the best efforts of

staff, the figure has increased by 63,000 per cent. Does the experience of Isobel and Martyn not show how mistakes can be made and patients can be put in danger because accident and emergency is overwhelmed on the SNP's watch?

**The First Minister:** A range of different factors will affect the circumstances in any accident and emergency department at any given time. Some of them will be about whole-system challenges, such as delayed discharge, where hospitals are so congested that it is difficult to ensure that patients can be transferred from A and E into routine wards in a timely manner. We work with local authority partners to ensure that we further reduce delayed discharge in order to support accident and emergency, and the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care is actively pursuing that on my behalf this week.

The second issue is the case load that presents at A and E. In that respect, we have taken forward work to put in place frailty units that will enable us to support frail patients more actively and in a more supportive environment than the mainstream of A and E, where there can be some acute and challenging circumstances.

The third factor is the prevalence of individual health conditions. As members of the Parliament will know, we are seeing an early and significant upsurge in the prevalence of flu, which is resulting in significant presentations at our hospitals. Indeed, in the past two weeks, there has been an increase of 70 per cent in flu admissions to hospital as a consequence of the gravity of the condition, despite the high performance of flu vaccinations that are currently under way.

The Government is taking forward a range of interventions to ensure that we are working to reduce demand in A and E services, so that individuals such as Isobel and Martyn Knights can be supported in the way that I would expect them to be.

### Local Housing Allowance (Impact of Freeze on Poverty Levels)

**4. Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP):** To ask the First Minister whether he will provide an update on the Scottish Government's latest engagement with the United Kingdom Government regarding any impact on poverty levels in Scotland of the freeze to local housing allowance. (S6F-04511)

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** It is disappointing that the UK Government's budget contained no commitment to end the freeze on local housing allowance. Next year will be the second year of the freeze and it will be three years since the local housing allowance was last uprated. The Resolution Foundation has warned

that next year, the gap between real-world rents and housing support will be the biggest on record.

**Paul McLennan:** The chancellor spoke about tackling child poverty, yet she failed to restore local housing allowance rates. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation estimated that 20,000 private renters, including 10,000 children, will be pushed into poverty in 2025-26 as a direct result of the policy.

Meanwhile, the Resolution Foundation predicts that the affordability gap, which is currently bigger than when the Conservative Government increased the local housing allowance in 2020, will rise to 25 per cent by 2029-30, unless the UK Government intervenes. That amounts to £180 a month for hard-pressed families.

While Labour continues to make lives harder for the most vulnerable, can the First Minister tell us more about the steps that the Scottish Government is taking across housing to further its ambition of eradicating child poverty?

**The First Minister:** The warnings from the Resolution Foundation are deeply troubling. The Scottish Government is investing more than £100 million in discretionary housing payments this year to offset UK Government welfare cuts. Some £2 million of that, announced by the Cabinet Secretary for Housing, will help families in temporary accommodation to secure homes in the private rented sector. That is part of our mission to eradicate child poverty.

On the question of local housing allowances, the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice has been calling for an end to the freeze as part of the UK child poverty strategy, which is a move that would help to lift more families out of poverty.

### A9 Dualling Project (Funding)

**5. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the First Minister what funding is in place to ensure that the A9 dualling project is completed by the target date of 2035. (S6F-04502)

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** The Government remains committed to completing the dualling programme by the end of 2035, and the necessary funding will be in place to do so.

**Murdo Fraser:** This week, *The Scotsman* reported that ministers were expected to reject private funding under the mutual investment model, which had been planned for further sections of the A9 dualling project, even though that has been utilised for two sections that are progressing. That raises real concerns about whether this vital scheme can progress, given the constraints on capital funding in the Scottish Government's budget.

A9 dualling has already been delayed 10 years from the original planned completion date of 2025, and any further delays will cost more lives needlessly. Just on Tuesday evening, we saw another serious accident at Ralia, which left one passenger in a critical condition in hospital and closed the road for hours. What guarantee can the First Minister give us that there will be no more delays in delivering this vital project?

**The First Minister:** I was very sorry to hear about the incident on Tuesday evening at Ralia, and I express my good wishes to the individual, who I understand is in a critical condition as a consequence. We hope for their full recovery.

As I said in my earlier answer, the Government remains committed to completing the dualling programme by the end of 2035, and the necessary funding will be in place to do that.

**Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):** Will the First Minister commit to introducing a duty of candour for the A9 project, as recommended by the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, to ensure that the Parliament and the public are fully informed about progress, delays and financial challenges in real time?

**The First Minister:** The Government responded to that request by indicating that it would report regularly to Parliament, and that is exactly what the Government will do.

### MV Lord of the Isles (Replacement)

**6. Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP):** To ask the First Minister whether he will provide an update on whether the Scottish Government will instigate a direct award to Ferguson Marine for the replacement of MV Lord of the Isles. (S6F-04505)

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** The procurement process for the replacement of MV Lord of the Isles engages complex legal and subsidy control issues. Any decision must take into account the responsibility that we have to secure the best outcomes for our island communities and businesses. We are currently considering the business case and next steps in relation to MV Lord of the Isles replacement and we will confirm those in due course.

**Stuart McMillan:** The presence of Ferguson Marine and its workforce is important to my constituency. The only way that that presence can continue is by ensuring that the yard has a strong order book. Making the yard efficient and effective and winning new orders is the responsibility of the new interim chair and management team, who are supported by the Scottish Government in those endeavours.

I am very aware of the arguments about why the issue of a direct award is extremely challenging. However, I am also conscious that the investment that the Scottish Government has already made in the yard will be lost for good if the yard does not have an order book. Will the First Minister commit to a direct award for the replacement of MV Lord of the Isles? That could lead to securing further work, if the board and management are successful, which would keep Ferguson Marine firmly rooted in Port Glasgow, creating employment and building ships.

**The First Minister:** I am very supportive of securing a future for the Ferguson Marine yard. More than 10 years ago, I worked hard to ensure that it survived the difficulties that it faced at that point, and the Government has given the yard sustained support over many years.

As I indicated in my earlier answer, the issues around the MV Lord of the Isles direct award are complex and involve significant subsidy control issues that the Government cannot ignore in any way, shape or form. However, I give Mr McMillan the assurance that the Government is absolutely committed to working with Ferguson Marine to secure its future.

**Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con):** Ferguson Marine's future depends on it independently securing work both from the United Kingdom and overseas. It is a Scottish National Party Government-owned yard, so what action is the First Minister taking to ensure that it is competitive, restores its reputation for delivering projects on time and under budget, and can procure its own work rather than relying on a direct award?

**The First Minister:** That is part of our ensuring that the yard has leadership and a workforce in place to support the direction towards its being able to attract orders and operate competitively in international markets. That is what Government support for the yard is all about and the focus of our interventions will be to ensure that that remains the case.

**Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab):** There is a strong economic and social case for a direct award to the yard, and I urge the First Minister to support such an award. A decision on the contract has been delayed for far too long and the workforce deserves clarity, so will the First Minister undertake to ensure that there is a speedy decision? If he cannot commit to a direct award of the contract today, will he commit to supporting Ferguson's through other avenues, such as the second round of the small vessel replacement programme, and the delivery—in full—of the promised £14.2 million investment?

**The First Minister:** As I indicated in my earlier answers—and I think that Katy Clark will

appreciate these points—there are complex issues of a legal nature, in relation to subsidy control, that the Government simply cannot ignore. I am enormously sympathetic to and supportive of a future for the yard. That is why the Government has committed investment to support the yard, which will be available to the yard at the moment when it is appropriate for it to be deployed. We are open to working with the yard to strengthen its competitive position to enable it to win vessel contracts and take those forward on an on-going basis. That remains the focus of the Government's intervention on the issue.

**Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP):** Does the First Minister agree that, whatever solution is found to the tender in question, the decision must be informed by the views of people in Uist and other island communities, who clearly want to see new vessels in service as soon as is feasible?

**The First Minister:** I understand and support that point. It was under this Government that the connection was established between Mallaig and Lochboisdale, which is the route on which MV Lord of the Isles primarily operates. I know how important that connection is to Dr Allan's constituents in South Uist and surrounding communities. It is important that we reflect on the necessity for sustained connections for all island communities. That lies at the heart of the Government's strategy in relation to the Clyde and Hebrides ferry services.

**The Presiding Officer:** We move to general and constituency supplementary questions.

### Bothwell (Arson Attacks)

**Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):** Residents of Bothwell in my region have been left shaken by the spate of targeted firebombing attacks on restaurants in the area. Four premises have been targeted by arson attacks over the past six years, with two taking place in September. People living in Bothwell have expressed fear and frustration, with one individual saying:

"it feels like it is becoming a no-go area socially."

There are now empty plots where restaurants once stood; jobs have been lost; and families have been impacted by recent events.

Bothwell residents deserve not just answers but reassurance. What reassurance can the First Minister give my constituents that Police Scotland is taking those events seriously? Will he ask the relevant minister to make inquiries to ensure that all information that can be made public is being circulated within the community?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** I am aware of and concerned by those issues. I

reassure Meghan Gallacher and her constituents that all cases that are presented to Police Scotland are taken seriously, and that will be the case in relation to those examples.

It is patently obvious that criminal behaviour is involved, so there will be a need for that information to be handled within the criminal justice system, to ensure that those responsible can be prosecuted for the acts that they are taking forward.

With that caveat, I am happy to advise that the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs will raise the issue with the chief constable. However, the amount of information that can be made available will be constrained by the necessity to protect that information in order to support criminal prosecutions, which there should be in the cases of the behaviour that Meghan Gallacher has put to me today.

### Acorn Project

**Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP):** The United Kingdom Government promised to end the dither and delay and committed £200 million to the Acorn project in June. Yet, months on, not a single penny has reached the developers, and now a project partner is seeking to sell its stake. After failing to intervene at Grangemouth and Mossmorran, and after retaining an energy profits levy that is throttling investment, if the UK Government fails to act on Acorn, it will be clear that it has abandoned Scottish industry.

Does the First Minister agree that, if a private buyer cannot be found for the stake, Great British Energy must step in to ensure that the project goes ahead, particularly in the light of its setting its five-year project today?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** I have been very clear to Parliament over a long period of time about my support for the Acorn project. Indeed, it is an issue that I raised frequently with the previous Conservative UK Government to seek progress, and it is an issue that I have raised with the current UK Government to seek progress.

In relation to the discussions on Storegga's involvement in the Acorn project, the Deputy First Minister has been involved in dialogue with the UK Government on that question. Acorn is a significant project that is key to the just transition and to the economic opportunities of the north-east of Scotland. The Scottish Government will do all that we can to support its development.

I also make the point that the presence of the energy profits levy is a significant inhibitor in all our actions. I call on the UK Government, as I will do again when I see the Prime Minister tomorrow, to remove the energy profits levy, because of the

damage that it is doing to the north-east of Scotland and to the future of the Scottish economy.

### Offshore Workers (Health and Safety)

**Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab):** Last week, fossil fuel giant Shell UK was fined more than £500,000 after pleading guilty to two offences following a Health and Safety Executive investigation into its Brent Charlie platform. That was a potentially catastrophic incident that put the lives of more than 175 offshore workers at risk due to negligence and penny pinching by Shell.

Does the First Minister agree that such behaviour from Shell is wholly unacceptable and that offshore worker health and safety must be paramount to our energy transition, if that transition is to be in any way just?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** On all occasions, the welfare and safety of workforces must be paramount in any industrial activity in our country. That is why the Health and Safety Executive, which is a reserved agency, exercises its responsibilities and why I strongly support its work to ensure that the aspirations that Mercedes Villalba puts to me are reflected in working practices in all circumstances, particularly in the acutely serious context of offshore platforms.

I very much welcome the role of the HSE in protecting the safety of workers.

### Scotch Whisky (Tariffs)

**Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP):** Last week, the United Kingdom chancellor increased duty on Scotch whisky. That has heaped pressure on that vital sector and the jobs in it, including those in my constituency. Another, bigger issue is US tariffs. The First Minister has already pressed the case all the way to the Oval office, but will he now exert pressure on the UK Government to stand up for Scotland and to press for a deal in this vitally important industry?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** I am very keen to make sure that a deal is arrived at on whisky tariffs. As members will know, I have put significant effort into trying to ensure that the case is made directly to the President of the United States. However, as members also know, trade deals cannot be negotiated by the Scottish Government—they have to be negotiated by the United Kingdom Government.

I am waiting with expectation for the UK Government to do what it should have been doing all along, which is to give priority to Scotch whisky and to ensure that we are exempt from United States tariffs. We are waiting for the UK to deliver the action that we all expect it to deliver.

### Prostate Cancer (Screening)

**Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** Last Friday, the United Kingdom National Screening Committee decided not to recommend a national screening programme for prostate cancer. The very next day, listeners to "Off the Ball" heard Kenny Macintyre speak very candidly about his own diagnosis with prostate cancer. Kenny was getting regular tests because of a family history of the disease, and he said:

"I'm very lucky to have caught this early, and I believe that is only because I pushed for regular testing. I had absolutely no symptoms and all examination indicated things were normal. Had it not been for regular checks, which revealed a rising trend in my PSA levels, things may have been very different."

We are lucky that we have men such as Kenny Macintyre, Sir Chris Hoy and others who are speaking about their experience, raising awareness and encouraging men to come forward and get checked. However, prostate cancer is still killing 8,000 men in Scotland every year.

What is the First Minister's response to the National Screening Committee's recommendation? Does he agree that, if we do not have a national programme, we should at the very least be encouraging as many men as possible to come forward to get tested, and we should be making those tests as easily available as possible, as they will literally save lives?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** I very much associate myself with the comments that Douglas Ross has made.

Mr Ross will be aware that the Government relies on the advice from the UK National Screening Committee, as do all Governments across the United Kingdom. That is dispassionate advice, which the screening committee gathers and shares with us. Mr Ross will appreciate that, although many of us will be enormously sympathetic to the point of view that he puts forward, when we receive formal advice, we have to have good reason to depart from it.

At the request of Sir Chris Hoy, I chaired a discussion in Bute house a few weeks ago that drew together a range of different experts on prostate cancer. I wanted to challenge whether more could be done to expand screening, as Sir Chris Hoy was very much requesting, and which request I also heard strongly expressed in Kenny Macintyre's contribution at the weekend.

We have asked the chief medical officer in Scotland to take forward further scrutiny and consideration of the issue, and ministers in the Scottish Government are very much open to looking afresh at that question. There will be further updates to share with Parliament in due course.

For today, I reinforce Mr Ross's point and encourage any man who is concerned about this issue to pursue any testing that they think is necessary, given that we all know that the earlier such circumstances are identified, the better the outcomes are likely to be. I welcome Mr Ross's contribution and assure him of the Government's focused intervention to try to address the issue.

### Turning Point Scotland (Glasgow Services)

**Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** The First Minister will be aware of Turning Point Scotland, which is a major voluntary sector provider of drug and alcohol services. The charity is facing an existential funding crisis after being billed £800,000 by City Property Glasgow (Investments), an arm's-length organisation of Glasgow City Council. The bill for repairs, following the closure of the outstanding 218 women's justice service, is £600,000 higher than the estimate by an independent surveyor, and it poses a very real risk to all Turning Point services in Glasgow.

The council is not responding, and neither is the board of City Property Glasgow (Investments). Will the First Minister agree to meet Turning Point? I know that he thinks that it is a valuable organisation. Will he help to resolve the situation to ensure the continuing provision of Turning Point's drug and alcohol services in Glasgow?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** I acknowledge the importance of the services that are provided by Turning Point in Glasgow. Obviously, that is a local matter for Glasgow City Council, but I will inquire about the situation and identify, with the Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy and Sport, Maree Todd, whether there is any action that the Government can take. I am not familiar with all the transactions that are involved, but we will look into them and see what action it is possible to take.

### Suicide Rates

**Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP):** Scotland is the only United Kingdom nation that is seeing a reduction in deaths by suicide. Front-line organisations credit early intervention and strong partnership working. I see that in the community action network that I facilitate in Motherwell and Wishaw. How will the Government promote best practice and ensure that suicide rates continue to fall in Scotland?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** We—the Government and society—must be very active in doing all that we can to prevent suicide in our society. We have been working in partnership with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on the "Creating Hope Together" strategy, which is delivered through Suicide Prevention Scotland and which is focused on tackling the prevalence of

suicide and the inequalities that so often lead to it. I assure Clare Adamson that the Government will continue to have that focus in the suicide prevention action plan for 2026-29, which will be published early in the new year, in order to continue that important work.

### Hospital Waiting Times

**Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con):** I declare an interest as a practising general practitioner in the national health service.

William McLaughlin wrote to me to say that he had to sit on an accident and emergency trolley for eight hours before he was admitted for a serious illness, and the report from Audit Scotland has laid bare the abject failure of the Scottish National Party Government in this respect. From hospitals to waiting lists, everything that the SNP touches seems to be crumbling.

First Minister, stop the spin, stop reading selective stats, stop defending the indefensible and accept the independent Audit Scotland report in full. Will the First Minister apologise to NHS staff, to long-waiting patients and to William McLaughlin?

**The Presiding Officer:** Always speak through the chair.

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** I am very open with the Parliament about the challenges experienced in the national health service. I accept that it takes longer for some individuals to receive treatment than it should and that that will cause distress. To Mr McLaughlin, and to anyone in such circumstances, I express my apology and my regret at that situation.

However, it is just not good enough for Sandesh Gulhane to say the things that he has said about the performance of our national health service. The plan that I have put in place, which is designed to tackle long waits, is working—it is delivering results. Between April and October this year, new out-patient waits over a year reduced by 17.9 per cent, with reductions for five consecutive months. In the same period, the size of the waiting list for those waiting for more than 52 weeks for new in-patient and day-case procedures reduced by 26.1 per cent. Moreover, GP numbers, which should be of some concern to Dr Gulhane, are rising on my watch.

So, yes, there are challenges, but this Government is delivering the solutions for the national health service in Scotland.

### Housing Crisis (Glasgow)

**Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** I know that the First Minister is aware of the scale of the housing crisis in Glasgow, which has been

exacerbated by the United Kingdom Government's changes to asylum policy—changes that are harming the lives of asylum seekers and are also harmful to the budgets available for public services. Will the First Minister tell us what urgent action the Scottish Government has taken, since his officials started meeting the local authority, registered social landlords and others to discuss the situation, to ensure that those parties have the resources that they need to deal with this crisis, which is not of their making?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** The first thing that we have done is to press the Home Office to address those issues—the Home Office is the root cause of the issues and difficulties that Mr Harvie has raised in the Parliament today—and we are working collaboratively with Glasgow City Council in that respect.

Other steps that we have taken include increasing investment in housing and, in particular, ensuring that void accommodation is brought back into use. In our partnership with Glasgow City Council, we have seen much progress being made, and I commend it for the work that it is doing, including with registered social landlords, as part of that process.

As a consequence of the support that we make available to the council, particularly in relation to homelessness, we are working as effectively as we can to tackle the significant issues that Mr Harvie has raised.

### Non-residential Social Care Charges

**Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Ind):** Will non-residential social care charges be abolished by the Scottish Government before the end of the current parliamentary session, as was promised in the First Minister's party's 2021 manifesto?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** The Government is working to address that issue. There is a range of competing financial pressures that we have to address, and we are working in collaboration with partners to do so.

### Devolution Settlement

**Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP):** The First Minister will know that, before the general election last year, the Labour Party promised to widen devolution for Scotland and Wales. This week, 11 Labour members of the Welsh Senedd wrote to the Prime Minister, accusing the United Kingdom Government of "rolling back" on devolution promises.

Whether it be the internal market or pride in place funding, Labour's abysmal record in Government shows its contempt for devolution. Welsh members of that Assembly have described

their own party's actions as a "constitutional outrage". [*Interruption.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** Let us hear Mr Brown.

**Keith Brown:** Welsh Labour members have described their own party's actions as a "constitutional outrage", showing at least a willingness to defend the devolution settlement—a willingness that is absent from the Labour Party in this chamber. [*Interruption*]

**The Presiding Officer:** Members, let us hear Mr Brown. I know that every member in the chamber would expect to be heard when putting a question.

**Keith Brown:** They do not like freedom of speech, Presiding Officer.

Does the First Minister share those concerns and can he outline what dialogue the Scottish Government has had with the UK Government on the devolution settlement, particularly in relation to the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 and pride in place funding?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** I acknowledge the letter sent by a number of Labour Senedd members to the Prime Minister, expressing views that this Government would share about the unacceptability of the internal market act, which is a product of post-Brexit legislation from the Conservatives and is actively undermining the powers of this Parliament.

When that bill was passing through the United Kingdom Parliament, the Labour Party in Scotland—and, indeed, the Labour Party in the House of Commons—vigorously opposed it. Therefore, when the Labour Government was elected, it was our reasonable expectation that the internal market act would be abolished and that we would have a restoration of the powers of this Parliament.

As with so many other promises from the Labour Party, that was broken immediately after the election of the Labour Government, so we can have absolutely no confidence that the Labour Government is going to fulfil its promises to protect devolution and to abolish the internal market act.

**The Presiding Officer:** That concludes First Minister's questions.

The next item of business is a members' business debate. There will be a short suspension to allow those leaving the public gallery and the chamber to do so.

12:46

*Meeting suspended.*

12:48

*On resuming—*

## Cumbernauld New Town (70th Anniversary)

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing):** I ask members of the public who have been visiting their Parliament to leave the chamber quickly and quietly as we are now moving to the next item of business. I thank them in advance for their co-operation.

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-19607, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on the 70th anniversary of Cumbernauld as a new town. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite members who wish to speak to press their request-to-speak buttons.

*Motion debated,*

That the Parliament recognises that 9 December 2025 is the 70th anniversary of the designation of Cumbernauld as Scotland's third new town under the terms of the New Towns Act 1946, having been identified as a suitable location in the Clyde Valley Regional Plan; understands that this is a significant moment in the history of the town; recognises that the area designated included the existing villages of Cumbernauld and Condorrat, with the first part of the new town to be built being in the Kildrum area of the town to provide accommodation for workers at the nearby Burroughs factory; recalls that the inaugural ceremony for the new town was in June 1957, where the sod was cut at Kildrum Farm; appreciates the great sense of community that exists in Cumbernauld through its wide range of organisations and bodies that do great work to promote the town and support its residents; thanks all those who are involved in promoting the 70th anniversary, and wishes all those who live and work in Cumbernauld the best for the occasion and the future.

12:49

**Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP):** I begin by thanking the many members who supported my motion and enabled it to be debated today, and I look forward to hearing from those who will contribute to the debate. Without picking any favourites, especially as I have not heard from anyone yet, I particularly look forward to hearing from my friend and colleague Gordon MacDonald who, before he came on a pilgrimage to Edinburgh, grew up in Cumbernauld. I also look forward to finding out who will be first to use the refrain "What's it called?" from a certain 1980s advertising campaign developed by the Cumbernauld Development Corporation to promote the town, although I realise that, in mentioning it, I have probably pipped everyone to the post.

It has been the best part of 13 years since I last brought a members' business debate to the chamber, and I am delighted that my first effort in

more than a decade marks an important milestone in the life of Cumbernauld, a town that I am proud not only to represent but to live in.

However, I am not the first Scottish National Party parliamentarian to represent Cumbernauld. Indeed, part of the new town's story is that one of the first of the 11 SNP members of Parliament to be elected in October 1974 was Maggie Bain, as she was then, who became Maggie Ewing. She was a much-loved representative of East Dunbartonshire and, of course, was a much-loved member of the Deputy Presiding Officer's family. She is very fondly remembered by SNP members of a certain vintage in Cumbernauld and is still highly regarded by my constituents. It is important that I put that on the record.

On the topic of anniversaries, today's date also represents an important one for a Cumbernauld institution. It is 25 years to the day since the Village Gentry was opened. I mention that because I thought that the proprietor, Michael Macpherson, might enjoy it, although, in the interests of even-handedness, I should make it clear that other barbers are available in the town.

I could say a great deal about my home town today, but time is limited, so I can only scratch the surface. I remind members that Cumbernauld is a long-standing settlement. There has been an established community in the area for hundreds of centuries. Its name derives from the Gaelic Comar nan Allt, which means the meeting place of the streams—those streams being the Bog Stank and the Red Burn.

I could speak at length about the area's links to Roman times, to the wars of independence and to Mary, Queen of Scots. I recognise that every town in South Scotland and Central Scotland could lay claim to being linked to Mary, Queen of Scots. Fiona Hyslop could certainly speak about Linlithgow's links to her.

Although I lack the time to explore the town's history, I mention it briefly to place the 70th anniversary in its wider context. The new town is part of the wider history and the wider story of Cumbernauld, but there is no denying that Cumbernauld is best known as a new town. It was on 9 December 1955 that Cumbernauld was designated as Scotland's third new town, following East Kilbride and Glenrothes.

Our erstwhile colleague Andy Wightman happened to notice that the debate was to take place, and he contacted me somewhat out of the blue to direct my attention to the biography of the late Scottish landscape architect Ian McHarg, who was dispatched to scope out Cumbernauld as a site for a new town. Ian McHarg wrote:

"I spoke to several farmers whose opinions were united. It was a miserable place, wetter than most, with intractable

mud, poor soil, a high water table, few trees, and those wind-pruned."

It was not the greatest endorsement of the location, but I am pleased to say that Mr McHarg's pessimism was misplaced.

Since the first bricks were laid in the Kildrum area of the town in 1956, Cumbernauld has grown to be a thriving community of more than 50,000 people, making it one of our country's larger settlements, with an abundance of green space and—despite what Mr McHarg said—plenty of trees. Those of us who live there are blessed with a wonderful environment to reside in and enjoy.

Cumbernauld's status as—in my humble opinion—Scotland's best new town is underlined by the fact that, along with the Beatles' performance of "All You Need Is Love", it featured as part of the first live multinational and multisatellite television production, "Our World". Broadcast on 25 June 1967, it featured the dulcet tones of Magnus Magnusson, no less, speaking about the new town. Everybody knows the town as the film location for the much-loved Bill Forsyth coming-of-age comedy, "Gregory's Girl", and, today, it is the location of Wardpark Studios, where the "Outlander" series is produced. Of course, we are also home to AG Barr, the manufacturer of Scotland's other national drink.

Cumbernauld is not without its detractors, although I often find that many of them have never even set foot in the town, let alone have any real knowledge of it. Much of that criticism is predicated on the condition of our town centre. What was once a cutting-edge, state-of-the-art indoor shopping mall—the United Kingdom's first such shopping mall—has suffered from decades of chronic underinvestment, to the point of dilapidation.

However, a town is more than its centre. Cumbernauld is blessed with an enormous sense of community spirit and an outstanding range of community organisations. Cumbernauld Poverty Action offers advice on social security to residents. This year, Cumbernauld YMCA-YWCA celebrated 65 years of operation. Cumbernauld and Carbrain community hub offers a range of different services to the community. Cumbernauld Action for Care of the Elderly supports many of our oldest residents. Cumbernauld Environmental Society and Cumbernauld Living Landscape projects do so much to maintain our green spaces. Cumbernauld FM is our dedicated local radio station. Cumbernauld theatre has served as a cultural hub for 60 years, and its future must be secured. Cumbernauld and Kilsyth Care—I should declare that my wife helped to form it—provides people who might require it with assistance including their children. I could go on. There are many such organisations, but those organisations and the

people who are involved represent the real spirit of Cumbernauld.

I am glad that steps are finally being taken to renovate the town centre to ensure that we have a space that befits the wonderful character of the town. Some might mourn the loss of the brutalist architecture of the 1960s, but most local residents welcome the coming investment and, if anything, are frustrated that it has taken so long and might yet take a while to come to fruition. That investment is a salient reminder that, as we mark the past 70 years of Cumberland as a new town, the community continues to evolve, adapt and grow.

We are seeing investment in new schools with funding from the Scottish Government. Funding is also coming from the Scottish Government to help to build much-needed new social housing. We are seeing new families come to live in Cumbernauld, including the Syrian refugees who came to the town a decade ago and settled happily, and who are now a vital part of our community.

All that is a sign that Cumbernauld new town is not just here to stay; it is here to thrive. To those who call Cumbernauld home, I say many happy returns to our 70-year-old new town.

12:56

**Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP):** I thank Jamie Hepburn for securing this important debate to recognise Cumbernauld's 70th birthday. Many people will be aware that I was born in Glasgow, but, apart from Jamie Hepburn, not many know that I grew up in Cumbernauld from the age of eight until I moved to Edinburgh in 1982. I attended Kildrum primary school and the then Cumbernauld high school, and it is a sign that I am getting older when I see that both those original new town school buildings have been demolished.

Coming at a young age from the centre of Glasgow to the first street that was built in the new town gave me a sense of freedom that I never had when I was surrounded by tenements and not the open fields and woodland of Cumbernauld Glen. Education was an improvement on the composite classes that we had in Glasgow, as the area that I lived in was being demolished. In Cumbernauld, there were no private schools within an easy commute, so everyone attended the local school. That helped to create a sense of community that still exists today, as everyone, regardless of their background, supported one another. It will surprise some that I am still in contact with school friends from those early days in Cumbernauld.

The town has a significant history of being recognised by the Saltire Society housing design awards, especially in its early decades. In eight

out of the 11 years between 1961 and 1971, Cumbernauld won Saltire Society awards for housing design, and, in two of those years, it won two awards in a single year. Those accolades were granted during a period of major innovation and experimentation in Scottish urban planning, with Cumbernauld often being highlighted as the model of a new community design.

It was not all good news. Some of the first homes, especially those in Kildrum, had flat roofs, which is not a clever idea for homes that are placed at the top of a hill that was prone to very wet and windy weather. Other blocks of flats were built of concrete and were demolished after a short lifespan because of damp. When we left school or graduated from college or university, little work was available in the town, which resulted in many of my generation moving across the UK to find employment, which also had an impact on the development of the town.

Another issue was the 1996 local government reorganisation, which resulted in the absorption of Cumbernauld and Kilsyth District Council into North Lanarkshire Council. Many residents in the town believe that Cumbernauld was used as a cash cow for North Lanarkshire and that investment in the town declined as a result.

We had the first indoor shopping centre in the UK, but many residents missed the traditional town centre. It was also the first indoor shopping mall to have a song written about it, with a local duo, Edible Pear, writing a song "The Concrete Town Centre of Cumbernauld".

With it being the first, it was also the prototype, with all the mistakes that go with building a groundbreaking centre that everyone else learned lessons from. The situation was not helped in 1997, when the UK Government wound up the development corporation, resulting in the town centre being sold to more than one landlord. That was the start of the centre's decline, as no one had a clear plan for or agreement on its future.

Despite those issues, Cumbernauld was a great place to grow up in. That first generation of new town dwellers appreciated the improvements in their living standards. Even though there was a lack of entertainment facilities, people came together, and a host of organisations were established. That brought the community closer together. That same sense of community exists today and should be celebrated as Cumbernauld reaches its 70th anniversary.

13:00

**Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):** I, too, thank Jamie Hepburn for bringing this celebratory event to the chamber. In planning terms, 70 years is practically adolescence, but in

Scottish political terms, it is several boundary reviews, a few economic cycles and at least one argument about whether the A80 was finished properly.

Cumbernauld was founded in 1955 as a bold experiment—a vision of post-war optimism that was designed to house Glasgow overspill and create a forward-looking, pedestrian-friendly community. Opinions will differ as to whether the town centre looks like a modernist masterpiece or a crash-landed concrete spaceship, but nobody can deny the ambition or the personalities that reside in Cumbernauld. The town's achievements are far greater than its architectural quirks, and it has produced remarkable people including musicians such as Jon Fratelli, actors, athletes and artists. Jamie Hepburn mentioned a few of the local legends in Cumbernauld—they are, of course, the folk who can find their way out of the town centre on their first attempt.

However, Cumbernauld's greatest strength is not concrete. It is community, and nowhere is that community more alive, vibrant and vital than in Cumbernauld theatre. For decades, the theatre, in both the old and new buildings, has been the cultural heart of the town—a home for local drama, youth arts, live music, pantomimes, poetry and civic pride. It has nurtured talent, inspired generations and kept culture alive in the town, yet today this vital institution faces the threat of closure. A funding package involving the Scottish Government, Creative Scotland and North Lanarkshire Council hangs in the balance.

Without real, practical financial support, the doors of this beloved theatre may close. Shutting Cumbernauld theatre would not be an efficiency; I believe that it would be an amputation within the town. It would silence one of Scotland's most community-centred cultural venues at the very moment when we should be celebrating its contribution and investing in its future. A town that was built on bold ideas deserves better than to have its creative lifeline cut. Frankly, if a town centre with a confusing landscape can survive for 70 years, surely a theatre full of laughter, creativity and hope can survive a funding shortage.

I hope that colleagues across the parties, councils and agencies will recognise the value of this cultural cornerstone. We all need to come together to ensure that Cumbernauld theatre not only survives but thrives. It has to be a place where young people can discover confidence, where older residents can find community and where everyone, regardless of their background, can come together to create something meaningful.

As Cumbernauld celebrates its 70th year, this debate allows us to show that the spirit of the new town—the spirit of optimism, innovation and sheer

determination—is still alive. Let us commit ourselves to safeguarding the theatre that embodies the spirit of the town. In 50 years' time, when Cumbernauld marks its 120th anniversary, I want future generations not only to say, "What's it called?"—I apologise to Jamie Hepburn—but to say, proudly, "That's a town that kept its culture alive."

13:04

**Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab):** I thank Jamie Hepburn for lodging the motion, because it is right that the Parliament recognises the fact that next Tuesday marks 70 years to the day since Cumbernauld was designated as a new town under the act of Parliament introduced by the visionary, the courageous, the socialist Labour Government of 1945.

It was an act founded on economic planning for full employment. It was an act that recognised that, in pre-war Lanarkshire, almost half of the working class were employed in just four industries—coal mining, metal manufacture, shipbuilding and engineering—and so it was an act that demanded an economic plan for industrial diversification. It was also an act with a founding principle: to tackle the overcrowding and the slum housing that blighted cities like Glasgow. So, it was an act with a social plan to tackle poverty, want and disease to improve public health.

**Jamie Hepburn:** Mr Leonard is right to talk about the challenges that existed in post-war industrial Lanarkshire, but, at the time, Cumbernauld was—and many people feel it still should be—part of Dunbartonshire.

**Richard Leonard:** Well, that is a moot point. I suspect that I am well advised not to get involved in that debate, especially with Mr Hepburn.

Let me turn to the economic planning aspect of the act of Parliament. Between 1953 and 1978, when, across Scotland as a whole, there was a net decrease of 89,000 manufacturing jobs, across the five Scottish new towns, manufacturing employment rose by 32,000. Much of this was foreign direct investment. Too much of it was in virulently anti-trade union electronics factories, which became increasingly characterised as assembly-only screwdriver plants—and characterised as well by mobile capital, which moved on. In Cumbernauld, this meant Burroughs Machines—gone; OKI Electric Industry—gone; and Isola Werke—gone. That provided the background to some of my formative experiences in the trade union movement, dealing with a hostile environment that was, of course, created by those multinational corporations but encouraged by an unrepresentative,

unaccountable and undemocratic Scottish Office and its agencies.

I also look back to the winding-up of the new town development corporations, which coincided with the abolition of an entire tier of local government, gerrymandered boundaries and the introduction of the poll tax. The winding-up of the new town corporations such as Cumbernauld's was more about securing financial returns to the Treasury, selling off more of the family silver and asset stripping at knockdown prices than about securing the long-term wellbeing of the Scottish economy. But, through determined pressure from a united community, we managed to secure the transfer of the housing stock to the newly established local authority when the Tory Government of the day wanted the stock and assets to be transferred to private landlords and commercial interests.

I visited Cumbernauld fire station two weeks ago. The station was built in the 1970s and it has reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete, so it raises safety concerns. The firefighters I spoke to were promised a new station. Now, instead, the new station is on hold and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is threatening to remove an appliance and cut back the night shift. I cannot help but think that, 70 years ago, that generation—still in the shadow of war and still saddled with wartime debts—had the vision to build an entire new town, and now our generation cannot even build a new bloody fire station.

The great designer, socialist and architect William Morris said:

“Apart from the desire to produce beautiful things, the leading passion of my life has been and is hatred of modern civilization.”

Well, I do not know what he would have made of Cumbernauld and its incarnation of modern civilisation over the past seven decades, but the people who live and work there are passionate and they deserve so much better. It is our job to give them hope in place of despair. It is our job to celebrate the past—maybe to mourn some of the past, but certainly to remember the past. But it is also our job to offer those people a better future—a future that they can believe in, like those generations who went before them 70 years ago.

13:09

**Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP):** Colleagues may have seen so-called “age tests” on social media—apparently, being able to explain the relationship between a cassette tape and a pencil places you firmly within a particular demographic. In the central belt, we have another: pose the question, “What's it called?”, and anyone who was around in the 1980s will gleefully answer,

“Cumbernauld.” I hope that Jamie Hepburn will forgive me for getting that out of my system early in my speech.

Cumbernauld's story is a fascinating part of our collective history: a modern, internal mass migration designed to ease overpopulation, speed up regeneration and provide green space and clean air. Its story of mass movement and the formation of a new community is complex and sometimes challenging but always inspiring. As the town's 70th anniversary approaches, it is a great opportunity to reflect on that story, to celebrate what makes the town special and to shape its future. I know that there are many and various activities planned to mark and celebrate the milestone.

It is fair to assume that many Scottish towns and cities will be hosting celebrations next year, given that the Scottish men's football team has qualified for the world cup for the first time since 1998. As we get caught up in a wave of nostalgia, television channels will be clamouring to fill their schedules with football-related content, and we will get to enjoy Bill Forsyth's “Gregory's Girl” again, no doubt. Although notionally set in a fictional town, it unmistakably brought Cumbernauld to big screens around the world. Shortly after providing the setting for that internationally acclaimed film, Cumbernauld produced a real-life football star: Ifeoma Dieke, a talented defender with a long playing and coaching career. She started playing football at St Mary's primary school when she was eight years old, and she later joined Cumbernauld Cosmos and the Cumbernauld ladies team. She received an incredible 123 caps for Scotland, became the first black woman to captain the national team and was part of the squad when Scotland's women qualified for their first ever major tournament, the Euros, in 2017. Her story, as well as the stories of countless other residents past and present, forms part of the rich tapestry of the town today. I commend the organisations and volunteers who not only are involved in planning next year's celebrations but are telling Cumbernauld's stories and doing great work to promote the town and support its people.

As I wish Cumbernauld well for its anniversary, I cannot help but mention my home town of Rutherglen, which I have the honour of representing. Next year, we celebrate an important anniversary: it is 900 years since Rutherglen was granted royal borough status. Like Cumbernauld, we are hosting events, exhibitions and community activities, which our town is very much looking forward to and for which all the volunteers involved in the “Rutherglen 900” project should be commended. A year-round celebration of Rutherglen's people, its history and, importantly, its future is being planned. The event programme

kicks off in Rutherglen's iconic town hall next month—an event that I am looking forward to.

I thank Jamie Hepburn for bringing this debate to the chamber, and I wish all those who live and work in Cumbernauld the best for their 70th anniversary and for the future of their town.

13:13

**Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab):** I commend Mr Hepburn, the member for Cumbernauld and Kilsyth, for successfully securing this members' business debate. I am pleased to support his motion. I commend his excellent speech celebrating the new town of Cumbernauld—that is, it is new relative to its bigger brother, Glasgow, which is celebrating its 850th anniversary this year. Nonetheless, there is a symbiotic relationship between the two places, because the new town of Cumbernauld as we know it today was born of a post-war goal to redistribute—or disperse—550,000 people from Glasgow to new towns across Scotland. That goal was visionary and ambitious in the scale of its attempt to address the severe issues caused by the rapid industrialisation of Glasgow in the previous century. Although there have been many positive aspects to that industrialisation, there have also been many challenging ones. If we view the history of industrial development and population dispersal in the round, as was alluded to by my colleague Mr Leonard, it is a story of mixed success for Scotland. We can learn some lessons from that.

The observation that Cumbernauld Development Corporation was an excellent vehicle for economic development is a key point. The dismantling of the corporation in the mid-1990s was regrettable—the regional councils and development corporations are sorely missed in Scotland's landscape. A test of that is the only remaining development corporation in the country, Clyde Gateway, which is proving to be quite successful at driving investment in the east end of Glasgow. We could do with more such organisations in Scotland.

**Clare Haughey:** I am grateful that Paul Sweeney has raised the issue of Clyde Gateway, which covers part of the Rutherglen constituency.

**Paul Sweeney:** It is important to note that it covers a swathe of greater Glasgow, including Rutherglen.

My earliest memory of Cumbernauld is of going to the town centre and seeing its megastructure—that was fascinating to a young kid. Built in 1963, it was one of the world's first megastructures and was set alongside the coherent plan for the town. As a young boy, I watched "Gregory's Girl", the 1981 Bill Forsyth film, which captured the spirit of

optimism around Cumbernauld—a young town with young people and a lot of aspiration. It certainly contrasted with the older inner city of Glasgow.

It is important to recognise that, although there was a lot of optimism—with new industries and new housing—there were consequences, too. A report published around 10 years ago by the Glasgow Centre for Population Health, "History, politics and vulnerability: explaining excess mortality in Scotland and Glasgow", highlighted the poor coherence of urban planning decisions through the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. A democratic deficit and a lack of ability to control decisions are among the reasons why there is a particularly high premature death rate among Glaswegians. Chik Collins, who authored the report, observed that the effect of the new towns—inadvertently, admittedly—was to

"steer economic investment away from Glasgow, and to 'redeploy' population out of the city".

New investments and industry were diverted to peripheral estates and new towns.

It is important to take stock of the story of greater Glasgow and its evolution over the past half century or so. We need to think about economies of agglomeration. It is interesting that there is a new agenda for city regions and for how we can improve transport links, spatial integration and economic justice across city regions. We can take stock of that. Cumbernauld was a visionary project and it has had great success, but we should be aware that it left behind communities in the wider region, particularly in inner-city Glasgow, where the old, the very poor and the almost unemployable were, according to the report, left behind. That accentuated and concentrated deprivation and poverty to an extent that is unknown elsewhere in the UK. We need to consider the lessons of the transient foreign direct investments through silicon glen and the dispersal of population from Glasgow. How do we rebuild a city region that can be truly world leading again?

I commend Cumbernauld on reaching its big milestone of 70 years—here's to the next 70. It is part of a greater Glasgow city region that can really punch above its weight, with all parts of it succeeding.

13:18

**Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP):** I am pleased to speak in this debate to celebrate the significant landmark of the 70th anniversary of the establishment of the new town of Cumbernauld and commend Jamie Hepburn for bringing the motion to Parliament. I also thank him for his kind words when he responded to my members' business debate just a

few months ago, which celebrated the 50th anniversary of the establishment of Summerston in my constituency. I hope that the member will forgive me that I might return to that fleetingly later on.

It is right that we celebrate such civic and community landmark occasions. I cannot claim to have much experience of Cumbernauld, but I know that the area has a proud history that stretches way back beyond 70 years. The formation of the new town incorporated historic villages such as Cumbernauld and Condorrat, with their own proud history.

My initial reference point for Cumbernauld is, as it is for many people, “Gregory’s Girl”. I still cannot count without putting “One elephant, two elephant, three elephant” into my timing, and I still want to visit Caracas, or say “Bella, bella” for no apparent reason. My point is that the film defined a period of time in Cumbernauld.

My first direct contact with Cumbernauld goes back some 30 years. As a much younger man I used to stay at a friend’s house in Cumbernauld after a night out in Glasgow. That was because Cumbernauld had a late-night bus service from Glasgow, unlike the Vale of Leven, where I grew up. Perhaps Jamie Hepburn can comment on what the late-night links between Glasgow city centre and Cumbernauld are like today for late-night revellers. It has been decades since I have partaken in that, however.

**Jamie Hepburn:** Would the member give way?

**Bob Doris:** I feel I must.

**Jamie Hepburn:** Those links could be much better, but that is why we welcome the work that Strathclyde Partnership for Transport is undertaking to improve bus services using the powers that the Scottish Government put in place through the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019.

**Bob Doris:** I thank the member whose debate this is for that intervention, although I hope that it will not spark interventions from elsewhere in the chamber, as I would not intend to take them.

During my occasional visits to Cumbernauld under the hospitality of my friend’s parents I visited Condorrat, whose history stretches many years prior to the establishment of Cumbernauld new town. Condorrat has a proud weaving heritage and was the birthplace of the 19th century revolutionary John Baird, a leading participant and a radical commander in the radical war of 1820. He was subsequently executed and became known as one of the 1820 martyrs. On researching that aspect, I was reminded that, on 10 August 1835, an absolute pardon was granted to Baird and to the four local weavers who had also been convicted and had been sentenced to

transportation to the penal colonies, such was the outrage of communities.

I understand that a memorial wall was erected in Condorrat in 2011 commemorating three groups of local people: those executed or sentenced to transportation for participating in the radical war; six local men who were killed, alongside 41 others, in the Auchengreich mine disaster of 1959; and all those local people who had lost their lives in conflict throughout the world—a real symbol of international solidarity. I emphasise the date of that commemoration: it was in 2011, way after the formation of the new town of Cumbernauld, looking back hundreds of years before its formation. That lineage and history stretches over time, way beyond the 70 years that we are celebrating here today. I also note that the remains of John Baird and fellow 1820 martyr Andrew Hardie were moved to Sighthill cemetery, now in my constituency, in 1847. The location is marked by an impressive monument erected in their honour.

In the short time that I do not really have left, let me note that the 50th anniversary of Summerston has gone incredibly well. We had a wonderful summer gala, and we are about to have an amazing Christmas fair: “Summerston loves Christmas.” One of the women behind pulling all of that together, Wilma Mather from the Summerston community and environmental group, was recognised just the other day in Glasgow city chambers, where she won the *Evening Times* community champion seniors award. I suspect that there are many community champions across Cumbernauld today, and that there have been over the past 70 years and beyond.

My happy birthday is extended to everyone with connections to Cumbernauld, today and in years gone by.

13:23

**The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee):** I am delighted to take this opportunity to give my congratulations to the people of Cumbernauld on this important milestone in the town’s history, the 70th anniversary of its designation as a new town. I thank Jamie Hepburn for securing this afternoon’s debate. Everyone knows the passion that he exhibits for the town of Cumbernauld, and I have been delighted to be his guest in the town on a number of occasions at various events.

This has been a really interesting debate. Members have taken different perspectives on what Cumbernauld means to them and on its wider significance. This is one of those debates where we learn a number of things that we were not already aware of. Members have taken the

opportunity to mention their own local towns as well.

Cumbernauld is one of five planned new towns that were developed across Scotland's central belt in the post-war period. It was designated under the New Towns Act 1946 to deliver housing and support during the slum clearances from Glasgow, providing housing for the overspill as well as economic stimulus, as has been mentioned by a number of members.

Many have celebrated the distinctive character and identity of Cumbernauld over the years, and it has been recognised for its sense of community and commitment to renewal. We have learned a lot from the success of our new towns, not least about the benefits of a clear vision and the need for the public sector and delivery partners to drive forward development.

Our places are ever changing. We are still working on the delivery of new homes and communities, and we continue to build at scale. A number of new settlements are currently being created across Scotland: Tornagrain, near Inverness; Chapelton in Aberdeenshire; Winchburgh in West Lothian; and Blindwells in East Lothian. As well as creating new communities, we continue to regenerate existing places, for example by steering development towards vacant and derelict land. There is much that our "new" new towns and regenerated places can learn from the previous generation of new towns.

On the subject of our many and varied towns, I am pleased that we have helped to fund the development and refresh of Understanding Scottish Places, which launched last week. That is a tool that is instrumental in supporting local government, businesses and communities to inform planning and investment decisions to improve Scotland's places, and it holds some fascinating data on a number of towns across Scotland, including Cumbernauld.

Towns such as Cumbernauld and their town centres play a vital role in improving people's economic, social and environmental wellbeing. In signing up to the town centre first principle in collaboration with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and council leaders, we must put the health of town centres at the heart of decision making.

Cumbernauld has a unique town centre, which was originally designed for the motor age and has been the subject of much debate. I believe that books have been written about it, and it has even been reported to attract international visitors. I know that North Lanarkshire Council is working hard to regenerate the town centre and to build

new education, health, leisure and community facilities.

Town planners and architects might like to think that new towns are their creation. Of course, they played an important role; Jamie Hepburn gave us some of the history of the events that took place prior to the building of the new town at Cumbernauld. In reality, however, it is the people who live there who are central to the town's success. As the contributions to the debate have shown, a town is about much more than bricks and mortar—it is people who make a place feel like home. There are many inspiring examples of organisations in Cumbernauld working with and for their communities to bring people together and create a real sense of community.

Since 2014, the Scottish Government has invested more than £52 million in capital funding to support North Lanarkshire Council, in collaboration with local businesses and communities, to deliver key regeneration projects. That has included a £4 million regeneration capital grant fund investment towards the Cumbernauld community enterprise centre, which has become a strong presence in the town centre, creating new jobs and training opportunities and stimulating further economic activity.

The Scottish Government also provided more than £325 million over three years from our investing in communities fund to the Cumbernauld and Carbrain community hub. That vibrant community hub works directly with people to provide an open, welcoming and accessible place where the whole community can come together. It provides a community food pantry, mental health support groups and employability workshops, and it brings in approximately 10,000 residents per year, reducing poverty and isolation and building stronger community cohesion.

**Jamie Hepburn:** On that point, will the member join me in thanking the Cumbernauld and Carbrain community hub for hosting the Presiding Officer's tour of the country to mark the 25th anniversary of the Parliament? The hub very kindly arranged the hosting of the Central Scotland leg of that tour when it was held in Cumbernauld.

**Ivan McKee:** I am delighted to congratulate the hub on taking forward that work. It is absolutely clear that Cumbernauld is a vibrant community, with people working together to support on another.

There are many other charities and voluntary organisations offering a range of services, including the Cumbernauld wheels for wellbeing service, which helps people to access healthcare, and the Cumbernauld community mental health hub, which works to improve wellbeing and overcome health inequalities. The Cornerstone

House Centre is a social enterprise that works very hard to benefit local people in a wide range of ways, whether through providing family, employability or health services, or simply by providing a place for people to gather together.

I am sure that there are many other great projects and organisations that I cannot cover in such a short speech, but members have highlighted some fantastic initiatives that we would all want to commend and celebrate. As we have heard today, there is a lot going on in Cumbernauld, and there is much to celebrate in the resilience and community spirit of the people of Cumbernauld, who have worked together to ensure that it is a great place to live and work. I congratulate those in the community on their efforts, their strong sense of identity and their commitment to supporting one another, and I join with all members, I am sure, in wishing them a very happy 70th anniversary.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** That concludes the debate.

13:30

*Meeting suspended.*

14:30

*On resuming—*

## Portfolio Question Time

### Education and Skills

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** The next item of business is portfolio question time, and the portfolio is education and skills. Members who wish to ask a supplementary question should press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question.

Question 1 has not been lodged.

### Apprenticeships (Healthcare)

**2. Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the action that it is taking to develop apprenticeship models for healthcare workers. (S6O-05252)

**The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Ben Macpherson):** Health and social care is a key growth sector and will continue to be a modern apprenticeship funding priority in 2025-26, as we support opportunities for young people across Scotland. To ensure that those opportunities align with the sector's evolving needs, Skills Development Scotland is reviewing the current health and social care modern apprenticeship frameworks. We have also recently launched the operating department practitioner—ODP—graduate apprenticeship, which enables perioperative staff to gain degree-level qualifications while ensuring safe and high-quality care. In addition, a foundation apprenticeship in social services and healthcare provides school learners with an early pathway into the sector.

**Carol Mochan:** I appreciate that expanding the apprenticeship model and earn-as-you-learn routes for healthcare workers across professions creates opportunities for people who might not have had the chance to attend university. It also offers the chance to grow skills in local areas. In the past, when I have asked about the apprenticeship model for allied health professions, the Government has pointed to the development of the next generation higher national certificate for AHP subjects, which could offer people a recognised pay-as-you-earn route into those professions. Has progress been made on that since the start of the year? When might we see those routes across the allied health professions?

**Ben Macpherson:** I am glad that Carol Mochan has raised that point, although I did not hear the totality of her question due to the technical issues. I will take away her specific request, look at the *Official Report* and engage with health colleagues

before providing her with a written update, if she is agreeable to that.

I will do that within the wider context in which £185 million is being invested in supporting 25,500 new modern apprenticeships in Scotland. In addition, the health and social care sector is part of the sport, health and social care occupational grouping, which recorded the highest share of modern apprenticeship starts in 2024-25, at 26.1 per cent, which represents an increase of 2.8 percentage points from the previous year.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** A number of members would like to ask supplementary questions.

**Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP):** About 400,000 apprenticeship opportunities have been delivered for young people in Scotland since 2008, which underlines the Scottish National Party Government's commitment to the value of apprenticeships. What work is under way to ensure that those opportunities are accessible to all and are not hindered by financial circumstances?

**Ben Macpherson:** Clare Haughey has raised important points. The Government is committed to making apprenticeships inclusive and accessible to all, which is an on-going process. As I mentioned, this year, we are investing £185 million to deliver 25,500 new modern apprenticeships, 5,000 foundation apprenticeships and more than 1,200 graduate apprenticeships, alongside continued support for more than 38,000 apprentices who are already in training.

To promote inclusion, we offer enhanced funding contributions to support young people with disabilities, those with care experience and those who reside in remote and rural areas. More widely, free bus travel for under-22s helps young people to access training and employment opportunities. All those measures help to ensure that the apprenticeship route becomes even more viable and remains an inclusive route into skilled work for all.

**Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con):** Lothian MSPs have been contacted by newly qualified midwives who have expressed concern that they cannot access further experience without gaining employment and securing a permanent position. There is no clear pathway for midwives to complete their preceptorship before applying for permanent positions in NHS Scotland. Has the Scottish Government considered the approach of the Welsh Government, for example, which provides a job guarantee scheme for newly qualified midwives that guarantees them a minimum of 22 hours of work, allowing them to achieve their preceptorship before they apply for jobs?

**Ben Macpherson:** I am grateful to Miles Briggs for raising those points. In my capacity as a constituency MSP, I have engaged on some of those matters over the past few years. We have a proactive approach to helping people to train in midwifery, and we want as many midwives as possible to be able to enhance their skills and experience as part of that, taking account of the challenges that he mentioned. We also want those people to stay in Scotland and work in midwifery here.

With respect, this is a matter that needs the engagement of health ministers and others in the Scottish Government, so I will take the point away and provide a detailed response to Miles Briggs at a later date.

**Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** On the same subject, a cohort of qualified midwives are not getting jobs. Yesterday, I hosted a round-table meeting in the Parliament on maternity services, and the issue that came up time and again was the lack of workforce planning. My question to the minister is simple: why has the number of apprenticeship starts in key health roles fallen in some areas in recent years? When will the Government finally produce a joined-up piece of work that gives a clear plan to show how apprenticeships will close those gaps?

**Ben Macpherson:** First, we want to provide equality of access to different educational opportunities, whether in midwifery or in other roles. The fact that we have state-funded education that is free for the learner helps people to enter the profession or area of study that is right for them.

How we ensure that we are planning appropriately and retaining people effectively is an important wider challenge for us all to consider. I know that the Government is focused on working across portfolios, and we will have updates on skills in the period ahead. That is also something for the wider Parliament to focus on in this important period in which we want to make sure that we are not only training people for our workforce of the future but ensuring that they stay and can develop.

**Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** We do it for teachers, so why can we not do it in health?

**Ben Macpherson:** In relation to the way in which training is provided, regardless of the profession, there is engagement between training providers and the industries or services that take on and develop those people. As I said, workforce planning is part of the wider skills planning that the Government is undertaking, executing and implementing. I look forward to giving Martin

Whitfield and other members of the Parliament updates in due course.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Question 3 has been withdrawn.

### Education (Kindergarten Phase)

**4. Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it has given any further consideration to initiating a consultation on the establishment of a kindergarten phase for children in Scotland. (S6O-05254)

**The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes):** Play-based and child-centred approaches are key to our approach to children's learning, particularly in the early years. That is what the curriculum for excellence already delivers, and our approach is underpinned by the internationally recognised national practice guidance for early years that is set out in "Realising the ambition: Being Me".

As I have discussed with Mr MacGregor previously, a kindergarten stage would represent a major shift in our education system. I believe that our focus at the current time should be on further embedding our play-based approaches and, equally, analysing their impact, but I welcome further discussion on that.

**Fulton MacGregor:** I know that the minister is well aware of Upstart Scotland's campaign to introduce a kindergarten stage. As she has said, I have raised that issue a number of times already.

Upstart notes that countries with well-resourced play-based kindergarten approaches in early education have better child development outcomes, while children in countries where the formal school starting age is as low as five, such as Scotland and England, face growing health, attainment and wellbeing challenges.

Although building such a system would take time and resources, a few years of care can clearly have long-term benefits. Therefore, how would the potential introduction of a kindergarten phase align with the Scottish Government's current early learning and childcare policies?

**Natalie Don-Innes:** I appreciate the points that Mr MacGregor has made. I am aware of the view that better outcomes in other countries are potentially associated with a later school starting age. Of course, Mr MacGregor will know that, although those countries are comparable to Scotland, they are independent and have full control over all levers and resources that are needed to help to, for example, eradicate child poverty.

In the meantime, I share the view that we have heard from stakeholders that full implementation of

the approach in "Realising the ambition" at the early level would go a long way towards delivering the same benefits without the need for more fundamental systemic reform. I add that it is important to understand the impact of our deferrals policy.

I believe that our focus should be on understanding the impact of policy changes that have been made fairly recently before considering more fundamental reform. However, I think that this is an important conversation to have and to keep open.

**Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** It is now evident, through studies that have been conducted across the world, that a kindergarten approach is beneficial to a child's development, and I welcome the positive way in which the minister is open to that. The model gives children time and space to learn through exploration, relationships and safe environments. It has been proven to lead to stronger language and communication skills, better emotional wellbeing and improved problem solving, and it has the potential to narrow the attainment gap. It is not a soft option; it is the way to go, and it can improve academic performance in the later years of a child's education. Given all that, can the minister explain why we have a timid approach to the kindergarten model and why we are not embracing it, with both hands, for children in Scotland?

**Natalie Don-Innes:** I appreciate the points that Ms McCall has made, but I do not think that we are taking a timid approach. As I have said, "Realising the ambition" is internationally recognised in what it aims to achieve.

At the moment, I am focused on ensuring that the guidance is fully embedded and implemented in our early years provision. That will have huge benefits, some of which Ms McCall has directly referred to. However, I am very open to continuing these conversations, because I am fully aware of the benefits and outcomes that we are seeing in other countries.

### Early Years Education and Childcare (Impact of Increased Provision)

**5. James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the impact of increasing funded early years education and childcare to 1,140 hours per year for three and four-year-olds and qualifying two-year-olds. (S6O-05255)

**The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes):** As a result of the priority that the Scottish Government has placed on investing in funded early learning and childcare, families across Scotland have benefited

from the provision of 1,140 hours of high-quality funded ELC since 2021.

Our interim evaluation, which was published in 2024, showed that uptake of the expanded hours is high, and there are promising signs that the expansion is delivering improvements in flexibility, accessibility and affordability. We expect to publish in early 2026 our overall evaluation of the expansion's outcomes for children, parents and families over the period 2018 to 2025.

**James Dornan:** Many of my constituents have praised the increase in hours for their children, because of the impact on the parents' ability to work and on the finances of the household. How does the Government plan to monitor the benefits of the increase in relation to child development, closing the attainment gap and workforce sustainability across local authority areas, in order for that welcome change to continue to work for the children and families of Scotland?

**Natalie Don-Innes:** There is no doubt that providing all families with 1,140 hours of fully funded early learning and childcare for three and four-year-olds since 2021—and ours is the only Government in the United Kingdom to have done so—will have benefited families financially, but we also need to understand the impact that it has had on the measures that James Dornan has outlined.

We are currently evaluating the expansion to 1,140 hours, to better understand the difference that it is making for our children and families, and to consider things such as accessibility, flexibility, quality and take-up. As I have said, we expect to publish the overarching report in early 2026.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** There are a number of supplementary questions.

**Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** I want to return to the difference in paid rates for private, voluntary and independent nurseries and those for council nurseries. According to a recent survey by the National Day Nurseries Association, 76 per cent of its members found that the fees received from the councils did not cover their costs and that the same proportion were either breaking even or making a loss. Members said that the conditions were in “a terrible state” and that

“Staff are on their knees and nobody ... cares.”

The minister knows all of that, because I have been telling her repeatedly about it for years on end.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Please ask a question, Mr Rennie.

**Willie Rennie:** The time for reviews is over. When will there be a fair rate for doing this really important job?

**Natalie Don-Innes:** Mr Rennie knows that I am very switched on to this issue. As well as Mr Rennie and other members in the chamber telling me about it, I go out and engage directly with providers and hear their concerns face to face, so I am very aware of the issue.

Mr Rennie will be aware that the key recommendation of the rates review was to improve the cost data that is available to inform rate setting, and the Diffley Partnership was appointed to lead a national cost data-collection exercise. Those cost surveys were open for providers to complete earlier this year. The surveys reflected the input of providers, and lessons were learned from the previous cost data-collection exercises that have been carried out. I will be presented with that data soon, and then I will consider next steps.

**Martin Whittfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** Will the review that the minister is talking about capture an explanation as to why working parents are finding the funded hours inflexible?

**Natalie Don-Innes:** As I said in response to James Dornan, the interim evaluation that we published in 2024 showed promising signs that the expansion was delivering improvements in flexibility. However, as I have said, the overall evaluation will be published in the new year. Of course, we will need to consider our next steps to ensure that our offer is working for all families, if it flags important issues such as the one that Mr Whittfield has raised.

**Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** Willie Rennie is right. He has been going on about the private and voluntary sector providers for years and years—and quite right, too.

The minister has disclosed that she is about to receive data, so I think that members will want to hear what the timeline is. When will the data be delivered to the minister, and when will the minister come to the chamber with that information? Will we hear anything in this session of Parliament about this burning issue?

**Natalie Don-Innes:** The final report and the data output tables from the ELC cost surveys will be shared with the sector in due course. I believe that the most important thing is to share them with the sector first. As I have said, I will be looking at the numbers and the data that come from that, and I will consider what steps we as a Government will take to bring more regularity to the rates.

On top of the other measures that we have taken—[*Interruption.*] I am sorry, but the member is shouting at me from a sedentary position when I am trying to answer his question.

**Stephen Kerr:** Or not answering it.

**Natalie Don-Innes:** What I am saying is that the data will be published, and we will consider next steps, on top of the measures that we have already taken to support the PVI sector.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Before we move to the next question, I should point out that I have called a number of supplementaries and, although we have a bit of time in hand due to questions not being lodged, I would be grateful if, when questions are asked, we could listen to the answers.

### Skills Development (North-east Fishing Industry)

**6. Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting skills development to promote the future of the north-east fishing industry. (S6O-05256)

**The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Ben Macpherson):** One of the ways in which we support skills development in Scotland's important fishing industry is through our marine fund Scotland. In the north-east, examples include funding a training manager within Opportunity North East's seafood transformation project, and providing funding to the North East Fishermen's Training Association to invest in training equipment to allow fishers to undertake Maritime and Coastguard Agency courses. The fund has also provided more than £800,000 to Seafish to provide safety training to fishers across Scotland.

The recent update on our fisheries management strategy delivery plan set out our commitment to continue to work in partnership with our fishing industry and Seafish to identify and support the delivery of actions in support of safety and career development training.

**Douglas Lumsden:** Vocational qualifications are a vital route for young people to enter the fishing industry, thereby becoming the next generation of skippers, deckhands and engineers and taking on what is an important way of life in the north-east and other parts of Scotland. However, according to new figures that I have obtained from Skills Development Scotland, no new vocational qualifications have been awarded in sea fishing since 2019. There were no north-east starts at all last year, and fewer than five workboat diplomas were given out of a total of just under 90 maritime qualifications in the past five years. What is the Scottish National Party Government really doing to guarantee the future of a totemic industry for the north-east, and is the minister content to allow the skills pathway to decline and to take away a way of life with it?

**Ben Macpherson:** To give some context in answering the question, I think it important to acknowledge that there has been a record number of vocational qualifications this year. However, I do take the member's points, and I appreciate why they are of interest not just to him as a representative of the north-east, but in relation to the common good of Scotland and this important industry.

If the member would furnish me and other ministers with the full details of the situation in his region, we would be happy to look into it. There are a lot of opportunities in his region—as well as some challenges, which he highlights in the chamber regularly—and we want to ensure that the fishing industry and other opportunities in the north-east are maximised for our young people and those who are retraining.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** There are a number of supplementary questions. Before calling them, I remind members that the substantive question is on skills development in relation to the fishing industry in the north-east.

**Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP):** I welcome the commitments in this year's programme for government on improving careers support and advice. How is the Scottish Government engaging with stakeholders to support every young person on the path that works best for them, including in relation to access to local industries?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Minister, if you could tie your response to the substantive question, I would be grateful.

**Ben Macpherson:** In order to make sure that individuals and our young people can access local industries, including our important fishing industry—

**Members:** Ah!

**Ben Macpherson:** —it is vital that we improve careers support for all ages. That is being taken forward as part of our reform agenda.

The career services collaborative, for example, which I recently engaged with during Scottish careers week, brings together partners from across the system to drive forward careers improvements. We are also engaging with employers through the developing the young workforce network, which has connections with employers throughout local areas, and through regional employer networks and industry bodies, some of which were mentioned earlier. Of course, we are also engaging with educators, colleges, universities, third sector organisations and young people to make sure that they are aware of the different opportunities.

**Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab):** The fishing industry in the north-east of Scotland will, of course, have to rely on the existence of apprenticeships and skills, but the Government is systematically failing in that respect. The minister has now written to the Education, Children and Young People Committee to say that crucial decisions in relation to the Government's Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill, which contains its only proposals on skills, have not yet been taken. The letter gives as one option Skills Development Scotland delivering "a managed service", because the due diligence to make the change that the Government has proposed has not yet been done.

The Government's woefully low ambition in simply rejigging quangos—which will fail many in the north-east fishing industry—is not even that now. Instead, the Government is legislating to kick the can down the road and diverting millions of pounds from opportunities in the process.

When will the minister take this decision? How much longer will staff, employers, colleges and learners in the north-east have to wait to find out what their future looks like? Is he just going to accept the inevitable—that this Government's plans are unworkable and that he should go back to the drawing board?

**Ben Macpherson:** We had significant discussion on the bill that the member mentioned at during its stage 2 consideration both yesterday and last week. I must say that I find the Scottish Labour Party's approach to the whole issue quite perplexing. On the one hand, it states that it wants to increase opportunities for young people and to be a constructive part of that process. In her question, however, the member quoted out of context aspects of a letter that I sent in good faith to the committee to update it on the implementation process, should the bill be the will of Parliament and passed.

I am working hard with members across the chamber, including with the member herself, and she has put forward some constructive ideas, despite the unfair negativity in her question. I am looking forward to working on the bill ahead of stage 3. This is not about diverting resource from skills provision, but about how we readjust the skills system in Scotland to meet the needs of the next part of the 21st century, when we will have to be more agile and efficient and to provide opportunities.

We are providing a record number of modern apprenticeships, and we know that there is unmet demand that we want to meet. I look forward to some of those apprentices coming from the fishing industry.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call Willie Rennie. Very briefly, please.

**Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** In the north-east of Fife, we have significant problems with recruiting crew for the local boats. The local schools used to provide courses for young people to access the industry, but they seem to have dried up. Will the minister look again at the provision in every community across Scotland, including in the north-east of Fife?

**Ben Macpherson:** I thank the member for raising those important points. His question builds on some of the discussion that we had at stage 2 of the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill about niche provision that we must ensure is in place, if we are to meet the goal of retaining skills that have been important in important industries in certain areas, including in the north-east of Fife and the north-east of Scotland.

If Willie Rennie wants to engage with me and the Government more widely on those points, I will be happy to try to assist him constructively, including as part of collaborative engagement with local skills or training providers, such as colleges or other entities.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Question 7 has not been lodged.

#### **English for Speakers of Other Languages (Protests against Adult Classes in Schools)**

**8. Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the impact on adult English (ESOL) classes that are held on school premises of the reported far-right protests that have taken place outside the schools in opposition to these. (S6O-05258)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth):** The Scottish Government recognises the important role that ESOL plays in supporting the integration of people whose first language is not English. Language is fundamental in understanding information from public services, gaining employment and participating in community activities. It is the statutory responsibility of all local authorities to manage their school estate. However, there is no place for racism, prejudice and intolerance to be projected in and around Scotland's schools. Our children, our school staff, parents and everyone who visits our schools, for any reason, deserve and have the right to feel safe. Making anyone in a school community feel unsafe is completely unacceptable.

**Maggie Chapman:** ESOL classes such as those taking place in Seaton in Aberdeen are for adults. Some of those adults may be parents or

carers of school pupils, some may be Ukrainian or Polish, and some may be asylum seekers. They all just want to improve their English to help them to live in our communities, yet they are being targeted by far-right racists. I hope that the Scottish Government agrees that it is totally unacceptable for education to be targeted and disrupted in that way.

What support will the Scottish Government provide to schools and councils to counter the misinformation and far-right agitation that is fuelling the protests, to protect family learning hubs and to deter racist fearmongering? What strategies can be put in place to defend inclusive adult education in our communities?

**Jenny Gilruth:** I very much recognise Maggie Chapman's strength of feeling on the issue, which I share. Earlier this year, I visited Glasgow City Council's ESOL curricular network in a school in Glasgow, and I heard from staff and pupils learning English as an additional language about the fantastic work that is under way across the city of Glasgow, which demonstrates the approach to inclusion and integration that is pivotal in our communities.

The Government has announced £200,000 of funding for work with the Scottish Trades Union Congress on the united workplaces project, which is supporting our trade unions to promote equality and diversity in the workplace. Wider work is also under way, including through Time for Inclusive Education and the digital discourse initiative, which is working with schools to empower teachers to respond to some of those challenging issues more broadly. The issues have also been raised with me by the teaching trade unions, and we will continue to work with Education Scotland to best support our teaching workforce in responding to some of those challenging topics in schools.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We have a bit of time in hand over the course of the afternoon, but I want to protect as much time for the debate as I can. I will take a couple of supplementary questions, but they will need to be brief, as will the responses.

**Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP):** The role of disinformation is increasingly alarming in today's age. We have seen hateful online rhetoric spread rapidly to incite division. What resources are available to schools to increase children and young people's awareness and resilience to online disinformation?

**Jenny Gilruth:** It is fair to say that disinformation is being used across Scotland and the United Kingdom to stoke division—we are all aware of that. As I mentioned, there is no place for

that discrimination or intolerance in Scotland's schools.

In response to Ms Chapman's question, I mentioned the work that is happening through the Time for Inclusive Education campaign and the digital discourse initiative. Yesterday, I was in Boroughmuir high school, meeting pupils and staff to learn more about the mentors in violence prevention project, a peer-to-peer piece of work that the Scottish Government also supports. The project helps young people in secondary 6, for example, to work with their secondary 1 counterparts and to tackle some of those issues on a peer-led basis. Those are examples of what the Scottish Government is supporting at the current time, but we remain open to working with Education Scotland on these challenging topics.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I will allow a very brief question from Mercedes Villalba.

**Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab):** Seaton primary school in my region has been the target of anti-migrant disruption twice in the past week alone. Successive Governments have allowed the poor to get poorer while the rich get richer. However, once again, it is migrants who are being blamed. Does the minister agree that those far-right protests disrupt not just education but our whole communities by sowing division? Is it not the case that the real solution to poverty, homelessness and unemployment is ending the gross inequality between us and the billionaires—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Cabinet secretary.

**Mercedes Villalba:** —and not attacking our hard-working friends and neighbours?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Cabinet secretary.

**Jenny Gilruth:** I very much agree with the sentiment of Mercedes Villalba's question, although I know that she was slightly cut short in asking it. Such protests disrupt education and our communities, and intimidate our educators and children and young people. There can be no place for that in Scotland's schools.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I suggest that Mercedes Villalba was not cut short.

That concludes portfolio questions. There will be a brief pause before we move to the next item of business to allow the front-bench teams to change.

## Widening Access to Higher Education

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-19984, in the name of Douglas Ross, on behalf of the Education, Children and Young People Committee, on widening access to higher education. Members who wish to participate in the debate should press their request-to-speak buttons now, or as soon as possible.

15:00

**Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I am pleased to open this debate on the committee's inquiry into widening access to higher education. I thank all those who shared their knowledge and expertise with us, and I thank my committee colleagues for their diligent work on the issue.

In 2016, the commission on widening access recommended that, by 2021, 16 per cent of full-time first-degree university entrants should come from the 20 per cent most deprived backgrounds. The recommendation was that, by 2026, the figure should be 18 per cent, with an overall national target of 20 per cent by 2030. Scottish universities met the first interim target ahead of schedule in 2019-20. At least 16 per cent of full-time first-degree university entrants have come from the 20 per cent most deprived backgrounds ever since, although it must be noted that progress has stalled since 2020-21.

Back in 2016, the commission also recommended that, by 2021, students from the 20 per cent most deprived backgrounds should represent at least 10 per cent of full-time first-degree entrants to every individual Scottish university—I will speak more about that in a bit. The commission further suggested that there should be a review of that target in 2022, and that a higher target should be considered for subsequent years.

Our inquiry considered the progress that is being made on widening access, focusing on the following issues. What is needed for colleges and universities to meet the 2026 target? What access initiatives are showing success? Is the work of the Scottish Government and partners to introduce additional data measures progressing, and when and how will that be incorporated into targets? What access challenges exist for disabled, black and minority ethnic and care-experienced students outwith Scottish index of multiple deprivation 20 areas, and what might be done to address those challenges?

I will take a bit of time to consider the key findings of our report and some of the recommendations that we made to the Government. I have chosen to start specifically on the unique learner number. That is because we heard a lot of evidence about it, it takes up a big part of our inquiry report and there is a clear recommendation to the Government.

The original report by the commission on widening access in 2016 recommended the introduction of a unique learner number across all levels of education to track learners and share access data. I will repeat that point: almost a decade ago, the original commission recommended the introduction of a unique learner number. In his annual report in 2024, the current commissioner for fair access also recommended that each student have a unique learner number to help to monitor progress on widening access.

Robert Gordon University and Universities Scotland indicated their and the sector's strong support for the use of a unique learner number. Universities Scotland stated that it would allow for an understanding of

*"where a person has been in their educational journey"—[Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee, 26 February 2025; c 37.]*

and identification of their needs. The committee strongly agreed with the value of introducing a unique learner number to track students' educational journeys and allow a better understanding of what works regarding transitions in the longer term.

**Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** I have heard the unique learner number described as a "bureaucratic nicety". Does Douglas Ross agree that it is far from that and that it would be a fundamental cornerstone in data retention and understanding what is happening in our schools?

**Douglas Ross:** I agree with Martin Whitfield on that point, as does almost everyone who gave evidence to our committee. There was almost unanimous support, not just in the few weeks in which we took evidence, nor just in the written submissions, but going back year after year to the report from the original commission in 2016. Why, at the end of 2025, are we still calling for the introduction of a unique learner number? The committee was extremely disappointed in the apparent lack of progress and that the Scottish Government has said that a unique learner number will not be introduced in the short term or even in the medium term, despite that being recommended by the commission almost a decade ago.

The committee was also disappointed that the Scottish Government was unable to provide any indicative costs for the introduction of a unique

learner number, or even to confirm whether legislation would be required. When the current minister's predecessor appeared before the committee, he told us that he had viewed all the other evidence, in which a unique learner number had come up time and time again, but when questions were put to him about whether legislation was needed and how much it would cost, he had no idea. I felt that it was disrespectful to the committee for a minister not to have come prepared to answer on an issue that it was clear would come up.

Our report was agreed to unanimously by every party in the Parliament. I stress that there was no dissent on the report as a whole or on our recommendation on a unique learner number. We recommended that the Scottish Government should commit to the introduction of a unique learner number and outline how that would be achieved. Sadly, in its response, the Scottish Government said:

"Whilst we recognise the potential long-term benefits of a Unique Learner Number ... it is a wide-ranging issue requiring careful consideration"

because it is

"complex ... inherently cross-cutting in nature, and potentially involves sharing the personal, sensitive data of millions of individuals."

We all know that. We know what the challenges are. We just want a solution.

It is only the Scottish Government that is preventing the adoption of a unique learner number. That is why I was encouraged by the fact that back-bench members of the Government party supported the recommendation, and I hope that the new minister and the Government listen not only to Opposition politicians but to the parties represented on our committee, whose unanimous view was that a unique learner number is needed.

There are a number of other issues that I want to focus on. We looked at the measures relating to the eligibility for, and the progress on, widening access initiatives. Currently, we use the Scottish index of multiple deprivation but, during the inquiry, the committee heard about the limitations on its ability to identify all the students who might need support. Although it is valuable and helpful at a national level, the SIMD is an area-based measure that does not capture individual circumstances. For example, it will not capture the circumstances of someone who is living in poverty in an otherwise affluent area.

Although the commissioner for fair access highlighted the continued need for a central measure of progress, he and many other witnesses advocated using a basket of indicators, including free school meals data, to help to identify individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. The

committee noted the usefulness of the SIMD as a widening access measure, but we recognised its limitations, particularly in relation to rural areas. We therefore recommended that the Scottish Government should work with stakeholders and the commissioner to introduce a basket of measures to identify person-centred characteristics for widening access measures.

I want to discuss free school meals data. The committee heard about the on-going work in relation to a pilot scheme in the north-east on the use of free school meals data, in addition to the SIMD, as a means of identifying students who are eligible for widening access measures. In its submission to the committee, Robert Gordon University said that the lack of legislation had made implementing data-sharing arrangements difficult.

Although we appreciate that there are potential barriers in relation to data sharing more widely, we urged the Scottish Government to look into the challenges and to confirm whether legislation was required to address them. The committee subsequently urged the Scottish Government to find a vehicle to allow for the necessary statutory measures, so we welcome the minister's amendment at stage 2 of the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill, which seeks to address those barriers. We raised the issue in our report and, very quickly, the Government and the minister found a solution.

There are a number of other issues that I am sure that committee members and others will address. I want to finish on the subject of colleges. It is important to recognise the crucial role that colleges play in widening access to university, via articulation, for students from SIMD 20 backgrounds, disabled students, care-experienced students, black and minority ethnic students and adult learners. However, the committee also recognises the importance of college education in its own right.

During this parliamentary session, the committee has conducted an inquiry on colleges and, in recent years, has focused much of its pre-budget scrutiny on the sector. For a number of years, our committee has expressed concern about the financial sustainability of Scotland's colleges and has made numerous recommendations to the Scottish Government on how those financial challenges should be addressed.

The committee is frustrated at the lack of change, or the urgency to make change, for the sector, and we share the concerns about the issues that colleges up and down the country are facing and about the serious and significant risk to the financial future of some of our colleges. Given

the importance of the widening access agenda, the loss of colleges would not only affect the communities that they serve but undermine the drive to widen access to opportunities, including degree-level study nationally.

I am grateful for the time in the chamber today for our committee report to be fully debated and discussed. I look forward to hearing from committee colleagues and other members during the debate, and to hearing from the minister about the measures that the Scottish Government can take to ensure that access to education and institutions is widened. I commend our report.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the findings and recommendations in the Education, Children and Young People Committee's 5th Report, 2025 (Session 6), *Widening access to higher education inquiry* (SP Paper 782).

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We have a little bit of time in hand, so members will certainly get back the time for any interventions. I call Ben Macpherson. Minister, you have around eight minutes, please.

15:10

**The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Ben Macpherson):** I thank the convener and the members of the committee, as it is their work, and that of all the stakeholders who gave evidence to the committee, that enables us to have this debate today. I also thank the clerks who were involved in the process.

I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss the committee's report and the Government's formal response, which was issued earlier in the year. I am also grateful for the opportunity to do so as someone who is politically committed to creating a fairer society—as are so many colleagues across the chamber—and who recognises the important role that widening access to higher education and other opportunities plays in that process. It should be one of our top priorities in the period ahead, along with creating greater parity of esteem, which I know also motivates so many colleagues in the chamber and others across the country. Those two aspects in particular will help us to establish a better scenario than we have now, although we have made much progress towards creating a more equitable post-school education system.

As the convener did, the report sets out the remaining challenges, but I want to talk first about some of the progress that has been made. It is important to acknowledge the advances that have been achieved collectively and on which the Government has sought to provide leadership. For example, as we speak here today—indeed, over recent years—the number of Scots from more

deprived areas entering full-time degree courses has risen. In 2023-24, that number showed an increase of 37 per cent in comparison with the number when the Government established the commission on widening access. The proportion of Scotland-domiciled entrants with a known disability from the 20 per cent most deprived areas has risen from 12.8 per cent in 2016-17 to 18.1 per cent in 2023-24.

**Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab):** I welcome that progress, but can the minister set out when he will be in a position to respond to the consultation on support for disabled students and part-time students?

**Ben Macpherson:** I will be happy to update the member on that in due course, but I am not able to provide an answer at this juncture. I thank her for raising the point—I appreciate the importance of the issue and will get back to her on it.

There is more to do, but, as I was saying, there has been progress. The proportion of black and minority ethnic Scotland-domiciled entrants from the 20 per cent most deprived areas entering Scottish universities has grown from 24.2 per cent in 2016-17 to 28 per cent in 2023-24.

Both the convener in his speech and the report emphasised the need for further progress, but we must also acknowledge the difference that has been made. We all think of those percentages and that wider summary of the national picture, but we will all have met many individuals in our constituencies who have managed to go to university—often via college—despite perhaps not considering that route before and who are now making a difference in certain professions or in growing sectors in our economy. Those stories are important, because they amplify the necessity of making sure that people are aware of the opportunities that are there for them in their communities.

**Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** The minister is right to point out some of the progress—there is no doubt that there has been some—but we are here to try to make things better. He is four minutes into his eight-minute speech. I want to understand why he thinks that progress has stalled and whether he thinks that the flatlining on closing the poverty-related attainment gap in schools has contributed to that flatlining at universities.

**Ben Macpherson:** I appreciate the member probing me on those points. One key bit of progress was shown yesterday in the action that is being taken in the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill to ensure that we have better data sharing.

As the member knows, one of the key interventions that the Government has made in

recent years on reducing poverty is the Scottish child payment—an intervention that has had a significant impact across nearly all of Scotland on the cost of living and, therefore, on the poverty-related attainment gap in both an indirect and, in certain circumstances, a direct way. The measures that we agreed at committee yesterday will help with data sharing across different organisations so that we have a better understanding, beyond SIMD, of where people need further assistance.

**Martin Whitfield:** Does that not relate to the convener's question about the unique learner number? If we can introduce that for what is, sadly, a relatively large group of people who can be specifically identified, why can we not do that for a slightly larger group of young people?

**Ben Macpherson:** I appreciate the points about the unique learner number that have been made by the member, by the convener in his speech and in the committee's report. As other ministers have emphasised, it is not a simple issue and consideration needs to be given to the fact that it goes beyond widening access to higher education and involves different organisations. However, I am happy to give an undertaking to look at the issue from a fresh perspective, as a new minister. The complexities should not be a barrier if there is merit in trying to advance the idea, which the committee has emphasised. I am happy to look at it and see what progress can be made in the period ahead.

**Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** Will the minister take an intervention?

**Douglas Ross:** Will the minister take an intervention?

**Ben Macpherson:** Two members are on their feet. I will take Brian Whittle's intervention.

**Brian Whittle:** I am grateful to the minister for taking so many interventions. I am slightly concerned about the Government's reticence across a lot of portfolios to implement artificial intelligence and tech. A unique learner number is hardly different from the community health index number in healthcare. What is the resistance to the idea?

**Ben Macpherson:** This Parliament, even in my time here, has had many debates on systems and data sharing, be it in relation to social security, the considerations around named persons or other subjects. In all Government considerations, we need to be very clear that any data sharing is done in a safe and secure way, that the systems are efficient and optimal in ensuring that the data cuts across, and that there is good value for money for the taxpayer. I appreciate that there are identifying numbers for patients in the health system and tax references for individuals. However, as previous

ministers have emphasised, when it comes to this issue, consideration is required across different entities including, for example, independent bodies such as universities, so it is more complicated. We also must ensure that we are considerate of costs.

I am conscious of time. There is a lot more that the report covers, and I am looking forward to listening to what colleagues have to say in the debate. We are aiming for a situation in which each university will be expected to match or exceed its highest proportion to date of entrants from the 20 per cent most deprived areas. As I said, we recognise that there is more work to do, and we continue to work with the Scottish Funding Council on that.

This really matters, not just for social justice, but to ensure that we maximise the human potential in our communities. Our people are our biggest resource as a country, so widening access matters. We have made significant progress. The committee's work on the subject is important and the recommendations are helpful. I look forward to working with members across the chamber on those and to hearing members' contributions to the debate.

15:20

**Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con):** I, too, thank all the people who gave evidence to the committee and all the organisations that provided helpful briefings ahead of the debate. In seven minutes, I will not be able to touch upon all the work that they highlighted, but we were given a lot of helpful content about the work that our colleges and universities are undertaking to try to close the gap and give people the opportunity to get into education.

I highlight something on which I agree with Keir Starmer—I did not necessarily think that I would say that. It is something that he said at the Labour Party conference. I say to Mr Whitfield that I was not there. I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister set the challenge of making vocational options as attractive to parents—we must remember them—and young people as higher education. We lack that in our debate in the Scottish Parliament.

As I have stated in almost every education debate, Conservative members want real reform to provide more opportunities for our young people. I refer to opportunities such as the ones that I saw on Friday when I visited Liberton high school with my Lothian colleague Sue Webber—I know that Daniel Johnson was there a few weeks previously. The school has partnered with the Tigers construction academy to offer young people in that part of the city a foundation apprenticeship in construction skills to give them a taste of the

careers on offer in the construction industry. It was positive to hear from those young people that that helps not only by providing practical sessions but by focusing their learning in other subjects, including the theoretical importance of, for example, mathematics to work. It also plants in those young people's heads the seed of a future career ladder and pathways beyond it into further and higher education.

**Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** I am grateful to Miles Briggs for going down that path, shocked as I am that he quoted Keir Starmer. The reason for that is that one of my long-standing concerns—I wonder if he shares it—is about the quality of the careers advice that is available to our young people. Most of our young people are lucky to get a few minutes with a careers adviser in their entire secondary school experience, and the range of possibilities that exists is not always clear to them—hence, they often get grouped together and are almost predestined to end up in a place that they did not choose to be in.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I can give you the time back, Mr Briggs.

**Miles Briggs:** I absolutely agree with Stephen Kerr. We need a new vision for how such advice is delivered and we need different organisations to provide the opportunity for extracurricular work outside school so that we can give our young people the ambition to get what is out there.

With my colleague Sharon Dowey, I recently visited the Ayr campus of the University of the West of Scotland. The university is doing a lot of work on the blending of school and university learning. I was hugely impressed by the portfolio of work-based learning and graduate apprenticeship models that it has developed. Those routes offer an alternative pathway into degree-level study for individuals who are employed or wish to go straight into work. Most young people tell us that they want work-based learning. We need to ensure that the systems that we put in place and that we publicly fund match that positive outlook.

When the Parliament was first reconvened, we used to speak more about the aspiration for lifelong learning—the ability for Scots to access the continuous development of skills and knowledge throughout their life. For many people, that is just not the case and the Parliament does not really talk about lifelong learning any longer.

However, I acknowledge the Open University's briefing, which stated that it has 16,470 students across Scotland, 71 per cent of whom are in employment. That demonstrates the alignment that we need between the provision of education and workforce development. We need to work

alongside employers to ensure that we achieve that.

**Martin Whitfield:** I am grateful to Miles Briggs for taking my intervention. Is it not right to say that that loss of lifelong learning happened to coincide with when part-time courses in colleges vanished in Scotland?

**Miles Briggs:** Absolutely. It is a fact that we have lost more than 100,000 places on such courses in our college sector. That has had huge impacts on every part of our society, and we should acknowledge that.

I would also like to highlight the work of Robert Gordon University, information on which was provided to the committee. I declare an interest in that I am a graduate of RGU. I loved my time studying in Aberdeen and one of the reasons why I chose to study at Robert Gordon was the fact that it had such a great reputation for graduate employment. The university has put graduate employability at the heart of its approach to education, working closely with industry in the north-east—including the fishing industry—to ensure that, through its courses, students gain the knowledge and experience that will allow them to access those career pathways. It provides a wide range of not only compulsory but optional placements to implant people into work. That is a model that I have always advocated for and, last year, it resulted in RGU's graduate employability rate standing at 96.5 per cent. The university was ranked second in the United Kingdom on graduate employment. We need to look not only to the pathways in education but to the pathways into employment and the opportunities that exist in so many key sectors.

The convener touched on the evidence that was provided. It is worth putting on the record that the targets that were set for Robert Gordon University were unable to be met. That was down to the fact that the targets relate to places for students from SIMD 20 areas. The fact that 7.2 per cent of full-time degree entrants at the university in 2023-24 were from SIMD 20 areas is incredibly welcome, but there are not enough SIMD 20 postcodes in the north-east for the university to meet the target. Ministers and the wider Parliament have to acknowledge that—we might hear more on that point from members for the north-east.

The progress that is being made to support care-experienced young people is important and the committee will return to that in the new year when the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill goes through Parliament. Some of the private sessions that the committee has held in relation to the bill were the most important ones—for me, anyway—because we heard young people's evidence about their concerns that, although there has been a lot of

success in getting them into further and higher education, whether they are being sustained in it has not been measured or tracked. I hope that it will be recognised that we should not take just getting a young person into an educational institution as success; we need to get them to the end of their time in that institution. That has not been tracked and we need to be honest about it. I hope that ministers will take on board the committee's recommendations and findings on that.

I am concerned that our college sector has become the Cinderella of our education system. In recent years, we have seen significant cuts to the sector. Colleges Scotland's submission called for a greater focus to be placed on the funding of part-time provision because it would bring benefits for adult returners and those who seek to develop their skills while in employment. The Scottish Conservatives have a vision to reform and increase the number of apprenticeships and to support our college sector. However, the budget in January will be a key test for ministers and it is important that we see whether there is a commitment to our college sector.

Widening access to higher education must be about real opportunity. Many of our talented young people are still being held back by background, postcode and circumstance. In order to change that, Scotland needs our colleges and universities to be properly supported and to deliver fair access, with clear pathways for students not only into further study but into work. Together, they can help achieve the potential of our young people in the years to come.

15:28

**Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab):** To start, I thank my colleagues on the Education, Children and Young People Committee, the clerks who supported us and all those who gave evidence in this important inquiry.

Widening access to education is crucial if we are to open opportunities for everyone in Scotland to live up to their potential. That is why this inquiry was so important. It is not about only a theoretical policy intent; it is about lives and changing them. For that to happen, we need a tertiary education system that is match fit. Sadly, in Scotland, we face significant challenges. While universities and colleges are working their socks off to support all to have the grades to get there, they are doing that against a tide of cuts and a lack of priority for that work from their Government. The Scottish Government's own "Equality and Fairer Scotland Budget Statement 2024-25", which accompanied the 2024-25 budget, said:

"There is a significant risk that the reduction in the HE resource budget will increase competition for remaining

university places, which could disadvantage learners from socio-economically disadvantaged areas with lower prior attainment."

According to what we heard in committee, that is, sadly, the case.

Progress towards the next target—18 per cent of entrants from the most deprived areas getting into university by 2026—has stalled. Data shows that, in 2023, fewer applications were accepted from people from disadvantaged backgrounds than was the case in 2022. The target is meant to be met in 2026. That is right around the corner, and, as the committee acknowledged, it is unlikely to be met. Missing it is not just about numbers, though. Our constituents are losing out on lives, opportunities and their futures.

The committee also looked at factors other than socioeconomic factors that can lock people out of opportunity, and we found that many are interlinked. We heard about the significant barriers that disabled students and care leavers face. Disabled students—particularly visually impaired students—are still not getting the support that they need to access the same opportunities as their non-disabled peers. We took seriously compelling evidence on that, which I ask the minister to consider carefully. As a former disabled student, I know that that fact will be, at best, intensely disappointing to disabled students and, at worst, the difference between being able to go to university and not being able to do so.

That the recommendations from the most recent review of disabled student support, which was completed years ago, have not been actioned not only is a failure of responsibility on the part of the Government, but is having a real-life impact on students in Scotland and their ability to get into higher education and stay there. It is leaving lives on hold. For that reason, during the inquiry, I pressed the Scottish Government for a commitment to review again the support that is available for disabled students. I asked it to build on the previous review, so that it did not put student support services in colleges and universities—and, indeed, students—under further pressure to repeat themselves. I asked for the actions in the review to build on the recommendations in the previous one. The minister has not been able to update us on that issue today, but I would like him to do so in due course, because it is a serious issue that is locking many people out of further and higher education.

Part-time students were included in the Government review, which the committee and my party hugely welcomed. The needs of part-time students must be addressed, especially because we know that the trend is towards more flexible study options, such as those offered by the Open University. The review, which has concluded, was

to consider the impact on and support for part-time students. I would welcome an update on that from the Government sooner rather than later.

Amid our challenging environment, our universities and colleges in Scotland are doing incredible work to widen access. I thank all the organisations that, ahead of the debate, sent briefings on the work that they are doing in that area. Seventy-one per cent of Open University students in Scotland—73 per cent in Glasgow—are in employment, with 30 per cent of students sharing the fact that they have a disability. Thirty-two per cent of University of the West of Scotland students are from SIMD 1 areas, and, for 11 years in a row, the university has been ranked as the best at widening access in Scotland. As we have heard, Robert Gordon University is also doing a great deal of work, including through its northern lights initiative and its work with colleges, to open up access to its courses. I put on record my thanks to all universities and colleges across Scotland. Scottish Labour and I will always be on their side.

Finally, I will speak about what a widening access agenda seeks to deliver. It cannot just be about getting into university or college; it has to be about staying there, graduating and then getting a good job. That is why the wider context matters, too. As National Union of Students Scotland has said, education might be free—and rightly, we agree—but studying and delivering it is not. Experts across Scotland told the committee that Scottish tertiary education is in crisis. Over the past decade, higher education funding has plummeted by 20 per cent in real terms per student. In further education, Audit Scotland has reported that Scottish Government funding for colleges has fallen by 20 per cent in the past five years. That is having a real-life impact on the life chances of the students who are furthest from access to education.

In 2023, the Institute for Fiscal Studies set out that the cost of living support that students can access in Scotland has

“become less generous over time, with total support for the poorest students cut by 16% ... in real terms between 2013–14 and 2022–23.”

Although students in Scotland have been able to borrow more per year for living costs, in the absence of more maintenance support, that leaves poorer students with more debt. The average student debt stood at £17,990 in 2023–24 compared to only £6,090 in 2007, when the Scottish National Party pledged to scrap student debt.

Rhetoric on widening access rings hollow if people cannot stay on and get on; it rings hollow if the very institutions that we need to deliver it are not a priority for their Government; and it rings

hollow if the significant challenges that students, including disabled students and care leavers, face go unaddressed any longer. There is a way to go before the class, glass and step ceiling that is in the way of opportunity in Scottish education is gone. This Government has had 18 years, but too many people are still locked out. I fundamentally believe that, in May, the public will see that and will not afford it more time to make the same mistakes again.

15:35

**Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green):** I thank the committee members, the clerks and everyone who gave evidence to the inquiry, because this report matters. Free, universal and equitable access to higher education is not just an aspiration but the cornerstone of a fair, compassionate and confident Scotland. It is about our culture, our wellbeing, our democracy and our shared future.

I am proud that Scotland chose to abolish tuition fees for some students. We rejected the corrosive market logic that sees education—something that should nourish human potential—as a commodity to be bought and sold. However, we must confront a hard truth. For too many people, the right—not the privilege—to a higher education remains a dream unrealised. The Scottish Government aims for 20 per cent of full-time first-degree entrants to be from the 20 per cent most deprived backgrounds. We are, as we have heard, now at 16 per cent, with five years to go. Progress has stalled and, without renewed action and without political courage, we will miss that target.

That figure hides further injustice. Disabled students may now be proportionately represented, but the committee heard that that masks significant persistent barriers, assessment delays, inaccessible learning environments and a review of support that took four years to deliver and is already out of date. That is indefensible. Disabled students deserve to be welcomed, supported and valued, not left in limbo. It is not just disabled students who are left out in the cold. We must do better and do it systematically, not superficially. That means widening access not only through traditional routes, but through flexible pathways that respect people’s lives and communities.

Robert Gordon University has already been spoken about in the debate. It is one of our institutions that is most committed to widening access, in a region where structural barriers are very real, and it has valuable experience to share. RGU, like the University of Aberdeen and North East Scotland College, faces a distinctive challenge. The city and shire have very few SIMD 20 postcodes. Only 8 or 9 per cent of households in the city and 3 or 4 per cent in the shire fall into

that category, yet three major tertiary institutions draw from that small pool.

RGU's SIMD 20 entrant figure of 7.2 per cent reflects demography, not a lack of commitment. RGU has responded not by shrugging and giving up, but by building one of Scotland's most sustained evidence-based approaches to widening access. Its schools hub model embeds staff in all 28 secondary schools across the city and shire, fortnightly or monthly, building long-term relationships with pupils, teachers and careers advisers. Its access to programme has grown from 70 pupils in 2019 to more than 1,000 this year, offering 11 subject-specific courses and free transport and food to remove the hidden costs that so often quietly lock out too many young people. Its northern lights programme reaches secondary 1 and secondary 2 pupils, providing early imaginative interventions that genuinely widen horizons.

Those are the kinds of interventions that we should celebrate—those that are embedded in communities, grounded in relationships and tailored to need. They work because academic and support staff give their time and share their expertise and enthusiasm, often in the evenings, and I am grateful to them for that. RGU's experience also reminds us that widening access is about so much more than SIMD; it is about understanding disadvantage in all its forms.

The free school meal pilot shows the value of individual-level data, capturing individual disadvantage far better than any postcode data can. It also shows the data-sharing barriers that hold us back and that we urgently need to address.

The same is true of rurality. SIMD is simply too blunt a tool to capture rural disadvantage. University participation is lower in remote communities. The Greens believe that opportunity should never depend on geography, so we need to look beyond SIMD. As we have already heard, widening access has to be about retention and success. Getting students into education settings is not enough; keeping them and supporting them to flourish is what real fairness looks like.

Currently, 12 per cent of students do not progress to year 2, and the rate is worse for disadvantaged learners. I have spent years working in universities—I refer colleagues to my entry in the register of members' interests, as I am the rector of the University of Dundee—and I know where there are gaps. Staff are expected to support students with little or no information about who has come through different routes or who faces particular barriers. They are left to guess or to ask students to disclose personal information again and again, which is not dignified, effective or fair. We must act on the committee's call for a

unique learner number, which was recommended a decade ago. RGU is right in saying that it would transform our ability to understand learner journeys, evaluate what works and intervene early.

Widening access also means facing the financial realities that students deal with. Tuition may be free for some, but rent, food, transport, books and equipment are not. Private developers are extracting millions of pounds from students who simply need somewhere safe and affordable to live. When the Government removed student rent controls from the Housing (Scotland) Act 2025, it removed one of the most effective tools that we could have had to tackle the biggest financial barriers that students face. Students deserve protection from predatory landlords just as much as any other tenant. Finally, we must not forget postgraduate study. Access cannot end at undergraduate level if employers increasingly expect applicants to have masters degrees and more. Education should not be for sale at any level.

Widening access is a moral imperative. It is about dignity, justice and the belief that every person deserves the chance to discover their potential. The committee's report challenges us to do better; institutions such as RGU show us what is possible. Let us honour both by committing to systemic change that puts compassion, equality and human flourishing at the heart of Scotland's higher education system.

15:42

**Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** I thank the clerks and the witnesses who gave evidence to the committee, as well as my fellow committee members.

I can honestly say that there was universal delight in the result of *The Herald* politician of the year awards, when our convener managed to climb the heady heights of achieving the committee convener of the year award. It was universal—even George Adam was delighted with our convener's achievement. It brought the committee together in a way that I have never seen before.

**George Adam (Paisley) (SNP):** For the sake of clarity, I was not quite as excited about it as Mr Rennie was. [Laughter.]

**Willie Rennie:** Two very important universities have been part of my life. The first is what I called Paisley tech when I was there in the 1980s, which is now the University of the West of Scotland, and the second is the University of St Andrews. Both have achieved remarkable progress on widening access. The University of the West of Scotland, which Mr Adam knows very well, has a fantastic foundation academy that reaches out to 34

schools through a range of councils—I think that it is 10 councils in total. It has enrolled 3,500 pupils at no cost to the schools and councils that are involved. It provides an introduction to university for those young people through a 10-week module, which is delivered in the school, not the university, and is run by lecturers and staff from the institution. On completion of the academy, a participant can get Scottish credit and qualifications framework credits. It has been so successful that *Times Higher Education* nominated it for the widening participation initiative award in 2024. The university has done that by itself, with no extra money from the Government, and it has made significant progress.

You would never expect the University of St Andrews to be treating widening access as a top priority, but it does. Alongside its work on contextual admissions, its gateway programme, which I have seen for myself, provides a tailored first-year course for those from SIMD 20 backgrounds. It also provides a bridging year course, which helps students to get into the university. The university provides scholarships and engages in outreach to almost every school across the country that asks for it. Further, it provides a particular course for Fifers: First Chances Fife, which goes into some of the poorest communities in Fife, including Cowdenbeath, Lochgelly and Levenmouth. The university also provides mentoring.

I notice the difference that all those initiatives have made. When I go round the streets of St Andrews now, the accents are different—it is not all just Americans and people from England or other parts of the world. There are Glaswegians and even Fifers in the university now. There has been tremendous progress.

Both those institutions have risen to the challenge that the Government set for them. To be fair to the Government, it set that challenge, and the universities have responded positively to it. That shows what can be done if we set quite tough targets. However, we have not met those targets, and we therefore need to look again at why the progress that has been made by those institutions has stalled.

There are two things that we should consider. The first is that, with regard to widening access through schools, we have to acknowledge that the attempt to close the poverty-related attainment gap has not worked. It has been an aim for 10 years and the gap is supposed to have closed by next year, but we are nowhere near that happening. There is some infinitesimal improvement in primary schools, but, in secondary schools, progress has pretty well flatlined. Therefore, the students who are going off to

universities are the ones who were already trying to access those courses.

Secondly, we take great pride in Scotland's college route being a unique route into higher education, with people doing their national certificates and their higher national certificates and then working up to degree level, and the articulation that creates a smooth pathway into universities. Although the percentages of people coming through that route have increased in recent years, the actual number has fallen, which is an indication of the fact that, as Miles Briggs said, colleges have shrunk. We do not have as many people going into colleges, so we do not have as many people accessing that unique route into higher education.

That brings me to my next point. I wish that the Government would be honest with us about why it has not made progress on the unique learner number. We should have an open debate about the challenges. We acknowledge that, sometimes, such things are hard to do, but the Government is not being honest about it, and we get the impression that it is not that interested in doing it. It should be honest: if it does not want to do it, it should tell us why it is not going to do it and say what it is going to do instead.

There are means to do what needs to be done. For years, we were trying to get the two-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds into the nursery sector, but the numbers were pathetic. The Government went to the Department for Work and Pensions to access particular records in order to make sure that those children got in, and progress was made. We have managed to get the numbers up; it is not by as much as I would like, but it can be done. Therefore, I do not quite know why the Government is holding back on the issue. If it is not a priority, it should just be honest and say so.

To be fair to the Government, progress has been made, but it has flatlined. We should therefore re-examine our priorities, because, ultimately, this issue is about getting those from disadvantaged backgrounds into the workplace. We know that economic inactivity levels in Scotland are shocking. Widening access to higher education is part of the solution. We need to ensure that everybody has the opportunity to get a good job. I hope that, in his summing-up speech, the minister will have something substantive to say about how we can deal with the challenges that we face, so that, at last, we can make some progress.

15:48

**Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP):** I am grateful for the chance to take part in today's debate. I am not a member of the

Education, Children and Young People Committee, but I am grateful to the committee for the work that it has undertaken in this area. It is an important area to look at and scrutinise.

The report is comprehensive. It is a good piece of work. Ensuring that we widen access to higher education is of the utmost importance. It speaks to creating a fairer society and ensuring that we have a more inclusive economy. Pam Duncan-Glancy used the word “potential” and, if we are to ensure that every person in our society has the opportunity to reach their full potential, ensuring that we have greater equity of access to higher education is an essential part of the equation.

I was able to experience and enjoy higher education when I was younger. I was not quite as adventurous as Miles Briggs, who grew up in Perthshire, if I remember correctly, and decided to make the journey up the road to Robert Gordon University. I grew up in Glasgow and went to the University of Glasgow, as many other members in this Parliament did. I had the time of my life there, and it laid a great foundation for the life that I have lived.

Ensuring that more people from a greater range of backgrounds are able to have that life-changing experience is important to me. Free education is not the only part of the equation, but it is part of it. By no stretch of the imagination could I say that I came from a deprived background, but, if tuition fees had been in place at the time that I was studying, it would at least have given me pause for thought as to whether it was a course that I wanted to take. From interacting with people in the area that I represent, I know that that would have the same effect on many young people now.

Having benefited from free education, I am proud, as a member of this Parliament, to have supported its reintroduction for Scottish higher education. Widening access is an important area of activity and it was important over a long period when I was the minister with responsibility for higher and further education, so I was pleased to see the progress that has been made.

I was involved in the appointment of John McKendrick as the commissioner for fair access. He took over from Peter Scott, who did a fantastic job in setting up and taking forward the widening access activity. I know that John McKendrick is continuing that activity, and I thank both of them for the work that they have done.

**Willie Rennie:** I can attest that John McKendrick is a good addition to the team.

Can Mr Hepburn tell us why he did not progress the unique learner number? What was his insight into the issue?

**Jamie Hepburn:** Beyond being able to stand up and say that I appointed John McKendrick as the commissioner for fair access, I think that I need to leave my deep and dark secrets in the ministerial office. I cannot say too much about it, but I know that the issue has been considered. There would, inevitably, be complexities in taking the policy forward. There is some merit in the case and in the argument. I understand the rationale for the unique learner number, and perhaps the minister will be able to say more about the Government’s current position.

We should reflect that there has been progress. Mr Rennie has talked about progress stalling but, if we look at the figure as it existed when we began this journey, we have made significant progress. Yes—there has been a bit of a bump from 2021-22, but the most recent figures show that we are moving in the right direction again.

**Stephen Kerr:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Jamie Hepburn:** Briefly.

**Stephen Kerr:** Briefly, Jamie Hepburn will remember that, when he was minister, he and I exchanged words in the committee about the paucity of data—for example, we could not tell how many had commenced a course versus how many had completed it. That is still the situation now, some years after Jamie Hepburn was the minister. As a former minister, what is his analysis now of why the information is so hard to collect?

**Jamie Hepburn:** With great respect, I think that the member is misremembering. When I was minister, I appeared before his committee on only one occasion. I was doing such a great job that he required me to turn up to his committee only once, and it was not to discuss that matter.

There are, inevitably, complexities in drawing down data, because it exists across a range of sources, and sometimes it is about trying to pull that together. I absolutely agree that we should be doing everything that we can about that, but there can be challenges.

I do not have much time left, but I commend the contribution of colleges, which are making a fantastic contribution to this endeavour. As the commissioner said to the committee, it is important that we do not view colleges just as a pipeline to universities, because they do important activity in their own right. However, they are an important pathway into higher education and the university sector.

I was very pleased to see the committee highlight an example in my constituency of the innovative partnership working between New College Lanarkshire and the University of the West of Scotland. It is important to reflect that, as

much as we have seen progress, we know that it is uneven and that some institutions need to go further than others. The University of the West of Scotland, in particular, must be commended for the activity that it has undertaken. A lot of the newer institutions are doing some of the heavier lifting in that regard, notwithstanding the fine work that is being done by the University of St Andrews, as Mr Rennie mentioned, although I was not entirely clear whether he was really welcoming Glaswegians into the town of St Andrews—we can discuss that later.

We know that there is more to be done and that the journey must be continued. I know that the Government is committed to that, and I look forward to hearing from the minister at the end of the debate about how we will hit that target come 2030.

15:55

**Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** I thank the Education, Children and Young People Committee for its comprehensive report on accessing further education and for the opportunity to highlight the importance of getting a great education and ensuring that it is accessible to all.

I listened to my colleague Jamie Hepburn—I am a product of the University of Glasgow, too. I have also been through college and through the Open University. Many people have tried to educate me, and yet I still stand here. *[Laughter.]*

We need a further education sector that offers equity of access for pupils with a passion and a drive to succeed in their chosen field of study. We need an education system that speaks to an economic need locally and more generally across Scotland and that matches that need with careers advice and a straightforward pathway into that career. What the Scottish Government has presided over is far removed from that ideal.

It seems to me that, if someone is academically minded and does well in an exam environment, there is a route through school and into university. The Scottish Government, as we have heard, is always keen to push for an increase in university attendance, especially in the lower SIMD areas. Of course, equity of access across all demographics is an extremely important goal that I am sure we all share, but surely it is not just about attending university but about getting an appropriate education that leads to a fulfilling and engaging career, especially by highlighting where local opportunities are available.

I read a recent report by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development entitled, “What is the scale and impact of graduate overqualification in Scotland?” It suggested that more than

“a third … of graduates feel overqualified for their jobs and are more likely to be underemployed, underpaid or working part-time, than graduates whose jobs match their qualifications.”

The CIPD recommends that we

“Provide better careers advice”—

as we have already heard from Miles Briggs—

“and guidance to help young people understand alternative vocational pathways.”

The CIPD also wants to

“Expand Scotland’s existing modern, foundation and graduate apprenticeships to encourage vocational pathways and work-based learning.”

Expanding access to higher education must start at primary and secondary school, with careers advice that speaks to and highlights opportunity. University is entirely the right place for some pupils, but in recent times, pushing young people down the university route seems to be the only measurement of success, to the detriment of our colleges. The Scottish Government has continued to erode the FE sector, with tens of thousands of places cut in recent years.

If we are discussing need, let us talk about healthcare. Only yesterday, in the social care debate, I highlighted that Ayrshire College had to turn away 71 applications for social care courses purely on funding grounds. That issue was echoed by colleagues across the chamber in relation to their areas. We all know how short of care workers the system is. It is described as a crisis, yet we are turning away people who would work in that sector. The Scottish Government is still sticking to its line that immigration is the only solution. That is lazy politics and an abdication of responsibility.

**Pam Duncan-Glancy:** I am enjoying the member’s contribution on the concerns around the number of people who are being turned away from colleges. Does he agree that it is also a tragedy that 1,200 students applied for places at Glasgow Kelvin College but there were only 300 places available to allocate?

**Brian Whittle:** I thank Pam Duncan-Glancy for her intervention; the same point was made in the chamber yesterday. I talked then about Ayrshire College, and colleagues from across the chamber described exactly the same problem in their regions—all those students who want to get into a college, who want to apply for a course and who want to get into careers for which we are crying out for workers, and yet they are being turned away.

Another example is that we are short of doctors, and yet applications from Scottish pupils are being turned away, even when the pupils have the qualifications to get on the course. That is because an artificial cap has been put in place by

the Scottish Government. There is an obvious solution—shift the cap. I do not understand why the Scottish Government will not instruct the obvious.

We are short of nurses and midwives, so let us make it easier for pupils to apply for those courses. For some potential nurses and midwives, an apprenticeship route would be more appropriate—especially for those who are looking to upskill from a healthcare environment. More than a third of trainee midwives are over the age of 30, which means that many of them will have to give up careers to train or that they already have children or mortgages and so on. Currently, in order to train they would have to leave work to go for a university place. Surely that barrier can be easily removed with an apprenticeship pathway.

**Ben Macpherson:** I agree with Brian Whittle's overall sentiment that we need to create greater parity of esteem and different pathways into professions and careers. Does he agree that the piece of primary legislation that is before Parliament is important in that regard, because it will bring together the funding for universities, colleges and apprenticeships, so that we can be creative and agile in the offer that we make to people and achieve greater efficiency and value for money for the taxpayer?

**Brian Whittle:** I appreciate the minister's intervention, but the committee could not even commit to that. I think that what the bill proposes is extraordinarily expensive. The only thing that matters is outcomes. In the case of the healthcare sector, I have described obvious steps that would widen access to education and deliver against a really urgent need.

While we are on the subject of apprenticeships, I want to once again raise the issue that we face in engineering and trades. In those fields there is a chronic lack of people, against the backdrop, in Ayrshire and across Scotland, of a demand for apprenticeships in engineering and trades, which would lead to very highly skilled and well-paid jobs. Ayrshire College turned away 400 applicants for engineering apprenticeships because of a lack of funding. It turned away 120 applicants for trades. Imagine if we were able to offer those young people the existing local opportunities that they strive for.

I am short of time, so I have to ask a question. Why is the Scottish Government resisting? It can create the skills environment that draws our pupils in. It can create an environment that encourages and enthuses our pupils and gives them hope and aspiration for what living and working in Scotland can be.

16:02

**George Adam (Paisley) (SNP):** For the second time this week, I follow my childhood sporting hero, Brian Whittle.

As always in these debates, I am going to be extremely positive, because that is my nature and I cannot be any other way. I do not see the dystopian picture of the Scottish higher education sector that some—although not all—of the Opposition members seem to be talking about.

I want to talk about the practical aspects of widening access and how it is working in the real world—the real lives that are being changed for the better and the access that might create a better future for them. There might be some talk of the great town of Paisley in my speech, but that part might have been nicked by Mr Rennie already. That just shows that I am seeing the positive message of Paisley all the time.

With regard to free tuition and the Scottish Government's commitment to it, I would like to start with the fundamentals. Since 2007, approximately 740,000 students have had free tuition on the higher education route. The SNP is resolute in its continued commitment to free education and free tuition, which ensures that higher education in Scotland is based on the ability to learn and not on the ability to pay. Because of free tuition, undergraduate students in Scotland do not accrue a potential additional-fee debt of around £28,000. In England, that comes to around £53,000-worth of debt. Scotland has the lowest average debt in the UK, and here there is also an impressive rise in widening access.

History has shown us that, whether in Scotland, England or Wales, Labour tends to put up tuition fees. The number of Scots from the most deprived areas who enter university has increased by 37 per cent since the Scottish Government established the commission on widening access—that is progress. I was quite impressed by John McKendrick, the commissioner for fair access, when he came to the committee, even though he is a former football referee—members will be aware that I have problems with football referees in general. However, I found him extremely impressive, given some of the work that he is doing, and very positive about how he will move that work forward.

I will talk about the UWS foundation academy in a bit more detail than Mr Rennie did, because the University of Western Scotland is leading the way in widening participation at university. It sits right at the centre of the universe in Paisley. Since launching in 2022, UWS's foundation academy initiative has already supported more than 2,300 students from 34 schools across 10 local authorities. This year, 29 pupils from Castlehead

high school and 17 from Gleniffer high school in Paisly are among the cohort. Those young people are gaining invaluable insights into fields such as forensic science, sports science, engineering and nursing—disciplines that are crucial to Scotland's future workforce. The programme is free for schools, ensuring that financial constraints are not a barrier. It provides a structured pathway into university for pupils in secondary 5 and 6, helping them to gain academic confidence and experience in university-level learning. Crucially, the pupils earn a level 7 credit that can be used as an alternative to a higher B grade when applying to UWS.

The UWS's unique approach arises from it being special not only in what it does but in its demography, because the students at UWS are predominantly female and nearly 70 per cent of the students are over the age of 21. That is not the traditional university model. It is a university that understands that education is a lifelong journey rather than just something for 18-year-olds. UWS is the largest provider of nurses and midwives in Scotland. It is also Scotland's largest articulation university, meaning that it takes more students from colleges who are educated up to higher national certificate and higher national diploma levels into degree level and beyond.

That is not the only good work that has been happening in Paisley on widening access. We also have the Open University in Scotland, which is Scotland's national widening access and lifelong learning university. Right now, there are more than 190 Open University students in Paisley. Here is what makes them remarkable: 74 per cent are in employment while they study, 52 per cent receive a part-time fee grant, and 21 per cent do not have a traditional university entrance qualification. They are people who might never have gone to university through the traditional route, who are balancing work, family and study, and who are proving that it is never too late to learn. The Open University works with three secondary schools in my constituency—Castlehead high school, Paisley grammar school and St Andrew's academy—through its young applicants and schools scheme, which provides a funded online bridging scheme for S6 pupils to help them gain university-level study skills in a range of subjects. That is making real differences in young people's lives.

UWS and Open University are not just investing in students in Paisley; they are transforming Paisley through what the students go on to do. UWS is taking that a step further in that it has developed some spin-out companies, including Novosound, which is now a multimillion-pound company that is developing cutting-edge ultrasound technologies—that is what happens when you widen access and give people an opportunity.

The Scottish Government under the SNP will always do its best with the powers that it has, but there is simply no substitute for independence. Scotland's future lies as an independent country, and Scotland will be best served by the full range of fiscal powers and choices that independence will bring.

Widening access is not just about statistics and targets—I think that I have proved that today—but about young people, such as those from Castlehead and Glennifer high schools, who are discovering that university is for them. It is about institutions, such as UWS, that are widening participation at their very core. It is about ensuring that a young person's potential—not their postcode—determines their future. I am proud of what we are achieving at the moment, of what we will achieve in the future, and of what UWS is achieving in Paisley. I am committed to continuing that work so that every young person in Scotland has the opportunity to fulfil their potential.

16:09

**Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** Like other members, I thank the Education, Children and Young People Committee, those who support it and those who contributed to this important report.

The SNP Government loves to talk about fairness and opportunity—we heard that again in this debate—but, when it comes to widening access to higher education, I am afraid that such rhetoric rings hollow. Its response to the Education, Children and Young People Committee's report on widening access shows that the Government is failing to deliver.

Let us discuss facts. I will pick a different period of time to show where we are today. The trajectory on access has flattened. The proportion of students from the 20 per cent most deprived areas who go to university sits at 16.3 per cent, down from 16.7 per cent in 2020-21. The interim target of 18 per cent by 2026 is now at serious risk of being missed. Ministers admit that, and I am grateful for that, but they offer little more than consultation and warm words. Where is the urgency? Where is the leadership?

Let us consider students. Getting them through the door is only part of the job; keeping them there is essential. They need to be supported to succeed. That is crucial. However, the retention rate for SIMD20 students has fallen to 83.1 per cent, which is the lowest figure since 2014-15. The trend is the same for care-experienced students. Access without success is failure. However, the Government's response is to engage with the Scottish Funding Council and to point to mental

health plans that have been in place for years while the retention rate has fallen.

Let us consider disabled students. They remain an afterthought. The committee rightly expressed deep disappointment that the recommendations from the previous review on disabled student support have been ignored. The Government's answer is another consultation—no timeline for action and no concrete improvement, just more delay.

The lived experience of our people backs up what I have set out. In relation to their school, one young person said to the committee:

"I felt that they were pushing me towards college, and were negative about my desire to go to university ... They didn't give me information about ... open days. I didn't get the support that I needed."

Another young person said that the system for disabled students was "exhausting" and "fragmented", with poor co-ordination between their school and colleges and universities. Those are real voices and they deserve real action, not another round of talking shops.

We have heard from members across the chamber that there are massive success stories out there in Scotland, principally driven by institutions, by schools engaging with those institutions and by schools and organisations that can think differently.

However, the financial barriers remain crippling. Students told us about the cost of housing, food and heating. One student told us in their evidence that

"university feels like a risk."

For care-experienced students, that risk is even greater. Students spoke of receiving inconsistent advice and the lack of a named point of contact. They need continuity of support, not a postcode lottery.

Colleges are the backbone of widening access. They provide the articulation routes that allow disadvantaged learners to successfully progress to university, but the Government has cut college funding in real terms by 20 per cent since 2021-22. Those are not my figures; they are Audit Scotland's figures. That represents not parity of esteem but neglect.

Practitioners have said that the cuts have led to a reduction in the number of widening access activities, especially in-person events. Those are vital for our rural students and for students who are concerned about what their next steps will be, so that they can sit down with someone who will talk about the experience that they will have and say, "Yes, it's a challenge, but it's fun." Jamie Hepburn said that university was the time of his life. People learn about that through face-to-face

discussions. When those activities are cut, people will say, "It's not for me." Another student said:

"Funding constraints have forced cuts to impactful programmes. This is undesirable and damaging."

Let us talk about the data quality that must underpin accountability. The committee supports the introduction of a unique learner number so that students' journeys can be tracked across schools, colleges and universities. Up until today, the Government's response on data and accountability has, I suggest, been incredibly weak. Today, the minister has undertaken to think afresh about the issue, and I genuinely welcome that. However, I am concerned about the fact that it has taken a new minister, at the end of a parliamentary session, to say that the Government will think again.

**Brian Whittle:** I thank Martin Whitfield for giving way in what I think is a very good speech. Does he agree that it would be a huge leap forward if we were able to link the data from education, health and welfare?

**Martin Whitfield:** I am going to steal Mr Whittle's suggestion. Goodness me—what a good idea.

**Ben Macpherson:** Yesterday, the committee agreed to an amendment at stage 2 of the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill that will enable exactly what Mr Whitfield and Mr Whittle have just called for, so I look forward to the Labour Party and the Conservative Party voting for the bill at stage 3.

**Martin Whitfield:** If provisions to introduce a unique learner number are added to the bill, I can categorically confirm my support for it.

I am conscious of time. Data is incredibly important. Our students have exam numbers, medical numbers and national insurance numbers. We number at the drop of a hat, so it is unforgivable that we do not have a unique learner number that would allow us to track the progress of our young people.

**Miles Briggs:** I come back to Willie Rennie's point, on which I hope we will hear from the minister later. I do not think that the Government has built IT systems that are capable of putting in place a unique learner number. The lack of investment in IT in our schools is at the heart of the issue.

**Martin Whitfield:** It is certainly true that there is not enough investment, but we have the SEEMiS information system, which is mineable, in all our high schools. It is not the most robust system, and changes need to be made to it, but if we do not address the issue now, we will never solve any of these problems.

The Government is not delivering fairness. It is hiding behind consultations while students from deprived backgrounds, disabled learners and care leavers continue to face barriers. The committee's report must be a wake-up call. The Government cannot consult its way to fairness. Students need action, not another talking shop. The question is whether the Government will act or whether it will keep making promises that it cannot—or chooses not—to keep.

16:17

**Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** I am grateful for the opportunity to follow Martin Whitfield, who gave an excellent speech. In fact, there have been quite a few really good speeches in the debate. As is the norm on a Thursday afternoon, there has been a lot of common ground among members of different parties—if only that would serve as the bedrock for action, as Martin Whitfield said. He was right to focus on the need for a unique learner number.

The report that we are debating is an excellent cross-party report by an award-winning committee with an award-winning convener, and it is right that we are spending time considering it.

I was disappointed that George Adam described the alternative views and the critique that some members were offering as “dystopian”. That is a very strong word, and it is wholly inappropriate. Frankly, we should look at what the real world looks like, rather than looking at it through the starry eyes that George Adam chose to look at it through. We must look at the reality of what the Government's own statistics say about the nature of what is happening, particularly among the SIMD20 cohort.

**Ben Macpherson:** In a very challenging fiscal context, which is a result of many matters that are outwith the Scottish Government's control, significant progress has been made—I mentioned the 37 per cent increase in the number of Scots from deprived areas taking degrees—since the Government took power. Mr Kerr said that we should not look at the situation through starry eyes, but does he agree that we should not look at it through overly gloomy eyes?

**Stephen Kerr:** I do not think that I am being overly gloomy by referring to the Government's own statistics on what is happening in quintile 1. We have learned that 16.8 per cent of 16 to 24-year-olds across Scotland are not in employment, education or training. We can congratulate ourselves on minuscule levels of improvement or we can look at the hard facts, which should be uncomfortable for us all. By the way, in Glasgow, that figure is 20 per cent, and in Inverclyde—the member for Inverclyde is in the chamber—it is 17

per cent. We should be filled with an inspirational form of dissatisfaction and be saying that that is not good enough for Scotland in the 21st century.

**Brian Whittle:** Does Stephen Kerr agree that there is a correlation between the size of the welfare budget and the size of the education budget and that, if we got education right, we would be able to reduce the welfare budget?

**Stephen Kerr:** Reducing the welfare budget is a noble objective of any Government that is worth its salt, because that means that we will beat the problem that we all want to beat, which is ingrained intergenerational poverty. If we are serious about doing that, we will see not burgeoning, climbing or exponentially increasing welfare budgets but resources being switched to solving the root causes of the problems, rather than just dealing with symptoms.

The Government's short-termism is one of the most shocking aspects of its performance. Child poverty cannot be dealt with simply by increasing welfare payments. It is tackled by enabling people to live the life of dignity that they want for themselves—the famous hand up, not handout. That is the direction of travel that we should be taking, and Brian Whittle is right to point that out.

The fundamental problem across all the different aspects of public policy in Scotland is the lack of data. It astonishes me that, time after time, I come to the chamber to listen to ministers telling us that they do not really know the nature of the problem because they do not have the data, and that is absolutely true in this area.

I am absolutely clear that my whole reason for wanting to be in politics is rooted in a belief in fairness and the principle of equality of opportunity. That is what defines my conservatism. People can make of their lives what they like, and I do not buy into the idea that the end product—the outcome—needs to be based on equality, because that does not represent a free society. However, I absolutely believe that we should promote the idea of equality of opportunity at every turn of the wheel. I am a product of parents who believed in hard work, taking opportunities and making the most of them. I do not know whether I pleased or disappointed my parents—I am sure that I will find out one day when I meet them again.

The point is that we live in a country where that fairness and equality of opportunity is not what it should be. I grew up on a council estate. My dad was a butcher who worked for the Co-op, and my mum worked in a paper shop and wrote the papers in the morning for the paper boys. My mum and dad expected things of my sister and me, and we were the first members of my dad's family to go to university. I bet that many other members

can tell a similar story. That was about opportunity, and my politics and the politics of those of us on this side of the chamber are about maximising and widening access to those opportunities.

When I look at the Government's record, I think that it provides the very opposite of fairness. The Government often hides behind phoney statistics, and one of the most phoney statistics of them all relates to the concept of the so-called positive destination. It is totally bogus to trade in that statistic. It does not mean anything. It tracks people three months after they leave school, and it covers casual work as well as education, training and employment. For heaven's sake, it also covers zero-hours contracts, which must be anathema to members on the Government side of the chamber. A positive destination includes an occasional hour or two of work in a charity shop. That is not what we want for Scotland's young people. Those are not fully explored positive destination.

That brings me back to the unique learner number. We do not know what we do not know. If we are to be able to craft public policy that responds to the situations that we are dealing with in Scotland, we need to have that data.

I see that my time is up. I hope that we can come together on these issues at least. I think that the minister is sincere, but does he really believe that the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill is the answer to any of this? It is not, and no number of amendments will make the bill useful—I am sorry, but it is not possible.

I say to Ben Macpherson that we judge the SNP by Nicola Sturgeon's famous declaration to judge her on education. We judge the SNP on education. The SNP has failed Scotland.

16:24

**Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP):** I, too, thank all those who contributed to the Education, Children and Young People Committee's report on widening access to higher education. The support from the clerks has been invaluable, as have the evidence and lived experience of the witnesses and the Government's co-operation, in considering where we are going and how we are going to get there.

I should not forget to mention, too, the dedication and tenacity of my fellow committee members. I believe that, together, we have ensured that this report is both comprehensive and constructive.

The subject of widening access is, of course, hugely important. Higher education should be a

gateway to opportunity, not a barrier. It is about fairness, social mobility and unlocking potential regardless of background, disability, ethnicity or care experience. Today, we have heard many voices with—shall I say?—sometimes differing views, but all with the same vision of fair access and equality for all.

The committee set clear aims for the inquiry, following on from the recommendations in the report of the commission on widening access, which was chaired by Dame Ruth Silver. The inquiry examined how to meet the 2026 interim target of 18 per cent of full-time first-degree entrants coming from the 20 per cent most deprived backgrounds, as well as considering which access initiatives are proving to be successful, the impact of widening access on other SIMD groups and, critically, the challenges faced by disabled students, BME students and care-experienced students and what can be done to address those barriers. Those aims reflected our shared ambition that, by 2030, 20 per cent of full-time first-degree entrants to higher education will come from the most deprived backgrounds.

I want to focus on two specific areas that are highlighted in the report—disabled students and care-experienced students. On disabled students, the evidence was stark. In Lead Scotland's survey, 16 out of 20 respondents said that disability made it harder to go to university, and 15 felt that universities did not welcome disabled applicants. Respondents called for better information, flexibility in course delivery, and staff training to ensure inclusivity. We also heard troubling accounts of low aspirations and young people being discouraged from pursuing university, because adults in their families deemed it an unrealistic aim. That is unacceptable.

The committee was disappointed that recommendations of the 2023 review of disabled student support had not been fully implemented. We welcome the Government's commitment to consult on support for disabled students and part-time learners, but we need clarity on timescales and outcomes.

The report includes several recommendations, and I welcome the Government's constructive response to them. I particularly welcome the publication in June of Scotland's first national transitions to adulthood strategy for young disabled people, which aims to ensure that we have a joined-up approach so that all young disabled people experience a supported and positive transition to adult life. That is a significant milestone, but implementation is the key. I therefore urge the minister to update Parliament on progress on delivering the strategy and how its impact will be measured.

In reply to the committee, the minister stated that, following careful consideration, the Government had decided not to reconvene at this time the group that was looking at support for disabled students, which was established in response to the 2023 review. Given the minister's statement that the group will not be reconvened at this time, I would welcome his views on whether that decision will be periodically reviewed and what alternative mechanisms will ensure that lived experience continues to inform policy.

Turning to care-experienced students, I note that the report acknowledges progress in that respect, with record numbers entering higher education. The publication of the national ambition for care-experienced students is a positive step—it focuses on intake, retention and successful completions—yet challenges remain. Students told us of inconsistent careers advice, gaps in support and housing barriers, and Universities Scotland highlighted that, although many institutions offer year-round accommodation, shortages persist, particularly in rural areas. Those issues affect retention and success, not just access.

In response, the committee has recommended that the Government provide regular updates on steps to address housing barriers and improve consistency of support. Although the Government's response in that respect is encouraging, I urge the minister to consider what more can be done to improve retention and housing support and how will we ensure that every care-experienced learner has the same opportunities as their peers.

Widening access is not just about meeting targets—it is about transforming lives. It is about ensuring that talent and ambition are not stifled by circumstance. The committee's report reminds us that progress has been made, but challenges remain. Financial barriers, mental health support, and systemic inequalities must be addressed if we are to achieve our 2030 goal.

I look forward to continuing this vital work with colleagues across the chamber, the Scottish Government and our education sector partners. Together, we can ensure that higher education in Scotland is truly accessible to all—that it is fair, inclusive and a foundation for opportunity.

**The Presiding Officer:** We now move to winding-up speeches.

16:30

**Pam Duncan-Glancy:** It is a pleasure to wind up for Scottish Labour. I thank Professor John McKendrick for the work that he has done on widening access to date and for allowing the committee access to his expertise in it.

I have enjoyed hearing members talk about the brilliant educational institutions that we have in Scotland and their experiences in accessing them. I look back with fondness on my time at Telford College, and studying in the evenings for a level 1 counselling course. I have fond memories of doing that part time and with colleagues from the workplace. I also look back on studying for my honours and masters degrees at the University of Stirling as one of the most formative experiences of my life, including when I first dipped my toe into politics—others can determine how successful that was—and to my time studying a postgraduate diploma at Glasgow Caledonian University as the first student on the university's human rights course to combine work and study.

I use those examples to show the rich tapestry of options that are delivered in Scotland, options that provide unimaginable opportunities for people such as me. My family—like Stephen Kerr's, it sounds like—pushed me to reach for those opportunities in the interest of fulfilling potential. It is clear from the strength of feeling across the chamber that that experience is shared. So, too, is the ambition to widen access to it.

I particularly welcome the recognition of the doors that access to education can open to enable everyone in Scotland to live up to their potential. Many members from all parties have recognised that, including Jamie Hepburn, Brian Whittle, Bill Kidd and George Adam. That is why this inquiry has been so important.

However, as members and the committee have set out, progress has been far too slow. I say gently to George Adam that that is the reality. The incredible work that many people do is not diminished, just because we recognise challenges. We are not being overly gloomy—it is just a reality check. We know that challenges can be overcome only if we accept the reality in the first place, but I am not sure that the Government has always got that fact.

As Douglas Ross reminded us, the committee considered the issue nearly 10 years on from the commissioner's first report, but much is still outstanding. The unique learner number is just one example of an issue on which the Government has failed to act. It has had 10 years and multiple opportunities to introduce the measure, including in the Education (Scotland) Bill earlier this year, but it rejected amendments from Scottish Labour and others to do so. I encourage the Government to move on it quickly; if it does not, another Government should.

I am afraid that the Government's inaction goes beyond that key factor, which could improve widening access, as Martin Whitfield and others have set out. The minister has set out that it is a Government priority to widen access and deliver

parity of esteem; however, that is hard to square with the extent of the failure to recognise the system's shortcomings, including those relating to the importance of the sector being match fit and the role of support for students in widening access, about which we have heard precious little from the Government.

The minister spoke of successes, and there have been some, thanks to the sector moving mountains. Just for comparison, though, the proportion of applicants from the most deprived quintile accepted into Scottish universities in 2023 was 72 per cent compared to 78 per cent in other parts of the UK. We have challenges, and there are others from whom we can learn.

**Stephen Kerr:** From one graduate of the University of Stirling to another, I ask Pam Duncan-Glancy whether she agrees that equality of opportunity will be elusive in our country for as long as there are caps on the number of young people who can go to university or college. Does she also agree that the way to create a more qualitative equality of opportunity would be to have no caps at all?

**Pam Duncan-Glancy:** Capping potential is something that any member in this chamber must seek to remove. It is important that people can get to university through potential and drive alone. That can be achieved only if universities and colleges across the sector have the support of their Government and others to make it happen.

In that respect, we have a long way to go. There are 1,200 fewer places available in further and higher education institutions as a result of the Government taking them away after Covid, and that will have an impact on students from the poorest backgrounds. That is exactly the point that I think Stephen Kerr has highlighted, and it can have serious impact on educational and equal opportunities.

The minister spoke of success and, as I have said, there has been some. However, although universities and colleges are working their socks off to support all who have the grades to enter them, they are doing so against the tide of cuts and a lack of priority. We have heard nothing about that from the minister. The minister also failed to mention that, according to the data, fewer people from disadvantaged backgrounds had applications accepted in 2023 than in 2022, and retention rates have been beginning to fall since 2021. The effect of that is more pronounced for students from the most deprived backgrounds than for those from the least deprived quintile. Again, we heard little about that.

On the unique learning number, the minister's response that it is complicated is not good enough. This Government has had 10 years since

the recommendation was made, and it is still saying that it is complicated. I agree with Willie Rennie that the Government should either get on with it, or say that it does not want to do it or does not agree with it, so that others can come forward with other suggestions or ways of making it happen.

We have heard nothing from the Government, either, on support for students. I got to university only because of the support of the disabled students allowance and an army of brilliant advisers. That system has broken down, and advisers are struggling against cuts. As Maggie Chapman set out, students face significant barriers and action on dealing with them is long overdue.

In the past hour, I have been reflecting on the minister's response to that—and I have to say that I do not think that it is good enough to come to the chamber to talk about widening access and provide no update on a review that came about only after it was pointed out that the last review had resulted in years of inertia. I hope that the minister will give an update on it sooner rather than later.

It is also not enough simply to say what should happen or that widening access matters and that the recommendations are helpful. People need to see policy decisions and actions that support our ambitions and meet the targets, and we expected to hear a bit more from the Government today about how that will happen and what that action would look like.

The committee's report was firm; it was stark; and it oozed with the frustration that we had heard from witnesses. However, that frustration will not have been assuaged today. We have heard nothing from the Government about the school-college partnerships, learner numbers, the review on student support or addressing the crisis in colleges.

I said in my opening speech that, without action, rhetoric on widening access will ring hollow. It might well ring hollow without a response from the Government that meets the challenge raised in the committee's report.

16:37

**Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** It gives me pleasure to wind up on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives. I am grateful for the contributions that have been made from across the chamber. As others have done, I thank the committee, the clerks, the staff and all the contributors for their hard work in producing the report.

At the heart of the debate is a simple truth: widening access to higher education must be about real opportunity—not headlines or political self-congratulation but real opportunity for the young people in our communities who dare to dream bigger than the circumstances that they were born into. Too many talented young people in Scotland are still being held back by their background, postcode or personal circumstances and, every time that happens, Scotland loses out not just socially but economically, culturally and morally.

The committee heard, and we have heard again today, that the current system is not delivering on its promises. As Willie Rennie and others mentioned, progress for students from the most deprived communities has stalled. For two years, the proportion of SIMD 20 school leavers entering higher education has been stuck at 26.8 per cent and the interim target for 2026 is slipping out of reach. Those are not just numbers; they are young people who deserve better.

Universities Scotland told the committee that public investment in each Scottish student has fallen by £3,000 in real terms since 2014-15. Colleges Scotland warned that colleges simply do not have the resources to provide students, especially those with additional support needs, with the experience and support that they require. Professor John McKendrick, our commissioner for fair access, reminded us that, even in a free education system, students must be able to live, travel and support themselves. Those are costs that bursaries do not cover.

Those are not the voices of political opponents; they are the voices of experts, practitioners and advocates. They are the people who work directly with our young people every day, and they are all saying the same thing: the system is not working as it should. Widening access should not be about getting students through the door; rather, it must be about ensuring that they thrive once they are there. It means proper funding for colleges, universities and the support services that students rely on. It means addressing the rising deficits across the sector, where, without the surpluses of two large universities, the rest of Scotland's institutions would be collectively in the red. It means listening to organisations that have told us clearly that very few of the previous recommendations on disabled students have been implemented.

Young people with disabilities are being let down, and so are care-experienced students, who face inconsistencies across institutions at the very moment when stability is the most important thing to them. Those are young people for whom widening access is supposed to matter most. I have spoken many times about the issues that

surround the care-experienced community. It is well documented that change for that community is met with fear and anxiety. That is simply not good enough. As Miles Briggs mentioned, we do not have the data on how many follow through to the degree instead of just entering further education, which is why we must do more.

Widening access is also about wellbeing. When a young person spends every day worrying about money, housing, caring responsibilities or travel costs, how can we possibly expect them to focus on their studies? How can we ask them to achieve their potential while ignoring the reality of their daily lives? It is those human elements that matter, because behind every statistic is a young person who just wants a fair chance: the student who might be the first in their family to consider university; the college learner hoping to articulate into year 2 but finding fewer and fewer pathways available; the care-experienced young person determined to break cycles but still not getting consistent guidance; or the student from a rural or island community who feels forgotten because SIMD alone does not reflect their reality. If widening access is to mean anything, it must mean fairness for all of them.

I will not rehearse every recommendation in the committee's report, but I will say clearly that the Scottish Government should heed those recommendations. They reflect intensive evidence, the sector's concerns and what students themselves are telling us.

I want to highlight a couple of points from members' contributions. The unique learning number has been mentioned by Douglas Ross, Willie Rennie, Brian Whittle, Martin Whitfield and Stephen Kerr. For me, it is the data retention from that number that is important. How on earth will we know whether the approach is working if we do not have the data? The people who are being let down are the children who need it the most.

Ben Macpherson and Jamie Hepburn, and George Adam, in a very positive speech, highlighted what progress has been made. We on these benches have spoken strongly about what more needs to be done. I am willing to accept that there has been progress but, as Willie Rennie and Stephen Kerr mentioned, that progress has stalled. If we do not recognise that it has stalled, we cannot fix it.

Stephen Kerr and Brian Whittle highlighted the fact that careers advice in our schools is not doing the job that it needs to do. Careers advice is the gateway to firing the imagination of our young people to be anything that they want to be. I am sure that my nephew will be thrilled when I tell people that, when he was five, he wanted to be a giraffe, but that is what we are talking about—the

imagination that can fire from young people. We should be doing more on that.

Miles Briggs and Willie Rennie mentioned work-based learning. I attended Glasgow's Central College of Commerce on day release, because I went through a management training scheme at House of Fraser stores. We must do more to encourage work-based placement.

Widening access is not a trophy to polish; it is a responsibility to Scotland's young people, our institutions and our future. The Scottish Government must stop congratulating itself—we have had that in speeches today—and start delivering a credible funded plan that gives every young person a fair chance to get in, stay in and succeed. Our young people deserve nothing less.

16:45

**Ben Macpherson:** This has been a good debate on our shared collective responsibility for widening access and building on the significant progress that has been made to date. Several excellent speeches have been made, and there has been constructive engagement.

First, I want to highlight the contribution of George Adam, who, while being fairly critical and asking for more progress to be made, rightly reminded us that we need to consider the progress that has been made.

I must say that some of the stats put forward by Opposition members, particularly by the Labour Party, do not necessarily correspond with the situation as I see it or with the stats that the Government holds. As I have emphasised, in 2023-24, the number of Scots from deprived areas entering university on full-time first degree courses was up by 37 per cent in comparison with the number when the Government established the commission on widening access. We should all welcome that significant progress. That is exemplified by George Adam's comments regarding the University of the West of Scotland and the Open University. That also signifies that we cannot deliver alone as a Government—we need to work with partners. We are setting clear expectations on the sector and are confident that we will meet the 2030 target.

The latest figures for 2023-24 show that 16.7 per cent of full-time first degree entrants to Scottish universities came from our nation's 20 per cent most deprived areas. That marks an increase from 16.3 per cent in the previous year. The figures also show an increase in the number of Scotland-domiciled students at Scottish universities to slightly under 174,000, as well as a rise in full-time Scottish first-degree entrants. I put those figures on the record, along with the fact that the proportion of care-experienced students at

universities has increased every year since 2016-17, to counter Opposition members' comments that suggest otherwise.

Retention rates are also in a more positive place than has been stated. Retention rates for full-time first-degree students returning for a second year in 2023-24 increased among Scotland-domiciled students at Scottish universities, reaching 89.5 per cent. Rates also rose for students from deprived areas, to 86.1 per cent, and for care-experienced students, to 84.9 per cent.

**Douglas Ross:** In his intervention on the minister's opening speech, Willie Rennie suggested that the minister had taken four minutes of an eight-minute speech to tell us things that were not necessarily the focus of the debate. The minister has taken three minutes of a six-minute closing speech to tell us figures that we know—they are available publicly. What we do not know is what his Government will do to continue that progress, if he believes that there has been progress, or to improve progress, because others have said that it has stalled. What is the Government going to do to address the concerns and the recommendations in our report? That is what we need to hear from the Government.

**Ben Macpherson:** I appreciate that fair challenge from the convener and from other members. I was getting on to that, and I will try to address some of it now, although I did address some matters in my opening remarks. It is unfair to say that I did not address anything—of course I did.

I will turn to other points that were raised. Maggie Chapman rightly emphasised that SIMD is not a sufficient data pool for achieving the impact that we need to and want to. She emphasised the challenges in her North East Scotland region. That is a good example of why the amendment at stage 2 of the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill that we discussed yesterday is so important. We have a good opportunity in that primary legislation to make a change that will allow us to share data better in order to provide more opportunities for widening access. That will make a difference for individuals and for our country in relation to what Willie Rennie rightly emphasised about boosting economic activity. That data sharing will be important.

What members have emphasised on college funding is also important. We recognise the situation with our colleges and their huge contribution to providing opportunities for individuals to move on to universities, if that is what they wish to do. However, it is also important to consider colleges as a destination in their own right. If we want to achieve parity of esteem, we must respect colleges and appreciate their role.

Almost one third—32.5 per cent—of new entrants to university in 2023-24 progressed from higher education courses at colleges, which emphasises the importance of our college sector.

The UK Government's budget was not generous; indeed, it was extremely disappointing in many ways. However, although the financial circumstances are still very tight, now that the Scottish Government knows what resources it has been allocated by the UK Government, we are in a position to consider the situation that is facing our colleges. Ministers will consider the asks that have been made, recognising the important contribution that colleges make and their collective determination to continue adapting to meet the modern needs of our communities and economy.

Bill Kidd made some specific requests that I do not have time to go through. I give him the assurance that I will write to him on the points that he raised, and I will share that information with the committee.

In conclusion, I emphasise the importance of the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill. Members are being unfairly and unhelpfully dismissive of the impact that the legislation can make in the medium to longer term. It will also enable Skills Development Scotland to fully emphasise careers advice and to bring together funding for apprenticeships and for higher and further education in order to create greater agility and efficiency, making us more responsive to the needs of the 21st century.

I will meet the commissioner for fair access in the days ahead. I look forward to hearing more from him and the committee about the important issues that have been raised, so that we can continue to work together towards meeting the 2030 target to create greater access to higher education for those for whom it is the right opportunity. If we achieve the 2030 target, create those opportunities and allow people to succeed in the way that is best for them, that will benefit us all in terms of fairness and economic activity.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I confirm to members that we have exhausted all the time that we had in hand. I call Jackie Dunbar to wind up the debate on behalf of the Education, Children and Young People Committee.

16:52

**Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP):** I am proud to close the debate on behalf of the committee. Like the convener, I pay tribute to the work of my colleagues and to all those who gave evidence to the committee during our inquiry.

As we have heard, in 2016, the commission on widening access recommended that 20 per cent of

full-time first-degree university entrants should come from the 20 per cent most deprived backgrounds by 2030, with interim targets of 16 per cent by 2021 and 18 per cent by 2026. In 2016-17, 13.8 per cent of full-time first-degree university entrants came from the 20 per cent most deprived backgrounds. Since 2019-20, that figure has been above 16 per cent. Much progress has been made, and that should be warmly welcomed.

However, there is more to do. As the committee set out in its report, students from different backgrounds face financial barriers in accessing higher education, particularly in relation to the ongoing costs that are associated with studying, such as housing, food, heating and travel costs. The committee also heard about the barriers that are experienced by students who are disabled, from black and minority ethnic groups, or care experienced. The committee received evidence from disabled students, the majority of them stating that they had received lower grades than they expected for a reason that was related to being disabled. They also found it harder to go to university because of something that was related to their being disabled, and they did not feel that Scottish universities welcomed or encouraged disabled applicants.

From black and minority ethnic students, the committee heard that it would be helpful if there were greater awareness of the widening access programmes that are available across Scotland for pupils, teachers, parents and carers of pupils who aspire to go to university; if there were continuous professional development for staff who offer information, advice and guidance, including school careers advisers; and if there were greater financial support for students, including help and advice in relation to student accommodation, affordability and availability. The students indicated that it would also be helpful if there were an end to the myth that university is only for the select few and if there were support programmes that encouraged pupils to be their best selves and that promoted positive actions and destinations.

Barriers that were highlighted by care-experienced students included the fact that information on transitions to university is variable and dependent on the individual's support networks, as well as the inconsistency of the support that is available. There were also concerns about the retention of care-experienced students. They said that there is a need for consistent careers advice at school, with bespoke advice and information about their support entitlements.

That is why we said that, although the widening access targets relate to students from deprived areas, it is important to consider young people

from other backgrounds, including disabled students and black and minority ethnic students, as part of the widening access agenda.

Other members have reflected on those issues today, as well as on measures that are used to identify those who are eligible for widening access programmes and the possibilities that are offered by free school meals data and a unique learner number.

As is normal practice, I will discuss members' contributions. Miles Briggs gave practical examples of positive destinations and the positive journeys to get to them. It was great to hear about the positive work that is being done jointly by workplaces, universities and colleges. He also spoke about the good work at RGU, and I, too, thank RGU for its briefing. Of course, the north-east also has another fantastic example of joint working: the girls in energy initiative, which is run by North East Scotland College and Shell.

Pam Duncan-Glancy spoke about the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill, which has just finished its stage 2. I look forward to seeing what stage 3 will bring and whether we can work together on any amendments.

Pam Duncan-Glancy also spoke about the difficulties that part-time students face. I agree that more needs to be done in that regard, and I look forward to working with her to find a solution.

**Pam Duncan-Glancy:** Will the member take an intervention on that point?

**Jackie Dunbar:** I really do not have time—sorry.

Maggie Chapman said that education is the cornerstone of our society, and she gave a valuable insight into what the north-east has to offer. Aberdeen is the next net zero capital of the world, but it is also the city that, at one time, had more universities than the whole of England put together. Aberdeen is, once again, punching above its weight.

Willie Rennie spoke about the fantastic work that is happening in his constituency, including what the University of St Andrews is doing to break down the barriers that I spoke about earlier, which I hope will lead to its no longer being seen as an elitist establishment. That shows that nothing is impossible if we put our minds to it.

Jamie Hepburn spoke about creating a fairer society and growing our economy. He also spoke about tuition fees and wondered whether he would have been able to go into higher education if it had not been free. Those fees are a barrier to the very people the committee wanted to hear from, and it was good to hear from him.

Brian Whittle spoke about students' passion for learning and how we need education that is appropriate to our economic needs. I totally agree with him on that point. That is why apprenticeships are important. It is important that people are able to access education and grow their skills, whether they do so in schools, colleges, universities or businesses. One size does not always fit all, which is why widening access is so important.

It wouldnae have been a George Adam speech without a mention of Paisley—there is no Punch without Judy. Although he claimed that Willie Rennie stole half of his speech, he still managed to give us more information on the positive destinations of our young people and their potential.

I will be honest: it was disappointing to hear the negativity from Martin Whitfield, given that this report had full committee support. We absolutely recognise that there is still work to be done. There is always work to be done, but things are progressing.

I cannot comment on Stephen Kerr's contribution, as I genuinely did not hear him speak to the report that the committee worked hard on. It was a committee report, not an SNP one.

Bill Kidd got back to the actual report, and I thank him for his measured approach.

I am running out of time, so I will crack on. It is important to recognise the work that is being done to support students from deprived areas in higher education, as well as students from other backgrounds, including those who are disabled, BME and care experienced. We should also recognise the successes that there have been, such as the increase in the number and proportion of students from the 20 per cent most deprived backgrounds, the number of care-experienced students being at a record level and, through articulation, the number of care-experienced students being above the level of those in the general population.

However, we can always do better, and further measures are needed to improve access for all those groups. I therefore welcome what has been said in that regard today. We should be proud of what has been achieved so far and be ready to push on to greater success.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** That concludes the debate on the Education, Children and Young People Committee's report on widening access to higher education.

## Decision Time

17:00

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** There is only one question to be put as a result of today's business. The question is, that motion S6M-19984, in the name of Douglas Ross, on behalf of the Education, Children and Young People Committee, on widening access to higher education, be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament notes the findings and recommendations in the Education, Children and Young People Committee's 5th Report, 2025 (Session 6), *Widening access to higher education inquiry* (SP Paper 782).

## Point of Order

17:01

**Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP):** On a point of order, Deputy Presiding Officer. Earlier today, First Minister's question time included an exchange between Anas Sarwar and the First Minister in which the First Minister referenced comments made by Mr Sarwar about the number of people using private healthcare in Scotland. The First Minister said that he believed that Anas Sarwar had previously claimed that one in six of the population were using private healthcare, describing that as "a ludicrously nonsensical figure". However, when I checked the record of what Anas Sarwar said on 26 June, I found that, in fact, he claimed that "almost one in three" Scots were using private healthcare—which is an even more ludicrously nonsensical suggestion, given the reality that the figure is closer to one in 25.

Can the Deputy Presiding Officer advise whether the First Minister should correct the record, given the importance of accuracy and the fact that Mr Sarwar's claim was even more ridiculous than was previously suggested?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** Mr Brown, as you will be aware, the contents of members' contributions are not a matter for the chair.

*Meeting closed at 17:02.*



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