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Tuesday 9 December 2025

CONTENTS

	Col.
TIME FOR REFLECTION	1
BUSINESS MOTION	3
<i>Motion moved—[Graeme Dey]—and agreed to.</i>	
TOPICAL QUESTION TIME	4
National Health Service Boards (Winter Pressures)	4
Salmon Farming (Mortality Figures)	8
EDUCATION STATISTICS	13
<i>Statement—[Jenny Gilruth].</i>	
URGENT QUESTION	26
Employment Tribunal Decision (Sandie Peggie v NHS Fife)	26
FERGUSON MARINE (PORT GLASGOW) HOLDINGS LIMITED	32
<i>Motion moved—[Richard Leonard].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Daniel Johnson].</i>	
Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab)	32
Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)	35
The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes)	38
Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con)	41
Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)	43
Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)	45
Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con)	46
Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)	48
Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab)	50
Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con)	52
Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP)	53
Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)	55
Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con)	57
Kate Forbes	59
Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD)	62
VETERANS AND ARMED FORCES COMMUNITY	67
<i>Motion moved—[Graeme Dey].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Edward Mountain].</i>	
The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey)	67
Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con)	70
Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab)	72
Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD)	74
Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)	76
Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con)	78
Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)	79
Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab)	81
Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con)	82
Graeme Dey	84
TERMINALLY ILL ADULTS (END OF LIFE) BILL	88
<i>Motion moved—[Neil Gray].</i>	
The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray)	88
Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP)	90
Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab)	91
Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)	92
Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD)	93
Neil Gray	93
PARLIAMENTARY BUREAU MOTION	94
<i>Motion moved—[Graeme Dey].</i>	
POINT OF ORDER	95

MOTION WITHOUT NOTICE	97
<i>Motion moved—[Graeme Dey].</i>	
DECISION TIME	98
E-BIKES AND E-SCOOTERS (ANTISOCIAL USE)	106
<i>Motion debated—[Sue Webber].</i>	
Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con)	106
Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)	109
Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con).....	111
Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab)	113
Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con).....	114
Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)	116
Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con)	117
Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab).....	119
Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con)	121
The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown).....	123

Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 9 December 2025

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection, and our time for reflection leader today is Tim Maguire, humanist.

Tim Maguire (Humanist): Presiding Officer, members of the Scottish Parliament, thank you so much for inviting me to address you today.

I invite you to cast your minds back to one of Scotland's darkest and most unsettling novels, "The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner". It was published in 1824 and it was written by a man who was baptised in Ettrick on this very day in 1770—James Hogg—but it speaks to us still.

The novel tells the story of a young man who believes that his salvation is guaranteed; that whatever he does—however cruel, however violent—he is safe in the eyes of God. With that belief, he falls into arrogance, into cruelty, into despair and, ultimately, into ruin. The moral is clear. When people believe themselves to be beyond question, beyond scrutiny and beyond doubt, disaster follows.

This is not a story only of religion; this is a story of politics, a story of power and a story of the human heart, for when certainty hardens into pride, and when conviction turns to fanaticism, the result is always the same: division, intolerance and, sometimes, tragedy.

This Parliament was not founded on such pride. Devolution was not given to Scotland so that its leaders might rule as if they were without fault. It was given so that you, the people's representatives, might answer daily to those who sent you here.

Hogg's tale warns us of what happens when humility is lost. When one voice insists that it cannot be wrong. When dialogue is silenced. When doubt is treated as weakness.

However, there is also compassion in Hogg's story. The "justified sinner" is not born a monster. He is misled, he is persuaded and he is drawn step by step into darkness. Is that not a lesson for us, too? For in our own time, when neighbours are consumed by extremism, or seduced by conspiracy, our duty is not only to condemn; our

duty is to understand, to educate and to bring back into community those who might otherwise be lost.

Let us hear Hogg's voice today not as an echo from the past but as a warning for the present. He reminds us that democracy, like faith, requires humility. It requires us to admit mistakes; to question ourselves; to accept that none of us—not saint nor statesman—is beyond accountability.

That, members, is the moral that the Scottish Parliament must carry forward—not the false security of being "justified" but the living, daily duty of being just. Thank you.

Business Motion

14:03

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-20066, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on changes to business.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revisions to the programme of business for Tuesday 9 December 2025—

after

followed by Topical Questions

insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Education Statistics and the 2026 National Improvement Framework

delete

5.30 pm Decision Time

and insert

6.00 pm Decision Time—[*Graeme Dey*].

Motion agreed to.

Topical Question Time

14:04

**National Health Service Boards
(Winter Pressures)**

1. **Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of NHS Ayrshire and Arran suspending routine hospital visits due to a sharp increase in flu cases, whether it will provide an update on the action that it is taking to support NHS boards in relation to increasing winter pressures. (S6T-02794)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): I am aware of the significant pressures that the national health service and its staff, who I am incredibly grateful to, are under over the winter period. I was clear in my statement to Parliament last month about the steps that we have been taking since last winter to improve our resilience this year. That includes providing additional support to NHS 24 and the Scottish Ambulance Service, as well as up to £20 million of investment to support social care and address front-door pressures to improve flow. Furthermore, the Scottish Ambulance Service is taking forward initiatives, such as a hospital ambulance liaison officer at the front door of our hospitals, that are designed to relieve pressure on acute services.

Experts in Public Health Scotland and in the Scottish Government are closely monitoring the flu situation, and vaccination remains our best protection against the virus. That approach, alongside enhanced infection prevention and control measures, aims to support boards to manage the increase in respiratory infections over this winter.

Carol Mochan: As the cabinet secretary outlined in his answer, vaccinations are the best way of protecting oneself from flu. Last year, the uptake of vaccinations was poorer, so why has uptake been so low this year? There are more than 300,000 fewer adults vaccinated now in comparison with the figure two years ago. Children's vaccination rates are down, and some areas have had delays in administering vaccinations. Public Health Scotland has reported that all age groups are now affected at levels not previously seen at this time of year, and it has confirmed that cases of flu in Scotland have

“more than doubled in the past week”.

As the cabinet secretary said, prevention is key, so why were there delays in administering vaccinations, and why are vaccination rates significantly lower than they were two years ago?

Neil Gray: I reiterate Carol Mochan's point about the importance of vaccination. Anybody who is eligible, whether they are staff or a patient, should be picking up their vaccination; it is the best way of protecting themselves, their family, their colleagues and services this winter.

The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation recommended that the groups for flu vaccinations should change this year, so when we compare like for like, in particular among adults, we are actually ahead of where we were last year on vaccine uptake. There is much more to be done, however, and I encourage people to continue to take up the vaccine.

We have delivered more than 1.5 million vaccinations so far this year. The vaccine programme started on delivery of the vaccine supply in September, and we continue to push the important message—I hope that it will leave the chamber resoundingly today—of, "Please, take up the vaccine."

Carol Mochan: Health boards across the country are facing a sharp increase in cases, with hospital admissions as a result of flu increasing by 70 per cent. NHS Ayrshire and Arran has been forced to suspend routine visits across all hospitals; some hospital wards in NHS Dumfries and Galloway have closed to new admissions; and NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde has told patients with flu symptoms to stay at home and treat themselves. The situation is worsening. What support has the cabinet secretary put in place to support staff who are dealing with that early, and very sharp, rise in cases?

Neil Gray: I offer my absolute gratitude—as, I am sure, do all members in the chamber—for the work that is being delivered under significant pressure by our health and social care staff. They deliver remarkable care and service to the people we seek to serve all year round, but I am certainly grateful for the sacrifice that they make at this time of year in particular, and I know that colleagues will be, too.

The uptick in flu rates this winter is following a similar trajectory, albeit slightly earlier in the year, to what we saw last year, when there was significant disruption. I have already set out some of the measures that we are taking to improve performance and flow through the system, but the Government has also made wider investments to support the wellbeing of our staff at particular times of pressure such as this, so that they can continue to deliver remarkable care and treatment for the people of Scotland.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): As the cabinet secretary is aware, NHS Ayrshire and Arran is under extreme financial pressure, which is in no small part due to high levels of expensive

agency staff. Given that the higher prevalence of flu cases will inevitably put greater pressure on staff numbers through sickness absence, has the cabinet secretary considered the possibility of emergency financial support to the board to prevent high levels of staff absence from making a bad situation worse?

Neil Gray: We continue to support the resilience of all boards, all year round. I note—as Brian Whittle will—the substantial reduction in the utilisation of agency staff across the national health service over the past couple of years. That is better for our staffing establishment, and it provides better continuity of care.

However, there are times of peak demand when the use of agency and locum staff is clearly important. We continue to have conversations with all boards around their pressures this winter. This week, I am standing up the winter resilience meetings—they were held last year through Christmas and new year—and I expect conversations on that subject and on boards' ability and resilience to respond to come through in those discussions.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): Scotland is experiencing what is said to be the worst flu death season in more than four decades, and changes to vaccination eligibility, to which the cabinet secretary referred, have meant that an additional half a million people were not offered the flu vaccine. Is the Scottish Government reconsidering eligibility and whether it should be extended to those aged 50 to 64?

Neil Gray: It is difficult to say for certain what this flu season will end up looking like, but the trajectories at the moment are following the very same path as last year, when there was an unprecedented level of flu in the system, which caused clear disruption to patients and the system.

We take our vaccination advice on a United Kingdom-wide basis from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation. Its members are the experts and, as we have done this year, we follow their advice on the most effective use of the vaccine.

I reiterate that anyone who is eligible should make sure that they take up the vaccine, because there are still more in the eligible groups who could take up the vaccine to help themselves, their families, loved ones and colleagues, and our health systems. I know that health boards are doing all that they can to make that as available as possible, including for staff of health and social care services, with drop-in clinics and peer-to-peer vaccination happening, too.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD): Three quarters of NHS staff in Ayrshire and Arran report

that they are working in conditions where they are so short staffed that they believe that patient safety has been put at risk. That is a major concern, because, if staff now go off sick due to flu or other viruses, the pressure on accident and emergency, for example, will be immense. If staff do not believe that they can deliver adequate levels of care to their patients—and that was before the current flu pandemic—what will the situation look like in January and February next year? What is the Scottish Government doing to ensure that all our NHS boards are appropriately staffed during the winter season? This situation has been a long time coming.

Neil Gray: The staffing establishment and safe staffing levels are covered by legislation, and we support boards to ensure that they have the requisite staffing establishment, although I absolutely take Mr Greene's point about the pressures on staff, particularly at this time of year.

In my response to the initial question from Carol Mochan, I set out some of the areas in which we are investing in order to reduce and suppress demand, particularly in relation to accident and emergency and our acute system, which is particularly pressured at this time. That includes the investment that we have made in general practice; the increased investment that is going through social care; and the upskilling and upstaffing of NHS 24 and the Scottish Ambulance Service, to ensure that we provide the best possible resilience to the whole system, so that the pressures that Jamie Greene is narrating and which are felt in our hospital settings are suppressed as much as possible.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): It is alarming that our hospitals are so stretched that, because they are petrified of a routine winter flu taking them beyond breaking point, they are having to deprive people of family visits at their time of need. What assessments have been made of whether flu vaccination uptake by NHS staff is sufficient? What additional steps will be taken to strengthen resilience across all NHS boards this winter?

Neil Gray: The decisions to restrict visiting that Sharon Dowey mentioned are not taken lightly and are not unprecedented, either. Local teams need to carry out a difficult balancing act around risk and the potential impact that restrictions can have on families and loved ones, which everybody will be well aware of.

On the vaccination programme, as I have already set out, there is more work to do, particularly among our staff groups. Our boards are doing what they can to provide drop-in clinics and peer-to-peer vaccinations. Vaccination is the best way for people to protect themselves, their colleagues and their loved ones at this time of

year. I encourage anyone—regardless of whether they are staff in health and social care or members of the public—who is eligible for a vaccine to take the opportunity to have it as soon as possible.

Salmon Farming (Mortality Figures)

2. Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, in which I declare that I am a proprietor of salmon fishings on the River Spey, and that I am a member of the Spey Fishery Board and of Fisheries Management Scotland.

To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking in response to the newly published October mortality figures for the salmon farming industry. (S6T-02793)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): Edward Mountain refers to data that was published by Salmon Scotland, not by the Scottish Government. Salmon Scotland stated that

"These figures represent isolated events, with overall survival rates remaining high at around 98.5 per cent per month."

Fish farming is highly regulated, and reasons for fish mortalities are complex and vary significantly between sites and incidents. Nonetheless, we expect producers to manage mortalities to the lowest possible levels. We support the sector in that regard through our support for the Sustainable Aquaculture Innovation Centre, which enables research into the challenges that are faced by the sector and the development of innovative solutions to those challenges.

Edward Mountain: It does not help that, this year, the industry has changed the way that it reports fish mortality. We know that more farmed salmon will die in Scotland this year than last year. Does the cabinet secretary share my deep concern about that, especially when one fish farm had a monthly mortality rate of 45.2 per cent, with more than 600,000 fish dying since the end of September?

Mairi Gougeon: Edward Mountain raises an important point. I hope that I made clear in my initial response that we expect producers to drive mortalities down to the lowest possible levels. This was an area of interest when the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee undertook an inquiry into salmon farming. Several recommendations stemmed from its report, and the Scottish Government made several commitments in response.

It is important to highlight that, although Edward Mountain chose in his question to reflect one set of data that is published on mortality figures, there are several different sources of data, and we

collect many different pieces of information on many different reporting matters. When we compare figures, it is important that we look at the overall analysis, such as the rate of survival to harvest, which is part of the Scottish fish farm production survey that the Scottish Government publishes each year.

Edward Mountain: I think that even the cabinet secretary will agree with me when I say that the optics do not look good. The industry is under the spotlight for increasing mortality. While I am threatened with legal action by the chief executive of the body that represents the farmed salmon sector for highlighting the industry's failures, the cabinet secretary has twice been entertained by that body at international rugby matches. Will she confirm that she shares my concern that more than 10 million salmon have died in the first 10 months of this year? Will she therefore implement all the recommendations from the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee's 2018 report—specifically, recommendation 9?

Mairi Gougeon: There were many points in Edward Mountain's question. First, he will be aware that the committee undertook a follow-up inquiry on the back of the work that was done in 2018. We published our response to that in full, in terms of the recommendations, all the work that we are taking forward as a result and the commitments that I have made. To follow up on that work, I published a response to the committee in September outlining the steps that have been undertaken, and I am due to provide another follow-up for the committee in March to update it on our progress.

However, it is important to highlight that we expect mortalities to be driven to the lowest possible levels. It is in no one's interest for there to be high mortalities or for such mortality events to take place. We also have to recognise that, sometimes, these incidents and events are completely outwith the hands of the fish farmers—they could be due to changing climatic conditions, micro jellyfish or algal blooms, which cannot always be predicted. Our investment in innovation is critical in ensuring that we get ahead of those challenges and drive down mortalities to the lowest possible levels.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There is much interest in this question. Concise questions and responses will be appreciated.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): As we rightly consider these figures, does the cabinet secretary agree that we also have a responsibility to ensure that we recognise the economic importance of salmon farming to the Highlands and Islands, not least in my own constituency?

Mairi Gougeon: Alasdair Allan raises a hugely important point. Salmon farming businesses are in the most rural parts of Scotland and in many of our island communities, where they support employment and provide well-paid jobs. I can give an indicator of that and of some of the value that they provide. In Alasdair Allan's constituency, more than 40,000 tonnes of salmon were produced for export in a year, which was worth around £276 million, while nearly 200 people are employed in the industry. In the wider supply chain, there are about 11,000 jobs, with exports worth about £1.3 billion. Salmon farming is a hugely important industry to Scotland and our wider economy.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): What is the Scottish Government doing to support the industry and ensure that research and development is carried out? With climate change, more threats are emerging. We need to anticipate events and, where possible, support the industry before they occur.

Mairi Gougeon: I could not agree more. As I tried to outline earlier, it is important to recognise that, with the changing climate, we face new threats and challenges all the time, so investment in innovation is hugely important.

Some work is being funded through the marine fund Scotland, and we also provide funding for the Scottish Aquaculture Innovation Centre. We are trying to get ahead of the challenges, and predicting what is coming further down the line and addressing that will be so important in the future.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Does the cabinet secretary recognise the investment by the salmon farming industry and the improving trend in survival rates, as well as the hard work that the men and women on the farms do every day to produce the United Kingdom's top food, with exports expected to reach £1 billion this year?

Mairi Gougeon: I absolutely recognise that. One thing that stuck out to me, when the committee was taking evidence and undertaking its inquiry, was hearing from the fish farmers who are working really hard to produce that high-quality source of protein, which, as I have outlined, is so important for our wider economy.

As much as I have outlined in previous responses the investment that we are putting into that innovation and ensuring that we are ahead of some of the emerging challenges, it is also important to recognise the huge sums of investment that the industry is putting in to tackle and address some of the challenges that it knows that it faces.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): In mass mortality events at Gob Na Hoe and Portree, which are both in Skye, the Government did not know the real numbers of fish deaths as they happened because Scotland's mortality figures exclude early deaths and losses from culls and transport; they also exclude cleaner fish. That has allowed Bakkafrost, for example, to report zero early deaths at Portree to regulators, while telling investors that 19 per cent of its fish died in the first weeks at sea.

With nearly four in every 10 farmed salmon placed in cages dying, will the cabinet secretary accept that regulation is not credible, and will she commit to closing those reporting loopholes so that every farmed fish death is counted in real time?

Mairi Gougeon: First, I emphasise that we have a really robust regulatory regime when it comes to finfish aquaculture.

On the data that is produced, I outlined in a previous response the number of different reporting mechanisms that we have. We collect that information for a variety of purposes. One of the key recommendations from the committee was on how we transmit that data and how we can make it more accessible and transparent for people. A number of pieces of work have been undertaken in that regard.

I can only reiterate what I have said about mortalities in previous responses: we want to ensure that they are driven down to the lowest possible levels. We undertook—we have made a commitment—to do pieces of work on that in response to the committee's recommendations, and I am determined to continue that work.

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Surely the Scottish Government must be concerned about the increasing levels of disease in the salmon industry, especially given the finding in the committee's report from earlier this year that slow progress was being made on regulation. Does the cabinet secretary recognise the damage that that continues to do to the national and international reputation of Scottish salmon?

Mairi Gougeon: I can only reiterate what I have said in previous responses in that regard. We want to ensure that mortalities are driven down to the lowest possible levels. It is in all our interests—those of the Government and those of the industry—that that happens, which is why the investment in innovation is critical.

On mortality levels and the events that we are talking about, a lot of that can be completely outwith the control of the fish farm, because of the changing climatic conditions.

It is important that we bear all that in mind when we look at some of the figures. We can pick out figures from month to month, but it is important to note that mortality can be variable and, as I outlined in my initial response to Edward Mountain, there have been increasing survival rates, too. We need to look across the whole cycle.

A lot of work is going on in relation to the issue. We have responded to the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee recommendations with a number of commitments, and I have followed up with the committee to outline our progress against what we said that we would do. That work very much continues.

Education Statistics

14:25

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a statement by Jenny Gilruth on education statistics and the 2026 national improvement framework. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

I call the cabinet secretary to speak for up to 10 minutes, please.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): This summer, when Scotland's exam results were published, we were able to declare 2025 a landmark year for Scotland's young people's success and achievements. This year's results delivered increased attainment across national 5, higher and advanced higher levels; a narrowing of the poverty-related attainment gap at national 5, higher and advanced higher levels; and more than 100,000 technical and vocational qualifications being achieved for the first time ever. The publication of statistics today on a wide range of metrics in early learning and in school education reinforce that improvement trajectory. Today's statistics show real evidence of post-pandemic recovery and progress across our education system. I hope that all members will be able to welcome that.

The data on achievement of curriculum for excellence levels is the most comprehensive national data set on attainment in literacy and numeracy. Importantly, it is predicated on teacher judgment. Today's publication confirms that, in our primary schools, levels of literacy attainment have increased to the highest level on record: at 74.5 per cent, it is 0.5 percentage points above the previous high. For numeracy, attainment remains at the record level of 80.3 per cent. In our secondary schools, the proportion of secondary 3 pupils achieving fourth level in literacy and numeracy is at a record high of 63.1 per cent and 68 per cent, respectively.

There has also been significant progress towards closing the poverty-related attainment gap. The gap has reduced to its lowest-ever level for primary pupils in literacy, its lowest-ever level for primary pupils in numeracy and its lowest-ever level for S3 pupils in both literacy and numeracy. That shows that our long-term investment in Scottish education, such as in the Scottish attainment challenge, is delivering tangible improvements and outcomes for our young people.

The challenge has had a transformative impact on Scottish education. Over the past 10 years, it has changed the culture, the narrative and the awareness of equity and the impact of poverty on education. SAC has been able to support our schools and local authorities in driving improved outcomes for children and young people who are impacted by poverty.

We know that recovery from the pandemic has been challenging. Across the globe, education systems have struggled to return to pre-pandemic normality following prolonged lockdown periods. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization reports that the pandemic affected more than 1.6 billion students and youth globally, and that the most vulnerable learners were hit the hardest.

In Scotland, young people and their families have struggled. Today's data suggests, however, that we are turning a corner on education recovery, with improvements across the board. Attendance of children and young people in school has increased. There has been further consolidated improvement in school attendance, which is now at a rate of 91 per cent, and a decrease in the levels of persistent absence of approximately three percentage points.

Our recent national marketing campaign on school attendance has been supporting improvements. More directly, however, individual schools have been focused on supporting families and young people in returning to formal education after the pandemic. Across the country, Scotland's headteachers are using a variety of interventions to support their young people with improved attendance—for example, in the employment of family liaison officers, as I witnessed recently at Pathhead primary school in Kirkcaldy.

Those improved outcomes are a testament to the diligence and commitment of our children, our young people, their teachers and all our school staff. We should all be rightly proud of them.

Those significant achievements also provide a clear indication that the choices and investments that the Scottish National Party Government has made are supporting better outcomes for our pupils.

In 2014, we chose to create an entitlement to fully funded early learning and childcare for every three and four-year-old. This September, nearly every eligible child aged three and four was registered for funded provision, which ensures that they get the best start in life. If families paid for the full 1,140 hours entitlement themselves, it would cost them more than £6,000 per year for each eligible child.

However, there is more to do to make sure that every child gets the best possible start in life. It is

disappointing that the proportion of eligible two-year-olds who are registered for early learning and childcare has fallen nationally. It is also concerning that there was a decrease in attainment in primary 1 level. Those children are, in effect, Scotland's Covid babies. We must not allow the longer-term impact of the pandemic to hold them back—the pandemic must not become a defining feature of their young lives.

The Government remains absolutely determined to leave no child behind. I have therefore requested urgent advice from our primary headteacher national panel to intensify and enhance support for that intake and the ones yet to come. I have also asked Education Scotland to consider how to enhance support for those children as part of our work on the Scottish attainment challenge and to provide a report, which I can share with the Parliament's Education, Children and Young People Committee. I will ask the new chief inspector, once appointed, to look specifically at the issue.

To increase uptake of early learning and childcare among eligible two-year-olds, we are funding a post in the Improvement Service to deliver intensive support to five local authorities—in Falkirk, Glasgow, North Ayrshire, Lanarkshire and Aberdeenshire—under a national improvement project on maximising uptake.

I know that colleagues will be mindful of the rise in the percentage of children and young people with an identified additional support need. Today's data confirms a 2.5 percentage point increase nationally, although I recognise that, in schools across the country, the figure is often higher and that it is dependent on the cohort. I have welcomed the constructive dialogue with members from across the chamber on additional support needs and, with thanks to Willie Rennie for the initial suggestion, I can advise Parliament that work has begun on a national event for teachers to showcase successful approaches to promote best practice. The event will mirror the approach of the early years collaborative in promoting the expertise of those at the chalk face to help to share good practice of what is working well.

Following a successful ASN data summit in November, I am today launching a programme of data improvement work on additional support for learning. The programme will focus on three key areas: first, a review of existing categories for recording additional support needs; secondly, clear and concise national guidance to support the recording of ASN data; and, thirdly, developed options for gathering data on local staged intervention models and reporting those at national level. That will, in turn, inform the feasibility of a national staged intervention model for identifying, assessing, planning and better supporting

children, young people and their families. That work will fully involve education authorities, given that they are our delivery partners for additional support for learning responsibilities and duties.

A final updated additional support for learning action plan and progress report will be published at the end of this parliamentary session. I intend that final progress report to be accompanied by a short, sharp review, which will be professionally led and will reflect on the changed context in our schools since the Morgan review and the establishment of the additional support for learning action plan. That will focus on the lessons learned from that process and the next steps, with a view to closing the implementation gap.

It is worth reminding ourselves that Scotland's schools continue to deliver high-quality learning and teaching. Of the 120 inspections that the independent inspectorate carried out in publicly funded schools between August 2024 and June 2025, 93 per cent were satisfactory or better, and 76 per cent were rated as good, very good or excellent for wellbeing, equality and inclusion.

Thanks to the efforts of Scotland's local authorities, today's census data shows an overall increase in the number of teachers for the first time since 2022. The pupil teacher ratio has improved as a result of that investment, which was made possible through support from the Scottish Government's budget last year. Extra funding in last year's budget uplifted the ring-fenced funding for teacher numbers to £186.5 million and provided our councils with an extra £28 million specifically to support additional support needs. I am therefore pleased to see an increase in the overall proportion of probationer teachers in permanent or temporary teaching posts, which increased this year to 69 per cent from 65 per cent last year. However, we now need to see sustained improvement on permanent posts.

The wide range of data that has been published today demonstrates that our education system is delivering sustained improvements across the board. Attainment has improved, the attainment gap has narrowed, attendance has improved and we have more teachers in our schools to support Scotland's young people. In 2025, the national improvement framework set out that, in the short term, our focus would be on improvements in the ABCs—attendance, attainment, behaviour and curriculum—in our schools. That focus has supported clear improvements in relatively short order, and it is also delivering on our longer-term vision of excellence and equity.

The national improvement framework for 2026, which was published alongside today's statistics, builds on the same approach. Our international council of education advisers has consistently advised that we should focus on those incremental

improvements in our education system, because they are indicative of the longer-term shift towards a culture of improvement. The exam results from the summer and the data that has been published today show that that longer-term shift is happening, which is to be celebrated.

The foundations of our education system are robust, and our plans for improvement build consistently on evidence of progress. Nearly every eligible three and four-year-old in the country benefits from fully-funded early learning and childcare. In our primary schools, more children than ever are achieving the expected levels of literacy and numeracy. This year, attainment rates at all levels of school qualifications increased for our young people.

Importantly, we are delivering equity for those who need it most. Closing the poverty-related attainment gap has a key role to play in achieving this Government's commitment to eradicate child poverty. Our children's attendance in school has increased again. The gap in literacy and numeracy levels between primary-age children from the most deprived and least deprived communities is at its lowest level ever. A record number of 18-year-olds from deprived areas secured a university place in 2025.

There is more to do to realise our ambitions for Scotland's children and young people, but today demonstrates what the SNP delivers in Government: promises being kept, progress being made, success being nurtured, opportunity being fostered and a better future for all our children.

The Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues that were raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business. I would be grateful if all members who wish to put a question could press their request-to-speak buttons now.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I welcome Paul O'Kane to his position as Labour Party spokesperson on education.

The third-last sentence of the cabinet secretary's statement claims that promises are being kept. Amazingly, the cabinet secretary managed to state that to the Parliament today while keeping a straight face. The facts speak for the reality, which is that teacher numbers remain at a historic low in our country. When the SNP first took power in 2007, there were just over 55,000 teachers in Scotland. That total has been lower in every subsequent year. In the run-up to the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections, SNP ministers pledged to employ an additional 3,500 teachers and classroom assistants, which is another pledge that has not been kept. Voters will know when they go to the polls in May that SNP promises on

teacher numbers have been broken and that they cannot trust the SNP on education.

I welcome the work that the cabinet secretary outlined about ASN. That work is important, and it has come about because the Scottish Conservatives brought forward a vote to Parliament to deliver it. However, we need action, not only words.

The biggest failure in the statement is the broken promise on eradicating the attainment gap. More than a decade on from Nicola Sturgeon's flagship pledge, there remains a chasm between the most and least deprived kids in our country when it comes to basic literacy and numeracy. Too many pupils are being failed, and we are falling short of the expectation that we should be delivering a basic education for them.

If SNP ministers can take credit for anything today, it is their ability to spin a record of failure. Will the cabinet secretary be honest with the teaching profession across our country and admit that the SNP pledge on teacher numbers will now not be met?

Jenny Gilruth: I find it remarkable that Miles Briggs was unable to welcome in his comments a single measure that was announced today. The statistics are the result of the hard work of Scotland's teachers and pupils, and the success that we have seen across the board in relation to attainment, attendance and, more broadly, the narrowing of the attainment gap is to be welcomed.

To come to some of Mr Briggs' points, it is worth reminding Parliament that, since 2014, teacher numbers have increased by more than 2,500 thanks to investment from this Government. In the previous year's budget, the Government made a direct intervention to protect teacher numbers. We uplifted ring-fenced funding to £186.5 million and provided local authorities with an extra £28 million to support those with additional support needs. The Conservatives chose to vote against that investment, which speaks to some of the challenges in that regard.

On teacher employment, it is worth welcoming the fact that there has been an increase in the proportion of probationers in the teacher induction scheme who have secured a teaching post in the year following their probation. As a result of our investment, the figure has gone up to 69 per cent compared with 65 per cent last year.

I am pleased that Mr Briggs welcomed the action relating to additional support needs, which has been informed by cross-party working.

This year's statistics show that we have made further progress in narrowing the attainment gap across a range of measures. However, Mr Briggs

made no comment on the impact on our education system across the board of the austerity policies that his party followed when it was in power. If members speak to any headteacher, they will hear about how, as a direct result of those policies and that approach, poverty is corroding the progress that is being made in our schools. I make no apologies for the Scottish Government's approach, which is delivering progress and improvement across the board. I wish that the Conservatives could bring themselves to welcome that good news for Scotland's children and young people.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement. As I take on my new role, I am looking forward to my interactions with her, her ministerial team and, indeed, colleagues across the chamber.

It is clear that, when progress has been made through the hard work and dedication of our teachers, young people and parents, that will receive welcome and constructive comments from Labour members. However, we will continue to point out, without fear or favour, the areas in which the Government continues to fail.

The cabinet secretary spoke about promises being kept. If the defining promise of the parliamentary session that began in 2016 was to close the poverty-related attainment gap, the promise of the current parliamentary session was about Covid recovery in our schools. However, with less than three months of the current parliamentary session to go, we are told by the cabinet secretary that we are just turning a corner and are on a trajectory of progress.

The reality is that our schools are still far behind where they were before the pandemic. We have heard about the failure to deliver the promise on teacher numbers. Despite a fractional increase since last year, attendance levels remain 2 per cent below the pre-Covid average, with unauthorised and persistent absence rates well above pre-Covid averages. Moreover, the Government has allowed a postcode lottery to develop. For example, East Ayrshire has one of the lowest attendance rates in the country, but, down the road in South Ayrshire, attendance rates are above the national average.

The cabinet secretary uses selective figures to claim that the combined measure for the numeracy attainment gap in our primary schools is the lowest that it has ever been. However, the attainment gap for those in primary 4, when they are in that crucial transition—the halfway point of a child's journey through primary education—has significantly worsened.

Is not the overarching truth that John Swinney's and the SNP's stated mission on Covid recovery and education has completely failed? What is the

cabinet secretary going to do about that, other than pat herself on the back?

Jenny Gilruth: I welcome Paul O'Kane to his position. I note that he has welcomed the progress today and has talked about the constructive approach that he will take in his new role. I look forward to that engagement.

Paul O'Kane provided challenge, and I am happy to talk to some of the challenges. For example, I absolutely accept the challenge relating to attendance, which he mentioned. The Government has taken forward a range of measures in that regard. Two years ago, I instructed the chief inspector to take forward focused work with local authorities on the matter.

Paul O'Kane was right to speak about the postcode approach that is taken by different local authority areas and the variance that we see in the system, but that is a feature of Scotland's education system, with 32 local authorities running our schools. However, that is not a reason for further improvements not to be made, which is why—[*Interruption.*] I hear Paul O'Kane chuntering from a sedentary position. If he will listen—

Paul O'Kane: I have never chuntered in my life.

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

Jenny Gilruth: As I mentioned, the national marketing campaign was launched last month, and it has been supporting some of the improvements in that regard.

Paul O'Kane mentioned the attainment gap. I have mentioned some of the data that shows a narrowing of that gap. In 2024-25, the gap in relation to literacy has reduced to 19.4 per cent, which is its lowest-ever level. The gap in relation to numeracy in primary schools has also reduced to its lowest-ever level.

Undoubtedly, there are challenges in the system that relate to the pandemic and to the points that I made in response to Mr Briggs. We need to intensify progress, which is why I have set out a range of measures in that regard. When appointed, the new chief inspector will have a key role in driving that improvement.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): As the cabinet secretary has mentioned, the poverty-related attainment gap in literacy and numeracy among primary school pupils reduced to its lowest ever level in 2024-25. How will the Government continue to combat that gap?

Jenny Gilruth: I am delighted to see the progress across the board that the member has spoken about. The Government has given an undertaking that we will continue with the Scottish attainment challenge. Of course, it will be a matter

for the next Government to decide on a policy approach, but, as we have seen evidence of today, it is delivering improvements in our schools as a direct result of the additionality that the Scottish Government has provided, whether through the pupil equity fund or the Scottish attainment challenge.

For example, the addition of extra staff in our schools is making a huge difference. Earlier I mentioned the primary school in Kirkcaldy where I saw the employment of a family liaison officer. Other headteachers take different approaches.

Across the country, around 3,000 extra staff are being employed in those roles as a result of the additionality from the Government, which is making a key difference and driving improvement.

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I, too, welcome Paul O’Kane to his new role.

I noted the reference to early years funding in the statement and the subsequent request for advice from the primary headteachers national panel about the decrease in attainment at primary 1 level. I also welcome the request that, when the new chief inspector is appointed, they should look at that specific issue, and note that the Government remains determined to leave no child behind.

However, the Government has not addressed the funding model that is causing disparity in provision, resulting in a postcode lottery that means that some parents are being prevented from accessing childcare that is most suitable to their needs and to the needs of their child. When will the cabinet secretary finally address that issue so that the early years funding model can actually guarantee that no child is left behind?

Jenny Gilruth: It is imperative that we focus on primary 1 pupils—the Covid babies as I called them in my statement—and intensify progress in that regard. Natalie Don-Innes and I are looking at a programme of work across Government to intensify some of that progress—Ms Don-Innes leads on early learning and childcare as the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise.

The member will have seen a dip in the uptake of early learning and childcare among our eligible two-year-olds in the statistics today. Again, we need to work with local authority partners on that, and I will meet them in the coming days to talk about how we might be able to intensify progress on that.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): With almost all three and four-year-olds across Scotland reaping the benefits of funded ELC, will the cabinet secretary set out exactly how that is benefiting young folk and their families?

Jenny Gilruth: As I set out previously, high-quality childcare is vital to giving our children the best possible start in life, but it also helps to ensure that parents and carers can work, train or study. That is why Scotland’s offer is available to all three and four-year-olds, regardless of their parents’ working status.

I am pleased to see further evidence that uptake remains almost universal for that age group. Independent research that was done back in 2022 found that 74 per cent of parents and carers said that funded ELC had enabled them to work or look for work, while 63 per cent of families with preschool children aged two to five stated that they had no childcare costs as a result. We will publish a full evaluation report on the expansion in early 2026.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): At time for reflection today, we heard that democracy requires humility, so I am asking for an answer to Miles Briggs’s question. Will the SNP Government keep its promise of 3,500 more teachers by the end of the current parliamentary session?

Jenny Gilruth: I did not quite catch time for reflection as I was coming into the chamber. There is much humility on the statistics today around about where we need to drive improvements. Of course, we heard from Mr Whitfield’s colleague about the requirements around attendance and I have engaged with Roz McCall on our children and young people who are aged two and the uptake of ELC.

As I outlined in my previous response, we have seen an increase in teacher numbers this year. I thought that that would be welcomed by the Labour Party. Of course, last year, the Labour Party was not able to bring itself to vote for the Government’s budget and the investment that has sat alongside it, driving that increase in teacher numbers. It is interesting that Mr Whitfield comes to the chamber today to talk about humility, and yet he does not appear to have any answers himself.

The Presiding Officer: I call Rona Mackay, to be followed by Willie Rennie—[*Interruption.*]

Let us hear one another, colleagues.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): We have seen the proportion of primary pupils achieving the expected curriculum for excellence levels in literacy increase to the highest level to date. How do you reflect on what that achievement tells us about Scotland’s education system?

The Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Jenny Gilruth: It is worth celebrating that improvement in relation to literacy in particular, as

the level is at its highest to date, as the member has set out. We are seeing clear improvements in areas such as literacy in relatively short order, and that tells us that the education system is on the right track. That is being supported by the investment through the teaching workforce, which was mentioned previously, as well as the Scottish attainment challenge and the key national programmes on literacy and numeracy. It is important that we press ahead with our further reforms to the curriculum and our qualifications system, towards the longer-term vision of a globally respected, empowered education system.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Ten years ago, the then First Minister promised that, by now, the poverty-related attainment gap would be closed. That was Nicola Sturgeon's defining mission, but Nicola Sturgeon cannot even be bothered to turn up today to see thousands of young people's futures being betrayed by the Government.

In numeracy in primary school, it will take 133 years for that gap to close at this rate of progress. Without hiding behind staff and pupils, will the cabinet secretary say when exactly she was planning to apologise to those thousands of young people?

Jenny Gilruth: I find it remarkable that Mr Rennie is not able to welcome some of the progress that we have seen today across the board at every level. This is about celebrating our children's and young people's achievements.

I accept the challenge, however, in relation to intensifying progress, which is exactly why—

Willie Rennie: It is your promise.

Jenny Gilruth: I can hear the member heckling from a sedentary position, but I have spoken to the issues that we are taking forward with the chief inspector, who will be leading on intensifying the progress that we have seen. We are also mindful of our primary 1 pupils in considering how we can intensify that work—I spoke to Ms McCall about that earlier.

Let us look at the figures from today. The poverty-related attainment gap in literacy for primary pupils reduced in 2024-25 to its lowest-ever level. Our exam results this year show progress, with a narrowing attainment gap across the board, so the interventions that we are putting in place are making a difference.

I accept the challenge from Mr Rennie on the need for intensification, however, and that is exactly what the chief inspector will be taking forward.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): The poverty-related attainment gap for S3 pupils in literacy and numeracy reduced in 2024-25 to the

lowest-ever levels. What is the cabinet secretary's assessment of that achievement, and will she join me in paying tribute to our teachers for making that possible?

Jenny Gilruth: Mr Torrance rightly speaks about the achievements of our teachers in driving that progress forward. I notice that no one has yet commented on the fact that the ACEL data is informed by teacher judgment; that is an important factor in how we arrive at the measurements across our education system. We trust Scotland's teachers to support the improvements that we need in our schools.

As a direct result of investment from the Scottish Government, we have been able to increase the number of staff in our schools, and not just the number of teachers. Educational psychologists, family liaison workers and ASN staff have been supported through additional investment from the Scottish Government. I absolutely join David Torrance in paying tribute to our school staff, who have helped to support the improvements that we are all welcoming today.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Moray has the highest level of teacher absences anywhere in Scotland. Councillor Derek Ross has described that as "shocking", and Councillor Marc Macrae asked whether Moray teachers are "living in fear". I ask the cabinet secretary for her response to Moray Council having the highest level of teacher absences in Scotland.

Given that the cabinet secretary has so far refused to answer this question twice, I will try for a third time. Yes or no—will the SNP deliver its manifesto commitment on teacher numbers?

Jenny Gilruth: Mr Ross will of course be aware that I began my teaching career in Elgin high school in Moray, in his constituency, and I found it to be a very supportive environment as a probationer teacher many years ago.

I am concerned about the statistics that Mr Ross has shared with me today in relation to teacher absence. As I think I set out in my statement, I and Ms Robison, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government, will be meeting representatives of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities in the coming days to discuss some of the figures, particularly in relation to variance in teacher employment across the board. I will also raise directly with COSLA the issue in relation to Moray to understand more about the detail. If the member is able to share any more detail with me on the matter, I am more than happy to consider it.

In relation to teacher numbers, I have set out the interventions that the Government has taken in relation to—

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): Yes or no?

Jenny Gilruth: I repeat that I have set out the interventions that the Government has taken in relation to the budget, and those interventions made through the budget last year have led to an increase in teacher numbers this year, for the first time since 2022.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): It is very pleasing to hear that teacher numbers have increased. How does the Scottish Government intend to work with local authorities and other partners to build on that?

Jenny Gilruth: It is important that we work with our local authority partners in relation to the improvements that we have seen across the board and, in particular, on teacher employment. That is a common theme that we have heard from members today. The education and childcare assurance board, which was established as a result of the Verity house agreement with local government, is the opportunity for the Government to undertake that work. We are looking at more strategic approaches to teacher workforce planning, which, to answer Colin Beattie's question, will help to inform how we drive improvements and more teaching jobs in the future.

Urgent Question

14:55

Employment Tribunal Decision (Sandie Peggie v NHS Fife)

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the decision of the employment tribunal of Sandie Peggie v NHS Fife health board.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): We note the judgment in this very complex case. Individual decisions by the board in relation to employment matters are a matter for the board, but, as a Government, we will be considering the judgment very carefully for any issues that require wider consideration.

This Government has called for, and will continue to call for, a respectful and compassionate debate on gender issues, recognising the need for respect and dignity for all involved. These matters need to be carefully considered, openly and thoughtfully, and respectful debate among people with differing opinions should always be possible—that is the only way that we will make progress. My focus is to ensure that NHS Fife and other boards provide an effective health service for the populations that they serve across Scotland, and that will continue to be my focus.

Tess White: NHS Fife was found to have harassed a nurse of 30 years just for standing up for her rights to privacy and dignity. Her sex-based rights under the Equality Act 2010 were not protected. Too many female nurses are operating in a climate of fear in a two-class system. National health service boards are allowing trans activists to push their illegal and harmful self-identification agenda and fuel a toxic and harmful culture. The cabinet secretary talks about different opinions, but what about nurses who are being told to be nice, when nice means subjugating their rights to privacy, dignity and safety? Activism has no place in hospitals, where the number 1 priority should be safeguarding. Cabinet secretary, what will you do to keep all women safe in hospitals, protect their sex-based rights and eradicate this climate of fear, harassment and bullying?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Speak through the chair.

Neil Gray: I have been very clear since coming to office—as, I believe, my predecessors were—on the importance of dignity and respect for all people in the employment in the health service. I will say again that our health system is based on the core values of care, compassion, openness, honesty, dignity and respect for everyone,

irrespective of their individual identities. This is an incredibly complex case and a lengthy judgment, so we will take care and time to reflect on it, as I urge all colleagues to do.

Tess White: Cabinet secretary, what about the care and compassion for female nurses?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Through the chair, Ms White.

Tess White: The floodgates have opened and the judgment is the thin end of the wedge for employment tribunal cases and settlements. Millions of pounds of hard-earned taxpayer money is being paid by the Scottish Government to fuel organisations such as Engender, LGBT Youth Scotland, Stonewall and the Scottish Trans Alliance, allowing them to go rogue and unchecked. Many of them push their illegal propaganda, influencing training materials, guidelines and policy in hospitals and the wider public sector. Under procurement policies, NHS boards do not award contracts to organisations that do not abide by the law. Why is this any different? Cabinet secretary, will you personally—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Through the chair, Ms White.

Tess White: Presiding Officer, will the cabinet secretary personally oversee a review of the policies and guidelines that are being influenced by those organisations before they come up for financial renewal next year—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary.

Tess White: —or will he, under his watch, allow—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary.

Neil Gray: Presiding Officer, I think that we are going slightly beyond the tribunal decision. To provide some context, the tribunal has still to proceed to a remedy; there are 14 days in which the people who are involved have an opportunity to appeal. It is important that we allow that process to take its course and that we respect it. The question of the wider considerations of ensuring that everybody is able to speak up and access and deliver health services with respect and compassion was answered by me in my previous reply.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: A number of members wish to ask supplementary questions; I hope to get all those in, but they will need to be slightly briefer.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): The ruling in the Sandie Peggie case leaves significant questions for NHS Fife and the Scottish Government to answer. The Scottish Government

wrote to health boards in early September about the Supreme Court judgment, but left it as a matter for individual boards to consider, following their own legal advice. Surely we should have one consistent approach across Scotland, in which the legal advice for boards is the same and a woman does not need first to complain to have her employer follow the law—or does the Scottish Government expect individual front-line staff to be their own experts on human rights law?

Neil Gray: Again, the Scottish Government accepts the Supreme Court ruling. We accept that judgment and are taking forward the detailed work that is necessary as a consequence. A working group that has been established and convened by the permanent secretary has been actively considering the implications of the judgment across every key area of Government. As a result of that work, action has already been taken, including the production of updated guidance on the Gender Representation on Public Boards (Scotland) Act 2018 and an amendment to the public appointments recruitment process for regulated public bodies, through which the act is applied. Action is being taken.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): This case is a prime example of the Scottish National Party's flawed self-identification guidance having gone wrong. It has been nearly eight months since the Supreme Court ruled that, when it comes to equalities legislation, the definition of "sex" is based on biology, yet public bodies under the direction of the Scottish Government have still not implemented that judgment. Will the Scottish Government finally commit to ensuring that all public bodies follow the judgment?

Neil Gray: I have already given the Government's position on the Supreme Court, in answer to Jackie Baillie. Again, I will provide context on where we are when it comes to the tribunal ruling. The tribunal has still to proceed to a remedy. The remedy hearing is still to take place. There are 14 days in which those who are involved in the tribunal can appeal, so I caution us all against rushing to judgment while the process is still under way.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Despite the valiant attempts of anti-trans campaigners to claim a win on the issue, the tribunal found that Ms Peggie's behaviour amounted to harassment of Dr Upton, and it dismissed the vast majority of her claims. Most important, it is the second Scottish employment tribunal in a month to find that employers are not, in fact, required to operate the kind of trans-segregation policies that anti-equality groups are pushing for. Does the Scottish Government agree that the blanket exclusion of trans people from the facilities that they need at work is generally unlawful, and will it therefore

make it clear to all public bodies in Scotland that segregating trans people is not supported in law and that their human rights will be defended against the current onslaught?

Neil Gray: As I said, we are still working through and will consider carefully the tribunal ruling and its implication not just for the health service but for wider public bodies as employers.

As I said in response to previous questions, our health system is based on the core values of care, compassion, openness, honesty, integrity and respect for everyone, irrespective of their individual identities. Four areas were upheld by the tribunal, which need to be taken seriously, and I will correspond with NHS Fife to hear how it intends to respond to those.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The conduct of the senior management of NHS Fife throughout this entire episode has been disgraceful. Hundreds of thousands of pounds of public money has been spent in legal fees defending the indefensible, and more money has been spent on media management. The character of Sandie Peggie, a nurse with a 30-year unblemished record, was traduced in court. A bizarre media statement was issued attacking Sandie Peggie's legal team, which later had to be withdrawn and which we now know was instructed personally by the chief executive. Carol Potter, as chief executive of NHS Fife, has lost the confidence of the people of Fife and does not deserve to continue in that role. She should not be allowed to retire next year on a healthy pension. Will the health secretary now sack her and remove her from a job that she is not fit to do?

Neil Gray: The tribunal has still to proceed to a remedy and the parties involved still have 14 days to appeal the decision. I note that four claims were upheld out of the 47 claims, and it is important that serious consideration is given by NHS Fife to those four claims that were upheld out of 47. I will be corresponding with NHS Fife in order to hear its response and how it will respond to those claims being upheld.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Everybody, regardless of their protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010, has the right to feel safe at work and free from harassment. Organisations such as Engender do incredible work using their vast experience to contribute to debates and to promote and protect women's rights. Does the cabinet secretary agree that we must listen to them when they do so?

Neil Gray: I have already set out that I expect, from a health service perspective, a culture of openness, transparency and support for patients and members of staff to be able to interact and go about their business, whether that is seeking to

get access to services or, indeed, to deliver them. I expect that irrespective of people's individual identities. Of course, it is open to anyone to bring forward concerns at any point and to ensure that those are properly remedied, and it is for those organisations to support people in doing so.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Shamefully, during the tribunal, the cabinet secretary expressed confidence in the senior leadership of NHS Fife. Now he must have come to the conclusion that most of us reached months ago—that they do not deserve that confidence. If the current chief executive does not do the right thing and resign immediately, will he do the right thing and sack her?

Neil Gray: I have already said in response to Murdo Fraser's question that the tribunal still has a course to run, which includes the conclusion of the remedy, and that all parties involved have 14 days in which to appeal. It is important that the issues that have been raised around the four claims that were upheld out of 47 claims are responded to. That is why I will be corresponding with NHS Fife in order to get its response. Otherwise, it is important that we take the time to reflect on the judgment and the complexity that is involved here. We will certainly be doing that in Government.

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Ind): The Sandie Peggie employment tribunal exposes not just one employer's failings but a systemic collapse in how public bodies understand and uphold women's sex-based rights. This judgment further exposed how whistleblowers are harassed merely for speaking up for themselves or for others. Women in Scotland should not have to become litigants simply to secure their lawful rights to dignity and safety at work and in public spaces and services. The Supreme Court settled the law. Will the Government now act with urgency to follow the law, as the Equality and Human Rights Commission advised months ago, and support its public bodies to follow the law and stop this ridiculous waste of taxpayers' money?

Neil Gray: We have been clear since the Supreme Court ruling that we accept its judgment. We are taking forward the detailed work that is necessary as a consequence. We have had sight of the Equality and Human Rights Commission's updated code of practice, but it is for United Kingdom Government ministers to publish that, and we await that happening.

On the outcome of the tribunal, there are still matters to run their course, including the remedy hearings, and it is open to individuals to appeal the decision. It is important at this stage to take calm reflection of the judgment, which is complex both legally and from a policy perspective, and to ensure that we are responding adequately across Government.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): It is clear that the SNP's gender self-identification policy still prevails in spite of the Supreme Court judgment. Sandie Peggie's case proves that the burden of expressing concerns around safety, privacy and dignity lies directly with women and women only. Women's protections must be guaranteed in the workplace. Will the cabinet secretary give biological females the assurance that they can feel safe in all health boards across Scotland?

Neil Gray: Since coming into office, I have made clear the culture of respect that I expect within our boards as employers, and I continue to work on that with the Independent National Whistleblowing Officer and local whistleblowing champions, as well as with the chairs and chief executives of boards. Regardless of people's individual identities, I expect everybody to be treated with respect and that boards will ensure that any concerns that people raise are properly considered and investigated, regardless of whether those concerns are about the issues that this tribunal is concerned with or about other matters around patient safety.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes this item of business. There will be a brief pause before we move to the next item of business, to allow members on the front benches to change over.

Ferguson Marine (Port Glasgow) Holdings Limited

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-20036, in the name of Richard Leonard, on behalf of the Public Audit Committee, on its report, "The 2023/24 audit of Ferguson Marine (Port Glasgow) Holdings Limited".

15:11

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I remind members of my voluntary register of trade union interests.

I present this unanimous report to Parliament on behalf of the Public Audit Committee, and I thank all those who have contributed to it, not least the committee clerks and other parliamentary staff for the work that they have put into it.

It has been a great privilege to serve as the convener of the committee for the past four and a half years. Whoever takes over after the elections in May, in the next session of Parliament, can look forward to continuing much of the work that has begun in this session of Parliament, not least the continuing scrutiny of Ferguson Marine (Port Glasgow); the final delivery of the Glen Rosa; a performance audit on completion of that order, which has already been promised to Parliament by the Auditor General; and the results of the forensic audit that is now being undertaken by Grant Thornton, which will be the subject of additional assurance by the Auditor General, ensuring that it will also come before this Parliament.

A forensic examination of the historical accounting records of Ferguson Marine is an audit that the committee strongly recommended be undertaken, because we believe that it is a matter of significant public interest that we properly understand—literally in forensic detail—how public money was spent when the yard was in private ownership between September 2014 and December 2019.

The committee report that we are debating this afternoon has its roots in a section 22 report that was laid before Parliament almost a year ago to the day. As part of our inquiry, we took evidence from old and new accountable officers, from the strategic commercial assets division of the Scottish Government, and from the trade union shop stewards in the shipyard itself. We did not just sit in Parliament—we went to Port Glasgow and spoke to the workers as well as to the managers.

Let me make clear at the outset why we produced our own report, conducted our own investigation and called for this debate in

Parliament today. It is because we do not want this yard to fail. It is precisely because, above all else, we want this yard to succeed. So, when the Auditor General warns in his report to this Parliament that he is concerned that Ferguson Marine (Port Glasgow) may not be “a going concern”, the committee has responded by concluding that, without “urgent investment”, and so without new orders, the yard may not survive.

So, this report is about securing the yard’s future—we make no apology for that. It is about productivity and investment. It is about jobs and a strategic industry. It is about the last commercial shipyard on the Clyde.

That is why, when the Deputy First Minister told the committee just a few weeks ago, in early October, that, of the £14.2 million that has been set aside for capital investment in the yard, only £570,000 has been spent—that is less than 5 per cent—the committee was alarmed.

In paragraphs 49 to 52 of this report, which we should remember was first published in early July, we make it plain—again unanimously—that the Scottish Government needs to act with urgency and that the Scottish Government and FMPG—the ministers and the board—must publish FMPG’s strategy and revised business plan as soon as possible. We are still waiting.

The yard simply cannot modernise on the basis of a perpetually pending plan. The director general for economy told the committee way back in February:

“We need to align the nuts and bolts of what is required for the investment with the strategy and the business plan.”

We are still waiting.

But our concern is not solely with the Government. When we quizzed the then chair of the FMPG board, Andrew Miller, about the strategic plan for the yard, he answered in both a confused and a confusing way. He told us:

“We have been trying to pull that narrative into the future, with substantiated data to articulate the dialogue of what the business needs to do”.—[*Official Report, Public Audit Committee*, 5 February 2025; c 45, 41]

What chance have you got?

Mind you, this is the board chair who told us in June 2023 that he did not, in his words,

“understand the narrative around the term ‘bonus’.”—[*Official Report, Public Audit Committee*, 1 June 2023; c 17.]

Management bonuses were not bonuses; they were “retention payments”, he claimed.

He also told us

“We would definitely like to deliver some good news in the next six months.”—[*Official Report, Public Audit Committee*, 5 February 2025; c 46.]

That was 10 months ago. We are still waiting.

In carrying out our parliamentary scrutiny and taking evidence on activities like the extraordinary secondment arrangements or the eye-watering exit payments, the committee has had to make tough recommendations. We cannot ignore what went on.

Take the secondment. Here we had an employee—seconded from another public sector organisation, Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd—who decided to form their own limited company in which they were the sole shareholder, in which they were the sole director and into the bank account of which their FMPG salary was paid. Between February 2023 and March 2024, that added up to over £144,000. Neither the board nor even the remuneration committee had approved this arrangement. A substantial sum of unpaid income tax and national insurance contributions had to be reimbursed to His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs.

In the lexicon of the Auditor General, this represented a weakness in governance and transparency, and the committee agreed, but it is hard to conclude anything other than that this was, in my lexicon, a secretive, tax-avoidance con trick. We should remember that this is in an organisation that is 100 per cent owned by the Scottish Government and so 100 per cent owned by us, and which exists in the first place only because of all of us paying all our taxes.

Then there were the exit packages. Three employees left with pay-outs above £95,000—which not only is a considerable amount of public money, but is above the threshold that requires advance Government approval—but this happened with only one out of the three exit payments, so where were the controls, internal and external? Where was the accountability? Where was the governance? Where was the Scottish Government’s sponsor division?

Let me offer another personal insight. In my almost five years of chairing the Public Audit Committee, it has never been those toilers, those lowest-paid workers or those creators of the wealth who break the rules. It is always—always—the highest paid and the most powerful people in an organisation who break the rules. It is as though some people believe that there is one set of rules if you are at the top and another set of rules for the rest of us.

Incredibly, we also discovered that, while the organisation operated with an audit and risk committee for three years post-nationalisation, it did not have a dedicated internal audit function until the financial year 2023-24. So, our report is clear—given the scale of historical weaknesses and the number of high-risk areas demanding

close attention, the Scottish Government needs to closely monitor the internal audit plan.

Let me end, Presiding Officer, where I started. The Public Audit Committee of this Parliament wants modernisation in the yard. All we want is for the workers to be given a fighting chance to compete for future work. We think that the workforce should be at the centre of decision making, not at the margins of it, and that, if they had been—instead of a reliance on retired naval commodores and rear admirals, international management consultants and highly paid turnaround directors—there would not have been some of these multiple and repeated failings, and our island communities would have been served by these two ferries quite some time ago.

This is a state-owned yard and the Scottish Government is the sole shareholder. There is no shortage of shipbuilding orders out there and no shortage of potential work. So, the cross-party parliamentary Public Audit Committee is unanimously calling on this Government to act decisively, because, if it does, this yard, which has a distinctive and proud history, can have a distinctive, proud and positive future.

Let me finish with something that Alex Logan, the GMB convener, candidly said to me when we visited the yard back in June. I hope that all parties will pay attention to this. He said:

“We don’t want to be just another sub-contractor to BAE Systems. If that’s the case, we may as well just get taken over by BAE and become a defence sub-contractor. But that’s not who we are, or have been for a hundred years.”

That is what we need to fight for and that is what this is about. On behalf of the Public Audit Committee, I move the motion in my name,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations contained in the Public Audit Committee’s 3rd Report, 2025 (Session 6), *The 2023/24 audit of Ferguson Marine (Port Glasgow) Holdings Limited* (SP Paper 846).

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Daniel Johnson to speak to and move amendment S6M-20036.1.

15:20

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): The report by Audit Scotland and the subsequent report by the Public Audit Committee are stark and emphatic, and Richard Leonard’s words emphasised that. We already know about the Government’s incompetence, which has led to years of suffering for island communities and to a £400 million bill being picked up by the taxpayer. That is why we have taken the unusual step of seeking to amend the motion. That is not something that would normally happen, but it is

important, because the issues raised by the committee’s report are substantial.

I urge members to read page 11 of the report, which lists the committee’s first four conclusions. The first conclusion is that the committee has “significant concerns” about the long-term financial sustainability of the yard. The second conclusion is that part of the problem is the “significant reputational damage” that has been caused by the process of overseeing the two vessels. Although the third conclusion is that the committee “notes” the Scottish Government’s financial support, the fourth conclusion is that “urgent investment” is required to secure the yard’s future.

I point members back to the second conclusion, on the reputational damage to the yard. Why did that reputational damage come about? It came about because the Scottish National Party Government used the yard as a political football for a political stunt. That politicisation is the exact reason for the reputational damage.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Daniel Johnson: I will do in a moment.

There is not just a financial story to be told—the Government and, indeed, all of us have a moral responsibility to ensure that the investment goes in, so that the yard can have the future that we all know that it deserves.

Stuart McMillan: With regard to reputational damage, would Daniel Johnson also acknowledge the fact that the yard went into liquidation in 2014? Clearly, the reputation of the yard was already damaged.

Daniel Johnson: What has happened since then? A £400 million bill is being picked up by the taxpayer—that is on the Scottish Government.

We all know that, beyond the Glen Rosa, the key to the long-term sustainability of Ferguson’s yard is simple—it needs orders. It is welcome that Ferguson’s has secured work through BAE Systems to build the next generation of Royal Navy warships. That is proof that the United Kingdom Labour Government’s investment in defence is supporting skilled jobs in Scotland.

However, the subcontracted fabrication work on HMS Birmingham is not, on its own, enough to sustain the yard and its workforce; Ferguson’s needs a steady supply of whole-ship orders. As we have heard, the Government promised to invest £14.2 million in modernisation, but, 18 months later, only £500,000 of that has been forthcoming. That is not good enough.

During that time, the Scottish Government has issued a contract for seven small electric Caledonian MacBrayne ferries—but to a Polish

firm. A Scottish yard that employs Scottish workers and that is owned by the Scottish Government is losing vital contracts to foreign yards, while the Government prevaricates on its investment promise to make the yard competitive. This is a party whose mantra is, apparently, “Stronger for Scotland”. That is almost as big a joke as using two ferries as a punchline. It is laughable, but that is the catch-22 situation that the Scottish Government has created: it will not provide the money until orders are forthcoming, but the yard cannot secure those orders without the investment that it needs.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): To use his word, the member talked about the “politicisation” of the award—I assume that he means back in 2015. He now wants us to break subsidy control and procurement law by making a direct award for the small vessel replacement programme. Can I just get the story straight?

Daniel Johnson: The Subsidy Control Act 2022 is clear—this has not changed since 2014—that there are several criteria that can be used, including local context and social value, and a direct award is certainly possible. If the Scottish Government wants to prevent the issue from being a political football, it should provide the yard with the investment that it needs in order to operate.

That brings me to my second point. We know that CMAL did not take account of the immense social value that the small ferries contract would have brought to Scotland and to Inverclyde. Despite scoring strongly on the technical aspect of the bid, Ferguson Marine lost out on price to a yard that has no obligation to meet the same high standard of labour laws that we have in this country. The Government needs to develop, at pace, a model of public procurement that takes account of social value. Procurement law has not changed since 2014—

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

Daniel Johnson: If it is brief.

Paul Sweeney: I am sure that my friend would also note that, unlike in Scotland, the Polish Government offers generous patient finance to Polish shipbuilders through its state investment bank.

Daniel Johnson: That is a point worth noting.

The United Kingdom Labour Government has committed to reviewing UK procurement legislation to boost domestic supply chains and support British businesses and local jobs. I ask the Scottish Government to work with the UK Government to explore how the legislation can be

changed. The issue is not just with shipbuilding; we also have the example of Alexander Dennis, to which the Government gave millions of pounds in grants only for buses to be built in Egypt and China.

The skilled and dedicated workers at Ferguson Marine have been failed time and time again by SNP chaos and incompetence. The fear now is that even changes to procurement legislation will not come quickly enough to secure the future of the yard. That is why the Government needs to act quickly to ensure the yard’s future.

We call on the cabinet secretary to commit to bringing forward the full £14.2 million, as was promised; to level the playing field for Scottish manufacturers by reforming its approach to public procurement; and to issue a direct award for the MV Lord of the Isles. Anything less risks losing another vital piece of our critical industrial capacity.

I move amendment S6M-20036.1, to insert at end:

“, and calls on the Scottish Government to fulfil its commitment to invest all of the £14.2 million promised to modernise the yard to enable Ferguson Marine (Port Glasgow) to secure orders.”

15:28

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): I welcome the opportunity to open this debate for the Government and to respond to the Public Audit Committee’s report on the 2023-24 audit of Ferguson Marine. I am grateful to the committee and to Audit Scotland for their continued scrutiny and the constructive challenge that they bring to the operations of an important Government-owned business.

Ferguson Marine is the Clyde’s last commercial shipbuilder. It plays an essential role in providing lifeline ferries for our island communities, and it remains—as, I am sure, my colleague Stuart McMillan, the local MSP, will make clear—a cornerstone of the local economy.

By taking Ferguson Marine into public ownership in 2019, we protected more than 300 skilled jobs and ensured that the Glen Sannox and Glen Rosa would be completed in Scotland. Our three core objectives remain unchanged: to complete the ferries that are required by our island communities; to support a highly skilled and dedicated workforce; and to secure a sustainable future for a shipyard that is of national industrial importance.

We share the committee’s ambition for a competitive, resilient and well-managed shipyard. In particular, I noted Richard Leonard’s point that

the committee wants the yard to succeed. That is a good point of consensus as we start the debate.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Will the Deputy First Minister give way?

Kate Forbes: I ask Craig Hoy to allow me to make a bit more progress, and then I will be more than happy to take his intervention.

We want Ferguson Marine to be capable of supporting Scotland's long-term maritime and economic interests. We also recognise the frustrations that are felt by Parliament, which the two previous speakers expressed, as well as those that are felt by island communities and, indeed, by the workforce due to the delays and cost pressures in the MV Glen Sannox and MV Glen Rosa projects.

The delivery challenges and governance issues at Ferguson's have been significant, and it is right that we address them openly. I will always apologise to our islanders, many of whom are my constituents, for the disruptions that they have faced in the ferry network as a result of delays at the yard.

With our support, the board of Ferguson Marine has, over the past year, taken sustained action to recruit fresh leadership, strengthen governance standards and improve oversight. A new chief executive, Graeme Thomson, who brings extensive shipbuilding and engineering experience, was appointed in May. He is tasked with driving completion of the MV Glen Rosa and developing a long-term commercial strategy for the yard.

Board governance has been strengthened, too. The Ferguson Marine board has introduced clearer segregation of duties and more structured agenda planning, and it has enhanced its programme of board and committee meetings. Four new non-executive directors with strong commercial and shipbuilding expertise have been appointed, and the board will continue to review its governance arrangements over the next 12 months to ensure that they remain robust.

Internal audit capability has also improved substantially. External expertise from BDO Global has enabled Ferguson Marine to address all high-risk and most medium-risk audit recommendations, with strengthened reporting to the audit and risk committee and improved corporate and project risk registers.

Nevertheless, I recognise the Public Audit Committee's concerns regarding earlier governance failings. I am very clear that the handling of certain matters during the financial year 2023-24—especially matters that were concealed from the board and from ministers—did not meet the standards that are expected of a

publicly funded body. When they were uncovered, the board alerted ministers and Audit Scotland and took appropriate steps to address them, including through the removal of the former chief executive.

The improvements that are now embedded across leadership, assurance, financial controls and governance represent a meaningful shift in capability and discipline at the yard.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD): Will the Deputy First Minister take an intervention?

Daniel Johnson: Will the Deputy First Minister give way?

Kate Forbes: I do not know whether Craig Hoy wants to come in at this point.

Craig Hoy: The minister is painting a rosy picture of the situation now that borders on recklessness and complacency. Is it not the truth that this has been a fiasco in procurement, a fiasco in governance and a fiasco in providing a strategic direction to the yard? Why, throughout all this, has no SNP minister resigned?

Kate Forbes: Craig Hoy was not listening if he thinks that I was painting a rosy picture in my comments a few minutes ago.

Let me turn to the delivery of the MV Glen Rosa. A joint project group now brings together Ferguson Marine, CMAL and Government officials to monitor progress and assess risks in real time.

Daniel Johnson: [*Made a request to intervene.*]

Kate Forbes: I ask the member to let me get through my points and, if I have some time, I will bring him in.

Lessons from the MV Glen Sannox are being applied to the MV Glen Rosa's build and commissioning stages.

Looking ahead, the future of Ferguson Marine must be built on strong leadership, improved productivity and a sustained pipeline of work. Incidentally, I think that most members across the chamber are agreed on that point.

The Government remains firmly committed to supporting the yard to compete for and win new contracts, and to secure its long-term sustainability. As part of that commitment, up to £14.2 million has been allocated over two years to support yard modernisation, subject to due diligence and commercial tests. That commitment has not changed, and, in that spirit, I am more than delighted to support Daniel Johnson's amendment.

To date, we have received 11 capital expenditure requests from Ferguson's, all of which have been scrutinised rigorously and approved. That targeted investment supports essential

repairs, health and safety improvements, and equipment upgrades. It is intended to assist with the delivery of the MV Glen Rosa and to build capacity for the yard to deliver future work more efficiently.

Access to the remainder of the modernisation funding requires a clear, board-approved long-term strategy, which will be evidenced through the revised business plan that is currently being finalised. I cannot remember whether it was Richard Leonard or Daniel Johnson who talked about that. However, it is important to note that that is the board's business plan, which will then be submitted to ministers.

The yard is actively pursuing commercial contracts, and it has been clear about the importance that it places on securing future public sector work. As Parliament knows—this is so important—shipbuilding is a competitive global market and any public contract award must fully comply with procurement and subsidy control rules. If it does not, we will have the worst of both worlds—no work for Ferguson Marine and ships not being built.

In conclusion, there is still much to do at Ferguson Marine, but strengthened leadership, firmer governance, targeted investment and clearer strategic planning provide a more stable foundation for the yard's future.

Presiding Officer, I will close there, considering the look that you are giving me.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Edward Mountain. You have around five minutes, Mr Mountain.

15:35

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Thank you very much, Presiding Officer. I will try to stick to my time, as the other speakers have.

I congratulate the Public Audit Committee on its detailed report. I do not recognise all the things that the convener said in his speech from the report, but the majority of them are there. I am delighted to see the forensic approach that has been taken by the committee, including my ex-colleague Jamie Greene, who was with me on the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee and has spent as much time as I have looking at the ferries. He and I, as well as this Parliament, have survived four chief executive officers, four chairs, seven cabinet secretaries and 10 ministers—quite a number, in other words.

Where are we now? As the Public Audit Committee has reported, we are with a yard with no orders; a yard that, going by the evidence that we have been given on the way that it is

structured, is going to need 25 to 30 per cent more money to produce a ferry than any other yard in the world; and a yard that needs about £14.2 million invested—I will come back to that last point, because at one stage we heard that it would be £25 million, so there seems to have been a bit of a reduction.

How have we got here? It is quite clear that there has been Government incompetence and management incompetence, and there is now no confidence from people who want to order ferries.

The Government incompetence goes back many years. First, who would award a contract to a company with no proven management experience in shipbuilding? I acknowledge that there might have been great experience among the workers, but the management of the yard would never have built a ship in their lives. Secondly, the Government allowed two ferries to be built at a yard that could not house two ferries, despite the fact that, as part of the contract, they had to be built at the same time. If that is not incompetence, I do not know what it is.

Then we got the arrangement of 15 staged payments for each of the ferries. What a great idea. Most yards across the world ask for five, but because the Government was keen to ensure that the person running the yard got as much support as possible, it agreed to 15 staged payments, and then managed to pay £82.5 million of the £97 million contract value when less than one ferry was built. That is incompetence.

What did we do then? When we got the yard into private ownership, we appointed Tim Hare to be the turnaround director. I know for a fact that, if you are a good turnaround director, you are never out of work. Well, Tim was the only one who was available. I also know that, if you are the turnaround director and you are six months into your job, you are no longer the solution to the problem—you are the problem. That was proved by the fact that, when he left, he had taken a huge amount of money from the Government and had not done much to turn the yard around.

We then got to the situation with the chair—I was amused by the convener's comments about this. The Government appointed a chair to run Ferguson Marine who had never built a boat in his life. He had pretty incompetently run Prestwick airport, and he gave speeches to the committee, which I heard a number of times and which I did not understand. They seemed to be a series of jargon-speak joined together into paragraphs that did not make any sense. Perhaps it was a code that the Government understood, but, as a human being, I could not understand it, so I am with the convener on that.

Where are we now? We have a yard with no orders. Western Ferries has taken its order and given it to Cammell Laird, and even the Government has turned the yard down, taking its orders to Turkey and Poland.

What we do not know at this stage, and what the Government has never come clean about, which I find quite bizarre, is what the unrecoverable costs of running the yard are. How much does it cost to keep the lights on, to pay the rates and to run the electricity in the yard? We do not know, but no more money is going to be paid for the ferries. We have been told that the yard has had all the money that it is going to get, apart from some contingency funds. So, apparently, the money that the yard has—although I do not see it in any bank account—is mythically going to multiply to cover its running costs until it gets a new order. I hope that the Government will tell us about that.

The Labour Party is calling for another £14.2 million to be invested in the yard.

Daniel Johnson: It is not extra.

Edward Mountain: It is an extra £14.2 million, because, as Mr Johnson will remember, we gave the yard £30 million—well, Derek Mackay did, without telling the Parliament or the minister who had ordered the ferries. The Labour Party is calling for another £14.2 million to be invested. The question is, who would invest £14.2 million—

Daniel Johnson: [*Made a request to intervene.*]

Edward Mountain: I cannot take an intervention from Mr Johnson unless the Presiding Officer will let me. I am coming to a conclusion.

The people of Scotland are being asked to invest that money when there are no orders in the order book and in the hope that an order will come along. To me, that is pretty dangerous and is a bit of a gamble. I hope that the Labour Party is going to explain that but, at the moment, I cannot support the amendment.

15:41

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I like Kate Forbes—I hope that my saying that does not damage the rest of her time in Parliament. When she was appointed Deputy First Minister, she was given a number of challenges—we could call them poisoned chalices—and Ferguson Marine was certainly one of them. Today, she tried her best. She tried to make a virtue of admitting the failings in 2023-24, although not all the other failings in 2014, 2015 and 2016, and she tried to make a virtue of admitting that there were board and management failures.

How many times do we have to listen to ministers telling us that it is nothing to do with them? They were the ones who appointed the board and brought in all those numerous directors to run the yard but, somehow, it is nothing to do with them. Well, the fact is that it is everything to do with the SNP, because it was the SNP that brought in its favourite businessperson to run and own the yard. When that failed, the SNP took over the yard, and that failed, with work that was over budget and over time, with painted-on windows and numerous other failures such as chains that were not long enough. There were all sorts of difficulties and problems, all because of the SNP and the decisions that it took in politicising the process.

Who was it that suffered? The workers. They have a tremendous reputation for doing a good job, but they were led by very poor management, appointed by the SNP. Taxpayers are hundreds of millions of pounds out of pocket when people are struggling to put the lights on and keep their homes warm, and we are told that it is nothing to do with the SNP. Of course, there are the islanders who cannot even get a ferry on time to go to work, get a hospital appointment or visit friends and family. All of that was on the SNP's watch.

The SNP needs to accept responsibility—Edward Mountain is right that no one has accepted responsibility enough to resign. We have been through numerous ministers, and they all run for the hills as soon as they can, but they are ultimately responsible, and somebody should pay the price, even if it is Kate Forbes.

Shipbuilding has its challenges, and it is difficult. I understand that it requires co-ordination and investment and that a drumbeat of work is needed to maintain the skills and good management, and to have security of investment and maintenance in the yard. We know that that is how it works. We know that we need a pipeline of work to give confidence to all those people that there will be work for the future—and there is a host of work. We are surrounded by seas, which are bustling with potential activity in relation to offshore wind, the remainder of the oil and gas sector and the Border Force. There is also BAE Systems just up the road, which is providing investment as a result of the UK Government investment in defence work.

A host of work is out there. What is the point of the Scottish Government owning a yard if it will not give it a future? At least plan for the future. Give the workers a chance to get some of that work, so that the yard can have a future.

The overall image is of a Government that we have transformed from cavalier—it was smashing champagne bottles and painting windows on the

sides of boats—to one that is too scared to even come out from under its shell. We need a proper Government that has proper plans for the future to give those workers a chance.

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

15:45

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): I thank my fellow Public Audit Committee members, the committee clerks and parliamentary staff for their work in producing the report, as well as those who gave evidence. The report is important not only to hold the Government and the management at Ferguson Marine to account but for the skilled workers at Ferguson Marine and the island communities whose lifeline services depend on having a modern ferry service.

Ferguson Marine has, in several different iterations, featured far too often in the Public Audit Committee's work over a number of years. I welcome the Scottish Government's on-going commitment to Ferguson Marine (Port Glasgow) and its long-term financial sustainability. The yard remains strategically important to Scotland's shipbuilding capability because it provides high-skilled jobs and supports our industrial base. The cost overruns and delays to the MV Glen Sannox have created reputational damage that will be difficult to overcome. The setbacks have impacted on confidence in the yard's ability to deliver on time and to budget, and island communities have felt the consequences most directly.

The report draws attention to a critical issue: there was no pipeline of future work beyond completion of the MV Glen Rosa, which is expected in Q2 2026. However, since the report, Ferguson Marine has signed a contract with BAE Systems to build three sections of a Royal Navy warship. The news is welcome, but it is important that the yard secures orders to build ships, not only fabrication work, as it is doing for BAE Systems. Without clarity on future contracts, the yard faces uncertainty that could affect employment and the value of the public investment that has already been made.

It is therefore disappointing that FMPG was unsuccessful in securing phase 1 of the small vessels replacement programme. It underlines the urgency of developing a revised business plan that is realistic, competitive and capable of securing future orders. The committee also found that urgent targeted investment at the yard is required if it is to compete effectively after decades of underinvestment. We must acknowledge the significant sums that have already been committed, but those must now be matched with

robust monitoring to ensure value for money and measurable improvement.

Financial monitoring, in particular, must be strengthened if future investment is to genuinely support long-term sustainability rather than simply manage short-term pressures. The report is clear: FMPG needs stronger oversight and tighter governance. The increased cost forecast of the MV Glen Rosa exposes serious weaknesses in project management and financial planning, which cannot continue. We need non-negotiable accountability at every level of the organisation, so I welcome the commitment from both Ferguson Marine and the Scottish Government to improve internal controls. Since our inquiries began, we have seen early signs of progress: engagement between the strategic commercial assets division, board and senior management has strengthened since the new chief executive came into post.

Governance has tightened around non-standard staffing arrangements, settlement agreements and exit packages. Importantly, the new chief executive now meets regularly with trade unions, which gives the workforce a direct and influential role in shaping decisions. I am pleased that the Scottish Government will ask the board to consider the committee's recommendation for greater union participation in governance structures. Those changes are welcome, but they will ultimately be judged on whether Ferguson Marine delivers vessels, restores confidence and secures new work.

Although mistakes have been made, the report provides a route to improvement. I am pleased with the committee's work and believe that our recommendations will significantly strengthen governance at the yard and improve its ability to secure future contracts. The Scottish Government must be held to account for its stewardship since the yard came into public ownership. That is right and proper, but I remain convinced that public ownership was the right decision. Without it, Ferguson Marine would have likely closed, taking skilled jobs, shipbuilding capacity and decades of expertise with it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude.

Colin Beattie: We must now ensure that Ferguson Marine becomes a modern and competitive shipyard that delivers for island communities and supports skilled employment.

15:49

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): The Public Audit Committee's unanimous report on Ferguson Marine is a damning indictment of SNP incompetence and failures in ministerial accountability. The SNP's nationalisation of

Ferguson Marine has resulted in islanders having to wait for delayed ferries and taxpayers having to foot the bill for the ballooning costs of new vessels. Since the yard was nationalised in 2019, the Scottish Government has poured more than £500 million of taxpayers' money into this fiasco. What do we have to show for it? Two ferries—not quite two, remember—that are years late, are massively over budget and have still not been delivered.

The latest figures are staggering: £47.9 million has been allocated for 2025-26, including £38 million for the MV Glen Rosa and £9 million for yard improvements; an additional £14.2 million has been allocated for modernisation; and the forecast cost of the MV Glen Rosa now sits at £185 million, up from £150 million last year. That is not just mismanagement; it is a scandal.

The SNP promised island communities lifeline ferries back in 2018. Instead, the MV Glen Sannox entered service six years late, and the MV Glen Rosa will not be delivered until quarter 2 of 2026—which is getting closer and closer, by the way—a full decade after the original contract. Meanwhile, businesses on Arran and the Western Isles suffer, and confidence in the Government collapses.

The Public Audit Committee's report exposes systemic failures: internal audit was so weak that assurance on governance could not be provided; exit packages exceeding £95,000 were paid without ministerial approval; and contractor arrangements bypassed board oversight, leaving the yard liable for £48,000 to HMRC.

What has been the SNP's response? More money, more excuses and still no ferries. Douglas Ross said it best when he said:

"This is the SNP's ferry fiasco—an embarrassment that has cost taxpayers hundreds of millions while islanders are left stranded. Ministers must stop hiding behind excuses and start taking responsibility."

As I have said previously, it should be a given that a nationalised shipyard wins a Scottish Government contract, but ferries that should be being built on the west coast of Scotland are instead being made in eastern Europe.

Beyond the numbers lies the human cost. Ena Burke, from Arran, told reporters:

"When you live on an island the ferry rules your life. It puts huge pressure on us. You find yourself sitting there crying, thinking I can't go through this anymore."

Local business owner Morag Kinniburgh said:

"People are saying they won't be back until the ferries are fixed because they can't risk being stranded. My takings are down 20 per cent—tourists have heard the horror stories and stayed away."

Barb Toab, from the Arran ferry action group, summed it all up by saying:

"We've gone beyond frustrated. We feel like we've been abused and ignored by the very people supposed to have our best interests at heart."

The committee is clear on what must happen next. First, Ferguson Marine and the Scottish Government must immediately publish a revised business plan and strategy to set out how the yard will secure sustainable work beyond that on the MV Glen Rosa. Secondly, all future investment must be subject to transparent governance and rigorous value-for-money checks, with clear monitoring of outcomes. Thirdly, the Government must implement stronger oversight and accountability to prevent further cost overruns, including by providing a detailed plan to deliver the MV Glen Rosa without any further delay.

This fiasco is not about shipbuilding. It is about trust. It is about a Government that cannot deliver its most basic promises. The SNP's failures have left islanders isolated, taxpayers fleeced and Scotland's reputation for shipbuilding in tatters. The Scottish Conservatives demand clear ministerial accountability for every penny that is spent and every broken promise. A revolving door of transport ministers, chief executive officers and chairmen, along with the lack of a coherent business plan, means that the future of Ferguson Marine is uncertain, and the blame lies with the SNP Government. Enough is enough. The time for excuses is over—it is time for answers.

15:54

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I was a member of the Public Audit Committee during its inquiry, and I fully support the recommendations that are set out in the report. I thank the convener for his flexibility in allowing me time to ask questions during the sessions.

The Scottish Government has invested in Ferguson's to protect jobs, finish the vessels and, ultimately, save the yard. The yard would not be in the position that it is in today if regular investment had been made during the decades before it went into liquidation, in 2014. We need to remember the fact that the number of overseas workers who are employed in naval construction yards has attracted criticism recently, with people arguing that it is being done at the expense of Scottish or UK workers and that it demonstrates the impact of a lack of investment in people. Willie Rennie talked about the pipeline and the drumbeat of investment and orders, and he is absolutely right about that.

To go back to the report that is before us today, thankfully there have been some personnel changes at the yard. For example, Duncan Anderson is the new acting chair of the board, and I wish Duncan well, while I hope that a permanent appointment to the position is found soon. The

current chief executive officer, Graeme Thomson, also took up his post in May, joining the yard towards the end of the committee's work. He can therefore be absolved of any of the legacy issues.

Edward Mountain: Will the member take an intervention?

Stuart McMillan: I am sorry, but I only have four minutes.

The Audit Scotland report was mixed, as was the committee's report, as the convener touched on earlier. Ultimately, the yard does need orders and, as section 18 of the report indicates

"there is no shortage of potential work."

Section 19 outlines the key steps to enable the yard to attract that, including four bullet points: rebuilding its competitiveness; sustained investment; effective management; and learning lessons from the recent tender bids.

It was foolish in the extreme for the yard management to decide to include the small vessel replacement programme 1 direct award order in the previous business plan. I know that I am not alone in thinking that. The subsequent wage bill was bloated, so its bids were always going to be exorbitant.

Notwithstanding the social value clause, which I am sure that Paul Sweeney will touch on in a minute and that has been touched upon many times in this chamber, the 65 per cent to 35 per cent ratio of quality and cost respectively gave the yard's board and management a prime opportunity to win the work. However, they did not just fail—they failed spectacularly, letting down the workers, the local community and the taxpayer.

The committee and anybody who will listen will have heard about the revolving door of highly paid senior personnel coming and going within months, costing a small fortune. That has not been a good use of taxpayers' money, and it certainly has not helped morale on the shop floor.

Daniel Johnson: Will the member take an intervention?

Stuart McMillan: No, I am sorry—I have only four minutes.

Sections 37 to 41 cover the then chair's frustration at the bidding process and the claim that UK yards cannot compete on a level playing field, despite section 38 suggesting that UK yards can win. As the convener touched on earlier, the then chair is quoted in section 41 as saying:

"There is work—a possible contract which involves a private individual. There are two or three other things in the pipeline that we are very enthusiastic about. We would definitely like to deliver some good news in the next six months."

There has been one bit of good news. That chair has gone from the yard, and I welcome that, because the yard management at that time lost orders and the workforce deserves better.

The yard needs investment and, notwithstanding some of the hyperbole that Daniel Johnson came up with earlier, I support that £14.2 million and want it to go into the yard, because it is crucial for the yard's future. The key to boosting the yard's efficiency and putting it in a position to secure some of that work that is mentioned in section 17 is for the board and the management to work effectively and efficiently and to turn our yard—because it is our yard—into a yard that we can all be proud of, and to support our workers.

15:58

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I commend the committee on its excellent work on Ferguson Marine and echo the sentiments of the convener in saying that the whole Parliament wants it to succeed. When we boil it down, the question is whether this country has the will to have a commercial shipbuilding industry. If we do, we need to be clear about what we need to do to achieve that objective national mission. Perhaps that was the Government's original aim when it saved Ferguson Marine from liquidation in 2014.

I visited the yard a year later as an account manager for Scottish Enterprise. To the best of my knowledge, I am the only member of the Parliament with any direct industrial experience of shipbuilding, so I speak with some direct insight. I visited the yard when it was largely under demolition and Ferguson's was constructing new facilities while simultaneously constructing a ship. Alarm bells immediately began ringing for me regarding the inherent risk of disruption to production during that process, challenges indeed emerged with hull 801 and hull 802, and the rest is history—as has been well rehearsed.

The question is where we go from here. We need to address some fundamental considerations. First Marine International, an excellent benchmarking organisation, has done a thorough analysis of Ferguson Marine's facilities from end to end—from steel coming into the yard to the ships coming out, outfitted, at the other end. It has set out a series of recommendations, which I understand are commercially confidential, so neither the Government nor Ferguson has disclosed that information in the detail that I would perhaps like to see. Clearly, however, there is a prescription for investments, which will allow the yard to achieve upper-quartile performance, as FMI would describe it—as I know, having worked with it before in world shipbuilding. That will involve elements such as a panel line, overhead

cranes, welding equipment, outfitting facilities and crange.

There are a number of obvious issues with the shipyard's layout. I walked the yard in great detail with David Tydeman, the former director, and we looked at some of the obvious issues. For example, in the module hall, the overhead cranes that were installed in the original upgrade in 2015 do not have a third hook, so it is not possible to lift and turn units of ships. Normally when you build a ship, you put the ceiling on the floor, you lay out the ventilation, the cabling and the complex pipework downhand, and you then turn the unit shipwise and stack it on the berth. It is not possible to do that in the module hall, because the cranes there were not specified properly. That is basic stuff—it is basic incompetence—which has cast a long shadow on the efficiency of the shipyard.

There are issues about the infrastructure that urgently need to be addressed. The £14 million or so of investment is so important for that reason, but I imagine that there is a lot more that needs to be done besides. The yard needs a comprehensive, end-to-end renovation to allow it to perform at an upper-quartile level. There are also wider considerations. It is basically not viable to build ships commercially in Scotland right now, because we do not address some of the fundamental issues.

Other countries have patient finance products offered through their national investment banks, which are standard across Europe. In Spain—where the Northern Lighthouse Board's most recent vessel has just been completed—there is a tax leasing arrangement, whereby you can effectively stagger your VAT returns over a long period, so that, in effect, you get a 20 per cent reduction on the up-front price of the ship. Poland offers patient loan finance to 100 per cent of the value of the ship through its state investment bank. That means not having to chase milestone payments to cover the overhead of the shipyard, which is exactly the mess that Ferguson's got itself into: chasing milestone payments while knowing that the design was not ready. It got itself into a right old guddle with that, which is why it is such a problem right now. If we had that patient financing, things could be carried out much more patiently and collaboratively.

There is also the issue of the demand signal. We are not converting state demand into domestic orders and domestic production, because of the laissez-faire procurement rules. We need to get that minimum 10 per cent social value baked into our future procurement cycles, which would create more of a demand signal to be converted into Scottish orders. If we can get some of those fundamentals correct, as well as specific

investments in the yard, we have a good chance of making a success of commercial shipbuilding in Scotland.

16:02

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I join others in welcoming the efforts and diligence of the Public Audit Committee. More than 10 years ago, two ferries were ordered from Ferguson's yard. The Glen Sannox has only recently entered service, and the Glen Rosa still has not been delivered. It is now six years since the SNP took Ferguson's into public ownership but, rather than a steady course being set for the yard, there has been a shameful tale of mismanagement from right at the very top of Government—yet not a single SNP minister has lost their job or resigned in the past 10 years of failure.

Meanwhile, islanders and other communities who are dependent on reliable ferry links have suffered from the SNP ferries scandal. I intend to speak to their interests today. The enormous cost to the taxpayer impacts us all, but it is in the communities for which the Glen Rosa and the Glen Sannox have been built, and all the other communities that are dealing with outdated or absent ferries, where there is real anger. That is anger not just at the delays but at the impact on those communities and frustration at the insensitivity and lack of focus from too many politicians here, in Edinburgh, who see islanders' concerns as peripheral at best and impertinent at worst.

The scale of the problem is already challenging, and it is only getting worse. The capital expenditure that is required to meet the cost of ageing ferries across Scotland is considerable. It is not only the west coast routes that are affected; the northern isles vessels are now more than 20 years old, and it has been estimated that replacing the Orkney inter-island ferry fleet alone will cost near enough £1 billion. Shetland is in the same boat—if members will excuse the pun—and the most recent Conservative UK Government had to step in to fund the new Fair Isle ferry.

It is not just the islands that are affected. Only last week, I raised local concerns over the future of the Corran Narrows crossing, which is one of Scotland's busiest routes, yet one for which the back-up vessel is now on the historic ships register.

A comprehensive long-term strategy—one that island and ferry-dependent communities can have confidence in—is long overdue. It should take an honest view of timescales and costs; recognise the impact of the neglect that has got us to where we are now; and put the needs of communities

ahead of procurement, greening the fleet and other incidental considerations that might be the priority of SNP ministers but are far from being the priority of islanders. It should look to new approaches but also ask fundamental questions about where the Government has been getting things so badly and disastrously wrong. It should look at the cost implications of privately chartering vessels, such as the MV Alfred, which has had its charter extended so many times to plug gaps in the west coast service that the bill to taxpayers is now more than the cost to build that ferry in the first place. It should look at whether the Government has considered fixed links seriously enough, where they are possible.

Ferguson's can be part of that strategy, but ministers must appreciate that, given its track record, the idea of further vessel contracts being awarded to the firm concerns the island communities that I represent. Those of us in Orkney with long memories remember that, in the early 2000s, Ferguson's won but then binned the contract for the MV Hamnavoe. The committee puts it bluntly. Although it recognises the work that has been done, it notes that

"the scale of historic failings highlights the need for continued vigilance."

I wish Ferguson's every success, but an enormous amount of work remains to be done to build public confidence in the company and to demonstrate its long-term viability. Ministers must never be allowed to forget that, although Ferguson's might employ hundreds of workers in Inverclyde, the company's failure, and that of successive SNP ministers, to deliver the promised ferries on time and on budget have impacted hundreds of thousands of islanders, island businesses and ferry users in communities right across Scotland. Their needs are non-negotiable, and any future strategy for shipbuilding cannot put what is good for Ferguson's ahead of what is good for the Highlands and Islands communities that I represent.

16:06

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP): I commend Richard Leonard, as convener of the Public Audit Committee, for insisting that the Parliament should debate the conclusions and recommendations that are contained in the committee's report, "The 2023/24 audit of Ferguson Marine (Port Glasgow) Holdings Limited". Although I was not a member of the Public Audit Committee at the time, I acknowledge the hard work of the committee clerks and my colleagues on the committee, both past and present. I am also grateful to the Auditor General for Scotland for his thorough and detailed report.

I will highlight the response from the Scottish Government to the Public Audit Committee dated 27 August 2025, in which the Deputy First Minister welcomed the committee's scrutiny and constructive recommendations. She acknowledged the frustration of the workforce, of the communities that will benefit from the ferries being built at the yard and of the Parliament, while sharing the committee's ambition for a competitive, sustainable and well-managed shipyard. She also recognised key aspects of the report that, rightly, highlight concerns around standards and governance. Those aspects include leadership, board governance, Scottish Government engagement and support, internal audit capacity, oversight of staffing and contracts, and staff engagement.

Governance, internal controls and contractor oversight in the early years clearly did not meet the standards that are expected of a publicly funded body. I therefore welcome the significant improvements that have since been made through close collaboration between the Scottish Government's strategic commercial assets division and Ferguson Marine's board of senior management. Ferguson Marine's leadership has been strengthened, robust governance processes are now in place and, crucially, transparency and accountability have improved. The Parliament has already heard that a new chief executive was appointed in May 2025, helping to drive the delivery of the MV Glen Rosa while learning lessons from the MV Glen Sannox project.

Other key aspects of the report focus on project delivery and financial controls, the future of the yard and reputation and performance.

Although it is crucial that lessons are learned and swift action is taken in the areas highlighted in the report and by colleagues from across parties, it must now be everyone's focus to ensure a successful future for Ferguson Marine.

I accept that there have been difficulties. However, let us not forget the key fact that the SNP Scottish Government stepped in and saved the yard to save jobs. We will never apologise for that. Had it not been for the actions of the Scottish Government, there was a real risk that Ferguson Marine would have ceased trading on the Clyde and lots of jobs would have been lost.

I urge members to compare the SNP Scottish Government's response to Ferguson Marine to the UK Labour Government's response to Grangemouth. The Labour Government at Westminster has failed to fulfil its election promises to bring forward the necessary investment and action to save Grangemouth. Anas Sarwar pledged on national TV to

"step in to save the jobs at the refinery".

His London bosses have, of course, found money to nationalise British Steel; they have found money for petrochemicals in Belgium; and they have found money to back the Ineos chairman's development of Old Trafford. However, they have repeatedly failed to invest in the workers and industrial future of Grangemouth.

Again, I thank the Public Audit Committee and the Auditor General for Scotland for their reports. I am confident that, with the Scottish Government's support, Ferguson Marine will once more be competitive on the open market.

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

16:11

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I join other members in thanking the Public Audit Committee's convener, Richard Leonard, and its members for bringing this important debate to the chamber. The figures that were laid bare in the Auditor General's 2024 report, and the conclusions in the report that the committee published subsequently, are stark.

The reports highlight multiple and repeated failings, including instability around changing leadership, inadequate internal auditing processes and serious weaknesses in oversight at the Ferguson Marine yard. Decisions were made on matters such as £95,000 exit packages without the required ministerial approval, which demonstrated a lack of oversight and scrutiny of a yard that is under public ownership. Concerns were raised about that—

Edward Mountain: I thank Neil Bibby for highlighting those issues. Does he agree that the appointment of Tim Hair and, subsequently, of Andrew Millar caused further problems for the yard, which it could have well done without?

Neil Bibby: Clearly, turnaround directors were appointed who did not turn around the yard, and significant payments were made to individuals from public cash. I heard the Deputy First Minister say that appropriate action was taken on those exit payments. If that is so, I wonder whether she will confirm how much of that money the taxpayer has received back.

There has been, of course, the well-publicised controversy over the delay to the vessels MV Glen Sannox and MV Glen Rosa, failing not only islanders but taxpayers. Compared with the original contract price, the combined cost to taxpayers now stands at an estimated £460 million for the yard's completion costs alone. The Glen Rosa, which was originally due in 2019, has been delayed again; its delivery date has been pushed into late 2026.

Clearly, there is a lot of blame to go round for the ferries fiasco. That applies to agencies, management and a merry-go-round of ministers. However, I want to be clear that the one group of people who have been blameless throughout are the workers, who are highly skilled and remain deeply committed.

As Paul Sweeney said, the question is where we go from here. The workers and their union, the GMB, have shown the leadership that has been lacking from others, and have been working to turn around the yard. That is why, alongside Inverclyde Council and a cross-party group of MSPs, the GMB has called for urgent investment in the yard to improve efficiencies and help to win future work. Paul Sweeney set out in detail the reasons why that is required.

The Public Audit Committee was clearly in agreement, stating in its report that

"urgent investment in the yard is essential if it is to become competitive and stand a realistic chance of securing new work. The yard's inability to compete effectively is, in part, the result of decades of under investment. Without addressing this, its long-term viability remains at risk."

However, in the months following those calls by the union and the committee, the pace of delivery of that investment has been glacial. Daniel Johnson pointed to the fact that only 5 per cent of the promised funding has materialised. Scottish Labour has repeatedly called for action and for that capital investment. It must be delivered as promised by the Scottish Government, to modernise the yard and provide it with a secure future.

Although the contract work with BAE Systems to build three sections of a Royal Navy warship is welcome, it does not secure the shipbuilding future that the yard and its workers urgently need. There is no doubt that those contracts and the significant investment in shipbuilding and defence from the UK Labour Government—I note that Joe FitzPatrick wants to concentrate on what the UK Labour Government is doing—demonstrate that we can help to secure the future of shipbuilding in the west of Scotland where there is the will to do so. The work from BAE has been a sign of confidence in the yard. However, we now need the Scottish Government to show a sign of confidence in the yard, too, not only with the capital investment, but with future Scottish Government work being awarded to the yard. The GMB has called for the yard to be awarded work from the small vessels replacement programme, specifically the replacement Lord of the Isles ferry, the original ferry having been successfully built at Ferguson's.

Ferguson Marine deserves an opportunity to begin to restore its reputation, which has been damaged by the ferries fiasco, with robust

oversight and checks being in place. The Scottish Government should not be sending ferry contracts to Poland and Turkey for smaller, simpler vessels when Ferguson Marine has a proud track record of building such vessels on time and on budget.

The people of Scotland deserve better than yet another report, this time from the Public Audit Committee, highlighting the consequences of more inaction by the Scottish Government. It is ultimately responsible for the ferries fiasco that has unfolded at the Scottish Government-owned yard, and it is for the Scottish Government to fix the mess of its making. Willie Rennie is absolutely right: the Scottish Government is scared to do the right thing now. To do that, it needs to listen to the skilled and dedicated workers at Ferguson Marine and their union, the GMB.

It is time for the SNP Government to move beyond the warm words and the letters of comfort that it continually sends to the committee along with vague commitments. It must invest in the yard and deliver the promised £14.2 million without delay to help it to win a long-term commercial pipeline and make it again a competitive bidder for domestic and international work. It must also show confidence in the yard—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Mr Bibby, you need to conclude.

Neil Bibby: —by awarding it future Scottish Government ferry work to safeguard Scotland's iconic shipbuilding industry. If the Scottish Government does not provide certainty—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Bibby.

Neil Bibby: —and show confidence in the yard, why should anyone else?

16:16

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): I thank Richard Leonard and the Public Audit Committee for bringing this important debate to Parliament and for their dogged work to make sure that we continue to expose what I think is one of the greatest scandals in the history of this Parliament.

It was a scandal of the SNP's making, because many of the problems that we see in the yard today stem from the initial corruption—I use the word in its broadest context—of the procurement process. As we have heard, those on-going problems include the real concerns about governance and financial management that have been identified by the Auditor General for Scotland, who has rightly taken more than a keen interest in the yard. I commend him for the dogged way in which he has independently ensured that he has kept abreast of developments at the yard. Not only has he probed the procurement of the

Glen Sannox and the Glen Rosa, but he has continued to probe the on-going management of FMPG and the wider issues at the yard, because public money is at their core. It is taxpayers' money, and all taxpayers should be concerned about the revolving door of highly paid senior managers who have sailed through the yard, seemingly incapable of turning it around.

When I visited the yard with the convener and the Public Audit Committee in 2022, one worker described the situation as a gravy train—or a gravy boat—that had sapped the morale of the workers, who felt as though they had been used and abused for political purposes. On bringing party politics into the matter, I say to Joe FitzPatrick that he is naive if he thinks that the SNP Government is not to blame. It is the SNP Government's inaction and its inability to remain on top of the matter that have led to two ferries costing millions and millions and millions of pounds of taxpayers' money and, all the while, have deprived islanders of their lifeline ferries.

The exit payments—the golden goodbyes—should be a matter of very real concern to ministers because, since the yard's nationalisation, ministers are meant to have been in constant contact with managers at the yard to ensure that such issues do not occur. It provides the minister with no cover to say, "We weren't aware—we didn't know." At the end of the day, ministers should have known. They should have had the governance and accountability processes in place to ensure that they knew.

Kate Forbes: I clarify that, as soon as ministers became aware, action was taken.

Craig Hoy: The ministers appointed the directors and the boards that allowed those things to happen. If ministers had been more engaged from the outset—in fact, if ministers had abided by the procurement processes that should have been in place, rather than simply giving the contract to their pal—the rot that set in at the beginning would not have continued all the way through.

Kevin Stewart: The way that Mr Hoy is speaking at the moment makes it sound as though he thinks that Government ministers should be micromanaging these contracts, which surely in itself would be very wrong?

Craig Hoy: I think that what Mr Stewart showed as a minister is that he could not manage anything, micro or otherwise.

On this Government's record, the problem is that, even after all that money has been spent and after the employees, particularly those at the yard whom we met, have poured their heart and soul into keeping the yard alive, it is quite clear that, because of the SNP's incompetence, there is a question whether the yard has a future.

As Mr Mountain said, we have a yard with no order book. I recognise the intention of the Labour Party, but to put a further £14 million into a yard that is, at present, failing would be naive.

Daniel Johnson: What should happen? If there is a failure to invest, does the member think that the yard should close?

Craig Hoy: I think that it is quite clear—get the present vessel finished to a satisfactory standard, get it out the door, get the order book and then seek to invest in order to be able to build the capacity to deliver on that. That would be the logical thing to do, because at present it looks as though we are throwing good money after bad.

At the end of the day, we all want to see Scottish industry thrive, but I asked Nicola Sturgeon the same question that I asked the Deputy First Minister. In November 2022, I asked her:

“How can it be that painters, welders and cleaners might lose their jobs as a result of the fiasco, but you keep yours?”—[*Official Report*, 4 November 2022; c 28.]

I appeal to the Deputy First Minister again. If she is to look the islanders and workers in the eye, can she not now say that a minister—any minister—should have paid the price for this? Perhaps the Deputy First Minister may be the leader that the SNP never had—the First Minister that they never had. Perhaps she could look those islanders in the eye and say, had she been First Minister and the leader of her party, whether she would have sacked the ministers responsible for this.

I welcome the committee’s view that on-going scrutiny is essential to ensure that public funds are managed appropriately in the future. However, the onus of that should not just fall on the Public Audit Committee or on the Auditor General, because it is SNP ministers who have got taxpayers into this position. It is for SNP ministers to now act decisively to end the waste; to finally get a grip of this yard; and to ensure that the governance and accountability arrangements are in place, that the yard is on firm foundations, that it is fit for purpose and that there is an order book to invest in. Otherwise, it will be hard-working Scots and islanders whom the SNP has taken for fools who will continue to pay the price for the SNP’s incompetence.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the Deputy First Minister, Kate Forbes, to close on behalf of the Scottish Government. You have up to seven minutes, minister.

16:23

Kate Forbes: I will start where Craig Hoy left off by talking about looking islanders in the eye. I

want to link that with what Willie Rennie said about ownership and responsibility. To be clear, I look islanders in the eye regularly. In fact, I have represented those very same islanders for almost 10 years.

I will say unequivocally in my closing speech what I said in opening speech—I apologise and the Government apologises for all the ways in which islanders have struggled with the lack of resilience in the ferry network, as linked with some of the delays at the yard.

In terms of assuming responsibility, it is crystal clear—all the debates and the scrutiny that has happened over the Ferguson marine yard and the number of times that I have responded to questions will leave the public in absolutely no doubt—that we take ownership of and responsibility for what has happened at the yard.

I was going to respond to every point that has been made. Unfortunately, however, all my scribbles basically demonstrate that the same four themes came through from all the speakers. I will therefore reflect on those four themes, which are future investment at the yard; direct award or order book; reputation of the yard; and leadership.

On the point about investment, we have—as I set out previously to Parliament—committed up to £14.2 million over two years to modernise Ferguson Marine. That is subject to full legal and commercial diligence. Edward Mountain put his finger on it when he talked about the importance of investment with contracts. It is clear, given the responsibilities that we have to abide by, that that investment needs to go hand in hand with the prospect of future income in and around contracts.

Daniel Johnson: Does the Deputy First Minister recognise that there is a chicken-and-egg question there—

Kate Forbes: Yes—yes, I do.

Daniel Johnson: Perhaps she can respond to that point.

Kate Forbes: Funnily enough, I use the phrase “chicken and egg” quite regularly in relation to investment. That is why we have taken a proactive approach in being very open with Ferguson Marine where there is investment that we can make now.

Paul Sweeney referred to some other forms of investment, such as investment in equipment—he talked about panel lines, for example—and we are very open to discussions about that. However, it is the board’s business plan. It has been revised recently, as Daniel Johnson might be aware, and it is very important that the funding is aligned with the prospect of future income in a very sensitive market, in particular with regard to subsidy control limits.

That funding of £14.2 million is still available—there has been no change in the Government's appetite to invest—but it has to be invested in line with subsidy control rules and in line with the business case. All those who have spoken in Parliament this afternoon have talked about the need for a future order book, and, if our focus is on the order book, that investment needs to follow the prospect of future orders.

That programme is partly under way. I appreciate what Richard Leonard said about the funding.

Richard Leonard: I suppose that one of the outstanding things is the length of time that it has taken. The quotation that I gave from the director general for economy, who reports directly to the Deputy First Minister, was from February this year. We are now nearly towards the middle of December. Why has it taken so long to get the business plan and to get action for the yard?

Kate Forbes: It is for three reasons. First, it is because of the revisions to the business case directly from the board. We engage constructively with the board, but it is the board's business case—that is important. We have had a new chief executive in the course of those months, and it is important that he is able to own plans for the yard. He brings a very commercial approach to it all.

Secondly, some of it is dependent on new work. We have been open to these discussions. The member will know, because it was covered in evidence to his committee and it is in the public domain, that the yard essentially tested the market on questions around pricing and interest. There was talk about it going up into procurement, and that was about testing the market. That work has been under way.

Thirdly and lastly, it is about future orders. The yard is in constant dialogue about potential future contracts. We will come in and support where we can and where it is appropriate to do so under the governance arrangements. Those are the three things that have to happen, and which are happening, in order to release that funding, but there is certainly no delay on our part. The funding is available—it is about drawing down that funding. There is no challenge in respect of that funding not being available.

Deputy Presiding Officer, I realise that I am getting short on time. Can I talk about the direct award? In the debate this afternoon, we have heard from members of all parties about the direct award. Shipbuilding is a competitive global market and any direct award of public contract must comply with applicable procurement and subsidy control rules, and must be capable of withstanding legal challenge. With regard to the small vessel replacement programme—as I have said

previously in the chamber—we must avoid having the worst of both worlds, in which there are legal challenges because of the process, and islanders do not end up with ships while, simultaneously, the yard does not have work.

We will consider vessel contracts case by case; that includes for MV Lord of the Isles. I hear what the Labour Party has said and what islanders are currently saying. It must be an appropriate and lawful route to market, and Transport Scotland is currently considering the business case and next steps in relation to the replacement for MV Lord of the Isles.

Deputy Presiding Officer, I am assuming that I am out of time to talk more generally about reputation—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have 50 seconds.

Kate Forbes: Wonderful. In general, with regard to reputation, this is critical. We recognise the reputational challenges that have been caused by past delays. There are clear signs that Ferguson Marine's standing has improved. The yard's technical bid for the first phase of the small vessel replacement programme was rated as very strong; cost was the only factor in the final decision. That should encourage us all to recognise not only the talent in the yard, but its potential to secure work as it nears the completion of the Glen Rosa—

Paul Sweeney: *[Made a request to intervene.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The Deputy First Minister is concluding.

Kate Forbes: Leadership will help enormously, and I have talked about the real progress that the yard has made.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Jamie Greene to close the debate on behalf of the Public Audit Committee.

16:30

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD): I thank all members for their contributions today; it has been a good committee debate.

As someone who was born and raised in Inverclyde, I always relish the chance to talk about Ferguson Marine. However, I do so in today's debate without any pleasure, because I am as disappointed as I am sad to have had to co-author the report that we are debating.

The report unearthed a catalogue of issues with regard to this publicly owned, apparently strategic asset that has been the source of so much attention over the past decade. Our report brought to light many issues: poor governance and leadership; the uncertainty of the future of the

yard; the secondment arrangements, which inexplicably lacked any financial transparency; the lack of adequate internal audit functions in the yard; and the highly valuable exit packages that were discussed. They were way above Scottish public finance manual thresholds and seemed only to serve as reward for failure culture in the yard's management.

Of course, there was that repeat offender, as Mr Leonard will know, in Public Audit Committee reports—a complete and severe lack of oversight on behalf of the Scottish Government's sponsorship department, the Scottish Government being the sole shareholder of that business.

It became clear to us that the yard's interests have not always aligned with the interests of the protagonists involved in this lengthy saga.

I will not repeat the convener's comments, but I will pick up from where he left off and talk about the future of the yard. When the committee went to Port Glasgow, it was clear that there is bags of potential for Ferguson Marine. We saw opportunities for small vessel shipbuilding, work on offshore wind tri-floaters, steel work and defence work. We saw a yard that was clearly willing to rise—and capable of rising—to the challenge to take on new projects and grasp new opportunities, but those opportunities have continued to pass it by. The small vessel replacement programme was a contract that the committee, the yard's board and even the Auditor General for Scotland acknowledged would be the key win to underpin the success of its business plan, but that business plan now lies defunct.

It became clear to everyone concerned that Ferguson Marine could never compete against yards in Turkey or Poland—not on price, anyway, because we rightly pay our shipbuilders well in this country and we have high standards of working equality. However, the chair of the board of Ferguson Marine sat in the Public Audit Committee and told us:

"We are not playing on an even field. No shipyard in the UK ... can hit the prices of overseas shipyards. It is impossible."—[*Official Report, Public Audit Committee*, 5 February 2025; c 42.]

However, the benefits of building ships in our own backyard and the immense social value that that brings have been consistently overlooked.

Stuart McMillan: Will the member take an intervention?

Jamie Greene: I do not have time at the moment—I will make some progress first.

That surely is the very ethos of another Government bill, the Community Wealth Building (Scotland) Bill, which this Parliament has been asked to consider. It makes no sense to observers

that CMAL, which is a state-owned public body, has set its bid-scoring criteria in such a way that it clearly excludes yards such as Ferguson Marine—a state-owned shipyard—from winning contracts. Ferguson can absolutely win on quality, but never on price.

We urge the Government to revisit that weighting so that Scottish shipbuilding is on an even footing with that of the rest of the world. If the issue is not addressed, the outcome will be fatal for the yard.

Stuart McMillan: Will the member take an intervention?

Jamie Greene: If I can have my time back, I will happily take interventions.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is no additional time, so it is up to the member.

Jamie Greene: Okay—if it is quick.

Stuart McMillan: What Jamie Greene has just said is very different from the fact that Cammell Laird won the order from Western Ferries, which Ferguson, as we know, was bidding for but did not get, because Cammell Laird was far more competitive.

Jamie Greene: I will come on to how the yard can be competitive, because the committee looked at that.

There are opportunities now with MV Lord of the Isles and the second stage of the small vessel replacement project, as well as many other contracts, which will undoubtedly go abroad if the yard is not fit for purpose.

The Deputy First Minister seems to agree that the yard needs new work, but she failed to acknowledge in her comments that the primary source of such new work is the front benches on which she currently sits. The committee called for the yard to get sufficient investment to be upgraded, which it must do to stand any realistic chance of securing new work. We went as far as to say that we have

"significant concerns about the ongoing uncertainty"

regarding the yard's long-term financial sustainability once the Glen Rosa has set sail.

That point is where I will address the Labour amendment. It raises a fair point. Of course, of the £14 million that was promised by the Government, less than around £500,000 has actually been delivered to the yard. However, it is clear from the correspondence that I received from the yard that that is because it failed to request the true value that is available to it.

That leaves a worrying end result: we could be in a use-it-or-lose-it scenario because that money cannot be rolled over to the next financial year.

Therefore, the yard must spend what is available to it to upgrade the business. We must also see an upgraded and revised business plan, but one that, this time, is realistic and accounts for the loss of the contract that was not awarded to it—a contract on which the previous business plan was heavily predicated.

Money is not all that the yard needs. Of course, it needs new orders, but the restoration of the yard's reputation is paramount as well. The past few years have been painful for the yard—I think that we all accept that. The cost overruns and delays to the Glen Sannox and the Glen Rosa are significant, and they come at a huge price not just to the public purse but to the islands that those vessels are meant to serve. No one now truly believes that the Government will ever say no to further asks for money to finish the job of building the Glen Rosa, because the whole project is simply too far down the line to stop bankrolling it at this late stage.

The reality is that the yard's reputation can be rebuilt only through the demonstrable and successful delivery of future projects—projects that are built on time and on budget. However, that means being awarded or, indeed, winning contracts in the first place. If the Government is as confident in the yard's abilities as many of us are, it must prove it.

The committee had no view on the issue of direct award—others do—but it begs the question: what is the point of having a publicly funded state-owned asset such as a shipbuilding yard and then consistently overlooking it when issuing contracts? It is an injustice to the talented workforce at the yard that there is no medium or long-term forecast or future for the yard that listens to the workers themselves.

The Ferguson Marine shipyard has a future. Its failure is not inevitable, but neither is its success. Although the Public Audit Committee was critical about the yard's current position, we were also clear in our recommendations about what needs to change for it to succeed. A bright future is possible: a yard that bustles with a long line of orders, makes money and pays for itself, invests back into its workforce, creates good local jobs, invests in the Inverclyde economy and gives a big boost to the Scottish national economy. It can be a yard that puts us back on the world map as a proud shipbuilding nation.

We were unanimous in our conclusions and recommendations and, equally, we were unanimous in our criticisms of all parties. If the yard fails and if it closes its doors for ever, that will not be an embarrassment for the Government; it will be a national shame. We cannot let that happen.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the Public Audit Committee's report, "The 2023/24 audit of Ferguson Marine (Port Glasgow) Holdings Limited".

Veterans and Armed Forces Community

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-20050, in the name of Graeme Dey, on support for the veterans and armed forces community in Scotland. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

16:38

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey): It is my pleasure to present the Scottish Government's ninth annual update to the Parliament on our support for Scotland's veterans and armed forces community. Before I reflect on the report, it is important to acknowledge what has brought us here today, which is our invaluable armed forces community, veterans, serving persons and their families, who should have access to the help, support and public services that they need, when they need them.

The impact of service life for the vast majority of people is positive, but we know that some face unique difficulties and risks as a result of their time in the military. I know that, for older veterans, for example, accessibility of services and support can present particular challenges that demand that we think outside the box and consider innovative ways to support them.

As in previous years, alongside this debate, we have published our annual report, which details fully what we and our partners have done throughout the past year. The debate is intended as a welcome opportunity to highlight successes and the progress that has been made by that collaborative effort, and to offer members the chance to challenge us on where we can do more. In the time that I have available, I hope to cover as many aspects of all that as possible.

This year, I was delighted to attend the launch of the veterans in-service injury network in Inverness. VISIN will provide independent expert clinical review of military service-related injuries that remain a concern despite treatment, either previous or current. There have already been nine referrals to the service in just a few short weeks, five of which were progressed to the multidisciplinary team.

The issue of waiting times for serving personnel has also come to the fore recently. We are aware that such delays can affect operational readiness and continuity of care and, in some cases, can lead to medical discharge due to prolonged deployment ineligibility. I understand that that is an

issue in Scotland as well as in England and Wales.

To identify solutions that work within the context of the national health service in Scotland, my officials are engaged with Ministry of Defence counterparts and are exploring direct referral pathways from defence medical services to NHS services, to help to tackle issues, reduce delays and improve access.

I take this opportunity to thank the Scottish Veterans Commissioner, Susie Hamilton, who is in the gallery today, for all of her hard work over the past three years, and for continuing to hold us to account for delivering our support to the veterans community.

A few months ago, the commissioner published her latest progress report, summarising our delivery against the recommendations that she and her predecessors had set out for us. I was delighted that, for the first time, we had no red assessments regarding progress against all the recommendations, which, at times during my tenure as veterans minister, has seemed as aspirational as Scotland reaching the world cup finals. However, both of those goals have been achieved—and in the same year. As the commissioner highlighted, work remains to be done, and we cannot—we will not—allow ourselves to become complacent.

Uptake of the general practice armed forces and veterans recognition scheme remains unacceptably low, and it is vital that it improves to ensure that as many veterans and armed forces families receive the understanding and tailored care that they deserve in primary healthcare settings.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Does the minister agree with me and Forces Children Scotland about the challenge that children of service people face in this transition? Does he agree that children should be explicitly mentioned and targeted in the whole-family wellbeing support that the Scottish Government is championing?

Graeme Dey: Martin Whitfield makes a reasonable point.

I go back to the point that I was making when I took Martin Whitfield's intervention. Work is under way to intensify promotion of the scheme in question, with the help of some of our key stakeholders. I hope to report that significantly more practices have signed up in the coming months.

Plans are now progressing quickly for our veterans mental health and wellbeing pathway, and we hope to have in place the pilot for that quite soon. It is essential that we balance pace with quality and ensure that the pathway meets

the complex needs of veterans and builds confidence in the system from day 1.

The number of veterans who are assessed as homeless has decreased by 3 per cent over the past year, while the proportion of veterans in the overall number of households that are assessed as homeless or threatened with homelessness has remained at 2 per cent, which is roughly proportionate to the veterans' population as a whole. However, we know that some veterans can be at greater risk of homelessness, and that is recognised in our homelessness strategy and in our housing emergency action plan.

Just last week, I met the Scottish Veterans Commissioner and Màiri McAllan, the Cabinet Secretary for Housing, to discuss the work that is under way with key stakeholders and to agree the best approach to progressing the recommendations in the veterans homelessness prevention pathway relating to local authorities and social landlords. In addition, we are working with Veterans Scotland's housing group on prioritisation of the key pathway recommendations for the Scottish Government.

Parliament passed the Housing (Scotland) Act 2025 this year. The legislation will, along with vital partnership working with our stakeholders, help us to support our veterans in their times of need. We continue to engage with underrepresented groups in the armed forces and veterans community in Scotland to ensure that their needs and experiences are better understood and supported.

As colleagues will be aware, last month the commissioner published a short report into the bereaved armed forces community. Although the report did not include any formal recommendations, we will be taking forward, as a priority, work to raise awareness of the bereaved armed forces community and the need, as she rightly pointed out, to ensure that they are explicitly referenced and considered within the development of policies, guidance and services, where that is appropriate.

I and the Government remain committed to providing the very best support for our veterans, their families and service families. The report sets out the breadth of work that has been undertaken over the past year and demonstrates our commitment to ensuring the veterans and their families suffer no disadvantage as a result of their service.

I give my heartfelt thanks to all those who contributed to this work—our partners in the public, private and third sectors, and the many individuals who worked tirelessly every day to support our armed forces community. Together, we will continue to build a Scotland that recognises the contributions of our veterans and

their families and ensures that they are supported to lead fulfilling lives.

I look forward to members' contributions to the debate, and to responding to them in due course.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, can you move the motion?

Graeme Dey: I move,

That the Parliament acknowledges and recognises the importance of Scotland's veterans and Armed Forces community and greatly values the significant contribution that it makes to society; recognises that the skills and experiences that it brings enrich communities; continues to support the Veterans Strategy Action Plan, which has a clear vision to ensure the best outcomes for veterans and their families; notes the progress made in delivering the action plan and the future work to develop an updated plan following the publication of the new UK-wide Veterans Strategy; welcomes the findings of the Scottish Veterans Commissioner's latest progress report and acknowledges both the successes she identifies and the areas where further work is needed, and agrees that the Scottish Government should continue to work with partners across the public, private and third sectors to ensure that the veterans and Armed Forces community receives the access to support that they need.

16:45

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I thank the minister for giving Parliament the opportunity to have a debate on veterans, and I thank Susie Hamilton for the work that she has done over the past year. I am delighted to say that I, too, welcome the work that the Scottish Government has undertaken to help our veterans—the veterans who stood by us.

I do not need to remind Parliament that national service stopped being a requirement in 1960 and that the last national serviceman probably left the services in 1963. Many of us do not know how many veterans are out there. We probably do not know that a person we are talking to is actually a veteran until we see them wearing a medal at a remembrance Sunday parade, whether it be a campaign medal or a medal for valour.

We could probably all put our hands on our hearts and name some of the conflicts that our soldiers have been involved in since the second world war. We could probably reel off Northern Ireland, the Falklands, the first Gulf war, the second Gulf war, Afghanistan and probably a few others. However, do we really know the extent to which our armed services have been involved in those conflicts and where they have been deployed? I can list a few. We have been involved in 45 official conflicts and many others besides. We could talk about Libya, Sierra Leone, Yugoslavia, Belize, Gambia, Angola, Oman, Tanzania, Uganda, Cyprus, Malaya, Kenya, Aden and many more. I will not list them all, but there is a huge amount of them.

To my mind, we owe a debt of gratitude to those veterans who stood by us, fought on our behalf and, when they were not fighting, helped to keep the peace in the places that I have mentioned. They allowed us to rest easy in our beds at night, so we owe them the ability to have a bed themselves. After the 1914-18 war, we gave many returning soldiers smallholdings across the country to allow them to come back to a house and to farm the land. I think that that was a great idea. Over the past 110 years, Veterans Housing Scotland, which we know a lot about, has been helping veterans to obtain housing.

I remind members that, currently, about 176,000 people across Scotland have served our country. Fifty per cent of those are over 65 years of age. In my area, in Moray, we have a high proportion of veterans—about 9 per cent of the population. In Highland, the proportion is slightly less, at 5 per cent. Those veterans play a huge part in society. Their great contribution has been recognised in the NHS and Police Scotland reports that we have read, which recognise that veterans bring so much to us.

Businesses across the country recognise the skills that veterans bring, whether in problem solving or in being worldly wise when they look to address problems. In my opinion, we need to encourage veterans to move to and settle in Scotland, and to help them do that. That is why the Conservatives have lodged an amendment that seeks to increase the availability of housing for veterans who move back here.

In the reports that she has presented the Scottish Veterans Commissioner makes the point that we need to do more on local housing strategy. In the amendment lodged on behalf of my party, I propose that the Scottish Government should talk to the UK Government to see whether any armed forces married quarters could be made available to retiring service personnel to facilitate them moving back to Scotland, possibly at a reduced rent for a period of up to a year, so that they can bring their skills back here and we can seek to use them.

Graeme Dey: Will the member give way?

Edward Mountain: If I have time, I will give way to the minister.

Graeme Dey: I apologise, as I should have said in my opening speech that the Government will be happy to support Mr Mountain's amendment in the spirit in which it is intended.

Edward Mountain: I am delighted to hear that. There is potentially a huge benefit. I realise that there might be some nervousness when I mention the issue, given the state of the married quarters, but let us be clear that they are empty at the moment, and my proposal would provide a chance

to gain some rent from them and for Scotland to benefit from them.

I will hold up my hands up and say that I tried to raise the issue with the previous UK Government but I got very little traction when I did that. However, I stand by the fact that the issue is worth investigating. All that I am proposing is that the Government looks at the option, so that we can get more veterans to come back to Scotland.

Given the spirit in which the amendment has been lodged, I hope that the Labour Party will support it. Scotland benefits from all the attributes that veterans bring back, most of which will help us in our businesses and everyday life.

16:51

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I congratulate the Scottish Veterans Commissioner, retired Lieutenant Colonel Susie Hamilton—sorry, it is of course Lieutenant Commander Susie Hamilton, who was a naval officer, not an army officer, nor a marine—on her excellent progress report and on her work over the past few years in holding the Government and the Parliament to account on their efforts to improve the lives of veterans across the country.

As Edward Mountain said, around 4 per cent of our population are veterans. There is significant regional variation, with Moray top of the league table, given the concentration of Royal Air Force veterans in that community. It is important for us to recognise the significant regional focus. We should also recognise that half of those in the veteran population in Scotland are of working age and that they represent a significant store of value as citizens of this country. They are an immense store of knowledge and national resilience.

I have just returned from the international sea power conference held in London yesterday, at which the First Sea Lord set out, in stark terms the existential risk to the country's safety that is posed by other state actors, most notably Russia. Given that situation, we need to consider national resilience in a way that we have not done in recent years, and our veterans community offers a significant vanguard group for us in that regard.

We must also consider the mixture of veterans in our community. Technically, I am a veteran, and 22 per cent of our veterans are reservists, so it is not all about regulars. We must also consider those who fought in hot conflict zones but who have not necessarily had the same support as their regular counterparts on returning from those zones. Especially for people around my age, we need to think about how they have dealt with that, the mental health impacts and the longer-term effects that it has had.

It is important to note that Lieutenant Commander Hamilton's points in the report are all positive—there are no red actions. That is commendable and shows the united front that the Parliament has had in supporting the Government's efforts in recent years, with this being the ninth debate on the issue, as the minister pointed out.

Lieutenant Commander Hamilton has, however, highlighted a number of key actions. She says that we need

“a more formalised structure to provide strategic leadership and direction in employability, skills and learning.”

That could be led in the public sector to a much greater degree than it is, particularly through organisations such as Social Security Scotland and the national health service, which are among Scotland's biggest institutional employers. We could see a lot more formal direction and strategic leadership in public sector organisations to demonstrate best practice.

The commissioner recommends that we need

“Stronger oversight and clearer collaboration across public, private and third sector partners ... to drive sustained improvement.”

That is a reasonable recommendation, and I hope that the Government will set out detailed responses on how it intends to make progress on it.

On Mr Mountain's point about the focus on veteran homelessness and housing, it is important that we recognise the risk there, particularly for veterans. A nomadic lifestyle typifies the service person, and it is important to provide stability for those who move on from service, particularly regular service. His proposal is, therefore, reasonable. We have liaised with UK Government colleagues on that issue and are minded to support the amendment. It is important that we work across Governments to realise that objective.

The Labour UK Government has announced a new UK-wide veteran support system called Valour, which is backed by £50 million of funding, to ensure that veterans have easier access to essential care and support. It is based on best practice, most notably that developed by the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen & Families Association, and Glasgow's helping heroes service is an excellent benchmark of excellence. Scotland already has a one-stop-shop casework service at which veterans can present themselves without facing any impediments to receiving tailored support from people who are veterans themselves. We could do with having more of that excellent model in this country. The Valour scheme was established very much in that spirit. It is important to note that £27 million of the funding is going live for local bids, to turbocharge the system and

ensure that veterans have easier access to essential care and support through the new support hubs. I hope that the Scottish Government will engage with UK Government counterparts to ensure that we make the most of that funding in Scotland and establish a comprehensive network in this country.

Graeme Dey: The Scottish Government is very willing to engage on that point. However, along with some of our stakeholders, we have found getting information from the UK Government on the form that the system will take, and some of the deadlines imposed, quite challenging. Will Paul Sweeney bring any influence to bear that he has with his colleagues in London to encourage a more collaborative approach on the issue that would reflect Scottish circumstances?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please bring your remarks to a close, Mr Sweeney.

Paul Sweeney: In the spirit of collaboration, I am more than happy to work as best as I can to be useful in liaising with UK Government colleagues on that. The recent announcement on defence housing in particular, and how we carry that over as part of our work with the veterans community, is really important. We will continue to work to support the work of the Scottish Veterans Commissioner and the Government, and we will be happy to support the Government's motion, as amended, today.

16:57

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I thank the 176,000 UK armed forces veterans who live in Scotland, and I would also like to mention the one in 30 adults in Shetland who have served in the UK armed forces. To all those veterans, we owe a debt of gratitude, and it is important that their service to the country is recognised and not forgotten. Let me be clear in saying at the outset of my remarks that, when the state fails our veterans in the support that they need, it is a stain on our society.

I thank Susie Hamilton, the Scottish Veterans Commissioner, for providing an update in her independent progress report. I note her assessment that the general practice armed forces and veterans recognition scheme continues to have a disappointingly low uptake. Increasing the number of GP practices that participate is essential to achieving equity of access.

NHS Shetland signed the armed forces covenant in 2022, and Brian Chittick, the organisation's current chief executive and armed forces champion, has previously served.

On housing policy, the commissioner highlights the fact that progress on the veterans

homelessness prevention pathway was poor last year, and that a faster pace and greater scale of delivery are required to meet reasonable timescales. She also calls for a more formal structure to provide strategic leadership and clearer collaboration between public, private and third sector partners to achieve long-term improvement.

I want to say a wee bit about veteran entrepreneurship. Veterans bring a depth of experience, discipline and leadership to Scottish businesses that is unmatched in most sectors of civilian life. Our most junior soldiers, sailors, marines and aviators complete a minimum of 13 weeks of intensive, world-class training that equips them to be exceptional employees from day 1. A corporal or equivalent will undergo a further 16 weeks of leadership instruction in unforgiving, high-pressure environments. By the time someone reaches sergeant rank, they will have completed an additional 12-week leadership and management course that qualifies them to manage millions of pounds-worth of equipment, lead teams and run complex operations that, in civilian terms, look remarkably like running a business unit. Those are the people who are entering or returning to our civilian workforce. Their contribution to Scotland's economy lies not only in the skills that they bring, but in their mindset—they have a distinctive entrepreneurial drive, a habit of solving problems and a determination to get things done.

The Scottish Government does not currently collect data on veteran-owned businesses, but estimates from UK-wide research suggest that there might be about 24,000 veteran-run firms in Scotland. Those businesses generate jobs, innovate across sectors and contribute directly to regional economic growth. In Shetland, we can point to the example of the SaxaVord spaceport as an entrepreneurial vision that has been realised by ex-RAF personnel. Without Scotland-specific data, we cannot fully understand or support that economic engine, so the Scottish Government should look to address that.

My party would like more to be done to help current armed forces families. In England, the service pupil premium, which was introduced by the Liberal Democrats in 2011, recognises that children from armed forces families often face disrupted schooling, frequent moves and periods of parental absence. The policy provides targeted funding to help schools to support those pupils academically and emotionally, but no equivalent system exists in Scotland. Increasingly, service personnel live and work separately from their families, sometimes commuting weekly across the country, which puts enormous strain on support networks and could leave families isolated socially, educationally and emotionally. By not

offering a Scottish equivalent to the service pupil premium, we are asking armed forces families to absorb those pressures alone, we risk undermining the wellbeing of children who already face greater instability than most, and we are missing an opportunity to ensure that Scotland remains a welcoming and supportive place for those who serve.

If Scotland values the contribution that veterans make to our economy and the sacrifices that their families make on our behalf, we must match that sentiment with action. That means recognising the unique pressures that armed forces children face and ensuring that our policies do not fall behind those in the rest of the UK when it comes to supporting those who have served and those who still do.

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

17:02

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I like talking about veterans in the chamber, because it is one of the few areas in which there is fairly broad consensus. There is clear agreement among all MSPs that nobody should be worse off for having served in the armed forces. I say this as someone who has never been a minister, so I might need to be corrected, but, when it comes to supporting our veterans, there seems to be a level of co-operation and constructive working between the Scottish and UK Governments that does not always extend to other policy areas.

Over a number of years, the Scottish Veterans Commissioner's office has produced a series of insightful and informative reports that have delved into what we can do to better support our veterans in particular areas, including education, skills and learning; making a home; health and wellbeing; community and relationships; the legal and justice systems; and, most recently, financial matters. All the recommendations in those reports are sensible and deliverable, which means that there tends to be agreement that they should be delivered.

It is helpful that, in the commissioner's progress report, we can see the status of all the recommendations from the reports. The progress report clearly shows that progress has been made and that, for the first time, progress has been recorded against every extant recommendation. That means that we can also see where more work is needed.

A particular area for improvement, which is mentioned twice in the news release covering the report, relates to the GP recognition scheme, take-up of which has been described as "much lower than expected." The recognition scheme aims to ensure that there is a designated practice lead in

every general practice across Scotland, but, as I understand it, the figure currently sits at about 5 per cent. Given that the minister is in the chamber, I would be keen to take an intervention from him so that he can set out what the Government has done to improve uptake and what else can be done.

Graeme Dey: Jackie Dunbar is absolutely right. I struggle to find the words to describe my view on the fact that only 45 general practices have registered for the scheme and only 186 individuals have successfully completed the course. That is hugely disappointing.

The Government has done quite a bit of work in the past year, but I will not list it all, because the real point is what we do now to resolve the issue. Among other things, we will seek to have the scheme formally accredited so that participants receive professional development points for completing the course. My officials are exploring opportunities to work with Scottish deaneries to incorporate the scheme into GP and secondary care training programmes, so that we ensure that it becomes part and parcel of learning for full-time employment.

Once uptake has increased—I certainly hope that it will—officials will develop a quality improvement report to assess the effectiveness of the training and identify opportunities to enhance support for practice leads and the armed forces community. Fundamentally, this is a matter for our GPs.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. That was quite a lengthy response, and I am conscious that it is Ms Dunbar who has the floor. You have only 40 seconds left, Ms Dunbar.

Jackie Dunbar: I welcome what the minister has just said about the work that is being done on the process. While we are talking about recognition schemes, I point out that, as employers, our individual MSP offices—not us, but our offices—can sign up to the defence employer recognition scheme. My office manager has already done that for my office, and we are at bronze award level. He will email all offices to show them how it can be done.

I reiterate that the majority of veterans will never need support, and that their experience and work ethic mean that they bring a lot to our workplaces and their communities. However, some will need support, and I am pleased that we are agreed across the chamber that we need to get to that place so that Scotland is seen as a destination of choice for those who leave our armed forces.

17:06

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I declare an interest: I am a practising NHS GP. I also speak today as a Glasgow MSP who represents a city with a proud service history, with Royal Navy ships built on the Clyde and high-tech military equipment still produced at Thales, and it is home to many veterans and their families.

I begin by putting on the record my deep gratitude to our veterans, serving personnel and their loved ones. We welcome the work that has gone into the veterans strategy action plan, the Scottish veterans fund and the Scottish Veterans Commissioner's progress report. At the outset, I stress that the majority of veterans go on to live quite normal lives and require little or no help, but some require help.

It should be recognised that many charities and third sector organisations, not least Poppyscotland and Legion Scotland, do outstanding work, often stepping in where the state has struggled to keep up. In Glasgow, I have engaged directly with Community Veterans Support and the armed forces charity SSAFA, which are both based in Govan. They are clear that veterans still need more practical help, guidance and support when it comes to healthcare, social services and housing.

Community Veterans Support emphasises the importance of stronger social support to tackle isolation and help people to build a new life in civilian society. Its experience on the ground should shape our policy. My experience as a GP, and what veterans tell us, is that, while the strategy is welcome, delivery is what really matters. If we are serious about the armed forces covenant, the fundamentals of health and social care in Scotland must work for veterans and their families in practice, not just in principle.

Let us look at access to primary care. Scotland simply does not have enough GPs. We have many more registered patients than we had a decade ago, but the number of practices has fallen. Veterans who are trying to register with a practice or to get timely appointments for physical or mental health concerns are often competing in an overstretched system that is already under real pressure.

Paul Sweeney: The member might have noted that the commissioner said that she was disappointed by the slow uptake of the general practice armed forces and veterans recognition scheme. As a practising NHS GP, does he have any personal insights on what might improve uptake?

Sandesh Gulhane: I was going to intervene on the minister on that. It is a question of making sure that general practitioners have the time to do that. There are a lot of things that we would love to

learn and do, but we simply do not have the time, because we are firefighting all the time.

On mental health, the Government is keen to point to the forthcoming veterans mental health and wellbeing pathway. I welcome that work, but colleagues will understand the frustration that, in 2025, we are still talking about the phased launch of a pathway rather than veterans already receiving care through it. There are still too many who are bounced between services, who have to retell their story and fight for assessment and support that should be proactively offered.

Social care is another critical part of the covenant, and the level of delayed discharge remains far too high. We must remember that veterans include older veterans who are stuck on the wards, unable to go home. We can and must do better by them. The Royal British Legion and Poppyscotland's "Keep the Covenant Promise" campaign reminds us how far we still have to go, highlights the gaps in the covenant duty in areas such as social care, early years support and further and higher education, and calls for the duty to be delivered consistently, properly funded and robustly measured across the UK.

We support the motion, but we say to ministers and other colleagues across the chamber that we should work together to make the covenant real. Let us improve access to primary care, ensuring that mental health pathways are delivered on time and that persistent problems in social care are tackled, so that hospitals are not the default of our older veterans. Our amendment is a practical example of that approach.

The armed forces kept their promise to us, so it is time that we kept our promise to them.

17:10

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I have spoken in this debate on a number of occasions over the years, and I am pleased to do so again today. First, as others have done, I thank all those who have served in our armed forces over the years, and I thank those who are currently serving. As Paul Sweeney said, we live in difficult times, and it is important that we recognise the role that our armed forces and service personnel play in our country.

I note that the UK Government recently launched a veterans strategy—the first in seven years, I think—and I welcome that. I heard what the minister said earlier, and I would hope that the Scottish and UK Governments will work together, specifically in an area such as this. If they can work together, those from Scotland who have served and who are serving in our armed forces will reap the rewards.

I note that the report from the Scottish Veterans Commissioner shows good progress, and that is definitely to be welcomed. Over the years that I have talked in these debates I have often mentioned housing. We know that we have a massive housing challenge. In my experience in Fife over the past year or two, in cases where I have been approached by people coming out of the armed forces, Fife Council housing services, despite the massive challenges that they face, have been really good, working with veterans to ensure that they get housing. There is a lot of good stuff happening in local authorities, although I note from her report that the commissioner says that we need to adopt

“a faster pace and greater scale of delivery”.

I have not heard much in recent years about the armed forces champions; I have spoken about that in the past. My experience when I was the leader of Fife Council was that the armed forces champions played a pivotal role in ensuring that local authority services were focused. The minister, when he is summing up, might want to mention something about that. It is a crucial area. Local authorities have a major role to play in any strategy in the future.

I note what the commissioner said about a more joined-up approach for education, training and skills. There needs to be a more strategic approach. Colleges play a key part in how we organise and develop a more strategic approach to bring all the key players together. There is a role for employers, too. When people come out of the armed forces, they should be able to link into the local area that they are going back to live in. There should be some kind of strategic group there, engaging with employers, colleges and so on for the skills that people may need.

I know that the armed forces do so much before individuals leave but, if somebody is coming back from a base down in the south of England back to Fife, for example, we need some kind of collaboration at the local level, working with the armed forces to ensure that the support goes in, as well as working with employers.

Finally, because I am running out of time, I note that there is an organisation in Cowdenbeath—your constituency, Presiding Officer—the Knights Templar Goodwill Charity of Scotland, which both of us have visited, that does masses of work with veterans and the wider community. It is also out on the streets at the weekends in Glasgow and Edinburgh, supporting people.

We must recognise that there are quite a number of third sector organisations that do a lot of work yet are struggling for resources. As part of the collaboration that we need to see, we must

recognise the third sector. However, overall, there has been good progress—well done.

17:15

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Support for veterans and those in the armed forces is important wherever you are in Scotland, but it has a special resonance in my constituency, which includes His Majesty's Naval Base Clyde at Faslane.

The submariners protecting our seas do so knowing that they will miss out on many special moments with loved ones on land, and there are few things more moving than seeing families reunite after many months apart. For some, they have been at sea longer than they expected because of the capacity of the service, which the UK Government is addressing. This summer, I had the privilege of meeting the crew of HMS Vanguard at 10 Downing Street, where they were rightly celebrated for their contribution to keeping our country safe.

The reality is that our seas are already contested. Just yesterday, the UK Labour Government announced its Atlantic bastion programme, which will combine autonomous vessels and artificial intelligence with warships and aircraft to create a highly advanced hybrid force to protect undersea cables and pipelines. That follows an increase in Russian underwater activity, including by the spy ship Yantar, which is apparently mapping our underwater cables. Russia is also believed to have been behind the sabotage of Shetland's subsea internet cables in 2023.

The first priority of any Government should be keeping its citizens safe, and no Government can do that without its armed forces. The UK Labour Government is investing £250 million in His Majesty's Naval Base Clyde, which will reap a defence dividend in my constituency and beyond.

Part of thanking those who serve is showing that we value them when their service is over, which is why it is so important that we deliver for veterans. The UK Labour Government recently published its veterans strategy, backed by £50 million of Government investment, as a number of members have already referred to. That includes delivering the digital veteran card in 2025 to make it easier for veterans to access services, and creating a new network of local support centres to improve access to services such as health, housing and employment.

The Scottish Veterans Commissioner's report is to be welcomed, as it shows the progress that has been made by the Scottish Government. I congratulate the Government on that, and we are all grateful to Susie Hamilton for her work in that

regard. However, as I think we all agree, there is more to be done.

I welcome the minister's commitment to do more work with GPs to understand why uptake for the general practice armed forces and veterans recognition scheme has been so low and to increase the number of practices that participate in the scheme. I agree with Sandesh Gulhane that we simply need more GPs in order to cope with the capacity that is required.

The minister was right to reference long waiting times and, in particular, the impact on services. I have a constituent who sought a referral to treat a tumour that would affect his ability to work, but the waiting lists in Scotland were simply too long. He wanted a referral to the Dreadnought medical service, which offers treatment to seafarers, but NHS Scotland seemed to be unwilling to fund that. We need to get better at working collaboratively so that people can continue to serve.

The report warns that progress on housing for veterans is still lagging behind where it should be, and the Scottish Government needs to increase the pace if it is to tackle the blight of veteran homelessness.

Edward Mountain: [*Made a request to intervene.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Jackie Baillie is concluding.

Jackie Baillie: There is merit in Edward Mountain's amendment, and we will support it today.

At a time when armed forces recruitment is not a luxury but a necessity, I am sure that both Governments will work at pace to continue to support our armed forces and our veterans.

17:19

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): As others have done, I record the huge debt of gratitude that we owe to our armed forces.

Those who serve want simple things. While they are serving, they want to know that their families are taken care of, that they are provided with good-quality housing, that their children will not lose their place on an NHS waiting list or their support at school due to a relocation, that there is a job opportunity for their partner and that adequate childcare is available at a new posting. After their service concludes, they want to know that their mental and physical health will be taken care of and that support is available to adjust socially.

I was very interested to hear the contribution of the Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans, Graeme Dey, in which he highlighted

the wait for care for servicemen and women and talked about the outcomes from those delays. I welcome his frustration that GP uptake of the armed forces and veterans recognition scheme is unacceptably low, and I welcome what he is doing to promote that scheme and formally accredit it to improve uptake.

Many of the matters that we are talking about are devolved, which is why I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to the armed forces covenant, although I have to say that I am a little dismayed that there have been no specific meetings at this stage to discuss the expansion of that covenant into social care with health and social care partnerships and councils, according to the reply to a parliamentary question that I asked a few weeks ago. Given the role that adequate social care plays in making sure that people can live their best independent lives, as was highlighted by my colleague Sandesh Gulhane, and the issues of homelessness that my colleague Edward Mountain has raised, there is more to do.

Paul Sweeney: That was an important point about housing, which is critical not just to veterans but to sustaining people in service who might otherwise leave. The record investment of £9 billion in modernising more than 40,000 houses over the next decade could be a massive opportunity for the Scottish Government to engage in supercharging that around Scottish garrisons.

Brian Whittle: I thank Paul Sweeney for his intervention and for his foresight in knowing what was coming in my speech.

In 2022, statistics from the Ministry of Defence showed that the average age at which people joined the regular armed forces was around 20, and the average age at which they left was around 31. People are choosing to serve between 10 and 20 years but still have many working-age years in which to fulfil their civilian careers if they are appropriately supported.

Edward Mountain focused on housing. He also highlighted the fact that our armed forces have fantastic transferable skills, as was mentioned by Beatrice Wishart. We should encourage veterans into Scotland, but that will require an increase in housing stock, as was mentioned. Armed forces retirees' access to unused marital quarters was highlighted by Edward Mountain, and I welcome the fact that the minister was warm to that suggestion.

I have spoken before about the need to recognise the mental stress that we should be cognisant of when dealing with our veterans. Obvious issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder have been accepted much more readily, but we need to consider the issue of dealing with a significant change in circumstance.

We often see stress in profound change—in how we define ourselves and how those definitions change. Such changes include retirement, for example. Having worked all our lives and been defined by what we do in our working environment, we walk away with the proverbial carriage clock and a handshake. If I may be so bold, they also include being an international sportsperson one day and an ex-athlete the next. We go from knowing exactly what the day is going to look like, what is expected of us and who we will be working with to being cut loose and having to imagine a different path.

No more acutely will that be felt than by our veterans. One day, they are part of a close-knit team, used to working closely as a unit, having each other's back and knowing exactly what they will be doing and where they will be walking. The next, they walk through the gates into civvy street, without those tight bonds and frameworks, and where the rules are very different. There will be a period of adaptation, which will never be complete because the majority will still feel most at ease when with their old team.

I am the same with my old team mates. That is why we old athletes still get together as often as possible and why armed forces veterans keep in touch. When we are planning support services for our veterans, that situation needs to be at the forefront of our thoughts, even if we might not all quite understand where they are coming from.

I thank the Scottish Government for bringing the debate to the chamber and allowing us once more to talk about the debt of gratitude that we owe to our armed forces.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the minister, Graeme Dey, to respond to the debate.

17:25

Graeme Dey: I thank members for their contributions to the debate. I will attempt to respond to them as much as possible in the time that I have.

I thank Edward Mountain for lodging his amendment. There is a shortage of available habitable married quarter accommodation in Scotland, and I am more than happy to raise the proposal with MOD ministers in the context of their new defence housing strategy.

I will take away Beatrice Wishart's ask on the gathering of data on veteran-led businesses. She made an interesting point about that. She also highlighted the long-running issue about the service pupil premium. As she knows, she and I are not necessarily on the same page about that. However, I draw her attention to the work of the Scottish armed forces education support group,

which works collaboratively to mitigate and address any issues that affect service children in a way that helps to improve the experience of those children and their families in Scottish schools. In addition, the Government has funded the role of the national education and transitions officer since 2022. Martin Whitfield has highlighted the issue in Parliament a number of times, and we recognise that there are issues that affect young members of serving families, not just in education but in health as well.

Paul Sweeney and others focused on the issue that the commissioner highlighted in her report to do with the need for more formalised approaches in the employment space. I say to him that Social Security Scotland and the Scottish Government have done some good work in that space, but, of course, there is more that we can do, and I accept the commissioner's criticism that there is now a bit of a void there.

Members will possibly remember that a decision was taken in the summer of 2024, after consultation with the veterans employability strategic group, to close that group, because it was not actually delivering in the way that we had hoped it would. At that time, there were two distinct groups—there was that group and one that was run by Veterans Scotland. I recognise that there is now a gap there that needs to be addressed. The Government has before it a report from Veterans Scotland that suggests ways in which we could look to address that, and I am actively looking at that with colleagues in Government, particularly education and skills colleagues.

Sandesh Gulhane criticised the delays in the mental health pathways. I accept that it has taken too long to get to the point that we are currently at. There were reasons for that, but I will not go into them in detail now. However, I hope that, in turn, he will recognise that, in asking for us all to work together, as he did, that must include those who can lead, including his GP colleagues. I do not entirely accept that workload explains the very disappointing uptake of the recognition scheme. Although the Government will do its bit to encourage take-up, I ask Dr Gulhane to encourage his colleagues in the city of Glasgow to engage with the scheme as much as possible, because it is incredibly important.

Paul Sweeney: I was just reflecting on the minister's intervention on my opening speech about greater collaboration. I note that the funding deadline for the initial tranche of Valour grants is 14 January, with a total of £27 million of funding and grants of up to £1 million being available. Will the minister write to the health and social care partnerships in Scotland to advise them of the

scheme and perhaps invite them to apply? It could help with veterans' GPs.

Graeme Dey: I am happy to have a conversation on that point with the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, who is sitting next to me. However, I explained earlier that there has been a bit of a tension in the way in which the information has flowed or not flowed about the detail of availability, the criteria and the deadline. There is a bit of work to be done between the two Governments—I hope that the UK Government will be receptive to that—to allow our organisations, be they in the public sector or the third sector, to engage in the scheme.

Sandesh Gulhane: I will, of course, ask every GP to get involved with a scheme as worthy as that one, but does the minister accept that everyone wants GPs to know about their particular issues? That goes for every group that comes into this Parliament. There is a limited amount of time and GPs are under severe pressure. Perhaps we can, working together, give them the time that they need to do things as worthy as that.

Graeme Dey: The health secretary is doing work in that space, but I would also gently point out that the actual recognition scheme is an aid for GPs to support that cohort of patients.

Alex Rowley referenced the role of armed forces champions in the network, particularly in relation to local authorities. We are putting together a meeting through the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities with the champions network next week. I hope to have the commissioner and a representative of the families federation attending that with me, so that we can explore what more is actually needed by veterans' families, for example, and what can be done by our local authorities to support veterans and their families.

Jackie Baillie focused on the issue of waiting times for serving personnel, which has become pertinent over the past few months. I could point out to her that this is a UK-wide problem; it is not just in Scotland. That is not to deflect—rather it is to lead on to the point that, to that end, the three Governments are working collaboratively to look at the options that are there to tackle the issue.

Some of the actions that are being considered include developing a national policy for managing waiting list transfers for armed forces personnel across NHS boards and exploring the adaptation of the South Wales fast-track model to support urgent or specialist care for small numbers of MOD patients. The MOD has also proposed the establishment of a UK-wide working group, in collaboration with NHS England and NHS Wales, to facilitate cross-border referral. I can therefore give Jackie Baillie the assurance that there is work going on in that space.

Finally, it will surprise no one to hear me say that resources are tight at the moment for everyone who is working in the veterans' space, and I do not see that changing overnight. The question therefore becomes, how do we make the most of the resources that we have?

For me, the best answer to that is through even greater collaboration. The progress that we have made has been possible only through effective teamworking with dedicated partners from the public, private and third sectors. The Government will do all that it can to ensure that that continues, not least with the roll-out of the veterans' mental health pathway and the progression of the veterans' homelessness prevention pathway, neither of which can be achieved without collaboration.

I again thank members for their contributions and reiterate the importance of this Parliament having the opportunity to scrutinise our support for veterans, their families and the entire armed forces community in Scotland.

I will make one final point to close what will be my last such debate as veterans minister. Throughout my tenure in this Parliament, these debates have overwhelmingly been free of party politicking, reflecting our shared commitment to doing the very best by our serving and veterans' communities and their families. It is my hope that that approach and level of commitment will also come to characterise the next session and beyond.

Edward Mountain: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am embarrassed to tread on what the minister has just said, but I tried to get his attention earlier to make a declaration of interest that I am a veteran. I should have done that before I made my speech, so I apologise for doing it now, but I failed to do it earlier.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Thank you, Mr Mountain. Your comments are on the record.

That concludes the debate on support for the veterans and armed forces community in Scotland.

Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-20037, in the name of Neil Gray, on a legislative consent motion for the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation.

I call the cabinet secretary to speak to and move the motion.

17:33

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): The debate is about whether the Scottish Parliament should give its consent to clause 43, on prohibition on advertising, in Kim Leadbeater's Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill. I am speaking to the provision as described in the motion. My recommendation on behalf of the Scottish Government is that the Parliament gives its consent.

The motion in front of Parliament today is necessary to protect the constitutional settlement in the normal manner of legislative consent motions and is not a comment on the content of Ms Leadbeater's bill. The Scottish Government does not have an opinion on the content or principle of that bill, which it is the UK Parliament's responsibility to scrutinise.

Ms Leadbeater's bill has no effect on Liam McArthur's Assisted Dying for Terminally Ill Adults (Scotland) Bill, and neither does the motion; nor should the two bills be conflated, as they are undergoing very different processes in their respective Parliaments.

The Scottish Government's view is that clause 43 is for a purpose within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, considering the schedule 5, section C7 reservation in the Scotland Act 1998. The C7 reservation covers regulation of, among other things,

"misleading and comparative advertising, except regulation specifically in relation to food, tobacco and tobacco products".

It does not reserve advertising generally.

Therefore, we believe that the Scottish Parliament's consent is required for clause 43 and that it should be given, so that we do not find ourselves in a situation in which the English and Welsh assisted dying service can be advertised in Scotland but not in England or Wales.

Let me turn to the substance of the provision under scrutiny today. Clause 43 of the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill imposes a duty on the

Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to make regulations to prohibit

“the publication, printing, distribution or designing ... of advertisements whose purpose or effect is to promote”

the England and Wales

“voluntary assisted dying service”.

The purpose of clause 43 is stated to be to prevent pressure from being put on vulnerable people or the undermining of national suicide prevention strategies through the unethical advertisement of the England and Wales service. By consenting to the provision, the Scottish Parliament would be agreeing that the English and Welsh service, if it was introduced, could also not be promoted in Scotland.

Effectively, we are making sure that Scotland could not be used to advertise the service and closing what would be a gap in these islands if the bill were to be passed and such a service established. Regardless of personal views on assisted dying or on Ms Leadbeater’s bill, I doubt that any member would wish to see such an anomaly.

In addition to lodging a legislative consent memorandum, I gave evidence to the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee on 23 September, where I set out the Scottish Government’s position, as I have to Parliament today.

I have also responded to questions that were raised by the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee around the scope of the powers in clause 43, noting that our recommendation that consent be given was

“based on the substance of the provision, not the scope of the enabling power, which will be determined by the UK Parliament.”

In that response, I noted that, as the committee had acknowledged,

“the exercise of the power in clause 43 is likely to have a very limited impact on the law relative to devolved matters”

in Scotland. Both committees have since indicated that they are content with the motion and with our recommendation that consent be given.

I hope that Parliament finds that explanation and outline helpful in setting out the Government’s position, and I urge members to agree to give consent to clause 43 in so far as it relates to devolved matters being considered by the UK Parliament.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 16 October 2024, and subsequently amended, relating to the prohibition on advertising of the England and Wales Voluntary Assisted

Dying Service, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Clare Haughey to speak on behalf of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee.

17:37

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): During September this year, the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee undertook scrutiny of the legislative consent memorandum in respect of the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill. During the House of Commons report stage of the bill, several amendments were agreed to that extend the scope of certain provisions to Scotland. Kim Leadbeater, as the bill’s sponsor, concluded that the legislative consent process was not engaged by any of those provisions.

The Scottish Government agreed with that assessment, except with respect to clause 43, which makes provision for regulations that prohibit

“the publication, printing, distribution or designing (anywhere) of advertisements whose purpose or effect is to promote a voluntary assisted dying service”

and

“causing the publication, printing, distribution or designing of such advertisements.”

For the avoidance of doubt, a VAD service, for the purposes of that clause, means the services as set out in accordance with the act, should the bill be passed—that is, VAD services in England and Wales. The provision would, therefore, not apply to any such services in Scotland were the Assisted Dying for Terminally Ill Adults (Scotland) Bill to become law.

However, I note that the issue of advertising was actively debated during stage 2 proceedings on the Scottish bill and an amendment was agreed to that introduces a new section to the bill that would create an offence of advertising assisted dying.

We began our scrutiny of the LCM by writing to selected stakeholders to request their written views, and a number of them responded that they had no comments. The committee also received a detailed submission from Alzheimer Scotland that raised some points about the LCM. Those included highlighting the importance of careful alignment between any UK and Scottish Parliament legislation on assisted dying

“to avoid confusion, duplication, or conflict”.

The submission emphasised the need for robust definitions to ensure a

“clear distinction between prohibited commercial promotion that may result in exploitation and permitted factual information”.

Alzheimer Scotland also raised concerns about the implications of the provisions covered by the LCM related to article 10 of the European convention on human rights, arguing that although

“limitations may be justified to protect vulnerable individuals from inducement, they must be proportionate and clearly defined.”

It concluded by recommending clear mechanisms to establish how any resulting prohibitions would be applied and overseen in Scotland.

As part of its scrutiny of the LCM, my committee received assurances from the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care that the relevant provisions would apply only to what would commonly be understood as advertising and would not result in prohibitions being placed on the publication of factual information, for example, about the service in question or how it should be delivered.

On that basis, and on the understanding that the scope of the provisions is limited to the advertising and promotion in Scotland of a voluntary assisted dying service that would operate in England and Wales, my committee concluded its scrutiny by recommending that the Parliament agree to a legislative consent motion in similar terms to the draft motion included in LCM-S6-62.

17:41

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): The Scottish and United Kingdom Parliaments are currently scrutinising assisted dying bills. Although we may be doing so on slightly different timelines, the reality is that the debates are very similar and the nature of the amendments that are being considered are largely in the same territory of enhancing safeguards.

Wherever we stand in the debate, it is acknowledged that both bills, if successful, will have a profound impact on people across the UK, so it is right that the two Parliaments should work closely together. That is particularly the case when it comes to advertising and media, because online activity travels much more easily across borders than, for example, a poster on a wall.

In the recent House of Lords debate that considered the issue, it was noted that those with chronic illnesses have reported noticing Facebook adverts that include negative content about their treatment, about whether they can live with their condition and even content that suggests going to Switzerland for assisted dying. If Facebook algorithms are opaque, artificial intelligence is even worse. The House of Lords debate also referenced the current lawsuit against OpenAI

from the family of a young man who allege that ChatGPT encouraged him to take his life.

Once again, the bill is a reminder of the work that the Governments must do to ensure that there are appropriate safeguards in place. Combating advertising that targets vulnerable and suicidal people is an issue that the Governments should be working closely together on, regardless of the outcome of the bills. We, on the Labour benches, support the legislative consent motion.

17:42

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I will be fairly brief in setting out my hope that there is broad consensus on the LCM before us. I would like to hope that, as the cabinet secretary said, regardless of the range of views on the merits of legislation here in the Scottish Parliament or at Westminster, very few people would want advertising to play any role at all in the issue of assisted dying legislation or any equivalent legislation at UK level for England and Wales.

As others have said, the issue has been debated in both Parliaments in relation to both pieces of legislation. When we debated the LCM, my additional concern was that we should ensure not only that we are clear that we do not expect and do not want to allow advertising to play a role, but that we do not inadvertently make provisions against advertising that would inhibit the provision of factual information about services or, indeed, arguments about the policy merits of the legislation or how services should be delivered. When we considered the LCM in committee, I asked the cabinet secretary whether it was his expectation that the restrictions that we are talking about would apply to advertising alone, and he agreed.

We considered a range of possible restrictions in the Scottish legislation, and I had similar concerns that some variants of what was being proposed might have been more of an inhibition on the expression of legitimate opinions about assisted dying or, potentially, on research or the provision of factual information.

As we go forward, we need to ensure that we pay due attention to both aspects of that concern, either by working with colleagues in the UK Parliament to ensure that the legislation there is in fit shape or by scrutinising Liam McArthur's bill in this Parliament at stage 3. We must ensure that we not only do not allow advertising to play a role in a way that none of us would be comfortable with, but that we do not inhibit legitimate debate—nor that we allow the use of material on social media, for example, to influence or put pressure on people to make a decision in either direction.

17:45

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I will start where Patrick Harvie left off. Although there are disagreements across the Parliament on the principles of the bill, I think that we can coalesce behind the concern to ensure that the advertising of assisted dying services, whether in England and Wales or in Scotland, is robustly prohibited for the reasons that colleagues have set out.

The convener quoted the submission from Alzheimer Scotland, which pointed to the balance that needs to be struck. We all understand the importance of ensuring that access to factual information and advice—some may even need support to navigate the system—is available to those who need it. However, we must also guard against the risks that Jackie Baillie fairly highlighted in relation to the promotion—not just advertising—of assisted dying services.

I do not have a great deal more to add. The cabinet secretary set the scene well in explaining what this motion is and what it is not. There will be time enough for further debates on my bill and on this issue. The Health, Social Care and Sport Committee considered amendments in this area, which went some way but, as Patrick Harvie suggested, potentially slightly too far in relation to the impact on access to information, which is crucial. The Parliament will have an opportunity to return to the issue at stage 3 and will, I hope, ensure that the protections in my bill are as robust as they need to be.

I hope that the Parliament will back the LCM at decision time.

17:47

Neil Gray: I have nothing further to add to the arguments that I set out in my opening statement. I rest on those arguments, and I again urge the Parliament to support the LCM.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the motion on legislative consent for the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill, which is UK legislation.

Parliamentary Bureau Motion

17:47

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S6M-20067, on a committee meeting time.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that, under Rule 12.3.3B of Standing Orders, the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee can meet, if necessary, at the same time as a meeting of the Parliament during Members' Business on Wednesday 10 December 2025.—[*Graeme Dey*]

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

Point of Order

17:48

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

On a point of order, Presiding Officer. On 25 November, during the urgent question on a national grooming gangs inquiry, I asked the minister who was responding, Natalie Don-Innes,

“whether the Scottish Government will release all correspondence between it and Professor Alexis Jay”.—
[*Official Report*, 25 November 2025; c 77.]

At the time, the minister said that she did not have that information available but would write to me. The minister wrote to me this afternoon. In her letter, she says:

“I explained that I did not have this information available at the time and committed to providing it in writing.”

However, her very next paragraph states that the Scottish Government will now treat the request as a freedom of information request, because it has had similar freedom of information requests on the topic. She concludes her letter by saying:

“We expect this information to be published by the end of this year.”

I have so many concerns about that. Is it right that the Government can commit in the Parliament to provide information to a member who has requested it and then change that commitment to say that it will be part of a response to a freedom of information request? Is it acceptable for the Government to say that it will provide the information by the end of this year, which could possibly be while we are in recess, when there is no opportunity for the Parliament to scrutinise it?

I am further concerned that the Government has inserted a statement on the national grooming gangs inquiry, or the efforts that it will take forward regarding that, for next Wednesday and that, potentially, we will not have crucial information that was promised in this chamber because the Government is treating my request as a freedom of information request, which may not be answered until the end of the year.

I make a direct plea to you, Presiding Officer, as you are our representative in this Parliament. We MSPs are seeking to get answers that would allow us to respond to our constituents. Can you use your influence, or any powers under standing orders, to tell the Scottish Government that it is completely unacceptable to promise one thing and then change it, and to urge the Government to provide the information as a matter of priority, because it is needed now, not, as it suits the Government, by the end of this year?

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The “Scottish Ministerial Code” states:

“The Scottish Government should be accountable to the Scottish Parliament”.

As a matter of courtesy and respect, I would expect that, when a minister cannot provide information in answer to a question in the chamber, and when the minister has committed to providing that answer in the chamber, they should undertake to provide such detail to the member as soon as it is available.

Motion without Notice

17:51

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

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time be brought forward to 5.51 pm.—[*Graeme Dey*]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

17:51

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are six questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S6M-20036.1, in the name of Daniel Johnson, which seeks to amend motion S6M-20036, in the name of Richard Leonard, on behalf of the Public Audit Committee, on its report "The 2023/24 audit of Ferguson Marine (Port Glasgow) Holdings Limited" be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:51

Meeting suspended.

17:54

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We come to the vote on amendment S6M-20036.1, in the name of Daniel Johnson, which seeks to amend motion S6M-20036, in the name of Richard Leonard, on behalf of the Public Audit Committee. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I do not know whether my vote went through.

The Presiding Officer: I can confirm that your vote has been recorded, Mr Brown.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Ind)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)

Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and
 Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine)
 (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast
 by Fulton MacGregor]
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley)
 (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)

Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast
 by Ross Greer]
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)

Abstentions

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

The Presiding Officer: The result of the
 division on amendment S6M-20036.1, in the name
 of Daniel Johnson, is: For 82, Against 7,
 Abstentions 28.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is,
 that motion S6M-20036, in the name of Richard
 Leonard, on behalf of the Public Audit Committee,
 on "The 2023/24 audit of Ferguson Marine (Port
 Glasgow) Holdings Limited", as amended, be
 agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)

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

Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Abstentions

Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)ss
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-20036, in the name of Richard Leonard, on behalf of the Public Audit Committee, on "The 2023/24 audit of Ferguson Marine (Port Glasgow) Holdings Limited", as amended, is: For 90, Against 0, Abstentions 25.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations contained in the Public Audit Committee's 3rd Report, 2025 (Session 6), The 2023/24 audit of Ferguson Marine (Port Glasgow) Holdings Limited (SP Paper 846), and calls on the Scottish Government to fulfil its commitment to invest all of the £14.2 million promised to modernise the yard to enable Ferguson Marine (Port Glasgow) to secure orders.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-20050.1, in the name of Edward Mountain, which seeks to amend motion S6M-20050, in the name of Graeme Dey, on support for the veterans and armed forces community in Scotland, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-20050, in the name of Graeme Dey, on support for the veterans and armed forces community in Scotland, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament acknowledges and recognises the importance of Scotland's veterans and Armed Forces community and greatly values the significant contribution

that it makes to society; recognises that the skills and experiences that it brings enrich communities; continues to support the Veterans Strategy Action Plan, which has a clear vision to ensure the best outcomes for veterans and their families; notes the progress made in delivering the action plan and the future work to develop an updated plan following the publication of the new UK-wide Veterans Strategy; welcomes the findings of the Scottish Veterans Commissioner's latest progress report and acknowledges both the successes she identifies and the areas where further work is needed; agrees that the Scottish Government should continue to work with partners across the public, private and third sectors to ensure that the veterans and Armed Forces community receives the access to support that they need, and encourages the Scottish Government to work with the Ministry of Defence to facilitate access for retiring service personnel, who wish to move back to Scotland, to empty married quarters at a reduced rent for a period of up to one year from the end of their service.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-20037, in the name of Neil Gray, on a motion on legislative consent on the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Ind)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dowe, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)

Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Fulton MacGregor]
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)

Abstentions

Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-20037, in the name of Neil Gray, on a motion on legislative consent on the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill, which is UK legislation, is: For 103, Against 2, Abstentions 9.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 16 October 2024, and subsequently amended, relating to the prohibition on advertising of the England and Wales Voluntary Assisted Dying Service, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-20067, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on a committee meeting time, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that, under Rule 12.3.3B of Standing Orders, the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee can meet, if necessary, at the same time as a meeting of the Parliament during Members' Business on Wednesday 10 December 2025.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

E-bikes and E-scooters (Antisocial Use)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-19918, in the name of Sue Webber, on dealing with the dangerous use of e-bikes and e-scooters. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes with concern reports of the growing dangerous use of e-bikes and e-scooters across Scotland, but particularly in Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Dundee and Glasgow, and across major towns; understands that some e-bike and e-scooter users are often observed showing no regard for the traffic laws, endanger other road users and pedestrians, appear to violate the legally mandated speed limit and often do not use high-visibility clothing; believes that many users often wear what can be seen as intimidating clothing, such as balaclavas and face coverings; is concerned at reports that e-bikes and e-scooters are increasingly used to commit organised crime and vehicle theft; notes calls on the Scottish Government to give Police Scotland the appropriate resources and vehicles to counter people who use e-bikes and e-scooters in these ways, such as by seizing the vehicles, and further notes the call for greater action to be taken against the antisocial use of e-bikes and e-scooters, to provide a safer environment for roads users and pedestrians.

18:02

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): I thank everyone who has taken the time to stay behind and speak in this members' business debate, given the challenging weather tonight.

Last week, in the chamber, I asked the Minister for Victims and Community Safety how the Scottish Government

"plans to respond to the reported increase in antisocial behaviour and criminality associated with people using e-bikes".—[*Official Report*, 3 December 2025; c 21.]

That is why I am pleased to have the chance to raise the issue again. My motion for debate today addresses one of the fastest-growing threats to public safety on our streets: the dangerous and antisocial use of e-bikes and e-scooters across Scotland. I want to make it clear that, when I talk about e-bikes, I am also referring to the e-motorbikes—such as Sur-Ron bikes—that we see being used.

We have all seen it—in Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Dundee and Glasgow, and in towns across the country, these vehicles are being misused in many ways that put ordinary people at risk. Riders are weaving through traffic with no regard for the highway code. Vehicles exceed legal speed limits and often have modifications that make them even more dangerous. Pedestrians are put at risk by

reckless drivers. The riders are dressed all in black, with balaclavas and face coverings, and they are breaking the law and committing crimes. I believe that action must be taken and that people should not feel scared or intimidated by the actions of these hooligans.

Some members may think that I am exaggerating, but I will list a few examples of recent e-bike and e-scooter crime in Edinburgh alone. In May this year, police charged nine people during an initiative targeting illegal e-bikes and e-scooters in Leith. Offences included dangerous riding and using phones while “in control”—in inverted commas—of these machines.

In July, a 16-year-old boy was stabbed and robbed of his e-bike. In November, Police Scotland seized 13 e-bikes and charged men between the ages of 18 and 45 with offences including riding with no insurance, riding with no licence and riding with no helmet. Residents had complained of antisocial behaviour such as riding on the pavement, speeding and causing alarm.

Just recently—in the season of good will—a masked thief on an e-bike stole an 8-foot-tall Christmas nutcracker statue from outside a bar on George Street. The statue was worth £900, and the closed-circuit television showed the suspect breaking a £350 table in the process of getting away with the theft on his e-bike.

At the weekend, there was an incident much closer to my home. James from the Currie, Balerno & District Round Table contacted me to say:

“We were out on the Juniper Green Santa run tonight and got buzzed a couple of times by wee punks on the off road bikes”

and the

“first time ... they were blasting horns.”

He told me that he was

“concerned they would try and nab a collecting tub so told elves to hold them tightly”.

I know that it seems like I am making light of that, but nothing is sacred or left untouched by those who are hellbent on intimidating people who are out volunteering for charities. At a time when businesses are already struggling, that is the last thing that people need to deal with.

I want to make it clear to those who are listening to the debate or who may be listening back tomorrow that law-abiding cyclists, responsible scooter users and those who genuinely benefit from using electric vehicles should not be tarred with the same brush as criminals, but the numbers who are abusing such vehicles continue to grow.

Reports from Police Scotland confirm that such vehicles are increasingly used in organised crime,

vehicle theft and antisocial behaviour, and it is not only in Scotland that that is happening. Police forces across the United Kingdom and internationally are responding to the rise in e-bike-associated criminality with targeted operations and seizures and by using new advances in technology.

In 2024, across the UK, police confiscated 937 illegal e-bikes—that was up from 511 in the previous year. There have been police and multi-agency operations in Southampton, Greater Manchester and Merseyside, all leading to arrests, the recovery of stolen vehicles and the seizure of e-scooters and e-bikes. The people arrested and the vehicles seized during those operations have been linked to drug smuggling, robberies, knife crime and money laundering.

Further afield, cities such as Paris and Amsterdam have introduced strict licensing and registration rules for high-powered e-bikes, alongside police patrols targeting antisocial use. In addition, police departments in New York and Los Angeles have set up specialised task forces to tackle e-bike-enabled robberies and drug trafficking, often using plain-clothes officers and undercover stings.

Last week, I met an ex-police officer from West Midlands Police who had been working in the gang unit. He told me of intelligence that they had received that criminal gangs were disguising themselves as Deliveroo drivers to supply and courier drugs across the area, filling their teal bags with drugs and moving about the city with impunity. He told me that he went undercover as a Deliveroo driver and worked with colleagues, and they soon had enough information to put a stop to that illegal activity.

The Parliament has a duty to protect the public and to uphold the rule of law. Local authorities and Police Scotland are already stretched for resources and funding, and this problem requires more than the occasional police operation. We need a serious plan that is targeted at this growing threat to public safety on our streets. That is why I am asking the Scottish Government to act decisively by giving Police Scotland the resources that it needs; empowering officers to seize vehicles that are being misused—and let us not give them back; and sending a clear signal that we will not tolerate such behaviour in our communities.

Too often, our police are left without the tools, the vehicles or the resources to enable them to respond effectively. Local enforcement is not enough; I believe that, given the scale of the problem, we need a national response. That is why I am calling today for the creation of a nationwide police task force that is dedicated to tackling the criminal misuse of e-bikes, e-

motorbikes and e-scooters. That task force must be equipped to investigate and dismantle the networks that use those vehicles for drug dealing, car theft, house break-ins and other organised crime.

Furthermore, high-visibility clothing is not a fashion statement but a necessity, and yet too many riders ignore it and choose instead to cloak themselves in darkness to intimidate people and commit crimes. Traffic laws and speed limits exist for a reason. They are not optional, and they are not suggestions—they are the rules that keep us safe.

Some will say that my proposed approach is heavy handed, but the problem continues to get worse. We need campaigns that raise awareness, but we also need police on the ground who are equipped with the right vehicles to pursue offenders, and who can seize dangerous machines, to protect the public.

Our constituents deserve to feel safe. My motion is not about politics—it is about public safety, restoring confidence in our communities and saying that Scotland will not tolerate intimidation, lawlessness or crime on our streets.

With that in mind, I call on colleagues across the chamber to support my motion, so that we can send a message that Parliament will act—that we will give Police Scotland the tools that it needs and establish a nationwide task force to break the link between e-bikes and organised crime. That will enable us to protect pedestrians, road users and communities and reclaim our streets from those who misuse e-bikes and e-scooters for crime and intimidation.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate. I advise colleagues that we have a lot of interest, so I would be grateful if members could stick to their allocated speaking time, given the time already.

18:10

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I thank Sue Webber for bringing to the chamber this important debate on the dangerous use of e-bikes and e-scooters.

As convener of the cross-party group on accident prevention and safety awareness, I stress that these vehicles are not only a concern for the people who ride them; they pose huge risks to pedestrians and other road users, and to anyone—including service dogs—sharing our roads and pavements. Safety has to come first.

It is important to be clear from the outset that not all e-bikes are dangerous—many are safe, efficient and environmentally friendly. However, we are seeing a serious and growing problem with

black-market and illegally modified e-bikes. Too often, e-bikes are fitted with cheap conversion kits that let them reach speeds far beyond what the manufacturers had ever intended. To illustrate the danger, I highlight that a recent police seizure recovered an e-bike that was capable of reaching 70mph.

The issue is not only excessive speed. Illegally modified bikes pose a serious fire risk, particularly when they are being charged. There have already been fatalities in the United Kingdom that have been linked to fires that were started by e-bike and e-scooter batteries. The combination of extreme speed, instability and the risk of battery fires makes the bikes a very real public safety concern.

Alongside the physical dangers, we cannot ignore the rise in antisocial behaviour that is associated with some e-bike and e-scooter use. Ms Webber excellently laid out some of the problems, such as riders weaving through pedestrians, ignoring traffic signals and using pavements and shared spaces irresponsibly. That is becoming increasingly common. For communities, it is destructive day-to-day behaviour that shapes how they see e-bikes and e-scooters. It reinforces how urgently we need to address the wider safety issue.

In Scotland, the law is clear: e-bikes and e-scooters are already regulated in terms of their speed and power output and where they can be used. Police also have the authority to seize vehicles that are illegally modified or are being used dangerously. Recent enforcement activity shows that the unsafe modifications and reckless behaviour are not isolated incidents—they are widespread, and the risks are very real.

We need a balanced approach. E-bikes and e-scooters offer convenience and real environmental benefits, but public safety must come first. Education and awareness raising are essential to help people understand the dangers of illegal modifications, reckless use and antisocial behaviour, and unsafe charging.

Alongside that, enforcement must be robust. Those who put themselves or others at risk must be held accountable. We should look to the role of manufacturers, retailers and local authorities in ensuring that people have access to safe and legal e-bikes and e-scooters. I have worked extensively with the Society of Chief Officers of Trading Standards in Scotland to look at how such measures can be implemented in our communities.

E-bikes and e-scooters can absolutely be a positive addition to our transport system, but the dangers that are posed by illegal modifications, reckless riding, antisocial behaviour and battery-related fires cannot be ignored.

I make a final plea to the minister. The police are frustrated that, when they seize vehicles, a small fine is paid and the vehicle is then released back to the owner. If we could have stronger legislation for repeat offenders, that might help the situation.

18:14

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I congratulate Sue Webber on bringing the debate to the chamber, because the issue is—as we have just heard—a real menace throughout the country. In Aberdeen, Union Street is already suffering as a result of swingeing business rates; the damage to our oil and gas industry caused by the Scottish Government and the UK Government; short-sighted and damaging council policies such as a low-emission zone and bus gates; and the chronic underfunding and underresourcing of the police, which led to their piloting of a non-investigation of crimes approach.

We can throw into that mix e-bikes and e-scooters. People have become ever more reluctant to venture forth, as users of the bikes—clad in black with their faces covered, generally without lights and often in groups—are racing up the pavements, hurling anything from abuse to consumables. As e-bikes are often used on roads illegally, they are frequently linked with antisocial behaviour, the intimidation of communities and danger to other road users and pedestrians.

As Sue Webber said, we also know that e-bikes are being used to deal drugs. She is right that the underfunding and underresourcing of the police makes it challenging for them to deal with the issue, but the north-east police do what they can. They run a community action team, which investigates issues such as e-bikes and the antisocial behaviour that is associated with them. The police have seen many positive results and have managed to seize e-bikes and charge individuals. They have experienced officers who know much about this menace. There are specialist road policing officers who carry out vehicle examinations and regular patrols to examine and combat the issue. Nonetheless, our police feel constrained, because chasing a rider in a vehicle pursuit could result in serious injury or worse to the rider, to the police or to the public.

Using other methods such as DNA tagging spray to tag illegal e-bikes and their riders often allows for seizures and cross-referencing with other crimes. Police are also dependent on public-reported sightings to help them figure out who is using such vehicles and where they are being stored. Often, police are able to overlap that information with CCTV footage from across the city. However, that is the operational aspect. If we, in this place, do not act to support the police and

communities properly, we also own the consequences.

In my justice policy paper “Cracking Down on Crime”, which was released last month, Scottish Conservatives set out a number of initiatives that we would bring in if we were to form the next Government. We must back the police not only with proper funding and resources, but with the tools that they say that they need to tackle dangerous behaviour, such as enabling them to restore visible policing across Scotland, especially on our high streets.

We must take a zero-tolerance approach to antisocial behaviour, including the misuse of e-bikes, with tougher penalties for reckless e-bike and e-scooter use, intimidating clothing and the harassment of pedestrians.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): My concern relates to the member suggesting that more visible police—or more police on the beat, as we might say—is somehow a solution. I propose to him that it is not much of a solution, because these kinds of people will simply get on their mobile phones and say, “There’s police about there,” and evade them. That happens in all circumstances; it just moves the problem somewhere else.

Liam Kerr: I respectfully disagree with Christine Grahame. I understand her point—that we cannot swamp one area with police and move the problem to a different area. However, the approach that I described is part of the solution. I am perfectly happy to send her a copy of my justice paper, because I think that she would enjoy it. Part of the solution is to have more visible policing and patrols, particularly on our high streets, such as Union Street, because that will ensure that such behaviour is not perpetrated there. Nonetheless, Christine Grahame is absolutely right that there needs to be a whole-city and whole-system approach, and that is what she will find in my justice paper.

Scottish Conservatives absolutely would target the organised crime and vehicle-based offending that Sue Webber identified and would make it easier to disrupt the gangs. As Clare Adamson said, we must ensure that there are real consequences for repeat offenders, and we must address the issue of community payback orders being breached.

I congratulate Sue Webber on lodging the motion. This is a real issue for the people of Scotland. I know that our police do their absolute best, but let us use the powers that we have in the Parliament to back them and give those in our justice system the resources and the tools that they need.

18:19

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I thank Sue Webber for securing the debate and raising the important issues that her motion highlights. It is good to hear cross-party agreement from Clare Adamson and Liam Kerr, who I know both campaign on issues of community and public safety.

I want to speak in the debate because the issue of e-scooters has been coming up a lot in my local communities. It has been raised by local constituents—last week, it was raised by some local postal workers, who were almost victims of e-scooters at the hands of very young children. They described a situation where it was quite dark and the postie was nearly knocked off his feet. For me, it is a matter of community safety and public health.

We have very recently had some stark warnings from Police Scotland and from medics at the Royal hospital for children in Glasgow. I was concerned to read that, between May and October this year, more than 30 children required emergency care at the Royal hospital for children—that is an increase from four cases in the same period last year.

Mark Lilley, who is the major trauma co-ordinator at the hospital, said:

“We know eScooters are popular and may feature on many Christmas wish lists, but the risks are significant.”

Some of the injuries that have been sustained by children aged between seven and 14 include

“major head trauma, broken femurs, chest injuries, and severe lacerations.”

Those are really serious matters.

In the conversations that I have had locally, people describe near misses. I am not asserting that those incidents are actually recorded anywhere, but one man told me that his wife was almost knocked over by an e-scooter on the street, and he has a very young grandchild. They are very concerned about the issue.

There is a wider point about policing. I think that people want more visibility from the police, and they want to know who is in their community policing team. With regard to resources for police officers, we need to ensure that our police are safely equipped to deal with these matters. I understand that if there is an incident involving an e-scooter or an e-bike, the police need to respond to that in a safe manner.

I hear what Liam Kerr says about his party's response on these matters, but Anas Sarwar has very recently made it clear that the issue has to be a higher priority, and Scottish Labour has set out our plans on resourcing our police and making sure that we have clarity about community policing

in every ward. I think that that is what the public wish to hear.

Liam Kerr: Monica Lennon might also be very interested in my justice paper. Would she like me to send it over after the debate?

Monica Lennon: I am always looking for bedtime reading, particularly when I am struggling to get to sleep at night. *[Laughter.]* Liam Kerr knows how to get the paper to me.

Those serious points are well made. We all understand that, with regard to young people and children, it is illegal for anyone under the age of 14 to ride an e-bike in Scotland, and privately owned e-scooters cannot be used legally on public roads, pavements, cycle lanes or other public spaces. We want our pavements, streets and communities to be safe for everyone. In the wrong hands, used in the wrong place, these e-scooters and e-bikes can be dangerous weapons.

I am not trying to ruin the spirit of Christmas, but I know that parents are under real pressure to buy these e-scooters for their children. I was recently upgrading my mobile phone in a local electrical store in Hamilton that sells household goods as well, and the minute you walk in the door, there is an array of e-scooters in front of you, and parents feel real pressure. We need everyone, including retailers, to be responsible. However, I would like to hear from the minister today on the point about policing, because I feel that the big issue is a lack of enforcement. I will leave that point with the minister.

18:24

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank my colleague Sue Webber for bringing this important debate to the chamber. Her motion highlights the growing problem of the dangerous and antisocial use of e-bikes and e-scooters, and I welcome the fact that Parliament finally has the opportunity to debate the issue. The dangers that we are seeing from these vehicles are becoming a frequent concern in many communities. Members are quite right to highlight that they are hearing about many such issues from concerned constituents.

It is true that the problem appears to be worse in our large cities—Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Dundee and Glasgow—but it is also clear that the problem is not confined to urban areas. Concerns have been raised repeatedly across my region about these vehicles, in areas such as Clackmannanshire, Stirling, Fife and Perthshire.

Earlier this year, a 19-year-old was arrested after a collision involving an e-bike in the village of Fallin, in Stirlingshire. Accidents are happening regularly, and individuals are requiring medical

attention. We often hear reports of these vehicles being ridden dangerously along pavements and paths, and—as we have heard this evening—the riders wear balaclavas or face coverings to conceal their identity.

Despite the fact that it is illegal, as we have heard from other members, these vehicles are becoming an increasingly common sight on our streets and pathways.

In the previous decade, we became used to seeing motorised scooters being used for crime, including in drive-by thefts and vandalism. Those scooters were small, manoeuvrable and fast, and they were easy to get hold of and to get rid of. For many criminals, they were an ideal partner in crime. E-bikes and e-scooters are smaller and more nimble to manoeuvre, and they are better able to be modified, which makes them even more dangerous and fearsome. Naturally, that means that it is even harder for the police to deal with them, and they are sometimes difficult to trace. Vehicles have to be designed in a better way to ensure that we manage that.

There are areas—across many constituencies and regions, as we have heard—that are quickly becoming known for these problems. A tough approach from Police Scotland is needed to tackle the issue. In some cases, it will also require innovation from Police Scotland, because new technology often calls for new approaches. I look forward to hearing whether the minister, along with Police Scotland, is considering any new approaches to tackle the issue.

As Sue Webber's motion highlights, Police Scotland's approach should include seizing these vehicles permanently, without giving them back; we do not want them to be returned. The use of CCTV in crime hotspots also has a role to play. I am aware that the Scottish Government has been encouraging further anonymous reporting of these vehicles through the Crimestoppers service. That is also a valuable tool, but further measures have to be put in place to ensure that there are tough consequences for these individuals if they are using e-scooters and e-bikes. Local police must be allowed to tackle the issue in the way that they see fit, in order to manage their communities.

As I have said, we also need political leadership on the issue. The bikes can move at excessive speeds, and they run the risk of starting battery fires. They are dangerous to our communities and to individuals.

In conclusion, the onus is on the Scottish Government and Scottish National Party ministers to come up with a detailed, comprehensive action plan and to ensure that Police Scotland is given the resources that it needs to take those actions. The public are demanding action to keep

communities safe, and it is our important responsibility, as MSPs, to provide that. It is high time that people were listened to and that a plan was delivered and acted on.

18:28

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I was not going to contribute, but I have managed to get some free time this evening and it is a very important debate. I agree with much that Sue Webber said, but I will start with the "Highway Code", which is UK wide. If you look up e-bikes, it says that you do not need a licence, and the bike does not need to be registered, taxed or insured—presumably, along with all that, it does not need to have an MOT.

We start from that position. If we had a registration or licensing system and addressed all the other issues such as insurance, we would be starting with a sound grounding, rather than simply saying that we need more police.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Does Christine Grahame understand that the position that she describes is because those vehicles are not legal on the roads? It is vehicles on our roads that require those things, so if we required e-bikes to have licences, MOTs and so on, that would actually put the problem legitimately on our roads.

Christine Grahame: They are illegal on pavements, but they are actually legal on roads. If you look at the "Highway Code", which I have looked at carefully, you will see that they can go wherever a bicycle can go, and bicycles are legal on our roads. Of course, bicycles are in the same boat—you do not need a licence to have an ordinary bike. I ask the member simply to look at that.

However, I absolutely do not dispute that they are a menace, not just because of their speed but because of the way that they are driven. Much depends on defensive driving by motorists to evade them when they are weaving in and out of traffic. The riders deliberately make themselves menacing—macho, if you like—by being dressed in black. That adds another problem: apart from all the other problems, you cannot see them.

Most of the time—and sometimes for other cyclists—it is almost impossible to see them until you are just about upon them, quite apart from the weaving in and out. Even a cyclist, under the "Highway Code", is supposed to have a front light and, at the back, not just a reflector light but a red flashing light so that they can be seen. Many of the e-bikes do not have that. I would start, therefore, with simple, practical things such as

licensing and so on, and enforcing the requirements in the “Highway Code”.

Obviously policing helps, but I have concerns about that approach. Again, I make the point that it might be all right in town centres, but you will come across these vehicles when you are driving along the Portobello Road or coming through Holyrood park, and you cannot expect police to be on patrol all the time. The vehicles are not just there; they are delivering for various food chains and so on, so we have to consider the issue everywhere.

I will be interested to hear what the minister has to say about how the police are tackling the issue, but I would also like to know whether the Scottish Government is in conversation with the UK Government—this is not a hostile point, or a matter of what is or is not devolved—about how we can strengthen the requirements for the owners of these vehicles to have a licence; to be registered, taxed and insured; and to have an MOT, which every one of us with a vehicle needs to have. That would be a start.

Sue Webber: Will the member take an intervention?

Christine Grahame: Yes, I will take the intervention, although I was about to sit down.

Sue Webber: I think that the problem—as my motion should perhaps have intimated—is illegal use, or illegal e-bikes. All the issues arise when they hit speeds of 15 mph and above.

I also have concerns about Deliveroo riders—other food providers are available—but that is perhaps for a separate debate.

Christine Grahame: Yes, I appreciate that there are restrictions in the definition of a e-bike, and limitations on speed, but we know that the riders break those.

All of that would be part of it. If a rider was licensed, we would simply remove their licence, as we would do with anybody else who uses our roads if they were abusing the highway code and causing accidents and so on. We should consider that aspect as well. I am not completely opposed to policing in urban areas and pedestrian centres where there may be particular issues. However, with regard to general road usage, I would like to see these vehicles have to fulfil the requirements under the UK “Highway Code”, including the requirement for licensing.

18:32

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): I, too, thank my colleague Sue Webber for bringing this important debate to the chamber—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can we have your microphone up, please?

Tess White: Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer.

In the past few months, I have had near misses from a souped-up e-scooter or e-bike in Edinburgh. One morning, I came into the office and said to my colleague Sue Webber, “I was nearly knocked over by a bike last night in the Meadows, and it was a souped-up e-bike.” She said, “Well, I’ve got a members’ business debate coming up,” so I am delighted to be speaking today.

Sometimes, in Edinburgh in the evening, it feels like there is a scary swarm of riders, many with balaclavas and no lights on their machines. I ask members to imagine what that would be like if they were partially sighted. The training centre for Guide Dogs Scotland is in Forfar, in my region, and the organisation has a campaign called scoot aware to raise awareness of the alarming effect of e-scooters on people with sight loss.

As we have heard today, fast, heavy and powerful e-scooters are being ridden in an antisocial way, and that is already having a significant and detrimental impact on the lives of people with sight loss. E-scooters can reach high speeds and are relatively silent. One guide dog owner said:

“My guide dog ... and I were ... hit by a rider. I could hear two voices getting closer and the next thing I knew I was hit with such a force that I was knocked over”

the dog.

One of my constituents in Aberdeen said to me:

“E-scooters and bikes are a genuine hazard on the pavement for guide dog owners. My dog’s harness was clipped recently as a rider passed much too close. I have a young dog, not yet three, and he now stops when he is aware of a rider in front or even coming from behind. I carry third party insurance and it would be good if cyclists and e-scooter riders were similarly insured. At least if I was injured, my care home costs would be paid. A collision is a daunting prospect for me and I would appreciate you writing to local councils in respect of stopping parking on pavements and e-scooters and bikes. The sooner riders and drivers are made aware of just how hazardous this is and the effects of isolation, because they are afraid to go out, on visually impaired folks, the better.”

According to research by Guide Dogs, 78 per cent of people with sight loss had had a negative experience with e-scooters, 80 per cent had had an e-scooter rush past and frighten them, 12 per cent reported that their guide dog had been disturbed by an e-scooter, 10 per cent had been hit by an e-scooter and 2 per cent had been hit and injured by an e-scooter. The number of people who have already been involved in a collision is deeply worrying. Those results are deeply alarming. I am delighted that Guide Dogs has

contributed to my speech, because I feel that it is very important for the minister to hear that research.

It is important to note that, in July 2020, the United Kingdom Government introduced e-scooter trials in England. The trials were originally due to end in November 2021, but they have been extended, with the latest extension going to May 2028. Action from the Scottish Government is long overdue. The problem simply cannot be ignored.

18:36

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I, too, thank Sue Webber for securing the debate on this important issue. I agree with my colleague Monica Lennon that the debate is timely, given that, at this point in the year, more e-bikes might be being bought. People must think of the consequences.

We are hearing a common story from representatives around Scotland. People across my home city of Dundee are concerned about the growth in antisocial and criminal behaviour that is facilitated by e-bikes. Just this weekend, residents in Ardler explained to me the menace that is being caused in their community by people recklessly driving e-bikes at high speed. Last week, I spoke with residents in Kirkton who are being menaced by people driving e-bikes at speeds of up to 50mph in built-up areas, racing through red lights, riding on pavements and intimidating other road users.

A few months ago, I was overtaken on Riverside Drive in Dundee by two young men—boys, really—who were doing wheelies at more than 30mph, putting themselves and other road users in huge danger. As with the experiences to which other members have testified, those riders were in black clothing, with their faces covered, so it was impossible for the police to identify them, and it was frightening for children and residents to witness them.

No training, no licence and no insurance are required for what are vehicles that can travel as fast as a car in residential areas. They pose a real danger in our communities. According to UK Government data, 1,312 collisions involving e-scooters were reported in the UK in 2024, and six people were killed in collisions last year.

The cumulative impact of such behaviour on our communities is significant. People feel that our streets are not safe, parents are worried when their kids go out, and older people are hesitant to leave their houses.

Recently, I dealt with a case of damage resulting from a police chase involving e-bikes in Strathmartine, in Dundee. Such damage is being

done to our communities by reckless users of e-bikes, and overstretched councils are having to do additional work to clean up the mess that those users leave behind.

As other members have testified, it is impossible for the police to identify such e-bike riders, because they often wear black clothing and cover their faces. That leaves local people with the feeling that those riders are untouchable and there is no way of dealing with them. The sheer number of racers and bikers is overwhelming, and the police seem to be unable to pursue them and sanction them accordingly.

Christine Grahame: I might have misheard Michael Marra, but I thought that I heard him show a certain degree of sympathy for my proposition that e-bikes should be licensed, registered, taxed and insured. As well as allowing users to be traced, that would act as a deterrent in relation to the way in which some users behave.

Michael Marra: I have some level of sympathy for that proposition applying to the different forms of vehicles that are being used. We must get a grip on their general use. Many of them are illegally imported and, frankly, will not be taxed or licensed appropriately. We must get a grip on their proliferation in society, by whatever means. The grey areas that members have described, such as those in the highway code—where the vehicles can and cannot be used, and where their illegality depends on the speed that they can do—are some of the issues that need to be navigated, to ensure that we can deal with their proliferation.

People feel that those who use these vehicles are untouchable, so we need Police Scotland to be equipped with the tools and the resources to enable it to tackle the issues straight on.

Scottish Labour has a plan to restore local policing and deliver a named community and crime prevention officer in every community across Scotland. Alongside their colleagues in the force, those officers will work with local councillors to identify opportunities to reduce crime and respond to local incidents.

Scottish Labour also wants to ensure that the police are locally accountable, with a statutory requirement for councils to be consulted on local policing plans and to take evidence from local policing divisions, all of which, I believe, will help to tackle localised issues such as the dangerous use of e-bikes and e-scooters and dealing with those who engage in such behaviour. For far too long, our police officers have been neglected and our communities let down. That must change.

18:41

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I congratulate my friend and colleague Sue Webber on securing this important and, I believe, timely debate. I place on record my entry in the register of members' interests, which notes that my wife is a police sergeant in Moray.

I want to focus on the impact that the issue has had, and continues to have, in Moray. However, I must start with Christine Grahame's proposal. If she believes in any way that there is consensus in the chamber on her proposal, she should count me out.

My local police divisional commander disagrees with Christine Grahame. Chief Inspector Mike McKenzie, who is the local area commander for Moray, wrote:

"E-scooters cannot be legally registered by the DVLA, which means they are illegal to use on public roads."

He is very clear—*[Interruption.]* If Christine Grahame wants to come in, I will give way to her in a second, but—*[Interruption.]* In a second. I am sorry. I will give way once I have made the point that I want to put to Christine Grahame, which is that—I say this with the greatest respect—even if she disagrees with Chief Inspector McKenzie, it is naive in the extreme to say that licensing, taxing and registering the vehicles will solve the problems. The people who will do all of that are not the ones who are currently using those vehicles on public roads. They are the ones who are buying them to be used off road, in fields and so on. The ones who are causing the problems will not suddenly, overnight, start registering their vehicles, which will then solve the problems. I am sorry, but I do not agree that that is the solution.

I respectfully give way to Christine Grahame.

Christine Grahame: I know that the member is keen to have clarity in the chamber. I was speaking about e-bikes; I did not mention e-scooters. The fact is that what I said about e-bikes is the case. Although an e-bike is defined as being limited to speeds of no more than 15mph, we know that many such bikes can be adapted. The safest approach is to require the same kind of rules for e-bikes as we require for motorists' vehicles.

Douglas Ross: I will come on to that. However, you will need to help me to do so, Presiding Officer—the clock is ticking.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Indeed. If you could take us up to 6.46, that would be helpful.

Douglas Ross: Okay—that is fine.

I was speaking about e-scooters. If Christine Grahame was speaking about e-bikes, I apologise.

However, going back to my original point, I do not believe that simply requiring people to get licences and regulating their vehicles in some way will solve the problems. I believe that the people who will do things properly are the ones who buy e-bikes and e-scooters for the right reason, which is not to use them on the road. They will not be the ones who are causing the problems, and the people who are causing them will simply ignore that guidance.

Consequently, we need to get to the bottom of the policing issue, which I want to focus on. I would be interested to know whether the minister is aware of how often Police Scotland pursues such vehicles. Michael Marra mentioned that damage was done following a police pursuit. My understanding is that such pursuits are relatively rare. To go back to Liam Kerr's point, the police are worried about pursuing such vehicles, because if the offenders, who are on illegal vehicles—whether they be scooters or e-bikes—fall off and are injured, the police are potentially liable, as they entered into a pursuit. I would be interested to know what discussions the minister has had with Police Scotland about what police officers can do to pursue such vehicles and those who use them.

I also said that this is quite a timely debate. If people leave their Christmas shopping as late as I have, they will still be going about it. I believe that, when some parents are buying these e-scooters and e-bikes, they are unaware that they are illegal. Christine Grahame wants more legislation, but I just want people to understand the legislation that is in place at the moment and that these vehicles are not suitable as gifts, because of all the problems that we have discussed.

Chief Inspector McKenzie went on to say that

"anyone purchasing an e-scooter has a responsibility to be aware of the law and the implications of using one in a public space."

I think that too many people are unaware of that.

Clare Adamson made a very good point about batteries. Councillor David Gordon, chair of Moray Council's planning and regulatory services committee, echoed that point when he said:

"E-scooters are powered by lithium-ion batteries and in recent years some people have unknowingly bought unsafe or counterfeit models that fail to meet UK safety standards—with tragic consequences."

He went on to say that people should know exactly what they are bringing into their homes. He explained:

"Unregulated devices can pose a serious fire risk."

The problems in communities have been well articulated, and we have experienced those in Moray. We have also seen the problem with

batteries, some of which are potentially counterfeit, that are coming into people's homes. That is a disaster waiting to happen. We have seen the tragic consequences of the use of such e-scooters and e-bikes. Therefore, we need tougher enforcement. We need to get the message out from this debate that e-scooters and e-bikes are not toys that are suitable for people to purchase and place under the Christmas tree—they are dangerous vehicles that are wreaking havoc. I would like to hear from the Scottish Government what it will do to ensure that action is taken and that the police can do their job by tackling such crimes.

18:46

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): I thank Sue Webber for bringing the debate to Parliament and all members for their contributions highlighting the dangerous and antisocial use of e-bikes and e-scooters in our communities.

Sue Webber highlighted recent incidents in Edinburgh and also across the UK. Members have highlighted serious concerns, and the Scottish Government shares those concerns. Several members here have been at various meetings on the work that I and minister Jim Fairlie have been doing on this issue all year.

We share members' concerns about issues including riders travelling well above the speed limit, intimidating conduct, impacts on public confidence and, of course, injuries to people. Police Scotland's recent partnership with the Royal hospital for children in Glasgow highlighted a rise in serious injuries associated with e-bikes, and that must be addressed. That is why its recent work to share key messages about this issue, whether in person at the hospital, through press or on social media, is so important, particularly as we approach the festive period.

As Monica Lennon highlighted, people should think twice before buying e-scooters or e-bikes for children and should remember that it is illegal to use e-scooters in public spaces in Scotland. Many high-powered vehicles bought online are not legal for use on public roads, so they can be extremely dangerous, especially for our children.

Police Scotland has also made it clear that anyone riding a non-compliant e-bike or e-scooter on the public road is likely to have it seized by officers. Members are well aware that policing in Scotland is operationally independent. However, I agree with colleagues across the chamber that robust police action is a critical part of the response to the illegal use of or action resulting from e-bikes and e-scooters.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): At the end of last week, a constituent spoke to me about the fact that cameras had been removed from lights in the Hyndland area of Glasgow. He feels that that is a danger to road users because police are less often able to see what is going on. Is the minister aware of that issue, and would she like to work with me to address it?

Siobhian Brown: We have on-going conversations with Police Scotland. That specific issue has not been highlighted to me, but I will be happy to discuss it with Pam Duncan-Glancy as we take this forward.

Sue Webber: In exchanges in the chamber last week, we discussed an initiative whereby City of Edinburgh Council is looking to deploy mobile closed-circuit television cameras in hotspots. Does the minister agree that that approach might be ramped up and brought out nationally?

Siobhian Brown: Yes. I was going to get to that issue, but I will raise it now. I think that it was raised during general question time last week. The issue is really complex. It is about deciding how we should approach it, because the situation is different in rural areas and in cities such as Glasgow and Edinburgh.

For example, City of Edinburgh Council has led the way with a multi-agency approach, although I believe that the focus was more on the use of quad bikes and motorbikes in parks and green spaces. The approach taken elsewhere could be very different, and there will be variations in what different councils can do, but that council could be leading the way with that example of a multi-agency approach. After all, I do not believe that this is a matter just for Police Scotland; there has to be a joined-up approach, and I think that some learning can definitely be taken from what the City of Edinburgh Council did last week.

I just want to mention a few examples that members have highlighted today. When I and the Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity met His Majesty's chief inspector of constabulary on the antisocial use of vehicles several weeks ago, we discussed HMICS's recent review of roads policing, as well as the powers that Police Scotland officers have in relation to the antisocial use of e-bikes and other vehicles. I was pleased to note that a planned review of community policing is to take place next year, and I encourage anyone who might have useful evidence to engage with the inspector on that.

We also discussed officers' work with colleagues at the Royal hospital for sick children, which has seen a significant increase in injuries relating to antisocial use of these vehicles. I and Mr Fairlie will meet the chief inspector again in the

new year to get a deeper understanding of work that is happening on the ground.

With regard to members' comments on Police Scotland's powers, throughout the year we have had discussions with the police, in which they have advised that the current powers under the Road Traffic Act 1988 and the Antisocial Behaviour etc (Scotland) Act 2004 are sufficient to respond to the misuse of off-road vehicles. However, the Government remains committed to doing all that we can to support enforcement, and we are open to further legislation action, if required.

Christine Grahame: I might have misheard, but I think that the minister referred to off-road vehicles. E-bikes are, of course, on-road forms of transport.

Siobhian Brown: It is a complex issue. We are looking at all off-road and on-road vehicles, anyone using these vehicles in parks or on roads, and delivery drivers, too.

Police Scotland is carrying out work on its vehicle seizure and disposal powers, including the retention period that I know that members have raised in our on-going meetings, and we are working closely with key stakeholders to understand the current landscape. That work will build on changes that the Home Office is exploring with regard to reserved legislation on vehicle seizure. Indeed, I think that a consultation on that has recently finished.

I reassure members that I and Mr Fairlie will continue to ensure that Police Scotland and the Scottish Police Authority are fully aware of the concerns being brought to Parliament. Members have expressed a desire for a robust policing approach across Scotland that will reduce unwarranted variation. That expectation is entirely reasonable; indeed, ministers are reflecting it in discussions with both the SPA and Police Scotland.

Beyond policing, members will recognise that this is a complex challenge, and I can say that we are acting in other areas, too.

Clare Adamson: Will the minister give way?

Siobhian Brown: I am just conscious that I am coming up to the seven-minute mark, Presiding Officer. Will I get this time back?

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

Clare Adamson: I thank the minister very much for taking my intervention. I know that Mr Stewart has mentioned Crimestoppers, but my local police have been working with Neighbourhood Watch Scotland, too. I know that that will bring back images from the 1970s, of curtain twitching and so

on, but, like everything else, that initiative has gone online. It has the neighbourhood alert system, which not only alerts those who have signed up about incidents that are happening in their area, but provides a point for reporting such incidents. That gives the police the data to map some of the hotspots and the times at which these things happen.

I know that Neighbourhood Watch is sharing that information with my local police force, but I am not sure about the situation across the rest of the country. Therefore, I think that it would be worth members looking into that and encouraging their constituents to sign up to be part of that process.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, I can give you some of that time back.

Siobhian Brown: Thank you, Presiding Officer, and I thank Clare Adamson for highlighting that aspect. It is something that we could all be doing in our constituencies and our regions.

As I was saying, beyond policing, members will recognise that this is a complex challenge, so we are acting in other areas, too. For example, with regard to delivery platforms, several members have raised legitimate concerns about the behaviour of some riders in the food economy. Jim Fairlie and I have reached out to the major delivery companies to discuss expectations with regard to safety, compliance and responsible conduct. I should say that we have just done that, and we are waiting for them to get back to us about having a meeting with them. In any case, companies operating in Scotland are expected to play their part in keeping our streets and communities safe.

As members will know, the Government has undertaken national communication activities to complement local efforts, and statutory local antisocial behaviour strategies, which are the responsibility of councils and Police Scotland, can encompass tackling e-bike and e-scooter misuse, too, as well as preventative work. Members will agree that investment in prevention can help to address the underlying causes of the behaviours that members have described. That is why we continue to invest in the cashback for communities programme, which has provided crucial early intervention to more than 15,000 young people.

I am aware that I am running out of time, so I will move on to the key issue of product safety. As many members will know, many of the most dangerous e-bikes entering the market are imported; they are high-powered models that do not comply with UK standards, and my officials are working with the Office for Product Safety and Standards as it implements the new Product Regulation and Metrology Act 2025 and strengthens controls. Although the Scottish and

UK Governments differ on some issues—for example, licensing for off-road vehicles—there is significant common ground, and I want to work constructively on this shared challenge where we can.

Let me address the specific point in Sue Webber's motion about face coverings—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Very briefly, minister.

Siobhian Brown: Of course, if anyone feels threatened or unsafe in public places, they should contact the police. We have sought views from Police Scotland on whether further powers might be required in relation to the criminal use of face coverings, and we have been advised that, at this time, additional powers are not needed. However, we will keep the legislation under review.

In closing, I thank members for their contributions. I commit to ensuring that the issues that have been raised are discussed with the SPA and Police Scotland, and to engaging with members as we address this challenge and maintain our collective focus on keeping people safe.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate.

Meeting closed at 18:56.

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