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Tuesday 13 January 2026

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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 13 January 2026

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is the Rev Julie Moody, minister at Milton of Campsie parish church.

The Rev Julie Moody (Milton of Campsie Parish Church): Presiding Officer, members of the Scottish Parliament and guests, good afternoon and thank you for this opportunity to lead your time for reflection.

Jesus was a master storyteller, drawing people into deep truths by using everyday images. He once told a story of two builders: one who chose the easy option, one of convenience and speedy results, over the alternative, chosen by the other, of a more laborious approach, with deep foundations. When the storm came, only one house survived, thus illustrating Jesus's question:

"Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I say?"

We find that in Luke, chapter 6.

Our actions need to back up our words. Upon what foundation are we building our lives? It must be robust, for anything flimsy will simply fall with the first storm. Choose to be a wise, rather than foolish, builder. Jesus's short parable has significant challenge.

The work of the Scottish Parliament for 2026 has already begun. It is an election year, and you will all be very busy. Your constituents have expectations about your availability, your engagement and your visibility. For some, their basic existence may hinge on the decisions that this Parliament makes, the laws it enacts, the justice it pursues, the budget it agrees, the compassion it demonstrates and its mandate for service. What a responsibility! What a privilege.

In my parish, I, too, hold the tension of responsibility and privilege. How do I minister to those whose reality means that they are lonely today—or terrified, weary, stuck or seeking purpose? Like you, the church has a role in meeting the needs of the most vulnerable, offering practical help and bringing hope into dark situations.

A lot of words are spoken in this chamber and in the committee rooms—and in churches. Ideas get

teased out, discernment is sought and plans are made. Those we serve need much more than our words, however, for they will be forgotten in the first storm. They need action, solid foundations and lived-out principles.

Churches in your constituencies need to heed Jesus's warning and live out his mandate to care for the marginalised, the weak and the overlooked—and challenge those who are comfortable. Those who live in these parishes, your constituents, will be looking to this Parliament for action that confirms your rhetoric, justice that underlines your principles and compassion that demonstrates your humanity.

May God grant each of you the grace to be a wise builder.

Topical Question Time

14:04

CalMac Ferries Chief Executive (Severance Package)

1. Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports that the former chief executive of CalMac received a severance package exceeding £170,000, including whether this complied with the severance provisions set out in the Scottish public finance manual. (S6T-02834)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): CalMac Ferries has confirmed in response to those press reports that its former chief executive officer did not receive a severance package of £170,000; it confirmed that payments consisted of salary and pension payments to which the CEO was entitled, in addition to compensation payments for loss of office.

When the settlement agreement was proposed, CalMac initially indicated that the settlement would be £95,000, in line with the requirements of the Scottish public finance manual. We have recently been advised by CalMac that that figure did not include accrued holiday pay, as it should have done. Payment for that was subsequently added and, in including that, the final payment that reflected the compensation settlement was £107,635, which is above the threshold at which ministerial approval should have been sought.

Given the level of the settlement, the decision should have come to ministers, and I therefore find the position to be entirely unsatisfactory. The permanent secretary has undertaken to look further into the circumstances around the settlement, and officials have now written to the CalMac CEO and the chair to remind them of the need to comply with the Scottish public finance manual and to seek a full and detailed explanation as to why due process was not followed in that case.

Jamie Greene: I am glad that I asked, because it is difficult to see whether any of that would ever have come to light for the public.

The Scottish public finance manual is abundantly clear on the process for severance packages. Ministerial views must be sought on any payments of more than £95,000. Paragraph 7.5 of the section on settlement agreements is clear that

“views must be obtained”

in any particularly

“high profile cases”.

I have to say that the CEO's exit from CalMac is a particularly high-profile case.

In light of what the cabinet secretary just said, at what point did she know that the payment had been made? Was that after the payment had been made? One presumes so. At any point up until then, did anyone in the Government or the civil service receive a business case for the severance package? If so, who signed it off?

Fiona Hyslop: There were a number of points in there. On notice, ministers were given information that there would be a settlement. Obviously, it is up to CalMac to make decisions about employment positions. Officials signed off the business case; there was indeed a business case. Jamie Greene set out well what is in the finance manual, and that is exactly the process. I add that the then head of the ferries division at Transport Scotland wrote to CalMac to say that, if the settlement was in excess of £95,000, it would require a new business case, so CalMac was alerted to that. What happened is that the accrued holiday pay of just over £12,000 should have triggered the different process that has been set out.

As I indicated, we take the matter seriously. The permanent secretary has undertaken to look further into the circumstances as to why the additional £12,000 of accrued holiday pay was not added to the original amount, which would have triggered the requirement for ministerial approval.

Jamie Greene: I am still none the wiser as to whether the cabinet secretary knew about the scale of the payment that would be made and when that information was made available to Government. The cabinet secretary just stated that the Government was told that there would be a payment, which I presume means that it was told in advance of the payment being made. However, it sounds as though it was given the wrong information about the value of the payment that would be made; the total value then went over the limit at which ministers would have had to intervene to authorise the payment.

The whole thing is entirely unacceptable. Chucking CalMac under the bus is not the answer, because this is symptomatic of the Government failing to follow due process in signing off such payments, and it follows a series of repeated events in which high-profile heads of public agencies have departed with substantial golden goodbyes—this is yet another example. Will the Government immediately open an internal inquiry to get to the bottom of how these endlessly repeated breakdowns in the process are happening? Will the Government get a grip of such severance payments once and for all?

Fiona Hyslop: I make it clear that what is identified as making up a settlement agreement includes payment in lieu of notice, compensation for loss of office, legal fees and, as I said, accrued holiday pay. I do not think that it is satisfactory if procedures are not followed, and I am sure that the permanent secretary, in looking further into the circumstances, will want to indicate how public corporations such as CalMac should deal with the process.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): My member's bill—the Freedom of Information Reform (Scotland) Bill—includes a provision that public bodies must proactively publish information. The Scottish Information Commissioner has ruled that CalMac breached freedom of information rules by withholding information relating to severance payments and that there is a legitimate public interest in knowing how much senior executives are paid on exit from public bodies. Does the cabinet secretary agree with the aims of my bill, which would require bodies such as CalMac to proactively publish information such as the detail of severance payments for senior executives?

Fiona Hyslop: As Ms Clark knows from her professional background, any situation in which employment legislation is applied to an individual case must be treated carefully. However, I point out that the information has possibly come to light because CalMac's annual report and accounts identify the compensation for loss of office, along with the salary and the employer's pension contribution. In other words, the information that she is seeking is actually publicly available.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for her earlier answers, but I am slightly confused. Robbie Drummond worked for three days of that year and seems to have been paid £35,000 for each day that he worked, which is high by anyone's standards.

Can we have a definitive answer, cabinet secretary? Did you agree to that or not? Do you think that £35,000 a day is appropriate? Those are simple questions.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Please always speak through the chair.

Edward Mountain: Sorry.

Fiona Hyslop: To answer simply, it is for the CalMac board to make those decisions, as it did. Regarding employment contracts, Mr Mountain will know that different people in different employment will have different arrangements in any situation where there would be a severance payment. The payment did not come to ministers for approval; that was not required at the time because the payment was, at that point, below £95,000. It was

the accrual of another £12,000 in holiday pay that took the payment over that amount, and that is the information that should have come to me. I am not satisfied about that, which is why it is quite appropriate for the permanent secretary to examine the issue.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): This is not the first time that a CalMac chief executive has been given a severance package, and that is all due to the Scottish National Party Government's mismanagement of our ferries. Meanwhile, the only people who are not being compensated for the ferry fiasco are the islanders who are suffering as a consequence. When will they be paid compensation and when will a permanent compensation package be put in place?

The Presiding Officer: That is somewhat wide of the substantive question.

Fiona Hyslop: It is, but I will try to address it if I can. We are not paying compensation for disruption across any of the transport modes, such as that recently seen on the trunk roads. However, the member will know that the Government is cognisant of business resilience issues in our islands, which is why Mairi Gougeon, the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands, has provided £4.4 million for business resilience to islands that have been affected and impacted. That support was recently expanded to include Islay, Jura, Mull and other islands.

Classroom Supplies

2. Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports of a postcode lottery for classroom supplies and that some schools have only 93p per child per week for basic classroom supplies. (S6T-02831)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): This Government has increased funding for education. In 2025-26, the education and skills resource budget rose by £165 million to more than £3.2 billion, and local government received a record £15 billion, with an increase of more than £1 billion to support education and other local services.

Scotland has the highest spend per pupil in the United Kingdom, at £10,100 per pupil, which is approximately 20 per cent higher than spending per pupil in other parts of the United Kingdom.

It is essential that the funding that is protected by this Government centrally gets to the chalk face in our classrooms, where it will make the biggest difference. That is why I recently appointed John Wilson, a respected former headteacher, to lead work nationally that will interrogate issues pertaining to governance and school funding.

Paul O’Kane: The analysis of freedom of information data from local authorities that was reported at the weekend shows that six of the eight lowest-spending councils rank among the areas with the most deprived neighbourhoods, with some schools spending less than £1 per child per week on classroom supplies. In response to those findings, a Scottish Government spokesperson—we heard the cabinet secretary echo a lot of this in her answer—pointed in particular to funding that is provided through the Scottish attainment challenge, including pupil equity funding, which is supposed to go directly to schools in the most deprived communities to support children who are affected by poverty.

Is it not clear that year upon year of reductions and cuts to council budgets have led councils to have to make such decisions and that the money, which is meant to be additional—it is meant to add to our anti-poverty strategies and work to close the attainment gap—is not getting to where it needs to go? I note that the cabinet secretary mentioned John Wilson, but does she recognise her own responsibility in this area? What confidence does she have that the funds that are given by her Government to tackle inequality are being used effectively? What analysis has she done of that?

Jenny Gilruth: There were a number of different points in Mr O’Kane’s question. I am mindful of time, but I will try to respond to them all.

He is absolutely correct to say that pupil equity funding should be additional in relation to school budgets, and that is the way that it has been protected by this Government through budgetary processes. I observe that the Scottish Labour Party was unable to support the previous budget.

On the FOI data, as I understand it, we do not have such data on the issue from all local authorities. It is also important to say that the article that Mr O’Kane cited notes that the data can be recorded differently from council to council, and that most of the figures, as we understand it, relate to the financial year 2024-25. Of course, those figures were obtained by a tabloid newspaper.

On the substantive point that Mr O’Kane makes, it is important that we have an understanding at central Government level of how the additionality is being used in relation to school supplies. That is why I have asked officials and education analysts to give me a fuller update in that regard, because those measurements differ by local authority.

However, it is the case that there has been an increase to the education budget, which Mr O’Kane and his colleagues were unable to support in last year’s budget.

Paul O’Kane: I find it extraordinary that, in the final months of the current session of Parliament,

we are just getting round to analysing exactly what is happening with that spend in schools. I find that shocking, and I think that our teachers and parents across Scotland will find it shocking as well.

This Government promised to close the poverty-related attainment gap a decade ago, but it has failed to deliver. It already presides over massive disparities in attendance rates, which are still well below pre-Covid levels, and it has allowed violence and bad behaviour in our classrooms to rise. The Scottish National Party Government promised a Parliament of Covid recovery in education, yet five years later, we have, in the cabinet secretary’s words, only just turned a corner. Scotland’s once-excellent schooling system has been undermined by the SNP over the past two decades, and the latest reporting is just the latest evidence for it. *[Interruption.]*

I hear the First Minister groaning. He had quite a lot to do with it, from memory—

The Presiding Officer: Ask a question, please, Mr O’Kane.

Paul O’Kane: As a former teacher, does the cabinet secretary think that it is acceptable to spend less than £1 per child per week on classroom supplies? How has that happened on her watch when she promised Covid recovery?

Jenny Gilruth: Like Mr O’Kane, I agree that Governments should protect and enhance education spending. That is why, in last year’s Scottish Government budget, this SNP Government did exactly that, with a resource increase of more than 3 per cent. We provided extra money to councils for more teachers and additional support needs and we provided a record settlement to local government. Scottish Labour’s response to that record increase for the education portfolio was to sit on its hands.

This year, we hear from Mr O’Kane’s boss, Anas Sarwar, that Scottish Labour is

“not in a strong negotiating position”

over the budget. In a Parliament of minorities, members on the SNP benches might have expected that Scottish Labour was in a prime position to force the hand of this Government. Instead, just like last year, it opts out. That is a dereliction of duty from the Scottish Labour Party. It is happy to opine over FOIs and press comment, but when it comes down to it, it cannot even bring itself to push the button to secure more investment for Scotland’s schools.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): We all know that it is crucial that Scotland’s classrooms provide positive learning environments to support children and young people. How is the Scottish Government funding improvement to the pupil teacher ratio and, in turn, learning environments,

as well as addressing the cost of the school day for those children who are most impacted by poverty?

Jenny Gilruth: As I have set out, thanks to additional investment that was secured in last year's budget and the efforts of education authorities, the census data that was published in December showed an increase in the number of teachers in our schools for the first time since 2022, which is to be welcomed. It also showed an improvement in pupil teacher ratios. Our continued investment in relation to the Scottish attainment challenge over the past decade is helping to drive improvements at local authority level and in our schools, as is evidenced by the very welcome progress that we saw in the data on achievement in curriculum for excellence levels, which was published in December.

Budget 2026-27

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a statement by Shona Robison on the Scottish budget 2026-27. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:20

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison):

Today I present a budget for Scottish families, for a stronger national health service and for investment in Scotland's infrastructure. As a result of the decisions that I am announcing, some of the pressure on families and family budgets will ease; there will be more operations and appointments in our health service and it will be easier to access a general practitioner; college funding will grow, giving our young people more opportunities to learn and flourish; life will be a little easier for parents, with more wraparound childcare; and more young Scots will be able to find a home that they can love and can afford, which will help them to build a more secure future right here in Scotland.

The Government wants what is best for Scotland. That is why we will continue to offer and expand the best cost of living support package anywhere in the United Kingdom. My message to the people of this country is clear: thanks to our cost of living commitments, they will be better off in so many ways because they live in Scotland and because Scotland is led by the Scottish National Party.

I am very proud to present a budget for Scotland with an investment of almost £68 billion in the wellbeing of our people and the future prosperity of our nation. I also present our multiyear spending plans. Given a total investment of almost £200 billion, the Scottish spending review and the infrastructure investment pipeline demonstrate the scale of our ambition for our nation.

I will begin today where I left off in my budget last year. Just over a year ago, I announced in the chamber our intention to scrap the cruel two-child cap. That was widely welcomed across Scotland, but the representatives in this Parliament of the UK's governing party could not bring themselves to vote for it. It has taken the UK Government almost a year to catch up, but I am pleased that it has done so.

The Scottish Government will now go further and do more. Instead of mitigating yet another damaging Westminster policy, we can use the £126 million that is released for the coming year to keep even more Scottish children out of poverty.

Our aim is to target all those extra resources in the most effective way, to ensure maximum impact on those families in greatest need by increasing their income and reducing their costs. That means, this year, as part of a £50 million whole-family support package, specific additional support for colleges as part of on-going initiatives to raise income through skills and education, so that people can find work, or better-paid work; action to remove transport barriers that make it difficult for some to access work; and additional resources for key third sector partners to target more precisely those families who are hardest to reach. It means a further £49 million this year for measures that we will announce in the updated child poverty delivery plan in March, as we strive to reduce child poverty faster and further.

In 2026-27, the transformational Scottish child payment will, of course, increase with inflation. In 2027-28, because of the choices that have been made in this budget, we will go further, by boosting to £40 a week the payment for families with a baby under one. The first year of a baby's life is one of the most exciting times for any family, but we know that that time can also bring extra stress and costs. That is why the Government is delivering the strongest package of support for families with young children anywhere in the UK, from the baby box to best start payments and, of course, our game-changing Scottish child payment. That support for mums and dads will help them through the critical first year of their child's life, delivering the best start in life for children and for families. That commitment speaks to who we are as a Government and to our values and ambition for each and every child in our land.

To deliver even more for those with the least, we will ask those with the most—the very wealthiest—in our land to contribute that little bit more. That includes the introduction, by April 2028, of two new council tax bands for the most expensive properties in Scotland, which will be those that are worth more than £1 million on an up-to-date valuation. That measure will bring greater fairness as well as increased revenues to councils.

From April 2027, the air departure tax will come into force and we will shortly launch a consultation on a new Highlands and Islands exemption continuing to exempt domestic flights. Through that new framework, we will introduce a private jet tax. Those who choose to travel by private jet in Scotland will pay a fair share for that privilege. In doing so, they will help us to make Scotland the fairer nation that we all know it can and should be.

Self-government works for Scotland. The choices that we can make in this, our national Parliament, make a real difference for the people we serve. Our choices mean that child poverty in

Scotland is at a 30-year low and it has been falling in Scotland while it has risen elsewhere on these isles. That has been achieved because we can build a social security system that is more compassionate and a tax system that is more progressive.

Decisions taken by this Parliament and Government have played a key role in reducing carbon emissions in Scotland by more than half. Public health has been advanced, with Scotland taking the lead on action to reduce the harm from alcohol and through transformational measures such as the human papillomavirus vaccination.

The amount of electricity that is generated by renewable sources has increased more than fourfold since 2008—a step change that should mean substantially lower energy bills and will mean lower energy bills when Scotland's energy is in Scotland's hands.

Electrification of key rail routes has improved journeys for tens of thousands of commuters, and ScotRail has been brought into public ownership. We have been able to replace the UK's costly private finance initiative with a more cost-effective alternative, which has, in turn, enabled us to build hundreds of new schools and substantially upgrade hundreds of others.

We have abolished Thatcher's right to buy, which means that, after years when the number of socially rented homes was falling, it is once again increasing in Scotland. Indeed, since 2007, we have delivered more than 141,000 affordable homes, 101,000 of which have been for social rent.

Scotland has been changed for the better by this Parliament and by this SNP Government, but we are determined to go further. That is why this budget is focused not only on securing the gains that have been made but on moving forward to take the best next steps for our nation. When decisions about Scotland are taken here in Scotland by a Government that puts the people of Scotland first, transformational change can and does happen.

This budget is focused on delivery and hope, on a stronger NHS and on a brighter future for Scotland and the people who live here. It will direct more public spending to the front line. At its very heart is a commitment to effective and efficient policy delivery through a more modern public sector and smarter use of technology, including digital delivery, making it easier for citizens to access the services that they need.

Our approach to public sector reform will deliver £1.5 billion in efficiencies, helping us to protect front-line services from the worst impacts of a tightening fiscal environment, caused not least by the constraints that the UK Government has put

on Scotland's budget, including the near £400 million shortfall in funding as a result of the chancellor's decision to increase employers' national insurance contributions.

Our ambition is clear: a Scotland where public services work seamlessly for people, are modern in their design and delivery, are accessible where and when they are needed, are flexible in how they respond and are consistently focused on the best outcome. In short, public services that are centred on the needs of the citizen, not the needs of the system.

Of course, for the budget to pass and for the benefits to be felt by families across Scotland, we need support and votes from other parties across the chamber. As before—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

Shona Robison: As before, my aim has been to seek common ground. Thanks to constructive pre-budget engagement, key priorities of Opposition members have been included alongside the priorities of the Government in my budget plans today. Those include, among other things, more money to improve neurodevelopmental assessments and care for children and young people; additional investment for changing places toilets; resources to support bus franchising; and support for the redevelopment of Edinburgh's King's Theatre.

From our budget conversations, I have no doubt that members across the chamber will also welcome actions in other key areas. That includes our commitment to the communities that are affected by the closure of Mossmorran, which will receive targeted support of £9 million over the next three years; our commitment to the residents of Shetland and Orkney, who will benefit from lower costs as we scrap peak fares for islanders on the northern isles ferries; and our commitment to the college sector, which will see a substantial 10 per cent increase in funding—that is £70 million extra this year. Alongside that, the Scottish Funding Council, supported by the Scottish Futures Trust, will be working with colleges, including Forth Valley College and Dundee and Angus College, to develop a comprehensive infrastructure investment plan that addresses local priorities.

This is a budget for a stronger health service and a budget that protects and enhances the best cost of living support package available anywhere in the UK. It is a budget that is worthy of support. For our NHS, it delivers a record £17.6 billion for front-line services; £2.4 billion to support the vital work of GPs, primary care and community services; and more than £2.3 billion of support for social care.

That means that our health service will have the resources that it needs to continue to reduce waiting times and cut waiting lists. I commend NHS staff for the work that they are doing right now to cut the longest waits—something that has now been achieved for six months in a row. There will be more operations and appointments, building on the targeted investment in last year's budget, which has seen a record number of hip and knee procedures and an increase in in-patient and out-patient appointments. We know what works, and we are investing at record levels so that our NHS can do more of it.

There will be significant new investment in our staff—in higher wages, improved training and action to support staff wellbeing, retention and work-life balance. The NHS is nothing without its staff, and I want them to hear loud and clear that they are respected and valued. Thanks to their efforts, the NHS is already getting better, and the budget will continue to support them as they work tirelessly to put patients first.

For the social care sector, today's budget will enable further action to reduce delayed discharges, as the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care will set out following engagement with local government and health and social care partners. It also provides the resources that are needed to ensure that, where we commission services, those working in adult social care receive, at a minimum, the real living wage.

Once again this year, a bigger share of the health budget is going to primary care. That means that the number of GPs in Scotland will continue to rise, and more GPs will mean easier access. Because we are committed to ending the 8 am rush, the budget contains £36 million to begin the roll-out of new high-street walk-in GP clinics, with the first coming soon. Our ambition is to deliver the best care, at the right time and in the right place, free at the point of need. That includes an on-going expansion of our hospital-at-home programme, so that more people can receive the care that they need in the comfort and security of their own home. Members should have no doubt that we have an NHS in Scotland that is on the path to recovery: an NHS that, after Covid, which was a huge shock to the system, is getting better.

This is a budget that will enable our health services to do more and to do it better. I have no doubt that our constituents will not look favourably—that is an understatement—on any party that cannot bring itself to back a budget that offers so much for our NHS. This is a budget for the wellbeing of our people and the prosperity of our nation: for a society where the needs of people and planet are to the fore.

For the planet, that means that we will continue to play our part in global efforts to tackle the growing climate emergency. That includes an on-going commitment to decarbonise our economy, with investment to support more carbon-free transport and more carbon-free heating for businesses and homes, and to continue the expansion of renewable electricity generation around our shores.

Taken together, we are committing more than £5 billion this coming year towards measures that will reduce Scotland's carbon emissions, increase our resilience in the face of climate change, and, in many cases, save families hard-earned cash. It is an investment in our landscape and our natural environment: assets that are not only priceless in themselves but are of vital importance economically—I think of the food and drink and tourism sectors, which are flourishing—and are vital to our health and our sense of self, and to our wellbeing in its fullest sense. It is an investment in those who care for our land, in our rural communities and our farmers, including a new package to nurture and develop regenerative and sustainable skills in food and farming.

Our commitment to the planet extends to investment beyond our shores. While others are choosing to reduce their commitment to international development, I am proud to confirm that, in Scotland, we will increase our international development fund by a quarter, to £16 million—different choices, different values.

For our people, this is a budget that delivers record funding to support Scotland's creative and culture sector. As promised, there is a £20 million increase in the culture budget this year. It is through our songs and our stories that we best express ourselves and best understand ourselves and our place in the world. In these times of uncertainty, when there are so many pressures on family budgets, we can find some solace, and maybe even some much-needed escape, in art, dance, laughter and music and in the shared experience of a concert or festival. Scotland is richer because of our world-famous culture, and the Government stands full square behind our fantastic creative sector.

This is a budget that creates new opportunities for Scots to learn and to flourish. It includes extra funding not only for colleges, but for our universities, including £20 million for the University of Dundee, and an on-going commitment to Scotland's high-quality apprenticeships, which this year alone will provide more than 31,000 Scots with a pathway to a sustainable, well-paid job. There will be targeted support to ensure that critical skills shortages in our offshore renewables sector are met, and to help retrain workers in the oil and gas sector. This Government is serious

about a just transition, and serious about making the most of our renewables opportunity.

I know that many young Scots are struggling to get on the housing ladder and to find affordable homes to rent or buy. We will deliver record levels of investment to help deliver even more homes—a new generation of affordable, liveable energy-efficient homes.

Our plans provide vital support for children with additional support needs and give local councils the resources that they need to continue narrowing the attainment gap and to deliver on our commitments on class contact time. Overall, the funding for local government will increase by 2 per cent in real terms, comparing budget with budget—a settlement that is fair, and which recognises the important role of local government in the delivery of key services. Decisions on council tax rates will, of course, be taken locally. However, this is a reasonable deal and, given the cost of living pressures that we all recognise, I urge local authorities to translate the settlement into reasonable decisions on council tax.

Our ambition is for a society that is strong and an economy that is flourishing. Scotland is a nation of innovators and wealth creators, and this budget is designed to support those whose efforts are essential if our economy is to grow.

The most prosperous future for Scotland means being able to use our resources to deliver a clear competitive advantage for Scottish business, and that is why this Government believes that Scotland's energy resources should be in Scotland's hands. There is no good reason why Scottish companies are paying such high energy costs. However, short of independence, there are steps that we can and will take to get more direct benefits from the renewables revolution in our economy. That includes providing resources in the budget to support the creation of a diverse and sustainable supply chain for offshore wind in Scotland. The budget will also provide money to support a just transition for our industrial sector, including targeted investment in the Grangemouth industrial cluster.

We are working with our partners in Shetland Islands Council, Orkney Islands Council and Western Isles Council to agree a new accelerator model—a transformative package of funding that, we believe, can unlock hundreds of millions of pounds of investment in those island communities. Alongside that, our new national islands plan will take forward priority projects, including those relating to clean energy and fixed links, as well as other key infrastructure projects.

Those investments will form part of a capital investment programme worth £7.6 billion, which, given that infrastructure investment is a

recognised driver of growth, will deliver significant economic benefits across our economy. The programme includes investment in our railways, with the delivery of new battery electric trains on the Borders and Fife routes, and on-going investment in the most extensive renewal of our ferry fleet since devolution. This year, the investment includes nearly £200 million for the dualling of the A9. I say this loud and clear: the Government is committed to the completion of the A9 by 2035. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, members.

Shona Robison: We will take forward the dualling of key sections of the A96 and, working with partners, we will ensure that a new station at Winchburgh is delivered.

In 2025, Scotland secured a decade-long stretch as the top UK location outside London for foreign direct investment. Central to that achievement is the work of our enterprise agencies and the Scottish National Investment Bank. I am pleased to say that the budget delivers on our commitment to invest £1 billion in the bank by the end of the current parliamentary session, and it keeps us on track to invest £2 billion over the bank's first 10 years.

The budget will build on that progress with a package of funding to support disadvantaged and underrepresented young entrepreneurs and to support companies to scale up. The budget also includes enhanced support for VisitScotland and a commitment to multiyear funding to further support town centre regeneration.

The small business bonus scheme, which removes the burden of rates from 100,000 properties—businesses such as hairdressers, bakers and cafes that form the lifeblood of every community—will be continued for the next three years. In response to concerns in the business community about the recent revaluation, we will reduce the basic, intermediate and higher property rates while providing transitional relief worth £184 million over the next three years.

We will provide 15 per cent non-domestic rates relief in 2026-27 and in each of the three years of the revaluation cycle. Over three years, that will be worth £138 million for retail, hospitality and leisure premises that are liable for the basic and intermediate property rates, with a cap of £110,000 per business per year. In our islands and designated remote areas, that business relief will be 100 per cent. In total, including the small business bonus scheme, more than 96 per cent of retail, hospitality and leisure properties will pay zero or reduced rates. Together, that will provide retail, hospitality and leisure premises with support worth £322 million over the next three years.

We are still awaiting details from the UK Government about possible changes to business rates for pubs in England, following press speculation last week. I assure members that, if additional resources become available, we stand ready to use them to provide even further support to the sector in Scotland.

There will be no changes to land and buildings transaction tax, and we will continue to match UK rates with the Scottish landfill tax.

This is a Government that cares about Scotland and all our people. That means that we will work harder than anyone else to secure the best possible deal for our nation and its people. Above all, that means that we are committed to delivering the best cost of living support package that is available anywhere in these isles.

The best cost of living deal in Britain is getting better. That is not only about the cost of living; just as importantly, it is about quality of life. Free prescriptions—which provide a saving of £9.90 per item compared with England—will be continued. Free eye examinations—which represent a saving of £25 compared with England—will be continued. Average council tax and water bills will still be lower than in England and Wales. Peak rail fares have been abolished and will remain abolished for as long as there is an SNP Government. Young Scots are protected from a debt burden that is approaching £30,000 because tuition fees in Scotland are free, and they will be free for as long as there is an SNP Government.

The baby box, which contains items worth £400, is a gift to every new baby that is born in our land. There are free school meals for thousands in our schools, including pupils from primary 1 to primary 5. There is free bus travel for all young Scots under the age of 22 and all older Scots over the age of 60. The provision of 1,140 hours of free, high-quality early learning and childcare, which is worth around £6,000, is welcomed by thousands of young parents.

Those are all policies that help with the cost of living. More than that, they are all policies that are focused in different ways on the wellbeing of our citizens at each and every stage of their lives.

The choices that have been made in this budget enable us to go further and do more. That includes funding to deliver a breakfast club for every Scottish primary and special school by August 2027. What will that mean in practice? It will mean that the morning rush to get everyone organised and out of the house will become that little bit easier. It will mean that there is the chance to drop kids off earlier at school, perhaps opening up new shifts at work. For some families, it will mean saving on the cost of breakfast; for others, it will

mean kids getting a breakfast that they would not otherwise receive, fuelling them to learn.

Our plans also include new funding for wraparound activities in the afternoon and early evening. Building on the Scottish Football Association's excellent extra time initiative, the budget will enable us to trial a programme of activities between 3 pm and 6 pm in a range of primary schools, which will help to get kids active and will offer parents the peace of mind that their children are being looked after, free of screens. By providing more wraparound support, we will give parents greater flexibility and freedom. As a third element, there will be more help for parents during the summer holidays.

To mark Scotland's hosting of the Commonwealth games and return to the men's football world cup, there will be investment in a summer of sport. I know just how costly it can be for parents to keep their kids entertained during the long summer holiday. Therefore, this summer, thousands of young Scots will have access to a range of free sport activities, including—with an eye to future Scottish Commonwealth games gold medals—a universal learn-to-swim offer for every primary school child in our land.

That is action by a Government that understands the pressures that many families are facing. It is action that will help to reduce costs, deliver more wraparound care and help to keep more Scottish kids out of poverty.

Self-government works because it enables us to take different decisions that are based on Scotland's distinct circumstances and our particular priorities and values. That is why we have chosen to invest in the wellbeing of our society. Yes, that is about providing universal access to services that will leave more money in people's pockets, but it is also about solidarity and a way of seeing the world that reflects who we are as a nation. It is an approach that is about making life a bit easier for all.

In the recent Westminster budget, the UK Government made choices on tax that, taken together, mean that standards of living in the UK will continue to stagnate—or, as the First Minister has described it, will remain as "flat as a pancake". The chancellor decided to freeze income tax thresholds, including for the basic rate, which means that more of people's hard-earned cash will get taxed, or taxed at a higher rate, until 2030-31.

I am making a different choice. I can confirm that, this year, while the others remain frozen, the thresholds for the basic and intermediate rates will increase by 7.4 per cent, which is well over twice the rate of inflation. That is an increase in those thresholds of almost 11 per cent in two years.

As a result, even more people in Scotland can expect to pay less tax than they would if they lived in England, Northern Ireland or Wales—more than 55 per cent of Scots are set to pay less income tax because they live in Scotland and have a Government that is led by the SNP.

This is a budget for a stronger NHS and a more prosperous Scotland and a budget that, once again, gives the people of Scotland the best cost of living deal anywhere in the UK. It is a budget that offers new ways to access a GP through walk-in GP clinics; new help for hard-pressed families with more wraparound care; new hope for young Scots who are looking for their first home; and more operations and more appointments in our NHS. Under this budget, more people will pay less income tax because they live here in Scotland. It offers new help and more help. It is a budget for families, a budget for Scotland and a budget that is well worth voting for.

The Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 60 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business. I would be grateful if members who wish to put a question were to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): This pre-election budget is as predictable as it is cynical, but the problem that John Swinney and Shona Robison face today is that hard-working Scots who are tired of being taxed to the hilt by the SNP simply will not wear it. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Hoy.

Craig Hoy: It will not wash, because we know, and they know, that John Swinney has repeatedly hiked taxes and that he will never do what the Scottish Conservatives would do: comprehensively cut tax and increase thresholds now and into the future.

Although today's change to thresholds for the basic and intermediate rates is to be welcomed, that does nothing for those people at the middle of the tax bands, who are paying 50 per cent tax on the pound between £43,000 and £50,000. That is the cost of the SNP.

This budget, like all SNP budgets, is smoke and mirrors, is tax and spend and still prioritises welfare over work, with £650 million extra being spent in the social justice portfolio.

With an election just 113 days away, John Swinney thinks that he can morph from Che Guevara into Adam Smith with no intervening steps. *[Interruption.]* However, ultimately, nothing has changed because, at its core, this SNP Government remains high on tax and low on delivery. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Hoy.

Craig Hoy: Mr Swinney is chuntering away. Under the SNP today, Scotland still remains the highest-taxed part of the United Kingdom. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Just a second, Mr Hoy. Members, I am finding it very difficult to hear Mr Hoy. Let us be courteous.

Craig Hoy: Mr Swinney does not want to hear his litany of failure being read out in the chamber, because economic growth is an afterthought, public services are failing, and businesses, which are deprived of rates relief in full and still potentially face huge revaluation bills, are continuing to teeter on the brink, despite the modest concessions today.

Let us look at what Shona Robison has announced. There is more foreign aid when people are struggling at home, and there is a £36 million increase in the constitutional and external affairs budget—a secret stash for John Swinney's secret plan. There are cuts to economically productive areas, including cuts to the budgets for the Scottish National Investment Bank and Scottish Enterprise. Does anyone beyond the SNP's clapping seals believe that the fundamentals of the Scottish economy will improve as a result of today's budget?

I have a question for Shona Robison as she prepares to ride off into the sunset, leaving someone else to clear up the mess that she has created. Will the overall tax burden on Scottish households and businesses rise or fall as a result of the budget? How many businesses and how many jobs will be lost as a result of this Government's failure to pass on in full the rates relief that it has received in the past and its failure to create a new system in order to stop this damaging rates revaluation? Which infrastructure projects, such as the full dualling of the A96, will be shelved as a result of the on-going gap in this Government's capital funding?

This failing SNP Government cannot reverse the rot that has set in to public finances and the £5 billion budget black hole that it still faces. Lily-livered Labour says that it will let the budget pass, the Liberal Democrats look set to be lining up to support it and Reform is rolling in behind more benefit spending. Therefore, ahead of an election that will be defined by the cost of living, is it not the truth that only the Scottish Conservatives are standing up for Scottish taxpayers, by saving Scotland from an SNP Government that relegates growth, puts welfare over work and is still wedded to high tax for hard-working Scots?

Shona Robison: What is cynical is having a billion pounds of unaffordable, unfunded tax cuts and not telling the public which public services you

would cut by £1 billion. *[Interruption.]* That is cynical.

Before we go any further, I will say that I do not expect a single member of the Tory back benches who are here today to ask for a single penny of extra funding for public services, given that their front bench would cut services by £1 billion. We will not hear any asks for more money—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

Shona Robison: —from the Tory back benches.

As I set out in my statement, the estimates of the impact of the budget are that 55 per cent of taxpayers will pay less in Scotland. That figure rises to 57 per cent after costs such as pension deductions.

On business, I have set out that we will decrease the basic, intermediate and higher property rates in 2026-27, which will ensure that we have the lowest basic property rates since 2018-19. As I said in my statement, taking all the measures together, around 89,000 properties—or 96 per cent of all retail, hospitality and leisure properties—will benefit from zero or reduced rates. I would have thought that even Craig Hoy could welcome that.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): The budget does not meet the aspirations of the people of Scotland, and it does not recognise their need for real change. It is the 19th John Swinney budget, so it is more of the same. Everyone in Scotland knows what that means: hundreds of thousands of people in pain on NHS waiting lists, a justice system that is past breaking point, an education system that is going backwards day by day, and more than 10,000 kids waking up each day in temporary accommodation with no home to call their own.

Scottish Labour has delivered an additional £10.3 billion for Scotland's budget, and it is only this knackered SNP Government that could turn a £10.3 billion uplift into a £1.6 billion problem.

The positive measures in the budget see the SNP desperately trying to fix a few—I repeat, a few—of its own mistakes. It wants to pretend that it is turning the corner on its own abysmal record; in reality, it has decimated Scotland's finances and brought our services to their knees.

When I have asked SNP ministers what their plan is for desperately needed change in our hospitals, schools, colleges and universities, and for our businesses and families across Scotland, it has been apparent that they do not even understand the question, let alone have the answers.

Their incompetence has taken Scotland's NHS to the brink. There are people suffering in pain and a booming waiting list for direct flights to Lithuania for hip and knee replacements. Nearly £0.5 billion that could be spent each year on Scotland's schools, upgrading our roads or building more houses is instead wasted on delayed discharge, which the SNP promised to eradicate 11 years ago. On top of that, £1 billion was lost to Scotland's budget due to what the Independent Fiscal Commission calls an "economic performance gap", which is a direct result of the SNP's abject failure to grow Scotland's economy.

That is the true record of the SNP Government, so why on earth would a 19th John Swinney budget change Scotland's direction? Is it not the case that the real opportunity for change is just weeks away, when a new Government will be able to deliver real change? Is it not the case that the only way that we can finally kick out this knackered SNP Government—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Marra.

Michael Marra: —and choose a new direction for Scotland is by choosing Scottish Labour?

Shona Robison: I thank Michael Marra for Labour's decision to abstain on the budget without costing us a single penny, for the second year in a row. It is most helpful, and I thank him for that.

On the investment in the NHS, as I set out in my statement, we have had falls in long waits for six months in a row. This budget invests in our NHS to ensure that that fall continues over the next few months, because we know how important that issue of waits is for the people of Scotland. The budget also includes a massive investment in housing—£4.9 billion over the course of the spending review—to tackle the issues around temporary accommodation and make sure that everyone has a house that is warm and affordable to live in.

However, there is fundamental truth to Anas Sarwar saying that Labour is

"not in a strong negotiating position"

on the budget. I have some advice for Michael Marra: asking for something is a good start if you want to have a negotiating position on a budget. Maybe it will be third time lucky next year.

The Presiding Officer: on the budget. I have some advice for Michael Marra: asking for something is a good start if you want to have a negotiating position on a budget. [*Laughter.*] Maybe third time lucky next year, eh? [*Laughter.*]

Always speak through the chair.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): The devil is always in the detail, but I am glad that the Scottish Government has accepted Green

proposals to fund the likes of childcare expansion with tax rises on the super-rich, including a mansion tax on million-pound homes and a charge on the 12,000 private jet flights that are taken in Scotland every year.

I have repeatedly called on the First Minister to deliver more support for the workers who face redundancy at Mossmorran, and I welcome that that proposal has been accepted. However, the Scottish Greens and trade unions have called on that funding to be conditional on guaranteed job interviews for the workers who are being abandoned by Exxon. Will the cabinet secretary confirm that the Mossmorran support grants will go only to businesses that offer those job interviews to the highly skilled workers who have just spent a Christmas wondering how they will provide for their families in 2026?

Shona Robison: I welcome the productive discussions that the Scottish Greens had with me on the budget. The budget is better for the inclusion of Opposition asks, but the Opposition has to make those asks first.

We are pleased to support the workforce at Mossmorran and to enable the development of important economic opportunities in the area. In principle, I am supportive of Ross Greer's suggestion, because it is important that the affected workers are the first in line for the growth and business opportunities that will arise from our investment. I am sure that the Deputy First Minister will take forward the details of that.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD): The question is not about how the budget passes but about what people will get out of it if it does. The Scottish Liberal Democrats are in the business of getting stuff done. We have been clear with the SNP that a conversation could be had should we see movement on our key areas of priority: fixing social care; funding our colleges; providing flexible childcare; supporting people with neurodivergence, hospices, small businesses and young entrepreneurs; and ensuring that every young person has a home of their own.

I am pleased to see that many of the Liberal Democrats' asks feature in today's budget, but the eyes of Scotland's business community are also on us. It is good to see positive steps on rates relief that many, including the Liberal Democrats, have called for. However, too many businesses, particularly in hospitality and self-catering, still face choppy waters ahead. Will the cabinet secretary continue to work with me in the coming weeks to see how further targeted additional support might give more Scottish businesses the relief that they desperately need and deserve?

Shona Robison: I thank Jamie Greene for his very positive and constructive engagement on

behalf of the Liberal Democrats and for welcoming many of the responses to asks that feature in the budget. As he has recognised, my statement set out substantial support for business. I also recognise the importance of the independent Gill review of valuation methods for hospitality businesses, which the hospitality sector is very keen on. That work will continue at pace.

Of course I agree to continue to work with Mr Greene and others. As I said, we lack information on the UK Government's intentions; it has been opaque about whether it will go further. We found out about the possible changes through the press rather than through any communication from the UK Government, which is disappointing. I reiterate the point that, if further consequentialists should flow from a U-turn by the UK Government on the position in England, we would want to support the hospitality sector further. I have written to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to ask for an urgent meeting to discuss the issue. My colleagues in Wales and Northern Ireland are also keen to do so.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I warmly welcome the 10 per cent increase in college sector funding, which is a tremendous boost for our young people and the economy, and one that the Finance and Public Administration Committee called for. The cabinet secretary has listened.

Will she confirm that the necessary funding is in place not only to purchase but to redevelop Ardrossan harbour, given that the capital allocation for Scotland's ferry services has rocketed by 18 per cent—from £182.6 million to £215.5 million—since the autumn budget revisions?

Shona Robison: I acknowledge Kenneth Gibson's welcome for the additional college funding. On his substantive question, the Scottish Government is committed to Ardrossan being the mainland harbour for CalMac ferry services to Arran. The progress on the negotiations between Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd and Peel Ports Group, which the Cabinet Secretary for Transport set out last week, is welcome, and I note that both parties are committed to confirming details of the potential purchase as quickly as possible. Our capital spending review makes provision to progress the potential port purchase and improvements. I am sure that Kenneth Gibson will welcome that, too.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): As the Scottish Conservatives raised in the chamber last week, businesses across Scotland currently face increases in their rateable values of up to 400 per cent as a result of the current revaluation. Any hopes that the revaluation might be delayed or scrapped altogether have been

dashed today, and the reliefs that have been announced will come nowhere close to compensating for the increases that are coming down the track. What assessment has the Scottish Government made of the number of businesses in hard-pressed sectors such as hospitality that will go to the wall as a result of the choices that the finance secretary has made?

Shona Robison: Revaluation is an independent process, which Murdo Fraser knows full well. We understand the concerns, which is why Ivan McKee has engaged with assessors and businesses to listen to those. There is a process of pre-agreement discussion with assessors and a system of appeals, but the reliefs that I have announced today—transitional reliefs and reliefs for retail, hospitality and leisure—make up a package of £322 million to support businesses, which I would have thought Murdo Fraser would welcome.

I have also been clear that, if there is further funding for the hospitality sector from the UK Government, further Scottish Government funding will go to the hospitality sector in Scotland. Again, I hope that Murdo Fraser will welcome that.

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP): Colleges are vital for supporting people in their learning journeys and ensuring that Scotland has the skills that our economy needs. Will the cabinet secretary say more about how her budget will support the college sector, particularly the ambitious plans that are being developed by Dundee and Angus College?

Shona Robison: For Scotland's colleges, the budget delivers a combined increase of £70 million in resource and capital funding, which is equivalent to a 10 per cent uplift on last year's budget. The Minister for Higher and Further Education recently met representatives of Dundee and Angus College to discuss its ambitious proposals. The infrastructure investment plan that I am publishing today confirms that the Scottish Funding Council will continue to work closely with the college as it progresses work on the options to address its local priorities through its upcoming 10-year college infrastructure plan, which is due in the autumn of this year. It is a fantastic project that is very well run by local leaders at Dundee and Angus College.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Health and social care partnerships that are responsible for delivering social care face a funding gap of £560 million in this year alone, and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities estimates that £750 million will be needed for next year. If the SNP is funding social care adequately, as it claims to be doing, why are lifeline care services being slashed? Why are health and social care partnerships declaring a social care crisis? Why

are they funding only the most critical care, which means that people are stuck in hospital and unable to get out? Why is there a growing waiting list for care assessments? Why are essential packages of care being denied?

I ask the cabinet secretary: why are the most vulnerable people in Scotland being let down by the SNP Government?

Shona Robison: First, the investment of more than £2.3 billion in social care delivers our commitment to increase funding by 25 per cent. In 2026-27, that commitment will be exceeded by more than £500 million, supporting an uplift to adult social care pay as well as improvements to wider terms and conditions for workers. That is part of a package for local government of nearly £15.7 billion, with freedom for authorities to set their council tax rates as they see fit. In addition to that, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care will be meeting local government representatives to discuss what further steps can be taken to address delayed discharge, particularly in relation to complex care needs.

All that work is going on, but the money that I have just talked about can be put in place only if members support the budget. The question for Jackie Baillie is: why does she find it so difficult to press her button to support the £2.3 billion of investment in social care? That is something that she will have to explain.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Tuition fees have gone up in England and Wales under Labour but, in Scotland, the SNP has protected free tuition for our students. We believe that universities should be based on the ability to learn, not on the ability to pay. I am pleased that the cabinet secretary has confirmed that the budget will continue to protect free tuition. How many students have benefited from free tuition under the SNP?

Shona Robison: Kevin Stewart very much understands the importance of the investment that is being made in free tuition. If we do not invest in our young people, and if we saddle them with that debt, it will put people from lower-income households off going to university. I was the first person in my family to go to university, and I did so because of the supports that were in place. If I had had to face the debt that young people in England currently face because of tuition fees, I do not think that I would have gone. I will be happy to write to Kevin Stewart with the number of students who have benefited from free tuition to date.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): Thousands of oil and gas jobs are lost every month, while the SNP has a presumption against new oil and gas. In the face of that jobs emergency, the SNP's response is to allocate a

pitiful £3 million to support former oil and gas workers into renewables. When will the devolved Government open its eyes to what is happening to the oil and gas sector and back our workers, who keep the lights on for families across Scotland?

Shona Robison: One of the most important things that we have done is to demand that the UK Labour Government get rid of the energy profits levy—which Douglas Lumsden and his colleagues introduced in the first place. *[Interruption.]* They do not like to hear about that, because it does not suit their narrative, but we will repeat it and repeat it. The EPL was born out of the Tory UK Government.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I welcome the announcements that have made today to give the best start in life for children and families. That will benefit thousands of people in East Lothian. How will the budget continue to drive down child poverty and, in particular, increase support for families?

Shona Robison: We have put child poverty very much at the heart of the budget and the spending review, which outlines how we will drive continued progress. That includes more than £100 million to support the delivery of a universal breakfast club offer for primary school-aged children and increased investment in wraparound childcare through the school day.

In addition to our £50 million-a-year package of whole-family support and continuing to increase our Scottish child payment in line with inflation, we have committed to developing the systems and legislation to increase the Scottish child payment to £40 for children under the age of one.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): There are adults working in Wales today who benefited from free breakfast clubs two decades ago, as the Welsh Labour scheme has been up and running since 2004. The UK Labour Government began rolling out free breakfast clubs in all state schools within a year of taking office, and it has boosted funding for after-school clubs in England to support the most isolated children.

I, of course, welcome the Scottish Government following in the footsteps of those Administrations today, even if it has taken almost 20 years because of the Scottish Government's own cuts to local authorities and schools. However, given that it had additional money from the UK Government, if the Scottish Government cared so much and was so convinced of the benefits of the policy, that begs the question why it has taken this Government so long. The answer can surely only be that it is out of energy and out of time and that it needs to get out of the way of a Government that will do the hard work of delivering.

Shona Robison: It is really interesting how Paul O'Kane and Labour like to cite Welsh Labour when it suits them but, when it does not, they are very quiet on the matter. Apparently, it is all about what happens here in Scotland—until it suits them to say otherwise.

On early learning and childcare, the Scottish Government was further ahead with its investments. The Scottish child payment—which is not, of course, available in Wales or England—is literally putting food on the tables of families. That leads to the fact that Paul O'Kane cannot escape, which is that Scotland is the only part of these islands where child poverty is falling. We will take no lessons from Paul O'Kane or anyone else on how to tackle child poverty, because we are doing it and the facts speak for themselves.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): It is welcome that the SNP Scottish Government's progressive approach to taxation means that there is more funding available to support our vital public services, by asking those with the broadest shoulders to pay a little bit more, while protecting low-income households in Scotland. However, many powers over taxation remain reserved to the UK Government. Will the cabinet secretary give any indication as to how the budget will start to explore the use of wealth taxation within the limited powers of the Scottish Parliament?

Shona Robison: As we have said, we will continue to look at taxation, whether that is land value taxation or wealth taxation. Those things are not straightforward, particularly within the limits of our current fiscal powers, which is why I want a more fundamental review of the fiscal framework. Having the ability to establish new powers on areas such as wealth taxation would be important. That work is at a very early stage, but I am happy to keep Jackie Dunbar apprised of progress.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): In the budget, there was an increase in the total spend on concessionary fares and bus services, yet we know that large parts of Scotland are very poorly served, if at all, by public transport. We are all aware of the recent decision taken by Stagecoach to significantly reduce its bus services in Dumfries and Galloway. In her statement, the cabinet secretary said that public services should be accessible where and when they are needed. If there are no buses available, a bus pass becomes absolutely worthless. If the SNP is serious about tackling inequalities across Scottish communities, it would surely have been wiser to use that money to fund a specific rural bus fund.

Shona Robison: We want to ensure that public transport is available as far as possible to all communities in Scotland. Transport Scotland is working with rural and other communities on public transport commitments. However, I say to Sue

Webber that, with tax cuts of £1 billion, there would be less money for bus services or for the expansion of bus routes anywhere; there would be less money and not more for those things. As I said at the beginning—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the cabinet secretary.

Shona Robison: We cannot have Tory back benchers coming here asking for more money when their front-bench members would cut that money through £1 billion of unfunded tax cuts.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): It is vital that we press forward with work to support our town centres so that they can become more sustainable and thriving places for people to live, work and enjoy. Will the cabinet secretary say more about how the budget will support the regeneration of our town centres via affordable housing and other measures that can help to turn around the fortunes of our high streets?

Shona Robison: Supporting the delivery of 36,000 affordable homes and our wider all-tenure ambition, we plan to invest up to £4.9 billion over the next four years, of which £4.1 billion will be public investment. We are working with partners, including the Scottish National Investment Bank, to leverage additional private investment.

I think that there is a real opportunity to use affordable housing resources to regenerate our town centres, which are changing because of the way in which people have changed their shopping habits. That means that we really want to get people back into living in some of our town and city centres, and affordable housing can play an important role in achieving that.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): The cabinet secretary has repeated the claim that child poverty is at a 30-year low, but she should know that that is not the case for children in relative poverty, that the 2023-24 interim target was missed and that the Government is not on track to meet the 2030 legal target.

Table 5.07 of the budget shows that the budget for Social Security Scotland is set to go up by a third, which is an increase of some £125 million and is more than the sum of the resources freed up by the UK Government's decision to scrap the two-child benefit, an issue that much of the debate about using this budget to tackle child poverty has focused on. How is that increase justified?

Shona Robison: On the issue of children living in relative poverty, that is why we have focused so much of our effort, resources and policy on tackling child poverty. Shirley-Anne Somerville will set out the next child poverty delivery plan in March, and that will include a raft of measures to

give us the best chance of hitting that relative poverty target, which this Parliament signed up to.

I hope that Claire Baker, who feels so strongly about the issue, and given the measures in the budget to tackle child poverty, will find a way to support the budget and the resources that are included in it, rather than just sitting on her hands.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I welcome the continued investment in the Scottish National Investment Bank as a key enabler of economic growth. The detail in the budget shows that the bank can now reinvest income received. Can the cabinet secretary confirm whether the Treasury rules for that bank are now the same as those for the British Business Bank? Just as important, can she confirm whether the restrictions set by the Scottish Government regarding underspends at the end of any financial year have also been removed?

Shona Robison: Michelle Thomson will be well aware of some of the very welcome changes that were made to the fiscal framework that will enable a flow of resources into the next financial year. The work that we have done to ensure prudent management of finances means that we are able to pass money through into the reserve and can also reduce the use of ScotWind income, which is one of the few flexible resources available to us.

Michelle Thomson will also be aware of the limitations of the fiscal framework, which I referred to earlier. That is why I want to negotiate something far more ambitious, which is a subject that I have raised with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on a number of occasions.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Five years ago, the First Minister stated:

"If we are re-elected in May, the SNP will roll out a new programme to deliver into the hands of every school child in Scotland a laptop, Chromebook or tablet to use in school and at home."

Five years on, that election pledge is nowhere near being delivered. Will the cabinet secretary tell me how much money there will be in the budget to deliver that election pledge in the 100 days that the Government has left to do so? If it does not deliver, why should any young person or parent believe a word that the SNP tells them in May?

Shona Robison: I say to Miles Briggs that this Government has invested in our schools, in our teachers and in local government so that they can provide the education resources that are required. We have invested in the pupil equity fund, which enables headteachers to use some of the discrete purchasing options that they have. If they wish to use those resources to support young people who would otherwise struggle to have one of those devices, those resources can, of course, be used for that.

It is a bit rich for Miles Briggs to come here and talk about any of those things because his £1 billion cut to public services would not only prevent the delivery of anything additional in our schools; it would impact on school budgets and there would be swingeing cuts to local government and the NHS. Miles Briggs knows that full well.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): We were disappointed that the Scottish Government did not find the funding to roll out truly free at three early years childcare, which the Scottish Greens and organisations such as Pregnant Then Screwed asked for. However, we also discussed wraparound provision and more free meals for schoolchildren, and we are glad that those proposals have been accepted. Can the cabinet secretary confirm who will be eligible for the breakfast clubs? Will they be free for every child? If not, how many children will they benefit?

Shona Robison: Gillian Mackay's first point was about the childcare provisions that she asked for, which we are not able to meet at this time due to cost implications. As I said to Ross Greer in some of those discussions, we need a wider review of the delivery models for childcare to ensure that there is more flexibility and that we can extract better value from the investments that are being made. However, that is a longer-term issue that this Parliament will have to look at.

I am glad that Gillian Mackay welcomes the wraparound provision.

The roll-out of the breakfast clubs will start this year with £15 million of investment and it will tick up next year, in 2027-28, to ensure that every primary school child and children in special schools are able to get that breakfast offer on a universal basis. I am happy to provide further details to Gillian Mackay.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Thanks to the consistent pressure from the SNP, the Labour UK Government finally scrapped the two-child limit in its autumn budget. Can the finance secretary say more about how the money that would otherwise have been spent on mitigating the two-child cap will now be deployed to this Government's key mission of tackling child poverty?

Shona Robison: As I set out in my statement, we have reallocated funding that was committed to mitigating the two-child limit to drive further progress on child poverty. In the year ahead, that includes investing £15 million to meet additional demand for devolved benefits, including a further £8 million to mitigate the benefit cap. We will also further strengthen support by increasing our Scottish child payment in line with inflation to £28.20 from April, committing more than £111 million to our tackling child poverty fund and

providing a new package of whole-family support, with further detail of the investment to be set out in the delivery plan by the end of March.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife)

(Con): Social security spending now accounts for around 14 per cent of the budget. Scotland spends significantly more than it receives, which adds hundreds of millions to the benefits bill. Which public services is the cabinet secretary taking money from in order to fund the Scottish Government's bloated benefits bill? Can she seriously tell the public that the Government's plans to spend more and more on the benefits bill are sustainable?

Shona Robison: In turn, I ask Alexander Stewart which groups of people the Conservatives would remove help from, because they never tell us that. They use euphemisms and say that the social security bill is too high, but they do not have the guts to tell us who would lose out—not now, and not ever. Until we hear that, they cannot be taken seriously at all. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us not be shouting at one another.

Shona Robison: The updated SFC forecast shows a substantial reduction in the Scottish Government's benefits investment over and above block grant adjustments received from the UK Government, largely resulting from the UK Government's welcome but belated reversal of the unacceptable cuts to disability benefits, which was announced on 3 July 2025.

The funding that we expect to receive through the social security block grant adjustments now covers 87 per cent of the forecast expenditure for 2026-27. That figure will increase to 88 per cent for 2027-28 onwards and is forecast to reach 89 per cent in 2030-31. That is perhaps not quite in line with the narrative that Alexander Stewart would like to give out.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): The cabinet secretary will be aware that I have campaigned for the introduction of universal swimming lessons for primary school pupils for a long time, so I am absolutely delighted to hear that that is provided for in the budget. Given the benefits to physical and mental health and wellbeing of being active, will the cabinet secretary outline how swimming lessons for all will help us to achieve our aim of Scotland being an active and water-safe nation? Looking to the future, how does she envisage that the programme will be evaluated?

Shona Robison: I welcome and acknowledge Fulton MacGregor's history of and tenacity in raising the issue. We are very pleased to be able to make that offer to young people as part of the summer of sport. It is important for not just

physical activity but safety. I would be happy to keep Fulton MacGregor up to speed with the development and roll-out of that important initiative.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):

Before the budget statement, certain hospitality businesses faced huge rates increases of 300 to 400 per cent. Given the huge scale of such increases, a 15 per cent discount means that they will still face a huge increase in their rates bills. Why has the Scottish Government not decided to use its powers over assessors to pause the revaluation and introduce a fairer assessment for hospitality businesses?

Shona Robison: In England, because of the loss of the 40 per cent relief for retail, hospitality and leisure, the effective relief is now 10 to 12 per cent. The 15 per cent RHL relief in Scotland is, therefore, competitive in comparison—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

Shona Robison: In my budget, I have set out more than £320 million of support through transitional relief and RHL relief, through our passing on the vast bulk of consequential for business that we have received. To go further, we would have to take money from other areas of the budget, and I was loth to do so. Daniel Johnson is always welcome to suggest such areas. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Thank you.

Shona Robison: However, if the UK Government follows through on what it has briefed to the media about additional support for hospitality, which would result in further consequential, we will look to further support the hospitality sector in Scotland. I have given that commitment several times this afternoon.

The Presiding Officer: We are two thirds of the way through the time that has been allotted for questions but have not yet reached half of those who would like to put a question. I would be grateful for concise questions and responses and for the ability for us to hear one another.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP):

All will appreciate the budget's support with the cost of living during what is such a financially challenging time for so many people. My constituency has some of the highest fuel poverty rates in the country. Will the cabinet secretary outline what specific support is included in the budget for those in rural and island areas who struggle with rising bills?

Shona Robison: I am deeply aware that island communities continue to face some of the highest fuel poverty levels in Scotland. The budget

continues support for the islands cost crisis emergency fund, which, since 2022, has distributed £4.4 million to support vulnerable households, including £1.1 million for Western Isles Council. In addition, through area-based schemes, we have invested more than £13 million in the Western Isles since 2013, helping 3,500 fuel-poor households to make their homes warmer. This budget will continue to advance social and economic prosperity in our islands, in line with our new national islands plan.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):

Although an uplift to the housing budget is welcome, the cabinet secretary knows that encouraging private investment is key to solving Scotland's housing crisis. It is interesting that, in her statement, there was little to no mention of the housing emergency, given that a housing emergency has been declared by the Parliament.

The cabinet secretary talks a good game about attracting investment to deliver more homes, but policies such as rent controls and the proposed building safety levy threaten to put additional pressure on the private sector. How will today's budget support the private house building sector? Will the cabinet secretary commit to eradicating punitive taxes that will make it more difficult for the sector to build the homes that we in Scotland desperately need?

Shona Robison: Given the £4.9 billion investment in affordable housing, I do not think that we can be accused of ignoring the housing emergency. Over the course of the spending review, that is a massive investment—and, as we have been clear, £800 million of it will come from the private sector.

A lot of work is being done around mid-market rent and build to rent to make sure that the private sector is working in partnership with us to grow that pot to the extent that it can in order to meet the needs of the people of Scotland. That work is going well and I am sure that Meghan Gallacher will want to welcome that.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I am pleased to hear that the SNP's Scottish budget will deliver record funding for our NHS. How will that level of investment in health from the Scottish Government impact on the delivery of vital services across Scotland? Will the cabinet secretary join me in calling on Opposition members across the chamber to get off the fence and back the budget so that we can provide our NHS with the funding that it deserves?

Shona Robison: George Adam is absolutely right to welcome the funding of £22.5 billion for the portfolio, which includes £17.6 billion for NHS boards, £2.3 billion for social care and integration and more than £2.4 billion for primary care. All that

funding is about meeting the people's priorities, which we know the NHS is doing with that investment, but it is also about the transformation of services. Neil Gray, the health secretary, has set out some ambitious plans for transformation to ensure that as much of that money as possible goes to the front-line services.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind): In documents that the Scottish Government was forced to release under freedom of information, it has been disclosed that Transport Scotland advised the First Minister and other ministers three years ago, in 2023, that there would be no money for the Nairn bypass during this session of Parliament. More than that, the position in the next five years would be "equally challenging". I have a very simple question for the cabinet secretary that requires honesty and candour for my constituents in Nairn. Will the Nairn bypass be constructed and operational by the end of this decade—2030—yes or no?

Shona Robison: Let me say a number of things. First, the Scottish Government's position has not changed in that we remain in support of the full dualling of the A96 and are progressing the dualling process from Inverness to Nairn, including the Nairn bypass. I can confirm today that investment in the trunk road network in the next four years will allow us to make progress on dualling the A96 between Inverness and Nairn, including the Nairn bypass. With the land acquired for the project, funding is included in the 2026-27 draft budget to commence the delivery of advance works for the scheme, along with the adjacent A9 and A96 Inshes to Smithton scheme.

In parallel to the advance works, Transport Scotland continues to take forward the work to determine the most suitable procurement option for delivering the scheme and, therefore, a timetable for delivery. The Cabinet Secretary for Transport has given a commitment to update Parliament when that work has concluded.

Let me be clear: there is funding—

The Presiding Officer: Briefly, cabinet secretary.

Shona Robison: —for the A96 Inverness to Nairn in the budget and across the CSR in 2026-27, 2027-28, 2028-29 and 2029-30, which I hope Fergus Ewing will welcome.

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): Just last month, the Scottish Government announced £300,000 of funding for Cumbernauld theatre, along with £100,000 from Creative Scotland. Will the cabinet secretary set out what opportunities arise out of this year's budget for continued support for the theatre and, indeed, for the wider culture sector in Scotland?

Shona Robison: I am very pleased to have been able to confirm an additional £20 million for the culture budget and to continue to deliver on our commitment to increase culture spending by £100 million. The cumulative increase is now £70 million since 2023-24 and it supports a wide range of measures across this key sector.

As the member says, we have committed £150,000 to Cumbernauld Theatre Trust in 2026-27, with a further £150,000 in 2027-28, which is subject to progress being made by the trust to enhance its financial sustainability.

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): A fortnight ago, the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee brought a debate to the chamber with all-party support on the importance of swimming, given the background of Scotland having the highest accidental death by drowning rate of any part of the United Kingdom. I join Fulton MacGregor in welcoming the commitment that all children should be able to enjoy swimming lessons, but I ask for clarification. Is that a one-year commitment or a long-term commitment? Secondly, in the face of Scotland's golden athlete Duncan Scott commenting on the catastrophic reduction in the infrastructure of swimming pools across Scotland, is there anything in the budget that will halt or reverse that decline? A commitment to swimming lessons requires pools for people to be trained to swim in.

Shona Robison: I welcome Jackson Carlaw's welcome for the initiative. Initially, it is a one-year commitment, but it will depend on how that goes and the progress on the roll-out. However, we are determined that this summer will be an opportunity for every young person who wants to learn to swim to take up the opportunity. Who knows? Out of that, we may see other young people following in Duncan Scott's footsteps. He sets a fantastic example.

The infrastructure of pools is an issue primarily, but not exclusively, for local government. We have supported the local government settlement over a number of years to enable local government to provide the services that local people require.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Ind): I am grateful for the cabinet secretary's engagement on the budget. Unlike my former Conservative colleagues in Lothian, I am glad that I have been able to negotiate money for disabled charities, changing places toilets and the King's theatre. Does the cabinet secretary agree that not only are changing places toilets good for individuals and families but the economic benefit that they bring to groups, charities and organisations is good for Scotland and for the local economy?

Shona Robison: I thank Jeremy Balfour for his constructive and pragmatic engagement ahead of

the budget. What a contrast to his former colleagues, as he said. He has been getting things done and working with others to get things for local communities. My door has been open but, unfortunately, Craig Hoy and his colleagues have not come through it with any constructive suggestions whatsoever.

Jeremy Balfour made a compelling case that funding should not only continue for our changing places toilet programme but be spread over multiyear periods to allow for planning and delivery of the schemes. As a result, we will provide an additional £10 million of funding over three years, starting with £3 million of investment in 2026-27. Those facilities, which have been championed by Jeremy Balfour, will provide greater freedom to people with profound disabilities and complex needs, enabling them to access community resources more easily.

The Presiding Officer: Concise questions and responses would be appreciated.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests, which shows that I hold a bank nurse contract with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde.

Last week, welcome figures were published that showed that, through action from the SNP Government, long waits in the NHS have decreased for six months in a row, with significant year-on-year increases in activity. How will the budget assist in the on-going recovery of Scotland's NHS?

Shona Robison: The budget's investments in the NHS are absolutely critical. As Clare Haughey pointed out, we have made significant progress against the commitments in the operational improvement plan for this year. We will continue to build on that progress through the investment of a further £100 million in 2026-27 and through scaling the productivity and efficiency gains to create additional capacity.

This is critical to the people of Scotland. We know that the NHS is the key issue. We have made great progress over the past six months in bringing down long waits, and we want to continue that to ensure that people get their treatments, particularly the hip, knee and eye operations that people have been waiting for, as quickly as possible. That investment will help to deliver that.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): Scotland's firefighters are demanding urgent funding to end the SNP's decade of dangerous underinvestment, which has cut one in six firefighters since 2013—that is 1,250 posts—and delivered a real-terms reduction of £84 million in the fire and rescue resource budget. Will the cabinet secretary explain why her budget does not reverse those cuts and why it fails to fix the £800

million maintenance backlog relating to our fire stations, equipment and ageing vehicles, which are vital to protecting Scotland's people, environment and infrastructure against fire, flood and storms?

Shona Robison: We have allocated almost £436 million to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service in 2026-27—an uplift of 5.4 per cent. We will increase the SFRS capital budget to £48.4 million to ensure that it can develop its asset base across property, fleet, operational equipment, and information and communications technology. The continued resource and capital investment will support the SFRS in its ambition, through its strategic service review programme, to better align resources with current and future risks and to continue to keep our communities safe, for which I thank the service.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): The Government has already disgracefully cut 1,000 police officers from Scotland's streets. Police Scotland asked for £104 million simply to stand still and stop numbers falling further, yet the SNP budget delivers far less than that. How does the finance secretary justify choosing a budget that means fewer police numbers, overstretched officers, slower response times and compromised public safety?

Shona Robison: We have allocated more than £1.7 billion for policing in Scotland in 2026-27—an uplift of 5 per cent. That includes an additional £59 million of resource to the Scottish Police Authority to maintain capacity and capability in policing. We are increasing police capital funding to £86.3 million to invest in essential infrastructure technology and continue the delivery of the SPA's estates masterplan. We are also putting in £3 million to continue tackling retail crime.

However, all that is put at risk by Sharon Dowey's support for £1 billion of tax cuts. None of that funding would be possible—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Thank you.

Shona Robison: —if we were to cut taxes by £1 billion. All of it would go—police funding, college funding, NHS funding and local government funding—so the hypocrisy from Tory back benchers in asking for more money is incredible and they will have no credibility whatsoever with the public.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): The cabinet secretary will be aware that I led a campaign locally seeking extra funding for the college sector, in particular in relation to the continued existence of the Alloa campus of Forth Valley College. My constituents will be absolutely delighted by the Government announcement today of a 10 per cent increase in funding. They will be absolutely appalled,

however, to find out that the Labour Party never asked for a penny for colleges, and that it intends not to vote for the 10 per cent increase.

Will the cabinet secretary confirm that, having made that fantastic announcement of a 10 per cent increase, she has no reason to expect that the Scottish Funding Council and Forth Valley College will not now play their part in ensuring the continued, long-term sustainable future of the college's Alloa campus?

Shona Robison: Keith Brown is right that the 10 per cent uplift in funding for colleges will allow Forth Valley College to make strategic spending decisions in the interests of the communities that it serves, as soon as the Scottish Funding Council has confirmed allocations. The Minister for Higher and Further Education will chair a meeting in Alloa with FVC, the Scottish Funding Council, businesses and trade unions later this month to discuss matters.

A decision about the Alloa campus is ultimately a matter for the board of the college; nevertheless, my view is that the campus is valuable to the community and should remain open, and I hope that the resources that are being made available will make that more likely.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Liberal Democrats asked for support for neurodevelopmental assessments for children and young people and we are pleased that that is in the budget. However, I want to ask the cabinet secretary about the construction of special schools, because some of the special schools in my part of the world are the worst schools in that area, and they deserve improvement.

I ask the cabinet secretary to come with me and visit the schools in Buckhaven and Cupar to see for herself why it is essential that the review is conducted and that it results in new buildings.

Shona Robison: The infrastructure investment pipeline sets out a number of commitments, one of which is the next phase of the learning estate investment programme, or LEIP. That programme has involved a very successful funding model of shared costs between the Scottish Government and local government, and it has delivered, with the number of schools in a good condition going from 62 per cent to 93 per cent. A lot of progress has been made.

It is clear, however, that some schools still require attention. I say to Willie Rennie that we are keen to think about the role of special schools in the new phase of LEIP, and we will continue to work with local authorities, including Fife Council. I am sure that he will be kept apprised of that work, and that education ministers will be happy to visit some of the schools in his patch.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): According to an Economy and Fair Work Committee investigation, Scotland has the highest level of disability unemployment in the UK. Would it not be prudent to tackle that issue by helping those who can and want to work back into work? That is surely the way to reduce the social security bill.

Shona Robison: I hoped that Brian Whittle might have welcomed the summer of sport—I know that that is an area of interest for him and that he has asked questions about it previously—but I am sure that he will do so in due course.

On the issue that Brian Whittle raised, we have safeguarded £90 million of funding for employability services, but we will go further than that through the work that we will do with colleges. We were really impressed with the proposals that Colleges Scotland set out on how to support people back into work. That includes people with additional needs, who will find colleges a less threatening environment in which to take part in some employability and skills programmes. I am excited to see how those programmes develop with the college sector and how they will help us to support people back into employment.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): Community justice services play a hugely important but, sadly, often unrecognised role in the rehabilitation of offenders and in reducing recidivism. In turn, they make a significant contribution to the Scottish Government's priorities of supporting families, promoting wellbeing and eradicating child poverty. Will the cabinet secretary reaffirm that the budget will maintain the level of support that is required to deliver sustainable and meaningful community justice services across Scotland?

Shona Robison: Yes. We recognise the value of community justice. In the budget, community justice funding will increase by £10 million to a record £169 million. That builds on the £25 million of additional investment that has been made over the past two years. Expanding alternatives to custody, such as diversion and community sentencing, has been proven to be very successful in reducing reoffending.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): Normally, when we face an emergency, we put aside good things to focus on that emergency. If we really have a housing emergency, should we not set aside some of the expenditure on, for example, roads and put more money into housing?

Shona Robison: We are putting more money into housing. Over the spending review period, there will be investment of £4.9 billion, £4.1 billion of which will be public investment that will lever in

at least a further £800 million of private sector investment in, for example, mid-market rent properties and build to rent schemes. That will all contribute to the delivery of affordable homes, so I hope that John Mason will welcome that.

That is one of the biggest capital investments across our capital funding programme. Given that our capital funding will, unfortunately, be reduced after this year, due to the UK Government's spending review, the marshalling of the capital resources that are available to us to prioritise affordable housing is quite a commitment.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Scotland has always taken its international responsibilities very seriously indeed, and we have a proud tradition of supporting those in need. That is reflected in the Government's ambitions on climate justice and reparations. What provision does the budget make for the funding of international development, particularly regarding issues connected to climate justice?

Shona Robison: As I said in my statement, I was very pleased to be able to increase funding for international development. That says a lot about this Government's values, which are in tune with the values of the Scottish people. I find it quite difficult to understand the hostility of Tory members to increasing investment in international development, because such investment in ensuring sustainable communities, particularly in third world countries, contributes to making the world safer. Helping those communities to help themselves represents a good investment, and it is one that we are proud to make.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I declare my interest as a practising solicitor.

The Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service warned that, without a £40 million baseline uplift, trials will be delayed and that some will take more than two years to conclude. The budget will deliver an uplift of £4.2 million, which is a tenth of what is needed. What advice does the cabinet secretary have for victims of crime who are waiting more than two years for justice?

Shona Robison: Under Liam Kerr's plans, that budget would be cut because there would be £1 billion less to spend on public services. Members on the Tory benches cannot come to the Parliament and ask for more money when they want to cut investment in public services by £1 billion.

I have met the Lord President and we discussed the requirements of the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service, and we will continue to discuss those matters. However, the investments that we are making across the justice system will ensure that people receive justice in a timely manner—that is what the Government is focused on.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I welcome the budget, which shows that Scotland is in safe hands with this SNP Government. In comparison to previous disastrous Westminster Governments, this Government is putting the most vulnerable at the heart of its budgetary decisions.

What will the budget do for rural communities and our rural economy, particularly against a backdrop in which Westminster has slighted our rural communities?

Shona Robison: There will be substantial investment in our rural communities. That includes continuing the work to support our agricultural sector and also investment for peat restoration and forestry. Those are important investments, not just for local economies and jobs but for our climate ambitions. In addition, some ambitious agreements are being worked on with our island communities, such as the accelerator model for Shetland, Orkney and the Western Isles, which has the potential to lever in hundreds of millions of pounds of investment. Again, I am happy to keep the Parliament updated on those developments.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the ministerial statement. There will be a short pause before we move to the next item of business.

Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill: Stage 1

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-20388, in the name of Jim Fairlie, on the Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill at stage 1. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

15:00

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): I am pleased to open this debate on the Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill. I thank the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee for its detailed scrutiny of the bill and all those who have given evidence during stage 1. Most importantly, I thank the crofting communities for their invaluable insights and contributions, including the people I spoke to during my visits to Lewis, Harris and Skye.

I look forward to working constructively with members from all parties as we progress this important piece of legislation, and I hope that, today, we can all agree to support its general principles, as the committee recommended in its stage 1 report.

The bill has two main parts, and I will begin by focusing on part 1, which is the crofting element.

Crofting is a part of who we are. It was and is a hard-earned living tradition that shapes our rural land and communities. Around 15,000 crofters care for around 750,000 hectares of Scotland's land, and this Government backs them with more than £40 million every year because crofting matters—it matters to our past, our present and our future.

Crofting has much potential. It provides opportunities for new entrants and young people to make a life in the places that they know and love. We can assist that by supporting a range of approaches to crofting, including agritourism, local food networks, peatland restoration and livestock production, to name but a few.

The proposals that have been considered came from a variety of sources, including the crofting law sump and issues that were identified and raised by stakeholders over three years of close collaboration.

Over summer 2024, we carried out a consultation, and my officials ran 15 public events throughout the crofting counties, which were attended by 257 people. I take this opportunity to thank my officials for their hard work and their efforts to ensure that we have a solid bill that has wide stakeholder support.

The bill will deliver positive changes, building on previous reforms. Let me be clear: it represents another step on the journey that we are committed to continue as we work with our crofting communities to secure their future.

Crofting law is extremely complex, and even where there is consensus that something needs changing, it is often difficult to reach consensus on what the remedy should be. Developing proposals and identifying workable solutions requires time, and I think that crofting stakeholders are sympathetic to that.

However, the bill is more than just a technical bill; it is also an enabling bill, delivering a number of meaningful improvements to legislation. It will give crofters more options for how they use their land; allow around 700 people to apply to become a crofter; streamline the enforcement of duties and the family assignation process; prevent crofters who are in breach of their duties from profiteering and removing land from the crofting tenure; and prevent the accidental separation of a grazing share from an inby croft. In addition, landlords and subtenants will be able to report breaches of duty to the Crofting Commission, and crofters will be able to apply to the commission for boundary and registration changes.

That amounts to significant change, and the bill will make crofting regulation less onerous for active crofters and the commission, and flexible enough to grasp new opportunities and cope with future challenges.

As I set out in my written response to the committee, I am committed to ensuring that the views that were raised through the evidence sessions and on the bill are considered. We are therefore carefully considering a small number of possible amendments, which include strengthening the wording in the bill on the “environmental use” of crofts, providing flexibility to allow non-natural persons to take title of a croft, maintaining linkages between the crofting register and the land register when adjusting boundaries and, where applicable, maintaining a relationship between the grazing share and the inby croft.

This reform should not be viewed in isolation, but must be seen alongside the work that is being done by the Crofting Commission. It is important to note that the interplay between legislation and the commission’s policy plan is vital. The legislation provides the necessary framework, and the plan provides the detail of how the commission will administer and regulate.

The commission has the legislative tools, and it now also has the resources to carry out its functions. The changes in the bill will further support the commission’s work in processing regulatory applications and tackling breaches of

duty. I will continue working with the commission to ensure that it creates more opportunities for new entrants and for young people to enter crofting.

The bill prepares the ground for what comes next. It will help to lay a stronger and healthier foundation for crofting, where we aim to have increased residency levels and more people using their crofts and common grazings. We will then be in a better place to carefully consider what reform is needed for the future.

I turn to part 2 of the bill, which provides for the merger of the Scottish Land Court and the Lands Tribunal for Scotland. That is a measured and administrative reform; it is also one with practical importance for how land and property disputes are determined in Scotland. Work on the reforms was initiated back in 2015 by Lord Minginish, following his appointment as the chair of the Scottish Land Court and president of the Lands Tribunal, and it has continued under Lord Duthie, who is the current judicial head of both bodies.

The provisions in the bill will give legislative effect to the work and are grounded on three principles: simplicity, coherence and flexibility. Those principles remain central to part 2 of the bill that is before us today.

On simplicity, the bill replaces the two bodies operating in closely related areas of law and already sharing the same judicial leadership with a single unified court. That removes unnecessary structural complexity while preserving specialist jurisdictions.

On coherence, the committee heard evidence from the judicial stakeholders about the statutory overlap and procedural anomalies arising from the parallel operation of the court and the tribunal, particularly with regard to agricultural holdings and land reform registration. The merger resolves those issues and provides a clearer and more consistent framework.

On flexibility, the bill allows legal, agricultural and valuation expertise to be deployed more effectively across the court’s jurisdiction. The administrative integration that is already in place has demonstrated the benefits of a unified approach, and the bill builds on that experience.

In their consideration of the bill, members of the judiciary, including the chairman of the Land Court, Lord Duthie, raised important points about appeals and procedure, particularly for tribunal-type cases that are transferred into the court. I confirm that we will continue to engage with the judiciary and will introduce stage 2 amendments to ensure that those points are properly addressed.

Alongside the merger provisions, the bill also enables suitably qualified members of the merged

court and—on a transitional basis—members of the Lands Tribunal for Scotland to act in the Upper Tribunal. The intention of those provisions is to enhance the resilience of the Upper Tribunal by giving it access to a broader range of expertise when that is required.

The reform that is brought in by the bill modernises structures without diluting tradition. It creates a more integrated, coherent and flexible system for resolving land and property disputes for Scotland's crofting and rural communities. I commend the bill to the chamber.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Finlay Carson will open on behalf of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee.

16:06

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I am pleased to speak on behalf of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee to present our stage 1 report. At the outset, I acknowledge the positive feedback from many stakeholders about the Scottish Government's engagement on the bill—we do not often hear such praise, and it should be recognised.

The committee began its scrutiny in June with a call for views. We held five evidence sessions between September and November with stakeholders, including the Crofting Commission and the Scottish Government. We visited the Isle of Skye to meet crofters, and we held an online event with crofters across Scotland. I thank everyone who has contributed to our scrutiny and I thank the committee clerks, the Scottish Parliament information centre and, of course, the members of the committee for their hard work.

I turn to our consideration of part 1 of the bill. The committee recognises the vital contribution that crofting makes to Scotland's rural population, economy, environment and cultural heritage. Two clear messages emerged from our evidence taking. First, there is strong support for the bill's targeted approach of fixing specific issues rather than attempting fundamental reform. However, many stakeholders called for a wider, long-term review of crofting law. We agree, and we recommend that the next Scottish Government undertakes such a review and introduces comprehensive legislation as soon as practicable.

Secondly, we repeatedly heard concerns about the enforcement of crofters' duties—that is, to live on or near the croft and to maintain and use it purposefully. Crofters want a clear, consistently applied regulatory framework. We welcome the

Crofting Commission's renewed focus on enforcement and the Scottish Government's commitment to strengthen collaboration between the commission and the rural payments and inspections division. However, enforcement remains challenging. The committee believes that the current system for reporting and enforcing duties should be central to any future review of the crofting law, and we are pleased to hear that the Government shares that view.

Sections 1 to 27 of the bill make a series of specific, often technical, changes; I will focus on those that generated the most debate. In the sections on enabling the environmental uses of crofts and on common grazings, we welcome the extension of the definition of "purposeful use" to include "any environmental use". Crofting land can deliver significant environmental benefits, and simplifying the route to environmental activities is sensible. However, we heard concerns about how absent or negligent crofters might cite "environmental use" in order to mask neglect. The bill includes some safeguards against that occurring, but we recognise that the strongest protection lies in robust enforcement. On that point, we welcome the minister's commitment to strengthen the definition of "environmental use", and it would be helpful if he would set that out in closing today.

On common grazings and environmental projects, the treatment and sharing of benefits—particularly carbon credits—requires clarification. We heard support for joint projects on common grazings, but questions remain over fair benefit sharing while ensuring that grazing remains available in the spirit of crofting. Further details from the minister on that during the debate would also be welcome.

On assignments—that is, the family transfer of crofts—the committee supports a fast-track process to reduce administrative pressures on the Crofting Commission so that resources can be redirected to enforcement. Some stakeholders queried the proposed three-croft limit for using the fast-track process, particularly for crofters with multiple interests. On balance, we accept the Government's rationale and note that those with more than three crofts would continue to use the existing process. That is a fair and proportionate way to speed up family assignments without compromising oversight. We also heard concerns that prohibiting the transfer of owner-occupied crofts could inadvertently hinder community organisations from seeking croft land for crofting or housing. We welcome the Government's intention to explore a stage 2 amendment to ensure that community aspirations are not frustrated.

On common grazings, we took strong evidence about problems when grazing shares become unintentionally separated from the inby croft or croft land, so we support and welcome provisions aimed at preventing such separations. Members differed on whether the bill should go further and prohibit separation entirely. We note the minister's assurance that additional safeguards will be introduced at stage 2 to tighten practice while retaining flexibility where separation is genuinely desirable. We also welcome the consideration of a process to reattach shares that have been unintentionally separated, and we would appreciate an update on stakeholder discussions about workable solutions.

I turn to part 2, which is on the proposed merger of the Scottish Land Court and the Lands Tribunal for Scotland. Although some stakeholders worried that the merger might be driven by cost cutting, the general view was that it was pragmatic. We were reassured by the minister's confirmation that the aim is to streamline and improve operations, not to diminish access to justice or expertise. The committee's report sets out detailed comments, including from the current president of the court and the chair of the tribunal. We welcome the Government's intention to bring stage 2 amendments to tighten part 2 and clarify issues that we have raised, particularly by preserving specialist knowledge, ensuring appropriate routes of appeal and maintaining accountability for rural communities.

The committee supports the bill's general principles. We endorse the targeted approach in part 1. We also make a clear call for a comprehensive future review of crofting law, with enforcement at its core. We support strengthening of provisions on environmental use, common grazings and assignments. I look forward to further details from the minister on definitions, benefit sharing, safeguarding for grazing shares and community-friendly routes for owner-occupied transfers. Overall, on part 2, we recognise the potential benefits of the merger—subject to stage 2 amendments—which will secure clarity, continuity of expertise and access to justice. I look forward to members' contributions.

16:12

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I could not make it down to Edinburgh last week because of the snow in the north. I was trapped at home with my three children, who could not get to school. I want to thank farmers and crofters—I have done so on Facebook, but I want to say it in the chamber even though many others have already—because teachers and doctors live on my road, my wife being one of them, and we could not have got out without their help. I do not blame

anything on local authorities, which did their best last week to try to get people out and make the roads as safe as possible, but I thank the farmers and crofters across the Highlands and Islands and the north of Scotland.

The Scottish Conservatives will back stage 1 of the crofting bill today. When I first read the committee's draft report, the major point that I wanted to ensure that it contained was a recognition that there is a clear and growing consensus on the need for a full-scale review of crofting legislation. That was picked up by Finlay Carson, and I believe that it was accepted by the minister in his response to the report. Crofters across the Highlands and Islands are looking for that important piece of work—one that properly reflects what crofting means in different places and how it operates in those very different local contexts. There is no doubt that the bill is a step forward, but it also underlines that a deeper and more comprehensive review is now needed.

I welcome the work that has gone into the bill and the constructive engagement between the Government stakeholders and the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee. Part 1 of the bill makes sensible technical improvements and addresses practical issues that have caused frustration for some time. That progress is important and should be recognised. However, as I have said, many crofters feel that the bill does not yet answer those bigger questions about the future of crofting. After so many years, and with crofting being so ingrained in the way of life of highlanders and islanders, I believe that the Scottish Parliament owes them that wider review in the next parliamentary session.

The issue of enforcement has come through strongly in the evidence. Weak enforcement of residency and cultivation duties has, to some degree, damaged trust in the system and, in some areas, the social fabric of crofting communities. Although the Crofting Commission's recent efforts are very welcome, crofters want to see such efforts backed by long-term legislative safeguards and proper resourcing, so that duties are applied fairly and consistently.

Environmental use of crofts is another area in which balance is crucial. Environmental outcomes can sit alongside crofting, but they must be rooted in active use by real crofters. There is genuine concern that land could be neglected or effectively abandoned under the banner of environmental use, which must be addressed clearly in the legislation.

The bill also touches on owner-occupier crofts and common grazings, both of which matter deeply on the ground. There is real anxiety about crofts being priced beyond the reach of local people and new entrants, and about grazing

shares becoming detached from the crofting system. Those are not abstract legal points; they go to the heart of whether crofting remains viable for future generations. We should all give that careful thought as we reach stage 2. One interesting area that came up and that has not been touched on a great deal in the bill is around the ownership of carbon rights and—potentially in the future—biodiversity rights. That also needs to be considered at stage 2 of the bill.

The bill is moving things in the right direction, but crofters are clear that it cannot be the final word. I welcome discussion with the minister as we head towards stage 2 and the next phase.

16:16

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

I, too, thank those who gave evidence, the bill team and the members of committee staff and SPICe who helped us in our consideration of the bill.

Scottish Labour supports the Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill, which is a very necessary piece of legislation that puts right some of the mistakes that were made in the Crofting Reform (Scotland) Act 2010. As well as helping to streamline processes, it will, I hope, allow practices to be modernised.

However, crofters are desperately disappointed that the bill does nothing to deal with the current threats to crofting, which include market pressures. That market does not relate to crofting itself; it is to do with the fact that there is a housing crisis, coupled with the ambition to own second homes or holiday lets. The bill does nothing to encourage land use or to recognise crofting as an intrinsically agricultural practice in which, in order to make a living, a person must also have other employment.

Because of that, diversification has been encouraged, which has meant that diversification such as the provision of holiday accommodation and the finding of other uses for the land has eclipsed the agricultural use of crofts. Some activities, such as growing vegetables, weaving and using the produce of the land, fit well with crofting, but others do not. Second homes and holiday lets are damaging crofting, and the bill does nothing about them.

The bill's only innovation is to look at environmental management as part of crofting, which is a positive move, as long as it does not disguise dereliction and rewilding as environmental management. By its very nature, crofting is environmentally friendly. Crofters who carry out carbon audits find that they sequester carbon rather than produce it. It is also nature friendly in practice, so if we are serious about the

environment, we must support some of the traditional aspects of crofting while recognising that it is an economic driver and that people have to be able to make a living to stay and work in our crofting communities.

The bill also does not make it clear that peat, trees, grass and other essential carbon stores belong to the tenant. Crofters have always had the right to cut peat and to grow and cut trees—indeed, we now have woodland crofts. The bill needs to provide clarity on that issue, because if it does not, we will face a block to peatland restoration.

One of the most complex issues in the bill is that of grazing shares, which have sometimes come adrift from the croft, as many members have mentioned. In most cases, that has been unintentional, because the croft was sold and the conveyancing had not included the grazing share with the croft. The bill will put in place a default to stop that happening in future, but it does not deal with existing cases, so action needs to be taken to ensure that the land is being used. The most straightforward way to do that would be to reunite the share with the original croft.

Part 2 of the bill, which concerns the Scottish Land Court and the Lands Tribunal for Scotland, is less contentious, but that might be because it was difficult to discuss the policy with the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service, which made it difficult for the committee to get a clearer view of the practical issues. Although we understand that there must be a clear separation between the judiciary and Parliament, Parliament must consider the impact of changes on the running of court services, so there must be an ability to scrutinise that.

I hope that the bill will cut bureaucracy, but it does nothing to reduce the complexity that exists or to put crofting on a secure footing for the future. Therefore, Parliament must return to the matter in the next session if crofting and its value in slowing depopulation are not to be lost for future generations.

16:20

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I thank the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee clerks, SPICe, the bill team and everyone else involved in the development and scrutiny of the bill.

Crofting is a vital part of Scotland's cultural and social heritage, but it is not just a reflection of our nation's past. It is a tradition and an institution that is living and breathing; it is crucial to both our present and our future. Crofting is a glue that holds rural and island communities together and supports their respective economies. It offers us a

template for low-impact land management that—if it is adopted more widely across Scotland—can help us to meet the major challenges that are presented by the climate and biodiversity crises while providing fair access to land and food, as well as an antidote to rural depopulation.

While I am pleased that crofting's contribution to Scotland has been acknowledged by the very existence of the bill and am glad that crofters and other stakeholders are largely happy with its contents, it must be said that the proposed legislation represents something of a missed opportunity. It has been in the pipeline for a decade, yet what we have before us today is more of a technical exercise—although I heard what the minister said about it being an enabling bill.

What was hoped for, and what crofters have been calling for, was a more ambitious document setting out a vision for what crofting is for. Key elements that are missing from the bill include tighter regulations around the market in tenancies, so that crofting can be more accessible; a scheme to create crofts on public land; and a Scotland-wide expansion of where crofting can take place. I would be interested to hear from the minister what work is being done on those much-needed policies. We must ensure, as far as possible, that the next Government launches a new crofting bill process to address those matters and others besides, ideally on a foundation of current work.

As for what we have before us in the here and now, there is very little in the bill that the Scottish Greens disagree with. It is good to see that crofters will be able to put their land to environmental use, and I hope that that will give the community the confidence to do its bit for Scotland's nature and climate and help to achieve the landscape-scale change that is needed if we are to meet the major challenges of this century.

I understand that there has been some concern about whether the new power for crofters will lead to abandoned crofts but, with the right safeguards in place—which I am keen to explore at stage 2—that need not be a concern.

Turning to part 2 of the bill, the proposed merger of the Lands Tribunal for Scotland and the Scottish Land Court seems to be a sensible idea, given the close proximity in which those two institutions work. It is good to know that the newly formed Scottish Land Court will have jurisdiction over access rights disputes. I trust that that will allow for better, fairer access to justice in this area.

We also have an opportunity to consider how to deliver better, fairer access to justice for those who bring environmental cases. In the policy memorandum that accompanies the bill, the Government states:

"It is ... intended that consideration will be given to the expanded Land Court taking on new functions in relation to Aarhus cases in time to come".

Given that Scotland is currently in breach of its Aarhus obligations, especially under article 9 of the convention, which requires access to justice to be

"fair, equitable, timely and not prohibitively expensive",

I put the case that we now have the ideal opportunity to consider how environmental cases could come to the Land Court in the future.

Overall, I look forward to working with the Government and colleagues from across the Parliament to deliver an even better crofting and land court system in Scotland.

16:24

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I am pleased to speak on behalf of the Scottish Liberal Democrats on the Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill. I, too, thank the bill team, the committee's clerks and the many organisations and individuals who gave evidence and sent briefings to support the stage 1 process.

Crofting is of vital importance in my Shetland Islands constituency and across the crofting counties of the Highlands and Islands. Cultural heritage, tradition, community and connection to the land are all important aspects of crofting, which delivers economic and environmental benefits in rural and island areas.

Specific legislation has governed crofting since 1886, when the Crofters Holdings (Scotland) Act of that year was passed under a Liberal Government. The Law Society of Scotland has described Scotland's unique crofting law as having "developed over time in a piecemeal fashion",

and it is generally considered to be a complex and difficult area of the law that might be considered outdated in many respects.

Reform of the legal landscape has been slow to emerge. A consultation in 2017 led to the Scottish Government stating its intention to introduce a bill to correct known anomalies in crofting legislation, followed by further consideration of more fundamental changes. However, this first phase has taken years to come before the Scottish Parliament. Even allowing for the disruptions of Brexit and the pandemic, many people in the crofting communities have indicated frustration at the slow pace. A broader review of crofting policy and law to modernise the framework and reduce the intricate and confusing nature of crofting law remains outstanding. On that point, the committee recommends that, at the start of the next session, the new Scottish Government should confirm

“its intention to undertake this review and then bring forward legislation.”

Although it does not deliver the more fundamental overhaul that is still being called for, the streamlining effect of the bill is welcome. There was general support for the bill's provisions among stakeholders during the stage 1 process, as well as positive feedback about engagement and the co-design process between stakeholders and the Scottish Government. It is important that those continue as the bill progresses.

Part 1 of the bill will make changes across various aspects of crofting law, including the enforcement of crofters' duties, the powers of the Crofting Commission, and changes to common grazings and the crofting register. The bill will extend the definition of “purposeful use” of croft land to include environmental use. The committee heard concerns that that could be used as cover by an absentee or negligent crofter to neglect their croft, and NFU Scotland stressed that environmental use must be linked to active land management to mitigate that outcome. I note the minister's commitment to strengthening the definition of environmental use, and I look forward to seeing what is brought forward. That issue should be included in any future review of crofting law.

The bill contains provisions to prevent the unintended separation of grazing shares. Stakeholders, including the Scottish Crofting Federation and the NFUS, called for more action to reduce the separation of grazing shares from their original parent crofts. It was noted during evidence sessions that, in Shetland, unlike in most other areas, grazing shares are attached at the point of purchase, forming a “part and pertinent” of the croft. It is useful to note those differences across the Highlands and Islands and consider where they might offer opportunities for learning.

I turn to part 2 of the bill, which will merge the Scottish Land Court and the Lands Tribunal for Scotland. The Scottish Government intends that approach to deliver a more coherent and efficient administration of the services that are currently offered. The committee noted that there were divided views in the consultation responses to the proposal and heard that some stakeholders are concerned that the move might be motivated by cost cutting. For the merger to be successful, the new Scottish Land Court must be properly resourced and access to justice must be maintained.

Not only does crofting require full reform; there needs to be an understanding of what modern crofting life will look like in the years ahead. Working with crofting communities is crucial, and it is important to value and protect that way of life.

Although there is more to be done to deliver the changes that are needed to modernise crofting law, I am pleased to support the Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill at stage 1.

16:29

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP):

Crofting is a subject that is never far from my inbox—nor is the issue of crofting reform. It is clear that substantial change to 150 years' worth of crofting legislation cannot be achieved in a single bill, but the bill that is before us is an important first step towards wider reform. It is my view that an additional bill will be needed in the next parliamentary session.

I thank the other members of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee, our officials and the witnesses for their input into our report. I particularly mention the visit that the committee's convener Mr Carson and I were able to make to Skye. I believe that that visit was useful in informing the report and its conclusion that the committee should back the general principles of the bill. I also thank the Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity for his direct engagement with me on the bill and, more importantly, for his engagement with the wider committee.

Part 1 of the bill focuses on nine key areas, including: expanding the powers of the Crofting Commission; streamlining the administration of crofting duties; amending the crofting register; and enabling more use of digital communication between crofters and the commission. It also introduces provisions for the environmental use of crofts and common grazings and sets out definitions of a “crofting community” and an “owner-occupier”. Part 2 of the bill merges the Scottish Land Court and the Lands Tribunal for Scotland, and part 3 contains more general provisions.

As the committee report says, crofting does not function without effective regulation. There are still concerns about the number of crofts that are abandoned or where the crofter is a long-term absentee. Likewise, there are concerns about the need for enforcement action on that to allow new entrants easier access to crofting. The committee welcomes the emphasis on the environment that is evident throughout the bill, but it is also keen to see safeguards to prevent any wholesale abandonment of agricultural land in the name of environmental use.

It is outwith the scope of this bill, but in the future we must see legislation to tackle issues created by the marketisation of crofts that has happened in recent years. As the minister said in November last year, the current bill will prepare the ground for what comes next by helping to

increase residency levels and active croft use to allow consideration of what will be needed thereafter to increase the number of new entrants into crofting and to sustain support for existing crofters.

As the Scottish Crofting Federation has noted, work on more fundamental reform must get under way during session 7 with a review of crofting policy and law. That must be followed by the introduction of further legislation and the continuation of the robust engagement with stakeholders that there has been to date in this complex area of law.

I have no doubt that, in the course of stage 2, I will be among the committee members seeking to lodge amendments to improve the bill that is before us. However, I believe that the bill is an important step forward for crofting reform and that stakeholders will want to see it pass. I am therefore happy to commend the committee's report to members.

16:32

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am pleased to speak to the stage 1 report on the bill. I congratulate the committee and its clerks on progressing the bill and congratulate the minister on organising various meetings across the crofting community to discuss it. I attended one of those meetings, on a relatively bright summer night, and it was interesting.

However, there is a bit of *déjà vu* here. In 2017, during the previous parliamentary session, the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee produced quite a lengthy report on the need to make changes to crofting law. In that report, the REC Committee made it quite clear that we needed a statement of crofting policy that would not only lay out the aims of crofting but cover keeping the associated language going and keeping the crofting population and culture in place across the Highlands.

The REC Committee found key issues. Some of those have already been addressed and others are dealt with in the current bill, but it is still apposite to remind the Parliament of them. They related to the election of crofting commissioners and the management of absenteeism. There was a call for a new entrants scheme, which does not seem to have gained any ground at all, and for definitions of different forms of croft ownership, including owner-occupation and various other forms. The committee also called for the mapping of crofts, which also seems to have stalled slightly, and raised the issue of so-called "slipper crofters" who have shares in grazings but do not actually own crofts.

The 2017 report was clear that sufficient time should be allowed to ensure that a new bill would be passed before the end of the session in 2021, but that did not happen. It is therefore surprising that we are discussing the current bill only as we come towards the end of the current session. I hope that we will have sufficient time to get all the amendments through.

I agree with the current committee that there needs to be a fundamental review of crofting in the next session of Parliament. The committee has raised issues relating to the Crofting Commission, mapping and, as I have just mentioned, what I have termed "slipper crofters"—that is, people with grazing shares but no crofts.

The bill represents the low-hanging fruit of crofting law reform. I would have liked to see more of a definition of the cultural, economic, social and environmental benefits of crofting.

I would also have liked to drill down into the Crofters Holdings (Scotland) Act 1886, the Crofters Commission (Delegation of Powers) Act 1888, the Crofters Common Grazings Regulation Act 1891, the Crofters (Scotland) Act 1955, the Crofting Reform (Scotland) Act 1976 and the Crofters (Scotland) Act 1993. When we look at crofting law, we have to have the text of all those acts open at the same time. For people like me, who are trying to help crofters, that makes it difficult to understand which act is apposite to the matter that is being dealt with. There needs to be proper reform of those acts. I would like them to be drawn together to help to make crofting vibrant, understandable and enforceable.

As regards the merger of the Scottish Land Court and the Lands Tribunal for Scotland, I am aware of the expertise problem. The Government is pretty sanguine about it, but I would like to see some clarity when we come to stage 2.

I thank the Rural and Islands Committee for its work. I agree with the general principles of the bill, but I feel that opportunities have been missed here. I reiterate that a new bill will definitely be needed, which is what the REC Committee said back in 2017.

16:37

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): I put on the record my thanks to those who engaged with the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee on the bill. We heard from a huge number of stakeholders, from organisations to individual crofters, and I am grateful to them for putting so much time and energy into the committee's work on the bill.

Crofting is important to Scotland's heritage and to our rural communities and economies today. It contributes a great deal to vibrant and thriving

communities, with 30,000 people living in crofting households. Ensuring that crofting is well managed and that legislation allows crofts and the communities around them to thrive has knock-on positive effects. The Scottish Crofting Federation has set out that

“crofting has a proven track record of maintaining population and economic activity in remote rural areas.”

The proposed changes that are set out in the bill are widely supported, but it is important to ensure that they will work for crofters. As we heard in evidence, the activities of crofters and grazings committees are wide and varied, which is to be celebrated and supported. Enforcement of crofters’ duties was widely discussed, and I note that crofters want more effective enforcement. Previous legislation has created a complex system, and we heard from the Crofting Commission that much capacity is diverted to deal with the complications. Crofters shared concerns about a lack of enforcement.

The bill will go some way in streamlining and freeing up Crofting Commission capacity. Provisions in the bill set out greater flexibility for the commission, such as allowing it to make use of digital communication. Use of a wider variety of communication options is to be welcomed, although the committee notes that not all crofters have access to the internet or a reliable connection. Homes in rural Scotland are much more likely to rely on slower forms of internet such as digital subscriber lines. We expect that the commission will anticipate that and continue to offer effective physical communication, but it feels important to note that point.

Over the course of evidence taking, the commission also acknowledged the significant issues around its digital capacity and current website. I am interested in hearing how the commission will be supported to develop its digital capacity.

Although the changes that are set out in the bill are likely to streamline administration for both the commission and crofters, there is, as we have heard, a wide appetite for more fundamental change. I was glad to hear the minister confirm that this is the first step and foundation for wider change. I and many others would welcome more detail on what that might look like.

It is vital that crofting is fairly regulated and well enforced, without undue burdens on crofters. The committee supports the bill at stage 1 and looks forward to further changes in the future.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches.

16:40

Ariane Burgess: I will highlight several interesting contributions to the debate. Rhoda Grant talked about the need to support the traditional aspects of crofting. I add that we need to recognise things such as the machair and how crofters ensure that that treasured and important type of land is maintained.

Many colleagues raised concerns about the separation of grazing shares. Beatrice Wishart noted that the situation is nuanced, with circumstances in Shetland being different from those in other crofting counties.

Alasdair Allan talked about the importance of addressing the marketisation of crofting, on which I agree with him. Edward Mountain spoke of the need to reinvigorate the mapping of crofting, on which I also agree. It would be useful to understand how Scotland’s land is used. Given that crofting is extensive in parts of my region, it would be good to have a greater picture.

Evelyn Tweed raised an interesting point about the need to make sure that there are options for analogue as well as digital communication between crofters and the commission. It is important to recognise that not everybody has moved into the digital space.

As I said, the Scottish Greens support what the bill does. It ties up loose ends that are creating problems on the ground for crofters. However, I will wrap up by thinking about the future. Fixing the problems that crofters face now is all well and good; however, as with any other sector, we need to look beyond the present and into the future. We need to consider the multitude of challenges that are coming down the line—as I have heard about from crofters, including from one just last night—and to ensure that crofters feel supported to adapt to those.

For example, the 2045 net zero target is getting closer, and we also have the good food nation commitments to consider. In both instances, the Scottish Government’s job is to prepare the ground for crofters, positively encourage change and support those who already want to make that change.

As the Crofting Commission chair, Andrew Thin, told the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee,

“The proposed changes are helpful, but they are only steps on a journey ... A large chunk of land in our country is being used suboptimally and is suboptimally productive, which is not sensible.”—[*Official Report, Rural Affairs and Islands Committee*, 24 September 2025; c 25.]

He called on us to rethink existing systems of land use and management. At that point, I think, he was talking not specifically about crofting but about Scotland’s rural land in general. He called on us to consider, where appropriate, initiatives

such as carbon sequestration, peatland restoration and woodland planting.

Elements of the bill will help crofters to begin the process of adaptation. For example, the part of the bill that deals with environmental uses, albeit that it is not perfect in its current form, moves us in the right direction. We need to ensure that everyone who wants to use a croft for environmental purposes has the confidence to do so and enough confidence in the regulation of that form of land use.

Part 2 of the bill offers the chance to adapt the justice system so that it can handle environmental cases in a better and fairer way. I think that all members would agree that fairness should be at the heart of any just transition towards a more environmentally friendly Scotland.

Key to ensuring fairness is having a legal system that is fully prepared to deal with environmental cases. As the climate and biodiversity crisis develops, it does not take too much to see that we will need the capacity and expertise to handle such cases. Building that system should start today, especially given our Aarhus convention commitments.

Scotland's crofting system is unique. It is a culturally significant, low-impact land management model that maintains rural and island populations and their respective economies. The Scottish Greens believe that the bill will ensure that crofting will be slightly simpler, but once the legislation has passed, the next Government must move quickly to protect the future of crofting for generations to come.

16:45

Rhoda Grant: There has been a lot of consensus in the debate, with members talking about what needs to happen with the bill and what changes need to be made. However, there is agreement on the direction of travel.

There was discussion about common grazings and how to reattach grazing shares that had inadvertently become detached. That is quite difficult, because it will take a backward look at how we track the ownership of those common grazing shares and how we retrospectively legislate to have them reattached to the crofts that they originally belonged to.

Some witnesses who gave evidence to the committee talked about not always having the grazing share attached to a croft, because they felt that some people might be using their inby land but not their grazing share because they were no longer rearing animals. However, a solution to that is already in place, in that people can sublet their grazing share if they are not rearing animals but

one of their crofting neighbours is and could use that land. That would be a solution to that part of the argument.

Finlay Carson: It is important to emphasise that one of committee's concerns was that, if the inby croft was separated from the grazing share, there could be the possibility of people speculating in that grazing share, given the value of carbon and biodiversity credits.

Rhoda Grant: Yes, indeed, and the bill needs to do something about that. It needs to clarify that the carbon credits belong to the tenant, and that a grazing share belongs to the original croft. Beatrice Wishart talked about how that is not an issue in Shetland, because the way in which conveyancing was carried out, the grazing share always belonged to the croft. We need to make sure that that happens elsewhere.

Finlay Carson and others talked about the three-croft limit, which I think that the committee agreed to because it made sense. However, we also understood that the size of crofts varied hugely. There were some very large crofts, some very small crofts and some crofts that had been subdivided in the past. That was a historical issue. Some crofts were subdivided between family members to the point at which they were not really economic at all. As a rule of thumb, there should be a three-croft limit, but every application needs to be considered on its own merit, especially in relation to the size of the croft that is going to be transferred.

Alasdair Allan talked about abandonment and dereliction, and other members talked about environmental crofting and the crossover there. The minister has already agreed that he will strengthen the bill to make sure that environmental crofting cannot be used to disguise abandonment and dereliction. We also need to realise that there are already crofting laws in place that take a stand against abandonment and dereliction, and we must make sure that the Crofting Commission has the ability to do that.

We must also make sure that people can report that. Earlier crofting legislation made that a duty on the grazings clerk and we knew that that would not work. I am pleased that the bill will take that out, but the legislation should also widen who can report dereliction to make sure that it does not happen.

The future of crofting is important, and we need more comprehensive legislation. That legislation needs to understand that crofting has evolved differently in the different areas of the crofting counties. Beatrice Wishart talked about Shetland and the grazing share area, which shows that to be the case.

Ariane Burgess said that crofting is the “glue” that holds communities together, and that really is the case. We need to make sure that we protect it for future generations.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Jamie Halcro Johnston to close on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives.

16:49

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I declare an interest as a partner in a farming partnership, a member of Scottish Land & Estates and a crofting landlord.

We have heard a great deal today about the history of crofting and, from all sides of the chamber, about the role that crofting still plays, particularly in some of our most remote and rural communities, many of which are in my Highlands and Islands region. However, the crofting of today is not the crofting of 1886, when, as we have heard, the Crofters Holdings (Scotland) Act 1886 went through Parliament, and nor is it even the crofting of 1993, when the most recent attempt was made to consolidate crofting legislation in a more coherent framework. There has been an on-going process of change, mirroring the process of change to other types of land tenure and to the agriculture sector. That is the right approach. If crofting is to maintain its relevance, it cannot remain frozen in time.

The Scottish Government has indicated that this bill is a foundation and one that, in the words of the minister, aims to prepare

“the ground for what comes next.”

That has been the subject of a great deal of discussion and reflection in the crofting communities. However, it is the hope of members, certainly on this side of the chamber, that the bill has measurable outcomes in its own right and that the Scottish Government can demonstrate progress if the bill is passed by the Parliament. That is not just about increasing occupancy and ensuring purposeful use, or reducing the occasions on which enforcement powers have to be used; it is about ensuring that the novel elements in the bill are closely examined and reviewed.

That is particularly important in relation to the environmental provisions, where we should hope to see credible outcomes. As the stage 1 report illustrated, plenty of organisations have outlined where those provisions may provide opportunities for neglect or adverse effects. Confidence will be increased not simply by pointing to the protections in the bill but by clear assurances that those possible outcomes will be actively monitored.

The bill will strengthen the powers of the Crofting Commission. However, it is essential that those powers are put to good use, that oversight is exercised sensibly and, ultimately, that the purposes and functions of the Crofting Commission are clear and unambiguous, with a solid mandate to act when that is necessary.

We will support the bill at stage 1. However, given the time that it has taken, in many ways, the bill falls short in addressing the many pressing issues in the crofting sector. My colleague Finlay Carson detailed some of the issues and the background to the bill. Speaking on behalf of the committee, he outlined some important parts of its report. As the report recognises, there is an appetite for deeper and more fundamental reforms to the sector. That will, of course, be an issue for the new session of Parliament following this year's elections. It would be difficult to bring all the issues that the committee has raised into the scope of a short speech, but I am sure that we all hope that its recommendations are reflected in the Scottish Government's future work.

Tim Eagle said that the bill is a step forward but that there is a need for a more comprehensive review that answers some of the bigger questions, as well as a need to ensure that people are not priced out of local crofting. He also highlighted the need for crofts to be in active use—an issue that was raised by Dr Allan and Edward Mountain and that was hinted at by Rhoda Grant when she highlighted the concerns around second homes and holiday accommodation, which the bill will not address.

Edward Mountain welcomed the committee's report and spoke about its content, but he framed the bill clearly in terms of a missed opportunity. He also rightly noted the several outstanding issues that will now need to be tackled in the next session, as well as the indications that the Scottish Government gave that those issues would be recognised in this session, too.

There is a broad consensus in favour of reforming crofting law and ensuring that we have a framework that will work for the future. There is a collective will in the chamber to get the legislation right while looking forward to the future and perhaps more extensive reforms. It is my hope and belief that positive work can happen as the bill progresses if the Scottish Government is prepared to take on board a number of the issues that have been raised today. However, the bill and today's debate still leave an important question unanswered: what is the Government's and the Parliament's vision for the long-term future of crofting?

16:54

Jim Fairlie: I thank members across the chamber for the consensual way in which we have debated the bill today. That goes back to the point that I made in my opening statement, about the extensive amount of very good engagement that the bill team and my officials have done to ensure that we bring the crofting community along with us.

I will address a number of points that members have made—I am sorry, but I will not be able to associate names with all those points. A number of members said that there is not enough in the bill and that more wholesale legislative reform is needed. However, the bill was never intended to deliver fundamental reform—it is technical in nature, and it provides the improvements that we need while enabling crofters to take greater control of how they use their land.

Although reform will be necessary in the future, I would caution against rushing straight into it. We first need to establish what crofting policy should be in the future, and—to continue the approach that we took to this bill—we need stakeholders to consider that question, too. Although it is ultimately the Government's responsibility to deliver that policy, that should not be done unless we have good evidence from stakeholders.

Finlay Carson: Will the minister give way?

Jim Fairlie: Before I take the intervention, I should point out that such reform would also need to be cleared by any future Governments, Cabinets and Cabinet sub-committees.

Finlay Carson: I am surprised to hear the minister talk about not “rushing” into crofting reform when there has been talk, debate and consultation over future crofting policy for decades. Sadly, we hear the excuse about not rushing into reform from the SNP all too often. We accept that this bill is intended to address some of the technicalities, but the majority of crofters out there are calling for radical change, and that change needs to come sooner rather than later.

Jim Fairlie: We almost got through a consensual debate without any dispute at all. We should not rush things but I take Mr Carson's point that we need to move on to the next process, because today has shown the complexity of crofting law.

Anybody who is listening to the debate and is not absolutely embedded in crofting will not have a clue what most of us are talking about. When we go through the process of dealing with the current complex crofting law, therefore, we need to ensure that we have done the work and have engaged with stakeholders, and that we understand what it is that crofting is going to deliver for the people of Scotland and, more importantly, for the crofters.

That is a vital piece of work that we will need to undertake in the next session of Parliament.

The bill provides crofters and landowners with a legislative framework to help them to address environmental issues. That has been mentioned by a number of members, and I will touch on it just now. We have to avoid a situation in which crofters are unable to access future funding schemes that incentivise certain environmental uses, and that is one of the issues that the bill picks up.

Members have talked about carbon credits. We do not yet fully understand who owns those carbon credits, and I think that it would be premature to state in crofting legislation whether those carbon rights sit with the landlord or with the crofter. In the meantime, I absolutely encourage crofters to go into joint ventures with their landowners and other crofters in order to bring mutual benefit.

Rhoda Grant: I think that it is quite clear where those carbon credits sit. The crofter can dig peat and cut or plant trees on their croft, so the landowner could not claim the carbon credits. If they were to claim carbon credits for peatland restoration, say, and the crofter decided to start cutting a new peat bank, they could not do it—they have no control over the trees or the peat on their land. The credits must, therefore, lie with the crofter.

Jim Fairlie: There we see the complexity of crofting law and who owns what. That is why we need to take our time and fully consider the proposals so that we get it right. The issue that Rhoda Grant highlights is one of the matters that should be considered in the next crofting bill.

At some point, an issue was raised—I do not know whether it was raised by a member in the chamber today—regarding the three-croft limit for family assignation and how that might disproportionately impact crofters who have multiple crofting interests. We want to reduce the burden of crofting regulation where it makes sense to do so. The Crofting Commission's resources need to be freed up through the change that we are bringing forward, so that it will have more time available to deploy elsewhere—for example, in enforcement duties. I will come back to that in a moment.

We settled on a limit of three crofts because we felt that that struck the right balance between the policy intention, which is to improve the efficiency of the service that is provided to customers, and the concerns that it could result in croft collecting or land banking. I hope that that gives some comfort. If a crofter owns more than three crofts, they would have to go through the process, but that does not mean that they would not be able to take on other crofts—they would simply have to go

through the same process as everybody else. The proposal in the bill is that family assignations should be done far more easily, and I think that that has been widely welcomed.

I absolutely agree that the commission needs sufficient resources and staff based locally to monitor and enforce compliance. I regularly meet the commission's chief executive officer and chair to discuss the commission's performance, and the commission is increasing its enforcement work. Last year, through taking some form of regulatory action, the commission commenced engagement with 215 crofters and resolved 134 breaches of duties.

I am well aware that, historically, there has been a lack of faith in the Crofting Commission across crofting communities and counties. However, under the current regime, Andrew Thin and Gary Campbell are absolutely determined that the board will make the right assessment of the duties and will ensure that crofters carry out those duties.

I would have liked to touch on many other points, but I am running out of time. Should members agree to support the general principles of the Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill, I commit to working with members right across the chamber to better the lot of our nation's crofters and to deliver for our people and communities an effective bill that they can be rightly proud of.

Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill: Financial Resolution

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-20169, in the name of Shona Robison, on a financial resolution for the Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill. I call Jim Fairlie to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill, agrees to any expenditure of a kind referred to in Rule (a) 9.12.3 and (b) 9.12.3A of the Parliament's Standing Orders arising in consequence of the Act.—[*Jim Fairlie*]

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

Business Motion

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-20415, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on changes to business. I call Graeme Dey to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revisions to the programme of business for Thursday 15 January 2026—

after

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

insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Additional Support for Learning Review

after

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: UEFA European Championship (Scotland) Bill

insert

followed by Motion on Legislative Consent: Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction Bill – UK Legislation

followed by Standing Order Rule Changes – Lodging Deadlines for Public Bills

delete

4.10 pm Decision Time

and insert

5.30 pm Decision Time—[*Graeme Dey*]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S6M-20416, on the suspension of standing orders. I ask Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that, for the purposes of consideration of the second supplementary legislative consent memorandum on the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction Bill, Rules 9B.3.5 and 9B.3.6 of Standing Orders are suspended.—[*Graeme Dey*]

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

The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S6M-20417, on the designation of a lead committee. I ask Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Visitor Levy (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.—[*Graeme Dey*]

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

Decision Time

17:02

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S6M-20388, in the name of Jim Fairlie, on the Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill at stage 1, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-20169, in the name of Shona Robison, on a financial resolution for the Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill, agrees to any expenditure of a kind referred to in Rule (a) 9.12.3 and (b) 9.12.3A of the Parliament's Standing Orders arising in consequence of the Act.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-20416, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on the suspension of standing orders, 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.

17:03

Meeting suspended.

17:06

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We come to the vote on motion S6M-20416, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on suspension of standing orders. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Ben Macpherson): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My device lost connection. I would have voted yes.

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

The Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy and Sport (Maree Todd): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted yes, too.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Todd. We will ensure that that is recorded.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I could not connect. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Robison. We will ensure that that is recorded.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted yes.

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

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
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)
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)
Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)

Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 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)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 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)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jackie Dunbar]
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)

Abstentions

Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (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)
 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 motion S6M-20416, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on suspension of standing orders, is: For 87, Against 1, Abstentions 25.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that, for the purposes of consideration of the second supplementary legislative consent memorandum on the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction Bill, Rules 9B.3.5 and 9B.3.6 of Standing Orders are suspended.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-20417, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on designation of a lead committee, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Visitor Levy (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

17:08

Members' business will be published tomorrow, 14 January 2026, as soon as the text is available.

The full *Official Report* of today's meeting will be published online within three hours of the close of business today.

Members who wish to suggest changes to this draft transcript should email them to official.report@parliament.scot or phone the official report on 0131 348 5447.



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