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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 21 January 2026

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

Points of Order

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): On a point of order, Deputy Presiding Officer. Yesterday, the Presiding Officer, Alison Johnstone, refused to suspend standing orders to allow me to lodge an urgent question on the document that the Scottish Government produced in its case against For Women Scotland to allow it to continue to house male prisoners in the female prison estate. In response, Alison Johnstone told me that she would not suspend standing orders yesterday because there would be further opportunities this week to try to question ministers.

To me, it was very clear that one of those options was an urgent question that was submitted on time, which I did first thing this morning. The question that I wanted to ask was whether the Scottish Government would update Parliament on the written case for Scottish ministers and the Lord Advocate in the judicial review of the Scottish Prison Service's policy for the management of transgender people in custody, including how many times women's rights are mentioned.

I say this choosing my words very carefully. Disgracefully, the Presiding Officer has not accepted that urgent question.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Ross, I ask you to resume your seat for a second.

I understand the strength of feeling that there is around the decision, but I urge you, Mr Ross, not to challenge the chair. You can resume your point of order.

Douglas Ross: The Presiding Officer, in making her decision, asked officials to tell me this:

"The question is not sufficiently urgent to meet the criteria for an urgent question today".

What is more urgent than the Government saying that male prisoners should be in the female prison estate or the bizarre arguments that it published yesterday? Surely, that is urgent enough to hear from ministers about today.

Again, I thought very carefully about how I phrase this: it just looks like we have a Presiding Officer who is shielding Scottish National Party ministers and preventing them from being brought to the chamber to answer questions.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Ross, please resume your seat.

You may have thought very carefully about the words that you would use, but I think that you have gone ahead and still used them in ways that go beyond challenging the chair. You have made your point. I urge you to be sensible in the language that you use. You can resume your point of order.

Douglas Ross: I would be sensible in the language that I choose to use if we had sensible rulings from the Presiding Officer. It is a nonsensical ruling for the Presiding Officer to make.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Ross, resume your seat.

You have made your point, which is not a point of order. As you know well, the selection of urgent questions is up to the Presiding Officer. As has been intimated to you, there will be opportunities during the course of this week for you to make those points. I understand that you were encouraged to press your button during First Minister's questions tomorrow. On that basis, there is not more that I can add to what you have already been told.

Douglas Ross: On a point of order, Deputy Presiding Officer. If the argument is that I can ask one question to the First Minister, who repeatedly refused to answer questions from his own back benchers and from Labour and Conservative MSPs last week at FMQs, why not have the urgent question, so that multiple questions on the same subject can be put over a 10-to-20-minute period? Now, we are going to get maybe 30 seconds to question the First Minister tomorrow, when ministers should be put under the cosh on this. They should be challenged, repeatedly, by MSPs across the chamber. That is what our urgent questions are for, and this is not allowing it. I think that that is a disgrace.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Ross, that is not a point of order. I have responded to the substantive point that you made.

It is now time to start portfolio question time.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am sorry to disappoint you, but I believe that this is an important matter. I am sure that you agree that we want the Scottish Parliament to be a welcoming place for our guests and visitors. However, earlier today, a guest of mine was asked to remove his Doddie Weir lanyard and snood, neither of which included large campaign messages. The core policy explicitly states that

"Banners, flags and political slogans are forbidden",

and that that includes clothing that displays large or overly political branding or campaign messages. You can see that the Doddie Weir lanyard that I am wearing has no political messaging.

Presiding Officer, can you advise whether your office has changed the visitor policy without our knowing? Will you personally undertake to investigate this affront to a guest who had absolutely no political branding on his being?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am not aware of the circumstances of the case that you have raised, Ms Hamilton. For clarity, the policy is a Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body one, but I am concerned to hear what you have described. I will ensure that it is looked into and that a response is provided to you and to members, who I am sure will have an interest in that.

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I realise that people want to carry on with rural questions, and please believe that I want to do that, too, as the points that will be raised are critically important. However, I cannot help but rise to speak at this point.

Rule 13.7 of the standing orders deals with portfolio questions, the item that we are just coming to. My understanding is that, by convention, when members enter their names into the ballot to be picked to ask a question, they will submit a question. However, today, three SNP members have decided not to lodge their question. There are rows of people on the benches behind me who want to ask a rural question, so I seek your guidance, Presiding Officer. Will you ensure that those of us in the chamber who want to ask a rural question will get selected today, rather than members of the SNP who have not lodged questions?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As I and the Presiding Officer have made clear in the past, when members are picked out of the ballot to ask a question, they should make sure that they are available to do so. I think that it is disappointing to see in the *Business Bulletin* that a number of questions have not been lodged. I simply reinforce the message that the Presiding Officer has previously put out. She has spoken to the Minister for Parliamentary Business about these specific cases, but all that I can do is emphasise the importance of members taking care, when putting their names into the ballot, to ensure that they will be available to ask questions.

Portfolio Question Time

Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands

14:07

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): That brings us to questions on rural affairs, land reform and islands.

Question 1 was not lodged.

Island Connectivity (West Scotland)

2. **Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what cross-Government action it is taking to support island connectivity in the West Scotland region. (S6O-05388)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): The published strategies, such as the strategic transport projects review 2, the national islands plan and the island connectivity plan, outline our commitment to maintain and enhance connectivity across Scotland. Those strategies include on-going and proposed investments in ferries, roads, railways and other infrastructure across the west of Scotland.

Recent and on-going investments include works at the Cumbrae slipway and the procurement of new vessels such as the MV Glen Sannox. Wider committed vessels projects will see one third of the Clyde and Hebrides fleet renewed in the coming years.

Paul O’Kane: The minister knows well the frustrations and anger of local communities on Cumbrae and Arran and in the mainland ports because of ferry routes to Largs, Ardrossan and Troon being delayed. There is a fiasco in our ferries—I think that we all know that.

What will the minister do to rebuild the faith of those communities? It will require the physical upgrading of infrastructure, which he has referred to, which has been for too long neglected. That is what will demonstrate a long-term commitment to connecting our islands.

On the Cumbrae slipway, can the Government say what is being done to make sure that it progresses on time and on budget, with minimal disruption?

Regarding Arran, I note the First Minister’s comments that the acquisition of the harbour is at an advanced stage, but will the Government commit to ensure that any acquisition will come with an infrastructure investment plan to upgrade the harbour and reconnect Arran and Ardrossan?

Jim Fairlie: The first point that Paul O’Kane put to me was about how we are going to rebuild trust. I accept the fact that there is a need to do that.

However, since being re-elected in 2021, the Scottish Government has delivered the MV Glen Sannox into service; bought and deployed an additional vessel, the MV Loch Frisa; and extended the charter of the MV Alfred to provide additional resilience. In recent months, we have chartered the MV Arrow to provide cover and additional capacity on the northern isles ferry service route and Clyde and Hebrides ferry service route. Further, we have commissioned two new vessels for Islay, two new vessels for the Little Minch routes and seven new electric vessels for routes across the west coast.

We have started the procurement of two new freight vessels for the northern isles routes, serving Orkney and Shetland. We have progressed investment in the key ports and harbours, as has been mentioned. We have progressed considerations around the potential purchase of Ardrossan harbour. We have confirmed additional revenue funding of £270 million between 2018-19 and 2025-26 to support the operation of local authority ferry services. We have published the “Islands Connectivity Plan—Strategic Approach” and the long-term vessels and ports plan. We have introduced free travel to under-22 islanders on the interisland ferries in Orkney and Shetland and the outer Hebrides. We have extended the young persons concessionary travel scheme, which provides islanders with two free return journeys.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister.

Jim Fairlie: The point that I am making is that we are doing an awful lot of work to try to rebuild that resilience, and the points that the member makes about the Cumbrae section can be picked up as a further consideration.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): CalMac’s original plan—to have a single vessel, the MV Alfred, service Arran while both the MV Caledonian Isles and the MV Glen Sannox are unavailable—was inadequate. Although the situation has improved since CalMac was forced to deploy the MV Isle of Arran, the return to service of the MV Glen Sannox and the MV Caledonian Isles has been delayed yet again. Will the minister press CalMac to ensure that the MV Isle of Arran stays on the route until Arran’s primary vessels return and have managed several consecutive days of reliably serving the people and communities of Arran?

Jim Fairlie: I absolutely take on board the point made by Kenneth Gibson, who has been a fierce advocate for his communities in regard to ferries. It is very frustrating that the community of Arran is facing a further delay to the return of the MV Caledonian Isles and the MV Glen Sannox. Ministers and officials continue to engage with

CalMac to ensure that all options to expedite the repairs are being considered. The MV Isle of Arran is expected to be redeployed to its original timetable on the Oban to Craginure service when repairs to the MV Alfred lifts are completed.

The redeployment of vessels is particularly challenging due to the annual overhaul schedule at this time of year, but CalMac is committed to ensuring that the lifeline services are maintained to our islands. I am glad to advise that Alfred’s current charter has been extended to the end of February and that it will remain on the Troon to Brodick route until the regular vessels resume service. This winter, we have also been able to support the funding to maintain the dedicated service on the secondary route to Arran via Lochranza.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We will need shorter answers, even in the absence of lodged questions.

Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024 (Publication of Controlling Interests of Payees)

3. Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what consultation it has entered into with the Scottish Information Commissioner regarding the publication of the controlling interests of recipients of payments made under the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024. (S6O-05389)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): The Scottish Government consulted the Information Commissioner’s Office regarding the publication of data of recipients of payments made under the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024, as required by article 36(4) of the United Kingdom general data protection regulation—UK GDPR—at the time that the bill was introduced. The Scottish Government did not consult the Scottish Information Commissioner, as that office’s remit is limited to regulating compliance with freedom of information legislation for Scottish public authorities.

The Scottish Government has not yet consulted the Information Commissioner’s Office regarding controlling interests, as that will be addressed later, when secondary legislation is being prepared for introduction under the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024.

Richard Leonard: When I pressed the cabinet secretary to publish the ultimate recipients of farm payments, as legislated for by this Parliament under section 19 of the 2024 act, I was told in a letter:

“we must consult with the Information Commissioner before making any changes ... when we deal with controlling interests.”

I know that the Information Commissioner has been rather busy recently, but it feels like the Information Commissioner’s Office is being used as an excuse by the Government for delay after delay. When will that work be completed? The regulations came into force three weeks ago. When the data is published, will it disclose the names of all individuals, including all big landowners, and not simply list them as anonymous private applicants, as well as organisations and businesses? This is about public money, it is about transparency, it is about public interest, and it is about who pays and who gains.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We are going to need shorter questions as well.

Mairi Gougeon: There was quite a lot in there. On the fundamental point about transparency, I absolutely agree with Richard Leonard, which is why we agreed to the measures that were introduced as part of the 2024 act, but I think that we are speaking at cross-purposes slightly.

The Scottish statutory instrument that Richard Leonard referred to, which has just come into force, does not relate to the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024, to which his initial question referred. The SSI relates to our ability to continue to publish data under the retained payment schemes that we have at the moment, rather than being the new regulations that would be needed under new schemes under the 2024 act, if that makes sense.

I am happy to follow up directly with Richard Leonard, to set all that out clearly. I would not want him, or any member in the chamber, to think that I am, by any means, using the Information Commissioner’s Office as an excuse. As I said in the last part of my initial response, we have not yet consulted the ICO on those specific regulations, because they will be brought forward when we are using those other powers.

Future Farm Policy (Climate and Biodiversity Targets)

4. Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to ensure that future farm policy aligns with Scotland’s climate and biodiversity targets, in light of the concerns raised by environmental stakeholders regarding the agricultural reform process. (S6O-05390)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): Reforms are already under way to align agriculture with climate and biodiversity targets while sustainably producing food. This

year, we have increased the ecological focus areas, which means that more land is farmed in ways that benefit nature and climate.

We will continue to develop our agriculture policy in a way that works for climate, people and the rural economy, and, as reform advances, we will continue to engage with Scotland’s environmental sector. However, we can meet climate, nature and sustainable food production goals only if we have successful farming and crofting businesses, which is why we will continue to offer vital support through direct payments as we go forward.

Gillian Mackay: The First Minister has previously said:

“The Government is absolutely committed to maintaining an approach to agriculture that focuses on supporting the agriculture sector, supporting the measures to tackle the nature crisis that we face and implementing measures on climate change.”—[*Official Report*, 18 December 2025; c 26.]

How does the minister propose to deliver on that now, given that leading environmental organisations have lost confidence in the process?

Jim Fairlie: The fact that members of the agriculture reform implementation oversight board have left, which is the situation to which Gillian Mackay is referring, is a decision for them. I think that it was the wrong decision, a regrettable decision and one that they will regret themselves.

However, that does not alter the fact that the Government is maintaining direct support in order to maintain rural communities. Without those strong rural communities, we cannot deliver on the biodiversity and nature promises that we are seeking to deliver, so we will continue with that process.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is a lot of interest in supplementaries. I will try to get everybody in, but the questions will need to be short, as will the responses. If they are not, I will cut across them.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): There is near-universal consensus that things must, and will, change in agriculture. However, does the minister agree that, if we want an agricultural sector that can do the heavy lifting for climate and biodiversity, we need to continue to support Scotland’s agricultural producers to do exactly that—to produce?

Jim Fairlie: I completely agree with that. In the interests of time, I will cut my answer down. Any changes that we make will be developed in partnership. We will work with the agriculture sector to ensure that the support that we give meets its needs and also fulfils our desire to

ensure that we have biodiversity and climate change in hand.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The update on the future farming investment scheme, which the Government sneaked out on the very last day before recess, still leaves farmers in the dark on why their applications were deemed ineligible or unsuccessful. Although the minister stated that artificial intelligence was not used in the verification and eligibility process, we know that an Excel-based programme was used. Could applications be deemed ineligible and therefore not progress to the formal assessment stage without any human assessment whatsoever?

Jim Fairlie: The member is now talking about the FFIS, which is kind of going off topic, and an awful lot of such questions will be answered in the debate that we will have tomorrow. However, if the question is about whether the assessment process used more machinery and AI than human involvement, the answer is no, it did not.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): Vast amounts of money awarded under the future farming investment scheme have been hoovered up by large agricultural landowners and mega farms—the kind of wealthy farms that can afford to use deer fencing, leaving smaller, less wealthy farms that cannot afford it even more vulnerable to deer overgrazing.

Given that two aims of the future farm policy are improving business efficiency and sustainability and protecting and restoring the natural environment, will the minister assure us that priority under the scheme will be given to farmers—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister.

Mercedes Villalba: —who engage in sustainable deer management solutions?

Jim Fairlie: Again, we are back to the FFIS. I need to point out that £21.5 million of extra funding was invested in rural Scotland by putting that scheme in place. I also point out that, as I have stated in the chamber, including in response to Ariane Burgess, I am absolutely committed to small producers, who are a vital part of the rural economy working in Scotland. We have the small producers pilot fund and we are determined to do more for small producers as we go forward.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Very briefly, Willie Rennie.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Does the minister agree that this is not an either/or situation and that people who seek to divide environmental groups and the farming sector are doing a disservice? We should be working together. We cannot do this without farmers. There is no way

that we will deal with our biodiversity and climate change obligations unless we work together. What efforts is he making to get those environmental stakeholders back on board?

Jim Fairlie: I absolutely applaud Willie Rennie's good sense in taking some of the heat and division out of these debates. It is absolutely correct that there should not be a divide between our climate change and biodiversity targets and producing food in Scotland. I applaud Willie Rennie's intervention, because that is what we, as a Government, are trying to do.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Very briefly, Finlay Carson.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): How can the minister expect farmers to invest in new biodiversity or emission-reducing measures without clear, long-term, fully funded commitments? Does he accept that, without adequate funding, even the most willing farmer will struggle to meet the targets? Will he ensure that no farmer is left worse off as a result of policy changes?

Jim Fairlie: We have delivered direct support. We have delivered the Scottish upland sheep support scheme and the calf scheme. We have made sure that the less favoured areas support scheme is still in place. We have given those commitments. We have said right from the start that there will be no cliff edges or big-bang moments. We are doing that at pace, with the farming community on board, and we are delivering incremental changes that they can get on board with. We have carried out exactly the right kind of policy, in stark contrast with the scheme that the Conservatives started in Westminster and the Labour Party has continued with. We are doing it right in Scotland. Other places are getting it very wrong.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 5 was not lodged.

Lynx Reintroduction (Potential Impact on Farmers and Crofters)

6. Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests, which shows that I have a livestock farm in Moray.

To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the rural secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding the potential impact on farmers and crofters of any reintroduction of lynx into Scotland. (S6O-05392)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): I absolutely understand that there are concerns in light of the recent public engagement and media attention about proposals

to reintroduce lynx in Scotland. Any proposed reintroduction would require a significant amount of consultation and evidence to assess the associated risks and benefits before a licence would be considered.

Neither the Scottish Government nor NatureScot have carried out a formal assessment of any potential impact that lynx would have on rural communities and livestock in Scotland at present. For clarity, our position remains the same: we have no plans to reintroduce lynx in Scotland.

Edward Mountain: As the minister rightly says, the majority of farmers in Scotland would like the Government to abide by its policy not to reintroduce lynx in Scotland. Has the minister had any discussion with farmers about the likely costs in relation to the loss of livestock, including pedigree livestock, should lynx be reintroduced and start killing them?

Jim Fairlie: I admit that I have not had any such conversations, because it is not in our plans. We do not plan to reintroduce lynx, so I have not needed to have those conversations.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Again, we have a number of supplementaries, so they will need to be brief.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Lynx would help to naturally control excessive deer populations—something that Scotland is in dire need of. Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Slovenia and Switzerland all successfully reintroduced lynx decades ago and reaped the ecological benefits. Why does the minister believe that it cannot work here?

Jim Fairlie: We recognise the role that reintroductions of native species can play in nature restoration. As I have just said, a proposed reintroduction would require serious and significant consultation. NatureScot currently chairs the national species reintroduction forum, which is made up of a range of organisations from conservation, land use, public and non-governmental organisation sectors. If NatureScot were to receive any form of proposal for lynx reintroduction, it would be put through the NSRF for thorough discussion and consideration. We do not intend to reintroduce lynx or any large carnivores in the foreseeable future, because of the potential for negative impacts on farms and rural communities.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Given the focus on the potential impacts on farmers and crofters, and the fact that, under the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024 and the draft climate change plan, the Scottish Government requires a transition towards sustainable and regenerative agriculture—

including making space for nature on farms and crofts—has the Government carried out any assessments of the potential benefits of restoring lynx to Scotland. If not, why not?

Jim Fairlie: As I stated in my previous answer, there would have to be a process and a thorough investigation into what would need to be done. As yet, I have not considered any of the points that Ariane Burgess has just put to me.

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Although I recognise the concerns around any possible reintroduction of lynx, will the minister please acknowledge the significant and on-going impacts that sea eagles are already having on farmers and crofters on the west coast of Scotland, in relation to which there has been much discussion but no action?

I applaud the minister for not considering the reintroduction of lynx without the clear consent of affected communities, but when will the Government set out what it will do to address the current concerns on the west coast? The lambing season is right around the corner.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That question is not related to lynx, but the minister can make any additional comments.

Jim Fairlie: Tim Eagle is talking rubbish, because he said that we have not done anything.

Tim Eagle: Tell that to the west coast farmers.

Jim Fairlie: Last year, we added an extra £500,000 to the sea eagle management scheme, and we will continue to monitor that. I established the wildlife and land management forum, and discussions are on-going about how we manage the issue.

Tim Eagle: They have done nothing.

Jim Fairlie: To go back to Ariane Burgess's point, we need to make space for nature and for people to farm, so we are trying to find the balance for both. *[Interruption.]* That is why we put the extra £500,000 into the sea eagle management scheme last year, and it is why we are committed to making sure that we work with the sector.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I would be obliged if members, particularly Mr Eagle and Mr Carson, whom I have allowed to ask supplementaries, would not shout from a sedentary position.

Combinable Crops (Consultation)

7. **Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it is having with the United Kingdom Government to ensure that the consultation on combinable crops

will deliver for Scotland's arable farmers. (S6O-05393)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): I thank Paul McLennan for the question, because it is important.

Our arable producers face significant challenges, including volatile markets and extreme weather conditions. From conversations with stakeholders, I understand that the sector has a long-term concern regarding the supply chain. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is carrying out a supply chain fairness review into the combinable crops sector, with a consultation open until 4 February.

My officials have been closely involved in the consultation process and will collaborate in the development of any resulting policy measures, ensuring that the views of Scottish stakeholders are explored and understood as part of the wider consideration of whether any interventions need to be developed.

Paul McLennan: East Lothian produces excellent grain, but, as the minister said, the sector has faced issues in relation to one of the hardest harvests in years. After a dry spring and summer, growers—especially malting barley producers—face huge pressures. Growers are being left to carry the can for decisions that are made beyond their control, whether in relation to vague contract wording, inconsistent testing standards or an unwillingness to share risk.

What can the Scottish Government do to reinforce the need for joined-up thinking and shared responsibility at every level of the supply chain?

Jim Fairlie: Paul McLennan is well aware that supply chain fairness is a reserved matter, but we are working hard to ensure that Scottish industry concerns are taken into account in the current consultation on fairness in the combinable crops sector. If the consultation responses suggest that interventions are necessary, we will collaborate in the development of that policy response, ensuring that it meets the needs of Scottish stakeholders, such as our malting barley producers. Where we have the powers to do so, we are doing all that we can to protect and support that iconic sector.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): On that point, there is a long-standing concern that contracts for malting barley, which is an important combinable crop in the UK, are extremely volatile. Rising whisky costs and a fall in demand mean that it has been hard for those arable farmers to secure contracts ahead of this year's harvest. What discussions precisely has the Scottish Government had with the UK Government to support those arable farmers and to find new markets for whisky?

Jim Fairlie: Liam Kerr makes a very good point. Given the current global disruption, I applaud the First Minister's efforts to ensure that tariffs are reduced in America, because that is exactly where malting barley products go. As I have said, we are part of the conversations that the UK Government is having on supply chain fairness, and that work is on-going. We will continue to represent the industry as much as we can.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 8 was not lodged.

That concludes portfolio question time on rural affairs, land reform and islands.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. In my efforts to accommodate your request for brevity, I neglected to draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests as a partner in a farming business.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Halcro Johnston. There will be a brief pause before we move to the next item of business.

Health and Social Care

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next portfolio is health and social care. I remind members that questions 3 and 5 have been grouped together, so I will take any supplementary questions after both substantive questions have been responded to. I advise members that there is considerable interest in asking supplementary questions. I will try to get in as many as possible, but that will require co-operation from members regarding the brevity of questions and responses.

Whole-system Patient Flow

1. **Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government what urgent action is being taken to improve whole-system patient flow, including seven-day discharge services, social care capacity and shared responsibility across hospital departments, rather than focusing on redirecting patients away from accident and emergency departments. (S6O-05395)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): Through the national health service operational improvement plan, we are supporting boards to reduce waiting times, improve hospital flow and minimise delayed discharges. The plan is backed by £220 million of targeted investment. To support resilience over the winter, we are also providing up to £20 million to fund increased social care and reduce pressure at hospital front doors.

All hospital departments have a part to play, as does the wider health and social care system, and they must work collaboratively to improve patient

flow through the system, thereby ensuring that patients can receive the right care in the right place with no unnecessary delays to the patient journey.

Willie Rennie: The most recent data, which is from November, underlines the significant problem that we still have, as 37 per cent of patients who presented at A and E had to wait for more than four hours. That is unacceptable. In addition to social care capacity, there is a big push to improve the delayed discharge numbers, and there is also pressure to have seven-day discharge services. When will there be such services in every hospital and health board across Scotland?

Neil Gray: That requires collaboration not just at the hospital level but also in social and community care. We have been working with the collaborative response and assurance group, which is co-chaired by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Scottish Government, through me and Mr Arthur, to ensure that the standards that we expect to be met on a consistent and national basis are being met.

There is good practice in some areas, which have seven-day discharge, discharge before noon and work with front-door frailty services. The standards are there to ensure that there is a high level of application and consistency across the country so that we can get better flow through the system. That is happening in some areas, but I want it to happen everywhere.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Several members wish to ask supplementary questions. Again, I appeal for brevity.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I remind members that I am a practising NHS nurse.

Mr Rennie referred to improving patient flow. Nowhere is that more evident than in the recent statistics that show that, under this Scottish National Party Scottish Government, waiting times are down for the sixth month in a row. How will the cabinet secretary work to build on that progress to ensure that people receive high-quality care on an appropriate timescale?

Neil Gray: Clare Haughey is absolutely right. The latest planned care flow data shows that waits of over 52 weeks have fallen for a sixth month in a row, with a 29.4 per cent reduction in new outpatient waits and a 19.3 per cent reduction in inpatient and day-case waits since July. We are committed to maintaining that progress through the additional £137 million that has been invested in planned care this year and we are working closely with health board chief executives to ensure improvement.

As part of wider NHS reform, we are introducing a subnational planning approach to strengthen

cross-boundary collaboration and help patients to access timely care. It is also important to reflect that 97 per cent of hospital discharges happen without delay.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): The system can change effectively only if we reduce the queues at the front door, increase the head count or help the NHS to work more efficiently. I argue that we should go for all three options. However, none of the targets will be met without a revolution in the deployment of significant artificial intelligence and technology, starting with a fully interoperable universal tech platform for the whole of the NHS. When will the cabinet secretary deliver on that key element for future healthcare?

Neil Gray: To return to the point that Mr Rennie made, the NHS is not just redirecting patients from the front door. Suppressing demand by ensuring that people get the right care in the right place is important. However, the work that has been done on flow navigation is also important, as is the work that has been done by NHS 24 and the Scottish Ambulance Service to ensure that we call before we convey in order to reduce demand at the front door. We also have a record level of staffing in our NHS.

Mr Whittle and I have discussed innovation at length on several occasions. The Scottish Government is investing to bring forward increased innovation and adoption of technology in the health service, and increased investment in digital is part of the budget that has been put before the Parliament for the health and social care system.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I think that we would all acknowledge that social care is critical if we are to reduce waiting times at A and E. COSLA has calculated that there is a £15 million funding gap in meeting the cost of delivering the real living wage to adult social care workers. That appears to be because the Scottish Government has taken the baseline as £12.71 per hour rather than £12.60, which is the current level of pay. The shortfall will have a devastating impact on social care services. Will the minister clarify whether that was intentional? If it was not, will he move to correct the error?

Neil Gray: I agree with Jackie Baillie's first point about the importance of social care in ensuring that people receive the right care in the right place at the right time, and ensuring that there is proper flow through the system. That is why the collaborative response and assurance group, which involves COSLA, the Scottish Government and health and social care partnerships, is so important. We all have a part to play in making sure that the system works effectively.

It is important that employers honour their statutory responsibilities and obligations on pay. I have just left a meeting with Councillor Paul Kelly and COSLA in which we discussed that point. Discussions on the issue are on-going.

Hospital Discharges and Use of Non-clinical Spaces

2. Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will introduce standards and regular public reporting on hospital discharges and the use of non-clinical spaces to deliver care. (S6O-05396)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): We do not currently collect national data on the use of non-clinical spaces. Our focus right now is on addressing the underlying causes of the issue, such as high hospital occupancy and poor patient flow. We are driving improvements and we are working closely with local systems to ensure that plans are in place to cope with demand peaks. Through the NHS Scotland operational improvement plan, we are investing £220 million to reduce waiting times, improve hospital flow and minimise delayed discharges.

Regular public reporting on hospital discharges is undertaken and published by Public Health Scotland and can be found on its website.

Sarah Boyack: Given Healthcare Improvement Scotland's damning report on NHS Lothian; the horrific story in the *Edinburgh Evening News* this month about the young father who lost his life after waiting for 13 hours to be seen in accident and emergency; the Royal College of Emergency Medicine noting that, last year, there were around 720,000 days of unnecessary hospital stays in Scotland due to delayed discharges, which is nearly 2,000 years of lost bed capacity that could have helped to relieve exit block and corridor care; and the fact that the RCEM has been raising these issues for years, when is the Scottish Government going to fix this?

Neil Gray: First, I express my heartfelt condolences to the family of Dylan Jones at this unimaginably difficult time. I also make it clear that it is not acceptable that Mr Jones waited so long in the accident and emergency department. I know that investigations are on-going in that regard.

As Ms Boyack will recognise, I have regular engagement with the Royal College of Nursing. I know that this is an area of focus for it and that it wants to see greater data reporting, and I am engaged in discussions about how that could happen practically. However, as I said, my first priority is to address the reasons why this is happening. That is an area of concern for me that goes across the entire system. As Ms Baillie's

question alluded, it requires all parts of the system pulling in the same direction.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): On that point, will the cabinet secretary advise how the Scottish Government will continue to work with integration authorities and partners to support transparent reporting and improvement planning?

Neil Gray: Audit Scotland's report on delayed discharge, which was published in January, recommends that we strengthen national accountability and evidence via the establishment of a single evaluation framework for all delayed discharge initiatives. Furthermore, its report recommends that that be accompanied by an annual publication of outcomes, value for money and impact.

I welcome the report and I share the view that, despite the hard work that this Government has undertaken in partnership with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and partnerships, more must be done to ensure that people receive the care that they need in the right place at the right time. That is why I have asked the collaborative response and assurance group to come together to consider the report's recommendations as a whole and to develop a partnership approach to addressing them.

National Health Service Dentistry (Rural and Island Communities)

3. Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I start by apologising to the chamber, as I will be leaving the session early. I thank you, Presiding Officer, for the latitude to do so, as it enables me to attend a briefing on the A9 by the Cabinet Secretary for Transport.

To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to increase the number of dental practices that are accepting new NHS patients, including how it will monitor the effectiveness of the November 2023 payment reforms in improving access for patients in rural and island communities. (S6O-05397)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): We continue to offer a range of additional financial support for areas where access is particularly challenging, such as rural and island areas. The support includes grants of up to £100,000 for establishing new dental surgeries and allowances of up to £37,500 for new dentists practising in qualifying areas.

In reviewing the impact of reform, we recognised that its benefits have not yet been experienced equally, so we committed to reviewing and refreshing our financial incentives to support improved access for our most rural

communities. We anticipate that revised incentives will be introduced in the 2026-27 financial year.

Rhoda Grant: Despite the Scottish dental access initiative grants, areas such as Argyll and Bute, Orkney and Shetland remain, in effect, closed to new NHS patients. That is the case despite Government data suggesting that more than 95 per cent of the population are registered with an NHS dentist. That clearly does not represent the reality of accessing a dentist.

The situation requires investigation, so what steps will the Scottish Government take to address the problem? Will it consider providing a salaried public dental service to ensure that everyone has access to an NHS dentist?

Jenni Minto: There are public access dental facilities across NHS boards. In fact, I visited one in Coatbridge today, and I was really pleased to meet new dental students who are doing their vocational training with NHS Lanarkshire, in conjunction with the University of Glasgow. That is an important step forward.

Vocational training is also offered in areas such as Dumfries and Galloway, and we are having in-depth discussions with NHS Western Isles about the situation in that health board area.

Dental Practices (Island Communities)

5. **Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting dental practices in island communities to provide sufficient levels of service to ensure that islanders can access the dental care that they are entitled to. (S6O-05399)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): As I intimated in my answer to Ms Grant, the Scottish Government continues to provide a number of financial incentives in qualifying areas to support access. We recognise that the improvements following the 2023 reforms, which have resulted in consistently high levels of dental treatment at a national level, have not been experienced equally across Scotland. That is why we are committed to better supporting rural and island communities through targeted financial incentives to increase local workforces and improve access.

Alasdair Allan: I recently wrote to the Scottish Government about the serious challenges that dental patients face in the Western Isles, particularly in Uist. Recruitment is difficult, and the United Kingdom Government's removal of certain dental roles from the skilled worker visa list has clearly made the situation worse. What recent engagement has the Scottish Government had with the UK Government and NHS Western Isles about reversing that decision and improving islanders' access to dental services?

Jenni Minto: I, too, am deeply concerned about the UK Government's changes to the skilled worker visa list, which have resulted in key dental professions no longer qualifying for sponsorship. The changes will impact practices' ability to recruit qualified staff and reduce access to dental care. Last year, I wrote to the UK Government to urge it to reconsider the changes, and I am very disappointed that my request has been refused.

As I said in response to Ms Grant, my officials are working closely with NHS Western Isles to improve patient access. I understand that it is recruiting new dentists to the area and is seeking locum provision in the interim, pending successful recruitment.

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

I have been told that no body currently holds end-to-end responsibility for practice-level governance of mixed NHS and private dental practices and that responsibility for addressing the issue sits with the Scottish Government. The lack of responsibility placed on any body raises clear concerns about patient safety and clinical accountability. That is particularly important in rural areas, where there are dental deserts, with a complete lack of choice. What is the minister doing to ensure that all mixed dental practices are appropriately regulated?

Jenni Minto: I recognise that specific issue and I have asked my officials to look into it.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): We have seen residents of Bute having to travel by ferry to Paisley to access NHS dentists due to a lack of capacity on that island, and we have seen dental practices in Oban being unable to take on new patients due to staff shortages caused by a lack of housing. This is a holistic issue—it is about housing, transport and healthcare—and it is leading to a situation in which many people are unable to see an NHS dentist.

Does the Government agree that the lack of capacity is a systemic issue? Can salaried posts be created in such places? Will the minister engage with the royal colleges to offer a licensed dental surgery course for international practitioners to convert in Scotland?

Jenni Minto: Paul Sweeney mentioned my constituency in his question, and I recognise the issues. As someone who cares for all of Scotland and who wants to ensure that everyone in Scotland gets good access to dental services, I am really focused on them.

Through a number of areas in the draft Scottish budget, we have increased the dental spend to more than £500 million. It would be helpful if the

member's party would support that budget, to ensure that we can make that investment. We are also increasing the number of dental students in Scotland by 7 per cent this year, to ensure that we have that throughput and pipeline of dentists.

As I indicated in my response to Alasdair Allan, there are certain things that the Scottish Government relies on the UK Government to change. Therefore, you could perhaps use your influence with your colleagues at Westminster to improve visa access for dental therapists coming to Scotland and the exams that international dentists have to sit to allow them to practice in Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind the minister to always speak through the chair. I also ask for slightly more brevity in her responses so that we can get through the supplementary questions.

ADHD and Autism Task Force (Integrated Care)

4. Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how the work of the recently announced ADHD and autism task force will affect integrated care for residents in Strathkelvin and Bearsden, and for people across Scotland. (S6O-05398)

The Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing (Tom Arthur): The children and young people's neurodevelopment task force was set up in partnership with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities last autumn, following review of the implementation of the national neurodevelopmental specification for children and young people.

The specification sets out the standards that all services in Scotland should follow to ensure that children and young people receive the neurodevelopmental support that they need, when they need it. The task force is supporting work to deliver the improvements identified in the review to progress implementation of the specification throughout Scotland.

Rona Mackay: I welcome the work of the task force. However, many of my constituents and other young people are caught in a revolving-door situation whereby they are denied attention deficit hyperactivity disorder assessments until they are substance free, even if their substance use amounts to self-medication. Can the minister confirm that the task force will specifically address the dual-diagnosis barrier and ensure that addiction is never used as a reason to deny or delay an ADHD diagnosis?

Tom Arthur: I thank Rona Mackay for her supplementary question and her on-going interest in the area. To respond directly to her points, although the task force's focus is primarily on

children and young people, and although significant substance-use difficulties are less common in that group, we recognise that there will be a small number for whom that aspect is relevant, including those with ADHD. In such situations, I recognise that clinicians must balance providing timely support with their responsibilities on safe prescribing and the limitations of assessment when active substance use is involved. However, we want every young person to be able to access the support that they need, when they need it, whether it be for neurodivergence issues, substance use issues or both.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will take a couple of supplementaries, as long as they are brief.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): In my south Scotland region, people in the NHS Ayrshire and Arran health board area are stuck waiting too long for ADHD and autistic spectrum disorder assessments. Although my constituents can often access support without the need for formal diagnosis, continued funding cuts for integration joint boards and the long-term decline of council budgets are placing all services under immense pressure. Does the minister recognise that such cuts only limit the amount of support that can be provided through local services? Does the Government have any plans to give people living with autism and ADHD something to be positive about, rather than cuts?

Tom Arthur: I recognise the issues that Carol Mochan has raised. When I announced the establishment of the cross-sector task force, it was aligned with £500,000 of additional investment in this year. The budget that is currently before the Parliament proposes an additional £7 million of investment specifically for neurodevelopmental support services. I encourage members to engage constructively with the budget process so that we can pass that budget and get that money into the system.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I ask members to be briefer, please.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD): Thousands of people are still on waiting lists for assessments. A constituent of mine in East Dunbartonshire has been waiting for four years. That is simply not good enough. The Lib Dems have asked for the Government to focus on that issue, and I am pleased to see that £7.5 million has been allocated in the draft budget. However, all that people want to know is when the waiting list numbers will come down.

Tom Arthur: This is a complex and challenging subject, and I am grateful to the Liberal Democrats for their constructive engagement on it. We are

considering ways in which we can support assessment and diagnosis, but at the heart of our approach there must be a recognition of the significant systemic and societal complexity of the issue. Although diagnosis and assessment are important, we are taking a needs-based approach that recognises that assessment and diagnosis can be part of addressing a person's needs.

I am grateful to the member's colleague, Alex Cole-Hamilton, for his engagement in the work of the cross-party summit, as members from other parties have also done. I look forward to the summit being reconvened before the Parliament dissolves, so that it can discuss those matters further.

Eye Hospital Replacement (Edinburgh)

6. Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what the new infrastructure delivery pipeline means for a replacement eye hospital for Edinburgh. (S6O-05400)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): The refreshed infrastructure delivery pipeline confirms that replacing the Princess Alexandra eye pavilion remains one of the Government's four priority health projects, alongside replacing University hospital Monklands and the Belford hospital in Fort William, and progressing the Barra and Vatersay community campus project in Barra.

Capital funding for the replacement of the eye pavilion has been fully committed, and we await the business case from NHS Lothian. It is usual for the business case process, construction and commissioning to take some time, and there will be greater clarity on the timeline following receipt of the outline business case.

Daniel Johnson: The cabinet secretary will recognise the sensitivity of this matter. The eye pavilion was declared unfit for purpose in 2014. A replacement was committed to in 2018 but was cancelled in 2020, after which there was a U-turn during the 2021 Scottish Parliament election campaign. The next election is almost upon us. Although the development of the eye pavilion is in the pipeline, we do not have a clear timeline. We also know from the Government's spending review that capital spending on health, as a proportion of all capital expenditure, is forecast to decrease. When will we have a clear timeline? Until we have that, people in Edinburgh will remain extremely anxious about the future of the eye pavilion.

Neil Gray: There are a number of points in Mr Johnson's question. I recognise the anxiety that he highlights.

I was grateful for an opportunity, alongside Mr Johnson, Ms Boyack, Mr Macpherson and other

colleagues, to meet some of the eye pavilion's patients, and I recognised their anxiety and the need for progress. That is why I am pleased that we have confirmation of the continued prioritisation of the eye pavilion replacement. As I have said, the capital investment that will be required has been fully committed to over the pipeline. We await the outline business case from NHS Lothian to confirm the rest of the timeline and the project's progress.

Daniel Johnson referred to capital funding. I have to say that the capital funding that is available to us is being squeezed by United Kingdom Government decision making. Perhaps Mr Johnson can refer that concern to his colleagues at Westminster.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): When the cabinet secretary and other colleagues visited the old eye pavilion at my invitation, he would have heard that patient records are currently in paper form. Given the closure of the eye pavilion and the fact that those records had to be stored in halls and distributed around temporary services, will the digitisation of patient records and scans be taken into account in the design of and funding for the new hospital?

Neil Gray: It was remiss of me not to reference the fact that Mr Briggs was at the meeting in the Parliament and that he helped to organise the visit to the eye pavilion. I was grateful to have the opportunity to see it. I will need to get back to Mr Briggs about where we are on the paper records. The Government's general policy is to move to digitised systems and to ensure that we can have digital patient records, digital prescribing and digital applications that allow patients to interact with them. That is the general overview, but I will come back to the member on the specific principles involved in the project.

Rape and Sexual Assault in Hospitals (Protection)

7. Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to protect women from rape and sexual assault in hospitals. (S6O-05401)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): Rape and sexual assault occurring in our hospitals—or anywhere else in our society—is unacceptable. I expect all health boards to uphold their legal duties as employers to keep staff, patients and visitors safe. Everyone has the right to access healthcare or their workplace without fear of assault. The safety of patients and staff remains our absolute priority. That is why a national network has been created to bring together health boards and partner organisations to explore and share approaches to preventing sexual harassment across the national

health service in Scotland. That includes reviewing approaches to data, reporting and training, sharing resources and best practice, and providing support for staff and employers.

Tess White: That is welcome. However, last year, the Women's Rights Network exposed the facts that there have been 276 sexual assaults and 12 rapes in Scottish hospitals over a period of five years. The Patient Safety Commissioner said that those numbers might be underestimates and called for all health boards to consistently record or categorise all incidents of sexual assault and rape. Can the minister confirm that all health boards are doing so? Does he agree that every woman should be entitled to be treated on a single-sex ward?

Neil Gray: There are several elements in Ms White's question. I have met Karen Titchener, the Patient Safety Commissioner, to discuss the issue with her. As I sought to do in my first answer to Ms White, I gave her my reassurance about our response to the Women's Rights Network's report on Scotland.

I expect all health boards to report incidents of sexual assault or harassment, and I expect suspected criminality to be reported to the police. Local boards have a local reporting obligation, on which I have clear expectations.

Ms White will be familiar with the Government's policy on single-sex wards. It remains our policy that we expect boards to provide single-sex spaces where that is possible.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We are over the time limit, but, before we move to question 8, I am minded to take a couple of supplementaries to question 7 as long as they are brief.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Research carried out for the Women's Rights Network's report found that assaults in hospitals were not routinely recorded and that 133 hospitals did not hold data. I hear the minister's answer, but can he give us assurances that, following that report, he had discussions with the Women's Rights Network? What work he is doing to implement its specific recommendations?

Neil Gray: I have not met the Women's Rights Network. The report has been debated in the Parliament, Ms Minto met cross-party MSPs in May, and the chief people officer has discussed the report's findings with NHS Scotland's human resources directors. We are taking those findings incredibly seriously. I have set out several steps that the Government has taken and the obligations that we expect NHS boards to observe as a result. We will continue to monitor progress on that.

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Ind): The human rights of women and girls in Scotland are

not complex. Sex-based risk is real. Women and girls have unique vulnerabilities to sexual violence, including in institutional settings such as hospitals, but also in prisons, toilets and changing rooms.

Protections that are recognised in law should not be optional. The tribunal's judgment in the case of the Darlington nurses was clear that failure to provide single-sex changing rooms violated their dignity—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: A question, please.

Ash Regan: That vulnerability also applies to female patients in mixed-sex hospitals—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Let us hear a question.

Ash Regan: How many rapes of women and girls in Scottish hospitals are acceptable to the Government?

Neil Gray: None is acceptable to the Government. I have set out the steps that it is taking to provide protections for staff and patients who are accessing or delivering services in hospitals across Scotland.

Walk-in General Practitioner Clinics

8. **Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the potential benefits of walk-in general practice clinics compared with other potential service delivery models. (S6O-05402)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): We are committed to making services more accessible for patients. As part of that, we are investing £36 million in walk-in general practitioner services to provide the distinct benefit of allowing patients to see a GP without an appointment.

The funding for those walk-in services is just part of almost £22.5 billion that has been allocated to the health portfolio, including a record £17.6 billion for services in and resources for the national health service.

Our continued investment in the NHS is allowing us to target areas that are experiencing long waits, to reduce backlogs and to get people the appointments and treatments that they need as quickly as possible.

Evelyn Tweed: How have locations for the first walk-in clinics been chosen? Can the cabinet secretary provide more detail on how the clinics might operate?

Neil Gray: Improving access to primary care is the key priority for the Government. We are building on our on-going commitment through the service renewal framework to shift more care into

community settings and make services more accessible for patients.

As part of that approach, we are developing options to improve access to primary care, including the walk-in models, which will be open from Monday to Sunday and so provide more flexibility for patients.

We will develop those proposals first as a pilot model, which will be complementary and will not duplicate current core general practice. We are considering potential locations for those pilot sites, and we will set out further details as those plans develop.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio question time on health and social care. Before we move to the next item of business there will be a brief pause to allow front-bench teams to change places.

Budget 2026-27

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-20487, in the name of Kenneth Gibson, on behalf of the Finance and Public Administration Committee, on the Scottish budget 2026-27.

I advise members that, at present, there is time in hand for interventions, but that might change over the course of the afternoon. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak button.

15:01

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I am delighted to open today's debate on behalf of the Finance and Public Administration Committee. The debate provides an opportunity to discuss the committee's pre-budget reports and how they have influenced the Scottish budget for 2026-27. I thank our clerking team and all the other committees for their hard work.

The FPA committee's recent inquiry into the Scottish budget process recommended piloting new approaches to deliver a more joined-up and interactive debate. We have therefore set a broad theme of fiscal sustainability for today's debate, recognising the pressures on the Scottish budget and individual portfolio areas.

Building on its work to support the debate, the Scottish Parliament information centre has helpfully produced a briefing that identifies common themes across committee pre-budget reports, which I am sure many members will draw on in their contributions. I particularly look forward to hearing about what has worked well and not so well in influencing Government budgetary decisions and about the impact of a parliamentary session-long approach to scrutiny. SPICe suggested that

"Across committees, there is a shared expectation that accountability should extend beyond explanations of spend to include clarity on impact and delivery."

From the Economy and Fair Work Committee's call for clearer performance targets to the Education, Children and Young People Committee's request for the Government to set out its priorities for the college sector and match resources to fund those priorities, it is clear that, through the budget process, committees are robustly holding the Government to account on how spending is achieving outcomes. Further, committees are seeking greater transparency of budgetary information and evidence that data and analysis are driving prioritisation and decision making while supporting effective parliamentary scrutiny.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):

Does Kenneth Gibson agree that, when it comes to transparency, it is not all about complicated stuff? Some of it is about simplicity and getting agencies to report on the same basis; some of it is about getting them to report in a timely manner. Our committee was faced with a situation in which some of the agencies that we were scrutinising had not yet published their annual report, for example. Does he agree that, on transparency, we need to get the basics right as well as addressing the complexity?

Kenneth Gibson: I completely agree with Daniel Johnson. That is very important. Some issues relating to the budget were even raised yesterday at our committee's evidence session; no doubt some will also be raised at next Tuesday's meeting.

Concerns over the clarity of Government policy feature highly in this year's committee reports, with many requesting further work to be carried out to evidence the impact and sustainability of policies such as a growing social security budget. Other reports suggest that overlapping strategies, timelines and documents can hinder effective scrutiny. Across portfolios, committees are looking at whether prioritisation is clearly stated, justified and aligned with the Government's stated objectives. More information is needed on the trade-offs between the spend that the Government is choosing to protect and the impact that that has on other funding areas. I note that the subjects of skills, climate change and social security have frequently been raised.

The FPA committee's pre-budget scrutiny builds on the committee's findings over successive years regarding the Scottish Government's lack of strategic financial planning against a backdrop of fiscal pressures, including demographic trends. Ahead of the committee's pre-budget scrutiny this year, the Scottish Fiscal Commission said:

"the Scottish Government will face significant challenges funding devolved public services in the future, particularly over the next twenty-five years ... because the population in Scotland will age earlier than in the rest of the UK."

In June 2025, the medium-term financial strategy confirmed that the gap between funding and resource spending would rise to £2.6 billion by 2029-30. In the shorter term, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government warned that "difficult choices" would be needed for the 2026-27 Scottish budget.

There were challenging decisions for the United Kingdom Government in its autumn statement, too. The Office for Budget Responsibility noted that

"the scale and array of risks to the UK fiscal outlook remains daunting."

In that context, and drawing on the SFC's April 2025 "Fiscal Sustainability Report", scrutiny was focused on responding to long-term fiscal pressures. After calling for views over the summer, we received 28 submissions, heard evidence in the autumn and published our report in October 2025. To inform our scrutiny, we visited the advanced manufacturing innovation district Scotland—AMIDS—in Paisley, as well as Vilnius in Lithuania to hear about the excellent futures thinking approach there and about policies on economic growth.

I will highlight some key findings, how they have influenced Government budgetary decisions and where commitments have not been forthcoming. One of our main recommendations was for much greater Government emphasis on longer-term financial planning to start mitigating the impact of future trends. We urge the Scottish Government to provide a full response to the SFC's 2025 "Fiscal Sustainability Report", repeating a previous recommendation relating to the SFC's first such report in 2023.

The Government pointed to specific actions, such as its population strategy and Scotland's migration service. However, that falls short of committing to produce a full response. Common to other committees, we ask for clarity in future documents on which areas of spending are being prioritised and deprioritised. The Scottish ministers replied that they recognise the need for clarity, explaining:

"Progress is being made to further improve this in our 2026-27 Scottish Budget, including clear references to how prioritised funding delivers the Scottish Government's four priorities".

We were not convinced that the Scottish Government has provided sufficient evidence of social security sustainability, and we repeated our calls for a review of the fiscal sustainability of social security spending, asking for outcomes arising from universal payments and services to be reviewed. The committee is unclear from the cabinet secretary's response whether the Government will undertake that important work, because the response pointed to a previous report, a literature review and the development of its approach to public value.

On public service reform, we asked for a detailed plan on how the Government will meet its high-level targets on efficiencies and workforce, while minimising the impact on public services. We therefore welcome publication, alongside the Scottish budget, of the integrated public sector pay and workforce policy and of portfolio efficiency and reform plans. We look forward to examining those in detail.

An update was sought on progress with work that had previously been asked for in considering

the potential benefits, risks and costs of introducing a new preventative spend category of expenditure. The Government's work in that area is welcome, including the testing of a budget-tagging method for tracking preventative spend across portfolio areas of the budget, with publication of the results planned for summer 2026. I am sure that it will benefit all committees in the next session if they can clearly see where spending on prevention is occurring and making a difference.

The Government's announcement of an extension to the invest to save fund to support portfolios, public bodies and local government to carry out reform projects is appreciated. Its response is also reassuring in confirming that projects are required to provide six-monthly reports, that outcomes are being monitored and that successes are being shared more widely across the public sector.

Our pre-budget report looked ahead to the Scottish spending review, which was published alongside last week's budget. During a visit to Estonia in 2024, the committee noted the implementation of zero-based budgeting and asked Scottish ministers to reflect on how such an approach could be delivered in Scotland. We recommended that a zero-based budgeting approach should be taken to the Scottish spending review, and we requested in-depth information on the process for preparing, scrutinising and delivering that. In response, the Government said it already adopts

"the principles of zero-based budgeting",

and that spending is reviewed in detail throughout the Scottish budget process. However, the Government has not provided the in-depth review process information that was requested.

With the UK Government's autumn statement being four weeks later than it was in 2024, the timetable for Scottish budget scrutiny has been tighter this year. As a result, our committee agreed to carry out separate sessions on the spending review and the infrastructure delivery plan in February and March, although I expect both of those to be touched on when the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government gives evidence to the committee on Tuesday. I therefore urge the cabinet secretary to commit, in her closing speech, to providing that information on process in time to inform our spending review scrutiny.

The committee previously expressed concerns regarding recent funding settlements for the college sector, given its key role in developing a skilled workforce and in growing the economy. The uplift in funding for the sector in the Scottish budget is therefore encouraging, and I look

forward to hearing more about the sustainability of the further education and higher education sectors from the convener of the Education, Children and Young People Committee later in the debate.

On capital funding, we asked the Government to set out the steps that it will take as part of its investment delivery plan to smooth out the "lumpy" capital budget over time. The Government suggests that

"through careful management of the pipeline, we can ensure a steady stream of investment in the infrastructure needed to deliver ministers' priorities."

It also continues to explore revenue finance models to expand capacity for infrastructure investment.

The spending review confirmed that a new £1.5 billion Scottish Government bond programme for infrastructure will launch in 2026-27 to support capital investment and diversify borrowing beyond the UK national loans fund. Our successor committee will want to keep a close eye on that to ensure value for money and the delivery of successful outcomes.

During our visit to Lithuania, the committee was impressed by the country's approach to collectively developing and implementing Lithuania 2050, which is its national vision for the future. That includes buy-in from all political parties, its Parliament, public bodies and civic society, and a parliamentary committee is monitoring progress towards achieving the agreed national vision. The cabinet secretary told us that she was happy to consider that model, and we have asked for her conclusions by the end of January. We hope that she will look favourably on the approach, and we greatly anticipate receiving her response.

I commend the diligent and effective pre-budget work that has been carried out by committees.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the pre-budget scrutiny undertaken by the Finance and Public Administration Committee, and other parliamentary committees.

15:11

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): I thank the parliamentary committees and their clerks for the important work that they have undertaken in relation to pre-budget scrutiny.

The Government is committed to building broad support across the chamber, and I view the role of pre-budget scrutiny by parliamentary committees as a vital step in that process. Fiscal sustainability is essential to delivering the Government's four priorities—eradicating child poverty, growing the economy, tackling the climate emergency and ensuring high-quality sustainable public services.

A sustainable fiscal position relies on having a clear view of the medium term, and not only the decisions that are taken each year. The medium-term financial strategy sets out the multiyear fiscal outlook and associated risks. This year, for the first time, we have complemented it with a fiscal sustainability delivery plan that sets out our approach to managing longer-term pressures.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I thank the cabinet secretary for taking my intervention. Yesterday, the majority of the Finance and Public Administration Committee's evidence session with the Scottish Fiscal Commission and others dealt with the complexity of the fiscal framework, rather than the budget itself. If I can be cheeky, I will ask two questions. First, does the cabinet secretary have sight of that issue? Secondly, if the people giving evidence to the Finance and Public Administration Committee have an issue with the complexity of the framework, how on earth can other committees deal with it?

Shona Robison: I agree with the general point that Michelle Thomson made. The fiscal framework is incredibly complex and needs to be reformed. That is the ask that we have made of the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. I hope that, during the next parliamentary session, we can build a degree of consensus about the need to reform the fiscal framework and, potentially, to simplify it.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for taking my intervention. There is a case for some measure of reform. However, the last time that was done, parliamentary scrutiny was left very incomplete because of the timing. It was a very awkward situation for the finance committee at the time, because we did not have the facility to scrutinise what had already been decided.

Shona Robison: I have some sympathy with what Liz Smith said. However, what happened was largely outwith my control, because the United Kingdom Government and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury at the time were very insistent on what we would describe as a closed process. It was not ideal, and we were not particularly happy with it either. However, that is a lesson for the future in terms of transparency.

Alongside the MTFs and the fiscal sustainability delivery plan, the Scottish spending review and the infrastructure delivery plan provide the medium-term spending and investment context, giving Parliament greater visibility of strategic priorities. The spending review responds directly to committees' calls for stability.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Shona Robison: I will make some progress and will come back after that.

The spending review responds directly to the Finance and Public Administration Committee's calls for stability, providing multiyear certainty to local government, health boards and social security. It places fiscal sustainability at its core and provides clear links to Government priorities. The portfolio efficiency and reform plans detail how £1.5 billion in cumulative savings will be delivered, freeing up investment in public services. Similarly, the infrastructure delivery pipeline provides sectors with the clarity and confidence that they need for long-term planning by setting out an affordable and deliverable programme of projects alongside future projects. Taken together, those documents strengthen transparency and support more effective scrutiny of long-term choices. I recognise the Finance and Public Administration Committee's call for stronger long-term financial planning, and I hope that those publications demonstrate our commitment to delivering sustainable public finances.

On public service reform, although those documents set out a clear path for future spending in Scotland against a backdrop of constrained resources and rising demand for public services, reform is essential. Our public service reform strategy, which was published in June last year, included an ambitious £1 billion efficiencies target that focuses on reshaping our public sector workforce so that we have the right number of people in the right roles. That is supported by the integrated pay and workforce policy that was published alongside the budget. The publication reflects the fact that 2026-27 is the second year of the three-year public sector pay policy. The Scottish Government recognises pay policy and workforce management as dual drivers of fiscal sustainability.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): On the matter of pay, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has estimated that there is a £15 million funding gap in relation to meeting the cost of delivering the real living wage to adult social care workers. That will mean cuts to the service. Will the cabinet secretary clarify whether that is a result of the wrong baseline being used? If so, will that error be corrected?

Shona Robison: The funding that is provided is for the real living wage. However, we have said that the national minimum wage, which is a statutory requirement, should be met by employers. We are topping up the funding for the real living wage, but the national living wage is the level of pay that they have to provide. I do not think that that is an unreasonable point to make to employers. They have a legal responsibility to pay that.

A managed reduction in head count will be supported, where appropriate, by intelligent automation to protect and improve front-line services. I know that that is an area of interest to the Finance and Public Administration Committee, which is encouraging the Government to go further in maximising opportunities in artificial intelligence.

In addition to the Finance and Public Administration Committee, other committees have been considering how public service reform can support fiscal sustainability. I know that the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee focused on the invest to save fund this year, and I hope that it will welcome the budget's increased investment in it of nearly £30 million. The fund catalyses efficiency, effectiveness and productivity by encouraging projects that will generate savings across the public sector.

We believe that prevention is central to long-term sustainability—a view that the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee shares. Investment now to mitigate the harms of poverty can reduce future demand on acute services and increase participation in the labour market. That is why we are developing a method to identify and track preventive spend through the Scottish budget, with work under way to develop pilots, and first results planned for publication in the summer.

We share the view of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee that prevention plays a critical role in ensuring the long-term sustainability of social security spend. We recognise the risks of increasing demand on public services and believe that investing in a fairer system today can reduce costs in the future. That is why, following the UK Government's removal of the two-child benefit cap, the budget sets out how the Government will spend every penny of the £126 million that was released this year to keep more Scottish children out of poverty.

We believe that the budget also responds to and aligns with many other recommendations that came through in other committees' pre-budget scrutiny. I thank the Education, Children and Young People Committee for welcoming the Government's commitment to engage with the college sector on clarifying future priorities.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The cabinet secretary mentioned the Education, Children and Young People Committee, which I convene, and our views on the discussions with Colleges Scotland. Does she accept that the evidence session that we had today raises serious concerns about how her budget presented the £70 million uplift for Scottish colleges, to the extent that the Scottish Parliament information centre cannot find the figures in the budget document? Today, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills

acknowledged that that was not good enough and said that she will go away and look at it.

Shona Robison: I acknowledge that Jenny Gilruth has today committed to clarifying the £70 million calculation, but let me be clear, as I am sure that Jenny Gilruth was, that the college sector got £694 million in last year's budget and this year, it gets £764 million. That is a £70 million increase in core college funding available to the Scottish Funding Council to distribute across the sector, made up of £61.4 million of resource funding and an extra £8.2 million of capital. It is important to be clear about that, but Jenny Gilruth will absolutely come back to the committee on the point about the presentation.

I hope that members of the Education, Children and Young People Committee will welcome the budget's support for skills through investing £2.4 billion in Scotland's colleges, universities and skills system and providing capital investment of more than £480 million in key growth sectors over the spending review period through our enterprise agencies.

That investment complements the Government's commitment to ensure that post-school provision is responsive to Scotland's strategic skills needs, which is something that I know the Economy and Fair Work Committee has been focusing on. The investment and strategic approach to skills will support economic growth and productivity, as well as tackling poverty, all of which supports fiscal sustainability.

I hope that the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee will welcome the additional £20 million in 2026-27 for the arts and culture sector through the Creative Scotland multiyear funding programme, with future year funding also committed. That investment strengthens financial stability for cultural organisations across the country, as recommended by the committee.

I trust that, equally, the Criminal Justice Committee will welcome the additional funding for justice organisations to support their delivery of essential front-line services, with the Scottish spending review supporting long-term planning and flexibility by providing indicative budgets.

I share the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee's positive reflections on the development of the climate change taxonomy, which outlines a record of more than £5 billion of climate-positive spend in 2026-27.

Similarly, I welcome the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee's activities on human rights budgeting. I am pleased that we have continued to strengthen our approach to equality budgeting. On 19 January, we published our first strategic integrated impact assessment.

I am aware that, although the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee did not hold a pre-budget evidence session, the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands attended the committee today.

As I mentioned at the start of my speech, the Government values the pre-budget scrutiny work that is undertaken by all committees, and I recognise calls to remove challenges to parliamentary scrutiny. There have been unavoidable delays to publications in this parliamentary session, including this year's budget. The compressed timeline has limited the time that is available for scrutiny, and we support the Finance and Public Administration Committee's call for the UK Government to consider devolved impacts when setting fiscal event dates.

We also recognise our responsibility to enable effective scrutiny, and we will continue to improve the timing, quality and transparency of our fiscal publications. I hope that members recognise the substantial reforms that the Scottish Government has introduced to the fiscal and budgetary information that is available to Parliament and the public, including through the introduction of the medium-term financial strategy, the creation of the Scottish Fiscal Commission and, more recently, the publication of the fiscal sustainability delivery plan, as well as the package of fiscal documents that were shared with Parliament last week.

I thank the Finance and Public Administration Committee for recognising our progress, specifically on the level of information that is provided in the latest MTFs. I am proud that the budget represents further progress by baselining more than £750 million of level transfers between portfolios, which is a key area of concern for the Finance and Public Administration Committee. The Government is committed to working with Parliament to improve processes so that debates such as today's enable meaningful cross-chamber engagement and add value.

Craig Hoy: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Shona Robison: In closing—with apologies to Craig Hoy—we believe that the budget responds to calls for clearer prioritisation and better links between spending measures and outcomes by being explicitly driven by the Government's four priorities. The budget also recognises the vital role of fiscal sustainability in delivering our ambitions and provides greater fiscal certainty through the spending review and the infrastructure delivery pipeline.

I am proud that the budget has received positive feedback from stakeholders across all areas of our society, which demonstrates that it is a well-

balanced offer for Scotland. I welcome members' views on the budget and look forward to engaging across the Parliament throughout the remainder of the budget bill process.

15:25

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I am pleased to speak on behalf of the Criminal Justice Committee, and I thank the Finance and Public Administration Committee for bringing the debate to the chamber.

I thank everyone who works in the criminal justice sector for their commitment and support. We very much appreciate the work that they do, and we recognise the challenges that they face day in, day out. I also thank everyone who gave evidence to inform our budget scrutiny, and our clerks and SPICe colleagues for their support in preparing our report.

Justice impacts everyone; therefore, the importance of having an effective, well-functioning justice system in which the public trusts cannot be overstated. The aim of the committee's scrutiny is to focus on how sustainable the fiscal situation is for the justice sector. The committee recognises that there are no easy budgetary choices currently facing the Scottish Government. However, it is clear from the evidence that we have taken that the alarm bells are now ringing across Scotland's criminal justice system.

The justice budget for this year is £4.6 billion. That sounds like a lot of money, and it is, but—for context—it accounts for only 7 per cent of the total Scottish budget. Of the justice budget, 74 per cent, or £3.4 billion, is resource funding, which mostly covers pay and salaries. There is also a significant capital allocation of £643 million. However, taken out of the wider context, those figures mask a significant resource problem, in which, I fear, this budget will start to make only a small dent.

Craig Hoy: Can the convener say whether any stakeholders have expressed the same concerns that we are seeing across a number of portfolios: that the Scottish Government's pay policy already looks like it is going to be breached over the cycle and that, in many areas—including, no doubt, in the Scottish Prison Service—there will have to be a real-terms cut in salaries in year 3? How does the convener think that that will go down with those stakeholders who make representations to our committee?

Audrey Nicoll: While there was a significant amount of discussion on pay and the impact of pay settlements, I do not recall that the specific point that Mr Hoy raises was part of the discussions that we had in our evidence sessions on the budget.

The committee heard from Police Scotland, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, the Scottish Prison Service, the Crown Office and the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service. We also heard from community justice and third sector organisations working in the restorative justice space. They did not hold back when they told us what society demands of them in 2026, set against the impact that flat-cash funding has had on their organisations for the past three years. They painted a bleak picture; indeed, the justice secretary acknowledged that the warnings from the sector are “stark”.

Of the major justice organisations, only the Crown Office will receive a total settlement of the size that it said that it requires this year. In policing, the chief constable told us of the continuing escalating reporting of mental health-related incidents, alongside an alarming rise in social disorder, violence against the police and online-related crime and cybercrimes. She said that

“More than £2.5 billion ... should be invested back into policing”—[*Official Report, Criminal Justice Committee*, 5 November 2025; c 26.]

in Scotland, but that policing's allocation is £1.7 billion for the coming year.

The Scottish Prison Service capital budget is set to grow by £103 million, but that increase is largely to fund the construction of the new HMP Glasgow and HMP Highland.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):

One of the concerns that is often raised with me by the police is that their capacity is very much used up by shortfalls in other public services, which mean, for example, that police officers have to attend accident and emergency departments or deal with missing persons. What lines of inquiry has the committee followed on that, what evidence has it taken and what assessment has it made of those sorts of pressures that the police face?

Audrey Nicoll: I thank Daniel Johnson for his intervention. He makes the point very well. In fact, the Criminal Justice Committee has spent quite a bit of time scrutinising the impact of, for example, mental health-related incidents on policing. Last year, we were told that it was the biggest policing challenge at that time. It is a hard nut to crack, but we will be revisiting it before the end of this parliamentary session.

There may be very limited budget left to address other crucial issues, such as modernisation, maintenance of ageing prisons, digital infrastructure such as drone detection, window grills and body-worn cameras, to name but a few. Severe overcrowding in our prison estate presents a potential challenge flowing from human rights compliance, which, in turn, could increase the

risks of future costs in legal proceedings or compensation. There is also the risk of unrest in our prisons, exacerbated by overcrowding and increasing harm caused by substance use. Embedding new practices arising from new legislation—for example, trauma-informed practice—further shines a light on human rights-based budgeting principles.

As members will be aware, there is deep concern about the state of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, which now has a capital backlog of around £818 million. Last week, we heard about the enormous risk faced by our firefighters and their families from a lack of decontamination and showering facilities in fire stations. Many firefighters return home from their shift with hazardous particulate fire materials on their bodies and clothes.

The committee is particularly concerned about lack of funding to allow the fire service to respond to the public need. Restructuring what remains of it in order to meet new demands cannot obscure the uncomfortable fact that we first need to ask whether the challenges of climate change, flooding and wildfires mean that we need a larger or a different fire service, building towards funding the necessary structure. Members will be aware of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's reform process that is currently under way, the focus of which is to reconfigure the service in line with the challenges that I have mentioned. Our committee will scrutinise the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service again in February on those challenges.

To conclude, we are hearing stark warnings from across the justice sector that further cuts and efficiency savings are not realistic and that new investment is needed. Aside from the funding for the Crown Office, the budget falls short of what the committee was told was needed. I urge the finance secretary to reconsider the spending review's funding of the priorities in the vision for justice programme and the three-year delivery plan, particularly for our police, fire and prison services. I welcome the efforts that have been made in this year's budget settlement, but it is time to respond to the alarm bells from the justice sector, and future budget settlements must do that.

15:33

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):

It is a great pleasure for me to speak on behalf of the Economy and Fair Work Committee. Let me use this more reflective debate to express my thanks to the clerks, and particularly to my fellow committee members. The position that I have assumed was not necessarily expected, but I am very much enjoying it.

I will try to reflect broadly the contributions to the committee. Given that many of my fellow committee members are in the chamber, I invite them to intervene if they think that I could elaborate with further detail.

This is a useful debate, because committees are where we should properly be thinking about fiscal sustainability. I welcome the Finance and Public Administration Committee's innovation in that regard, although I note that its approach to budgeting for foreign travel has become somewhat looser since I left that committee.

Given the scope of the Economy and Fair Work Committee, and the nature of the economy, many of the things that impact the economy fall outwith the economy budget lines. We reflected on that point this morning at committee when the Deputy First Minister was in front of us. Likewise, many of the time periods in which those things will happen fall outwith a single budget year, so it is perhaps not a surprise that the Economy and Fair Work Committee has focused on the impacts beyond single budget lines and on multiyear funding.

One good example of that is the housing budget, which is not just about housing; it supports jobs and helps local economies to grow. We note that the budget line has seen some changes year to year. We welcome the 19 per cent increase in cash terms, but that is only a 3.4 per cent growth rate over the past five years, given the changes that have occurred. Likewise, we note that, over the past five years, the total number of completions across all sectors has declined. We need to see greater focus on that perspective in the budget.

More broadly, the Economy and Fair Work Committee's priorities have focused on supporting business, women's enterprise and skills development. I will make some comments about the enterprise agencies in a moment.

One point to note is that, very often when it comes to economic discussion, the Scottish National Investment Bank is considered something of a catch-all solution to the issues in the economy that members identify. It is welcome that we see a continued increase in capital funding towards the target of £2 billion, but that is a finite total. When we had the Scottish National Investment Bank in front of the committee, one area that we focused on was how the SNIB could achieve the status of a perpetual fund, to allow it to reinvest its capital. If we are going to see sustained and sustainable investment, and see the Scottish National Investment Bank achieve the status that we all want it to achieve, especially given the finite target, we need a vision and we need the plans to be put in place.

On the enterprise agencies, we very much recognise the importance of their work.

Michelle Thomson: Will the member take an intervention?

Daniel Johnson: I am very happy to give way to the deputy convener.

Michelle Thomson: I was a bit slow to get up there, but I want to flip back to the Scottish National Investment Bank. It is important to note that the rules that are applied by the Treasury have now been eased off, so the SNIB can reinvest profits that are made. Daniel Johnson made a point about wider and deeper investment, but it is even wider and deeper still.

Daniel Johnson: The deputy convener makes an excellent point. In a positive step, the committee wrote to the Treasury to ensure that the Scottish National Investment Bank was included in its broad review relating to capital treatment.

We note that the enterprise agencies received something of a tight budget this year, which is not unique. We must consider whether that reflects our broad priorities for the economy. We must also keep challenging the enterprise agencies on whether they are actually focused and taking the right approaches, given their budgets. I think that that starts with reporting. I alluded to that in my intervention on the convener of the Finance and Public Administration Committee. We did not have up-to-date annual reports from each and every one of the agencies—indeed, we struggled to get a clear articulation of how much of their budgets was being spent on running costs, compared with funds that were going out the door, so to speak. We got that information subsequently, having asked for it.

For transparency, we must start with clear and consistent articulation of the fundamentals. Although the enterprise agencies do broadly similar work, they were not consistently reporting their outcomes. We exposed that some of those metrics are based on self-reported measures. There needs to be greater examination of that issue.

Given the changing focus and scope of the enterprise agencies, we were also concerned about the “missing middle” in some areas of the economy when it comes to delivery of support by our enterprise agencies, especially for older, more mature businesses in non-high-growth sectors. Moreover, it is hugely important that we ensure that there is support from our economic agencies for people from all communities who might seek to engage in business, particularly women who are seeking to start and grow businesses.

One key issue that we must highlight is that we received evidence of a huge amount of concern

from businesses about rates. We note the 15 per cent rates relief that is in the budget, but that is against the background of a significant revaluation. It was useful to hear reflections from the Deputy First Minister this morning that more work needs to be done on methodology. The methodologies are far from clear and transparent, and there is an on-going question about the role of the valuation boards, which the Deputy First Minister also reflected on.

As the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government mentioned, we took a good deal of evidence on skills. We reflected on the fact that there is a sense of urgency and need from many industries, and that the agenda for upskilling and reskilling cannot wait. Rather than taking years to reform Skills Development Scotland and other agencies, such reform needs to be urgently brought forward. The changes that are being brought in by technology—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Johnson—

Daniel Johnson: —and demographics are important. I will close there.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you. We have some time in hand, but we need to share it around. I call Clare Haughey to open on behalf of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee.

15:40

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

First and foremost, I offer sincere thanks to all stakeholders who engaged throughout the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee's budget scrutiny process. I thank the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, Neil Gray MSP, and his officials for giving evidence and responding to the committee's subsequent pre-budget report. I also thank the committee clerks for their work in supporting the committee's members. I look forward to welcoming the cabinet secretary to the committee next week to discuss the budget and its implications for health, social care and sport across Scotland.

Members will be aware that the health and social care portfolio is again a budget priority. It remains the largest budget area in the Scottish budget, with total planned spending in 2026-27 coming to £22.5 billion. As is highlighted in the latest SPICe briefing on the Scottish budget, the health and social care portfolio will grow at a faster rate than any other area of the Scottish budget, at 1.5 per cent in real terms, compared with 0.2 per cent across the budget as a whole.

However, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge that the health capital budget remains constrained. According to recently published analysis, it is set to fall by 6.6 per cent in real terms. Despite that, the spending review in 2026 also sets out plans for further increases in health and social care spending. The committee welcomes the inclusion in the spending review of indicative health board budgets for a three-year period. Such indicative budgets have long been requested in previous budget letters and reports, and they should go some way towards helping boards with future planning.

On average, the budgets for health boards in 2026-27 are set to increase by 14.5 per cent. However, some of that increase reflects the fact that budget lines that were previously transferred in-year have now been baselined. That said, the committee nonetheless welcomes the additional funding that has been made available to meet the pay settlements that have been agreed for nurses and doctors. The committee commends the efforts on all sides to reach those settlements and avoid widespread industrial action by resident doctors, unlike in England.

The committee also welcomes the additional funding for primary care and community health services, which has increased by 10.1 per cent. That includes the £36 million that has been allocated for walk-in general practitioner clinics.

Furthermore, the mental health budget is increasing by 11.8 per cent, with further mental health spending now baselined in health board budgets. As members may be aware, the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee's central focus in its pre-budget scrutiny was on mental health spending, and the committee has long raised concerns regarding the transparency of spend in that area. Although the additional investment is welcome, issues regarding transparency and the linking of spending to outcomes remain.

The Scottish Government has stated that NHS boards are expected to spend about £1.5 billion on mental health services in 2025-26. However, it remains impossible to break that down to any granular level of detail on specific services, which is an issue that many stakeholders raised during our pre-budget scrutiny. I am aware that the population health framework and the service renewal framework note that those links will be made clearer. However, I flag that, although the Government's response to the committee states that it is "committed to improving transparency", it has not yet given specific examples of how that will be achieved. To that end, the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee awaits a detailed plan as to how improvements in that area will be implemented, and it stands ready to assist where necessary.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Another interesting point that was raised during the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee's inquiry was the tension between revenue and capital. However, how preventative spend could better achieve goals might be another factor that the Government considers when trying to balance the challenges on expenditure.

Clare Haughey: Mr Sweeney must have been reading my speech, because I am about to come on to the issue of preventative spend.

There are also similar challenges in relation to the social care budget. Although the committee welcomes the additional funding of £471 million that is identified in the budget, it remains difficult to get an overall picture of planned social care spending for 2026-27.

There is some clarity on future budgets for health boards, but the same multiyear planning is not set out for social care, which the committee and stakeholders have been highlighting as an issue for some time.

Jackie Baillie: Does the member accept that the £400 million-plus figure that she quoted for social care will be spent entirely on salaries, and that there is very little for services? COSLA has estimated that it needs £750 million to ensure that social care continues to be provided in our communities.

Clare Haughey: I wish that the member had been as vociferous in her complaints about the increases to employer national insurance contributions that her Westminster colleagues have imposed on social care providers, which have caused huge issues across health and social care.

Similarly, the committee argued in its pre-budget report that there needs to be a clearer definition of what constitutes preventative spend and that the level of resources that are currently assigned to preventative activities needs to be identified. Although that information has not been provided, the committee nonetheless welcomes the response from the Government and the references to on-going work in that area to tag spending and enable tracking, and looks forward to seeing the initial outputs of that work.

On preventative spend, the committee welcomes the strong uplift for sportscotland and the active, healthy lives budget line, with planned spending in those areas set to double in 2026-27. The importance of physical activity has been a common theme throughout the committee's work during this session of Parliament, and I cannot overstate the positive impact that it has on individuals of all age groups, from both a physical health and a mental health point of view.

That said, the committee seeks reassurance as to whether those levels of spending will be maintained in 2026-27. With major sporting events happening this year, such as Glasgow hosting the Commonwealth games and Scotland reaching the men's FIFA world cup finals, it is vital that we harness the momentum that the events will bring and ensure that there continues to be adequate funding for sport and physical activity for future generations.

The additional investment for the health and social care portfolio that is contained in the budget is most welcome, particularly in the light of the immense challenges that the sector faces. However, it remains of paramount importance that we can efficiently track spending in those areas. It is the view of the committee and, I believe, across the chamber that there is more to do to improve transparency in spending decisions. It is only by making such progress that we can make the best use of the budget to ultimately improve the health and wellbeing of the people of Scotland.

15:48

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on behalf of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee. Unfortunately, as the cabinet secretary said, our committee has not carried out pre-budget scrutiny this year due to time pressures on our work programme. However, we met the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands this morning.

I plan to focus my remarks on some of the key budget announcements in the rural affairs portfolio, beginning with some of the headline figures. The rural affairs portfolio settlement is £1.2 billion in this year's draft budget. According to independent analysis that was carried out by SPICe, that represents a 3.5 per cent real-terms cut compared with the 2025-26 autumn budget revision. That cut follows previous cuts to the portfolio's funding in last year's budget.

Although I understand why the Scottish Government is keen to emphasise the importance of fiscal sustainability when making its decisions on the budget, I am concerned that, when budgets are tight, the Government seems to go to this portfolio first in order to find savings. For at least the previous two budgets, it has been the only portfolio to see a real-terms reduction in budget, despite increasing pressure on rural areas to deliver on the Scottish Government's climate and biodiversity targets.

I will turn to some of the specific budget lines. The SPICe budget briefing notes that the funding allocations for major agricultural payment schemes continue to be broadly frozen in cash

terms. The £26 million in capital funding for the agricultural modernisation fund is a welcome development, and I look forward to hearing more about future spending plans for that funding. However, it is important to note that that is not additional funding; the £26 million that was taken from the ring-fenced budget in previous years is being returned.

A more welcome development in the draft budget is the increase in funding for the Crofting Commission. In its stage 1 report on the Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill, the committee made it clear that an adequately resourced Crofting Commission, capable of effectively enforcing crofters' duties, is essential to a healthy, thriving and sustainable crofting community. The additional funding will go some way towards ensuring that the commission has the tools to deliver on that promise.

On fisheries, the draft budget provides a settlement of £79.3 million for the marine directorate. That is the same settlement, in cash terms, as was provided last year, so that equates to a £1.7 million decrease in real terms. That means that the marine directorate's budget has decreased in real terms for the third consecutive year.

Last year, the committee focused our pre-budget scrutiny on the marine directorate. As part of that work, we visited the directorate's Aberdeen laboratories. The committee was concerned by the poor condition of the facilities and the impact that that was having on the scientists' ability to carry out important science to inform fisheries management. We recommended that the Scottish Government prioritise a long-term solution to enable the restoration and modernisation of the facilities as a matter of urgency. Given that the site is in much need of upgrades and replacements and that there is a budget commitment to fisheries modernisation, it is disappointing that the marine directorate's capital budget has been cut by £900,000 in real terms.

We were informed this morning that some capital work will be funded through the Scottish Government's capital budget. Although there are no suggestions that it is a deliberate policy, there continues to be concern about the transparency of budget spending in relation to the marine directorate. I note that the Scottish Government has increased the marine fund Scotland by £2.1 million, which it says will support the delivery of outcomes for Scotland's blue economy vision.

On forestry, the draft budget includes an increase in spending on woodland creation to support efforts to reduce carbon emissions in the land-use sector. The committee has heard consistently throughout our scrutiny of the draft climate change plan that public funding in the

forestry sector could, if it is deployed effectively, help to crowd in additional private investment in the workforce and in the equipment that Scotland needs to achieve our climate and biodiversity goals. However, the budget for woodland creation still falls short of the budget in 2023-24, before large cuts were made the following year.

The draft budget allocates £7.1 million for support for our island communities, which represents a 13 per cent cut in funding compared with the funding that was provided in the 2025-26 autumn budget revision.

Shona Robison: It is important to recognise that, alongside the islands plan, there will be three accelerator deals for Shetland, Orkney and the Western Isles. Those deals, which involve our supporting their borrowing capacity, have the potential to lever in hundreds of millions of pounds, so they must be considered alongside the money in the islands plan.

Finlay Carson: The 13 per cent cut includes a reduction in capital funding for both carbon-neutral islands and islands plan budgets. I am unclear how those cuts will help to deliver the ambitious commitments that the Scottish Government has made to our island communities, but I take on board what the cabinet secretary has said.

I think that it is fair to say that this year's draft budget brings both good and bad news for people who live and work in rural communities. I hope that the Scottish Government will reflect on what I have said as the budget process continues, because I am sure that I speak for all committee members when I say that we want the Scottish Government to deliver a budget that is fit for purpose and enables our rural communities to thrive and prosper.

15:54

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate as the chair of the Scottish Commission for Public Audit.

One of the commission's main roles is to scrutinise Audit Scotland's budget proposals and report to the Parliament on them. On Monday, we published our report on Audit Scotland's budget proposal for 2026-27. Audit Scotland's budget comes from two sources. It estimates that the fees that it charges to audited bodies will provide 62 per cent of its budget for 2026-27, and the remaining 38 per cent, which amounts to £16,207,000, will require to be funded from the Scottish consolidated fund.

Although that represents an 8.2 per cent increase in the funding required from the Scottish consolidated fund, equating to an additional

£1,224,000, the budget proposal for 2026-27 includes one-off costs of £878,000 related to a project to modernise the approach to public audit. The underlying and recurring increase in funding from the Scottish consolidated fund is therefore £346,000, or 2.6 per cent. The budget will support the delivery of audits of around 230 public bodies, 30 performance audits and continued investment in audit modernisation.

Audit Scotland said that its budget proposal has been prepared in the context of significant cost pressures and operational risks. It underlined, among other risks, future audit procurement costs and a pay award yet to be agreed. We have asked to be kept updated should any of those risks materialise.

The overarching theme of the debate is fiscal sustainability. Throughout this parliamentary session, the commission's enhanced scrutiny of Audit Scotland's budget proposals has been central to strengthening the fiscal transparency required for sustainable public finances. By seeking greater clarity on Covid-19-related funding, proposed audit fee increases and the resources allocated to support the Accounts Commission, we have ensured that budget proposals contain the level of detail needed to assess their long-term affordability and sustainability.

Across the session, we also asked Audit Scotland for greater financial planning to allow year-on-year comparison. A detailed business case was sought for the audit modernisation project to ensure that investment decisions were grounded in evidence of long-term value. In addition, we strengthened our challenge function by holding extra informal meetings to explore financial assumptions in greater depth. Those actions have ensured that Audit Scotland has generated the comprehensive financial information needed to support informed judgments about fiscal sustainability.

The commission also sought clearer evidence on how efficiency savings are achieved and underspends avoided. Audit Scotland identified in the 2026-27 budget £2,135,000 in efficiency savings. Those savings represent 5.2 per cent of its overall budget and arise from a range of measures, including a 5 per cent vacancy factor and reductions in staffing numbers and property costs. The commission has rightly explored whether those savings contribute to fiscal sustainability, given that the largest elements, such as the vacancy factor and reductions in staffing, are non-recurring. Non-recurring savings can help to address short-term budget pressures, but they do not strengthen the underlying financial position. That creates a challenge, as achieving savings of a similar scale in future years may

require new measures. Of the £2,135,000 in efficiency savings identified, only the reduction in property costs of £220,000 is recurring, meaning that just a small proportion of the savings improves the baseline financial position year on year.

In our report, we noted that that is a challenge faced across the public sector. We also recognised that the public sector reform process may make delivering public audit more challenging for Audit Scotland—for example, if there are delays in public bodies' readiness to be audited, or if public bodies are merged, created or closed.

The final allocation rests with the Scottish Government, but I highlight our conclusion that we are, on balance, content with Audit Scotland's 2026-27 budget proposal of £16,207,000.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Clare Adamson, who joins us remotely.

15:58

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Thank you very much, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sorry to interrupt, Ms Adamson, but could you please put your camera on?

Thank you. Please continue.

Clare Adamson: My apologies, Presiding Officer.

I welcome the opportunity to speak today on behalf of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee. The committee adopted a cumulative approach to budget scrutiny over session 6. Consequently, our most recent budget report examines the current fiscal context, as well as evidence that we have received throughout the session. We have heard from the culture sector about the perfect storm of the impacts of Covid, budget pressures and reduced income, while participation and operating costs have also been challenging to the sector. On behalf of the committee, I extend my thanks to all those who provided evidence for their time and contributions, and to the clerks and SPICe for their support.

Before I proceed, I note that there was some disappointment that the Scottish Government's response to the committee's report was not received until after 6 o'clock last night, and that many of the questions that were asked in our pre-budget scrutiny have not as yet been answered. We will explore those issues further with the Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture when we take evidence from him on the budget in a couple of weeks.

On the fiscal context for the culture and heritage sector, as is outlined in our report, we continue to

welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to increase funding for the sector by £100 million per year by 2028-29. As part of that commitment, culture funding was expected to increase by £20 million in 2026-27, and I note that that uplift had been included in the draft budget that was published earlier this month. I assure the cabinet secretary that that is welcome. However, despite additional funding, the culture sector remains under significant pressure. Witnesses have highlighted to the committee that the uplift in culture spend may, to some degree, be being used to help the sector to meet the on-going pressures of increased costs and falling participation, rather than going towards generating improved cultural outcomes.

Our report asked that COSLA and the Scottish Government respond to concerns that increased funding for the sector

“may be being offset by funding reductions by local government.”

Additionally, we requested that the Scottish Government respond to concerns about disparities in the provision of cultural services across Scotland. COSLA has stated that the increased culture budget has not benefited local authorities. It noted that local government has seen reduced funding and highlighted that there are increasing levels of ring-fenced and directed funding.

That makes it difficult to see how our ask for plans to support greater collaboration between partnerships across the Government and local authorities can be met. The Government did not respond to our request for it to set out how issues around local government culture funding and potential disparities in culture provision and access might be addressed.

We have asked the Scottish Government how it is addressing the skills shortages that are being faced by the historic environment sector in particular. We hope that that can be addressed in collaboration with the education system and the revision to apprenticeships that was contained in the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill, which was passed yesterday.

We would also like further information about how the upcoming spending review can consider a capital programme for the heritage sector to support the upkeep of cultural assets.

Throughout session 6, the committee has heard calls for greater provision of multiyear funding. We welcome the expansion of Creative Scotland's multiyear funding programme, recognising the improved stability and confidence that that provides to the organisations that it supports. Given the programme's progress and success, witnesses emphasised that multiyear funding

should be expanded to a greater variety of cultural organisations. We have pressed the Scottish Government on its 2021 commitment and are hoping that the number of three-year funding settlements for directly funded organisations can increase.

We had concerns around strategic approaches to funding decisions. We welcome the Scottish Government's response to our report, which recognises on-going calls for consideration and transparency around the strategic use of additional funding. We await its response to our request to set out what progress has been made towards adopting a strategic approach to funding over session 6.

Our report included several additional questions and recommendations to the Scottish Government in the area of culture. We need an urgent update on the delivery of the culture strategy action plan and an on-going review of the culture sector and Creative Scotland.

We also would like a clear set of metrics to assess the impact of cultural spend. We suggested that the on-going review of the national performance framework could offer an opportunity to increase budget alignment, particularly across portfolios, to achieve a more strategic approach to meeting goals.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Could you bring your remarks to a conclusion, Ms Adamson?

Clare Adamson: I will do, Presiding Officer. My apologies—it is difficult to time my speech at home.

We will take up several outstanding questions with the cabinet secretary. However, we welcome the progress towards the £100 million of additional funding for the culture sector, as delivered in the draft budget.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Edward Mountain to speak on behalf of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee.

16:06

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I will not spend much of my speech talking about this or that line of spending in the net zero, energy and transport portfolios or about this year's direction of travel. There will be an opportunity for the committee to consider those matters when it takes evidence from the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport next month. At those sessions, the committee will jointly consider the 2026-27 budget and the draft climate change plan—it makes sense to do so, because it is clear that the committee must read across those documents, from one to the other.

I will reflect on the extent to which what we might call net zero thinking has been fully embedded in the budget-setting process. Let us be clear that public confidence about Scotland's net zero momentum and direction of travel has clearly been dented in this parliamentary session. One way for the Scottish Government to restore that confidence is for it to more convincingly show its workings on how it expects to achieve its spending decisions to drive emissions downwards.

The Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee's pre-budget representations were about the joint budget review, which was set up at the end of the previous session of Parliament to improve budget information on climate change and increase alignment between budgets and the climate change plan.

I do not need to remind everyone—but I will, because people might have forgotten—that that work had three main strands. The first was to include in each annual budget a climate change assessment narrative—an overview of the impact of spending decisions on the climate. That was an opportunity for the Government to go beyond the narrow confines of the balance sheet and to explain, for example, how second-order outcomes of the headline spend could have an impact on emissions and on the private finance that is needed for particular policies and projects that are linked to net zero—not in a vague and aspirational way, but by setting out concrete actions and any relevant modelling or estimates.

The second strand was a so-called taxonomy approach for budget spend lines, which the cabinet secretary mentioned, that would set out how those spend lines do or do not align with emissions reduction goals. The Scottish Government embarked on that approach in this session with a rather simple traffic light system, but it has undertaken to “deepen”—its word—the taxonomy and to expand its coverage to make it more useful.

The third strand was the development of a net zero assessment—a process to evaluate the climate impact of policies and their associated budgets early in the policy development stage.

In other words, I take that process to be somewhere upstream of budget setting and a process that might even, in some cases, filter out projects or policies that are simply too costly—to borrow a word from finance—with regard to their carbon output to go anywhere near the final budget.

In that connection, I remind the Parliament that what we are discussing today is not the only budget that the Parliament has to monitor. We are expressly bound to a carbon budget, with a spending limit of no more than 175 million tonnes

of CO₂ between 1 January this year and the end of 2031.

Turning back to the budget that we are debating, the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee has not yet collectively considered the 2026-27 offering, so I will be careful when I express a view. I simply say that, although the committee welcomes the start that the Scottish Government has made during this parliamentary session on implementing the three key recommendations of the joint budget review, the momentum needs to be kept up. I am not sure that I have seen much momentum this year on those three strands.

My concern is compounded by what I see as a lack of rigour in how the draft climate change plan sets out financial costs and benefits. I stress that that is a personal view, not a committee view, but it is shared by some of the experts we have heard from. For instance, the Auditor General found the costs in the draft climate change plan to be vague. He said that the plan

“includes limited information on how the cost estimates were calculated and what assumptions underpin them, and it recognises that there is significant uncertainty associated with many of the estimates.”

Michelle Thomson: Will the member take an intervention?

Edward Mountain: Will I get my time back if I give way, Deputy Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will give you some of the time back.

Michelle Thomson: At both of the committees that I sit on, I have mentioned several times the Scottish Fiscal Commission's fiscal sustainability perspectives report. The reason that I have often asked about that is to check the knowledge and understanding of it. Fundamentally, that report makes it clear that Scotland cannot get to net zero because of the anticipated finance under the terms of the current fiscal framework and because of the critical dependency on fiscal transfers. Is your committee aware of that report from a financial perspective?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Edward Mountain: The Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee certainly considers all the costs, and we have considered the implications. The climate change plan has been drawn up by the Scottish Government, which has put some fairly opaque costings and savings in it. It is for us to drill down into those, and I am sure that we will bear in mind the point that the member made.

This debate is about fiscal sustainability, but I will end by talking about parliamentary sustainability, by which I mean the doggedness

that the Parliament needs in order to see things through to the end. It means holding on to institutional memory while individual parliamentarians come and go. I will not be here in May, but others who are listening to the debate will be. Whoever forms the next Government, it will be up to the members of the next Scottish Parliament to hold them to account on delivery of the joint budget review on climate change. There is still quite a way to go on that.

16:13

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): I am pleased to contribute on behalf of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee to the debate on the Scottish Government's budget for 2026-27. I thank all those who engaged with our pre-budget consultation and provided oral evidence, and I thank the cabinet secretary for responding to our report. I also thank the clerks to the committee for their continued support throughout the process.

The Social Justice and Social Security Committee considered the affordability of Scotland's social security system, the Scottish Government's plans to fund the level of spending that it had forecast, the benefits of the increase in social security spending and how that compares with other budget priorities. We also considered whether specific benefits, such as the Scottish child payment and the adult disability payment, could be adapted. The cabinet secretary has confirmed the reduction in the additional amount that the Scottish Government will need to invest in social security assistance over and above the relevant block grant adjustments.

The cabinet secretary does not believe that spending levels for social security are unsustainable. However, the Fraser of Allander Institute told us that, despite that, the nature of social security expenditure still means that it can be less predictable and more volatile than other forms of spend.

We heard that, as benefits are demand led, the only ways to reduce costs are by limiting eligibility or by reducing the need for social security in the first place. That could be achieved by improving people's health and wellbeing, for example. The Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland—the ALLIANCE—suggested Scotland's health and population framework as a potential avenue for that.

Both the Scottish child payment and the adult disability payment were discussed extensively by stakeholders, given the proportion of spend that they account for, as well as the impacts that those payments have on people's lives.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): We were told at the Finance and Public Administration Committee yesterday that the proportion of people who are being accepted for claims has in fact reduced. It used to be about half; now it is only about a third. Is that having an impact on the costs?

Collette Stevenson: Judging from the evidence that we have taken at the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, there is still insufficient data being provided. It is timely that Social Security Scotland representatives are attending our committee meeting tomorrow, so we will follow up on that information to see how effective the payments are in terms of people's lives. I thank John Mason for that.

The forecast increase in social security payments for carers was described as significant. The Scottish child payment is widely supported among stakeholders for the role that it plays in reducing child poverty. We note the announcement that the payment will be increased to £40 for babies under the age of one from 2027-28. We also heard that the Scottish Government would have increased flexibility over the design of the payment if it were to become a form of childhood assistance as opposed to a top-up to universal credit. We asked the Scottish Government what scope there is for that, and we welcome the cabinet secretary's confirmation that the Scottish Government is committed to reviewing the legislative footing on which the Scottish child payment is based.

We considered how the Scottish Government intends to spend the money that was allocated to mitigating the two-child limit, given that the UK Government has now withdrawn that policy. We welcome the confirmation from the cabinet secretary that the money will be invested in other initiatives to tackle poverty, including through additional funding for the Scottish welfare fund, Children First and Aberlour Children's Charity, alongside a £49 million boost to the tackling child poverty fund.

We heard that crucial data that could inform policy for adult disability payment is lacking. Edel Harris OBE, chair of the independent review of adult disability payment, told us that there is not enough information on the impact of ADP on people's lives, nor is there enough data on the number of disabled people in Scotland.

Data on what is driving demand for adult disability payment is vital to inform future spending. We are therefore pleased that the Scottish Government has confirmed that it will publish information on that by the end of next month. The impact of giving people cash payments versus improving public service provision needs to be properly evaluated if money

is to be spent as effectively as possible. We welcome the Scottish Government's confirmation that more analysis is needed and that that will be considered during the development of the third tackling child poverty delivery plan.

We also heard evidence about specific changes that could be made to improve people's circumstances. Increased funding for advice services and improving the take-up of existing benefits were mentioned, especially in relation to pension credit, which can be a passport to other devolved support.

The relationship between universal and targeted benefits was raised in evidence, and I note the cabinet secretary's confirmation that the Scottish Government has no plans to remove any benefits or entitlements from people.

We were pleased to hear that the Scottish Government's chief statistician is working with the UK data-sharing team to streamline data-sharing processes in order to improve access to data about Scotland.

16:20

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I am pleased to take part in the debate on behalf of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee.

Public service reform forms the first pillar of the fiscal sustainability delivery plan, and it was the focus of the committee's pre-budget scrutiny. In particular, we looked at the invest to save fund, a £30 million pot that is aimed at supporting public sector efficiency projects.

During the conclusion to my speech in the debate last year, I noted that the committee agreed on the urgent need for transformational change in councils and expressed hope that, when I stood up today, I would be able to reflect on concrete evidence of a decisive shift towards preventing poor outcomes instead of having to deal with their consequences.

I welcomed the Scottish Government's recognition of the need for that change. It had the opportunity to demonstrate that further when the public service reform strategy was published in June 2025. The strategy sets out commitments to changing the system of public services, based on three principles: prevention, joined-up services and efficiencies.

Local government has taken an active role in driving change. There are various organisations, professional networks and initiatives to support individual councils, and we were pleased to hear of many great examples of transformation projects and collaboration.

We called on the Scottish Government to address potential barriers to such projects, including workforce capacity, morale, resilience, leadership and lack of data. Two of the most prominent barriers were the lack of multiyear settlements and the high cost of initial action, which the invest to save fund sought to address.

Multiyear funding certainty is a long-held ambition of local government. The Scottish spending review, which was published alongside the Scottish budget, provides resource spending plans up to 2028-29 and capital spending plans up to 2029-30. Although that is welcome, it suggests that there will not be increases in local authority funding across the next three years. However, the cabinet secretary told the committee yesterday that we could expect the initial estimates in the spending review to change.

We welcomed the invest to save funding and recommended that the Scottish Government consider increasing the fund. Although the fiscal sustainability delivery plan recognises that

"releasing efficiencies often requires initial investment",

the invest to save fund remains at £30 million in this year's budget.

Our recommendation of the continuation and extension of the fund was in the context of some of the other suggested improvements. We thought that the fund could better incentivise collaboration between different parts of the public sector, and we asked the Scottish Government to consider how the fund could be accessed across local authorities without a bidding process. The response from the Scottish Government to our letter comments on our recommendation that the funding should continue, but not on our suggestions for improvement. I hope that, in her concluding remarks, the cabinet secretary will take the opportunity to provide the Scottish Government's view on those proposals.

I will move on to funding for local government more generally. Although there has been real-terms growth in local government budget settlements in recent years, the overall financial situation of local government looks challenging. A primary factor is the significant increase in demand, particularly in areas of education and social care.

Although there has been a real-terms increase in overall revenue funding for local authorities, it falls short—by almost £1 billion—of what COSLA suggested was required. The capital allocation to local government is also reduced in the budget.

That leads me to how COSLA and the Scottish Government worked together in the development of the budget. Last year, I set out that it was pleasing to see evidence of a broader consensus

between the spheres of government on the budget.

The much-anticipated fiscal framework between COSLA and the Scottish Government was published in October and, in evidence to us, COSLA was broadly positive about progress on that.

We can see from the recent budget a continuing reduction in the use of ring fencing by the Scottish Government. Around 7 per cent of the total revenue allocation to local government next year will be either ring fenced or transferred in-year from other portfolios. That is down from 18 per cent before the Verity house agreement was signed.

In conclusion, I will return to whether I was right to be optimistic in my concluding remarks last year. As I said, the fiscal sustainability delivery plan identifies that

“releasing efficiencies often requires initial investment”.

The continuation of the invest to save fund can, I hope, encourage and support continued transformation in local government. However, there is room for improvement. Access to that funding must be more flexible to suit the needs of local government. It is not yet clear whether the current funding that is provided to local authorities, or that is available through the invest to save fund, will allow them to realise ambitions for transformation and the public service reform strategy.

16:25

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am speaking on behalf of the Education, Children and Young People Committee, and I thank the committee members, the clerks, SPICe and our stakeholders, who all got involved in pre-budget scrutiny.

However, what I will say next I say not as convener of the committee, but as someone who is now sitting through a budget debate as a convener for the second time: it does not work. In my humble opinion, this is not a good use of parliamentary time. Ross Greer agreed with that last year—I do not know whether that is the reason why he is not here this year. He said, as a Finance and Public Administration Committee member, that it did not really work.

I accept that Mr Gibson and the committee have tried to change the process slightly by having a focus on fiscal sustainability, but I do not honestly think that anyone watching this debate would think that it has been a particularly good use—

Craig Hoy: No one is watching.

Douglas Ross: Yes—as Mr Hoy says, probably no one is watching.

Liz Smith: Would Mr Ross agree that one area where we could improve things would be to have a finance bill process, whereby everybody who wanted to pitch into budget discussions could do so?

Douglas Ross: I agree with that suggestion. I also have another alternative, which I was just thinking about as I sat here, not particularly motivated by the debate. Is there an opportunity for either the Finance and Public Administration Committee or the Conveners Group to arrange for all the committee conveners to question the finance secretary, as we do with the First Minister and as the committee members will have questioned her?

The point is that this process is not working. We are having six-minute speeches from every committee and we are not really having a debate. We have an opening speech from the cabinet secretary and a closing speech from the minister in which, if we are lucky, they might touch on one or two points that we have made.

Michelle Thomson: Will the member take an intervention?

Douglas Ross: I have not even got to the script that my clerks wrote for me; my point is that, in my personal view, this is not working.

Michelle Thomson: I could not agree more. I completely agree with the statements that you are making, and I am sure that they will be picked up elsewhere. However, one important consideration is that the Finance and Public Administration Committee has worked very hard to encourage all the other committees to look carefully and closely at finance. We have found that people are almost saying, “It has nothing to do with us.” A case in point is that your committee was not sighted on a very important fiscal report. Of course, I appreciate that that will be up to the clerks, but I would like the member to reflect on that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Again, always speak through the chair.

Douglas Ross: I will reflect on it, but I am in a slightly different position. In Mr Greer and Mr Mason, I have had two members of my committee who were also assiduous members of the Finance and Public Administration Committee—I now have just one, as Mr Greer has left that committee. As convener, I certainly felt that that helped, because we had robust questioning on the finance elements of many of the issues that came forward.

Kenneth Gibson: Will the member take an intervention?

Douglas Ross: I am two and a half minutes in and I have not even started my prepared speech yet, but I will give way to Mr Gibson.

Kenneth Gibson: I will try to be brief. One of the things that the Finance and Public Administration Committee has agreed and got some buy-in from the Parliament on is the idea of having a programme of fiscal literacy, not just for new MSPs but for all MSPs and ministers in the next session of Parliament. Do you feel that that would be beneficial?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Again, please speak through the chair.

Douglas Ross: I absolutely do feel that it would be beneficial, and that allows me to get into the points that I am keen to raise on behalf of the committee.

For our pre-budget scrutiny, we focused on the long-term sustainability of funding for colleges and universities. The challenges that those sectors face are significant, and it is imperative that we act decisively to secure their future.

The budget scrutiny for this year is built on themes that are similar to those that we have raised in previous years. That shows that this is an on-going problem. In fact, for our colleges and universities, the problem is only getting worse and more acute.

I will begin with colleges—although perhaps I should say that I will end with colleges, because I have taken up my time on other things. Throughout this parliamentary session, the committee has focused to a considerable extent on colleges, and we have repeatedly raised concerns about the extent and impact of the financial challenges that colleges are facing. Many of our colleges are having to deal with immense financial pressures, with a 20 per cent real-terms reduction in funding between 2021-22 and 2025-26.

The SFC said in a 2025 report that, by 2027-28, the sector is expected to face a negative cash balance, with 12 colleges forecasting cash deficits. The report concluded:

“These forecasts show that most colleges are not sustainable.”

That is a stark warning that the Parliament, this Government and future Governments cannot ignore.

In relation to Mr Gibson’s point about additional training, be it for MSPs or for Government, I want to highlight—as I think Mr Mason might also do in his remarks—the point that I made in my intervention on the finance secretary. On budget day, the finance secretary announced a 10 per cent increase in funding for colleges, which is

equivalent to an extra £70 million in 2026-27. However, that specific figure simply cannot be replicated from any of the published budget figures, which leads to considerable confusion.

The Scottish Government provided additional information to SPICe, setting out that the 10 per cent increase is, in fact, based on excluding capital funding for the Dunfermline learning campus—a spend of £30.3 million in 2025-26, falling to £1.1 million in 2026-27. That is important, because individual capital projects are usually included in the net college capital total.

At today’s committee, our member who is also on the Finance and Public Administration Committee rigorously questioned the education secretary and officials. Jenny Gilruth acknowledged that the figure of a £70 million increase cannot be found in the published budget and said that the Scottish Government needs to reflect on that and on how it communicates any extra funding that it puts in as a Government. She undertook to write to the committee following her evidence.

Earlier, in responding to my intervention, the finance secretary said that it is really important to be clear. It is, because there is a lack of clarity. Our committee took up some of our time today in our budget scrutiny trying to understand a point that the Government thinks is clear when it absolutely is not clear in the budget documents.

I was going to say a lot more on colleges and universities, but I will use that one example as a plea to the Government to make the budget clear and readable and absolutely obvious to everyone who looks at it. If SPICe cannot work something out and the Scottish Government is struggling, and if John Mason has a problem, we should all have a problem. If he cannot find a figure in a budget document, it is almost certainly not there.

The committee has looked at considerable issues over the past few months and years, and we will continue to look at them over the remaining weeks and months of this parliamentary session. I welcome the opportunity to raise those issues in the chamber today, but I think that, going forward, there might be alternative ways of doing so.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate. I advise members that we have exhausted all the time that we had in hand, so I will have to be pretty strict with the speaking time allocations, which are of four minutes during the open debate.

16:32

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I thank Douglas Ross for bringing the debate alive. I will try to keep it up, even though we are now back

to the Finance and Public Administration Committee.

We have long laboured the point that we need a sustainable fiscal environment in Scotland, and we have consistently said that we need better-quality data, combined with more transparency from Government. That point came through loud and clear yesterday in our session with the Scottish Fiscal Commission. We also heard evidence that the Scottish Government is operating in an environment in which the lack of consideration from the UK Government meant that the Scottish Government was given little time to incorporate UK budgetary decisions into its process. We are at this point now because of the late UK Government budget.

We also have to operate within a UK tax system that is hugely complicated—we heard yesterday that there are more than 1,000 tax reliefs—and we have heard much comment in the debate today that we are living with a fiscal framework that is, frankly, not fit for purpose. I do not say that as a political statement. When I listen to what is happening in the process and hear about the additional spend and effort that are required to get to understanding and effective monitoring and measuring of spend, I know that we have a problem.

I will make a few remarks on productivity. We know that the recent forecasts have not been encouraging. At the recent UK budget, the OBR downgraded its central forecast of productivity growth to just 1 per cent, and the SFC has downgraded its forecast of trend productivity to 0.9 per cent. I reiterate—as I have done every year when I have spoken in the budget debate—the importance of productivity growth. I note the comments from the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which says that we need “heroic improvements in productivity”.

We know that multiple factors affect productivity, and I will make some brief remarks on two areas are affected by the budget: one in which productivity is constrained, and another that is encouraging productivity.

On the positive side, I go back to some remarks that we heard earlier. Increased investment in the college sector and skills is hugely welcome, but I add my voice to the voices of those who have talked about a lack of clarity around that. Is it £70 million or is it £40 million? Nevertheless, it is a critical area for enhancing labour market productivity. As we go forward, we need a focus on skills needs, particularly in the social care sector as a result of UK Government visa restrictions, as well as digital upskilling and management skills.

On the less positive side, some of the devolved taxes act as a barrier to productivity growth, partly due to the limited range of taxes that are under the Scottish Government’s control. For example, the land and buildings transaction tax makes it harder for people to move to get jobs or for businesses to get better premises, which harms productivity growth. I appreciate that the limited flexibility that the Scottish Government is afforded by the few devolved tax powers that it has makes that difficult, but I was pleased to see no further increases this year.

I want to raise another issue that is too often ignored. It is perfectly understandable—I suspect that we will do this next—that all parties argue for their spending priorities. However, I think that it was Liz Smith who said in committee that we also need to consider which areas can be deprioritised. Where we move resources from is as important as where we move resources to. If we do not tackle areas for deprioritisation, our landscape will become increasingly cluttered—where have we heard that before?—and we will increasingly call on one-off opportunities such as the revenues from ScotWind to fill revenue gaps instead of investing in the future.

16:37

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): I thank the convener of the Finance and Public Administration Committee for his efforts to make this debate more interesting than last year’s debate was. However, to echo Douglas Ross’s remarks, I fear that, for conveners, this debate has become the parliamentary equivalent of the last day at school, when children are allowed to bring Kerplunk or their gerbil along. It may be interesting for them and for some others but, ultimately, it is unproductive. I am not certain that it is a good use of parliamentary time, particularly in the late stages of this session of Parliament.

This debate was meant to be about fiscal sustainability, but when I heard the minister mention those words, I did not get any sense that there is a real and coherent strategy to deal with the £5 billion budget black hole that she is set to leave behind. Fiscal sustainability is meant to balance revenue and spending over time and not to burden future generations, nor future finance ministers, with an imbalanced budget.

I will deal with some of the issues that we have heard about during the debate. Across all areas of public expenditure and taxation, alarm bells are ringing, be it about the burgeoning benefits bill; lower productivity growth; projected higher inflation; higher pay settlements than the Scottish Government public sector pay policy can withstand; pay grade inflation in the civil service; some large negative tax reconciliations that are

coming down the line; increased interest on increased Scottish Government borrowing; stubborn, albeit slightly reduced, levels of economic inactivity in the Scottish labour market; or infrastructure costs that are rising at an alarming rate at a point in time when capital expenditure is seriously constrained.

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): Does Craig Hoy recognise that, given that long list of very significant and serious challenges, it is a testament to the finance secretary that she has managed to balance the budget yet again?

Craig Hoy: She is balancing the budget by drawing down a whole series of non-recurring potential pots of money to fund recurring projects, with ScotWind being the latest attempt to try to balance the budget. Ultimately, however, we all know that the budget is unsustainable, as has been referred to throughout today's debate. It is unsustainable—as we heard from Audrey Nicoll—for the police service, the justice system and the prison service. Equally, it is probably still unsustainable for the college sector, because, as we have seen, smoke and mirrors have been deployed in relation to funding for that sector as well.

That brings me to a subject that the committee has raised on several occasions and that the Government has in part addressed in this year's budget, which is baselining and making sure that we are comparing apples with apples and pears with pears. We picked up some frustration yesterday from the Fraser of Allander Institute and the SFC in relation to the way in which the budget was presented.

Ultimately, the budget statement, which the cabinet secretary made last week, should be about delivering for Scotland and not about delivering headlines for the SNP, yet the partial way that some of the data was brought forward should be a cause of concern. Last Thursday, for example, local government was left with the impression that it was getting a 2 per cent increase, but it transpires that it will get only a 0.4 per cent increase this year and a net reduction in real-terms budgets in future years, which is not putting it on a sustainable footing. It has also given people the impression that they will not get higher council tax bills down the line, but it is now quite clear from councils across Scotland that that will be the case.

My appeal is that we do not repeat this debate in the next session of Parliament and that the Government learns the lessons that have been pointed out to it, not just by the Finance and Public Administration Committee but by a variety of stakeholders, who have put a lot of time and effort into making sure that they properly analyse this

budget and future budgets. In order to do that job, they need the tools and the data, and they need the clarity that has been sadly lacking in this and previous budgets.

16:41

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I welcome the chance to take part in the debate, having just recently rejoined the Finance and Public Administration Committee. Ross Greer decided not only to give up speaking in this debate but to give up his place on the Finance and Administration Committee in my favour, if I can call it that. Obviously, those decisions are now well above my pay grade, I am very happy to say, and I am sure that he is never wrong in those judgments.

However, I will be a tiny bit more glass-half-full about the debate, and I acknowledge the work that all the committees have done on their budget scrutiny. This debate might not be where the budget drama plays out—if there is to be any of that this year—but it brings a bit more light rather than the heat of party-political positioning, and I think that it shows some of the nuance that is understood across all portfolios.

On whether particular budgets are sustainable, I recognise that we need to look at that issue in the round, rather than in silos. It is not reasonable to ask whether social security spending, for example, is sustainable without asking what we are trying to achieve and how we are going to pay for it. I strongly believe in raising a bit more revenue through tax policy in order to be able to fund things such as the Scottish child payment and protect other spending, such as on social security or public services. It is clear that the Government still believes in the same thing—raising a bit more revenue through tax policy in order to spend a bit more. We need to be clear that the difference is important and has been significant, but it is not transformational and is not yet at the level to meet all the challenges that have been raised by all the individual committees.

On child poverty, I welcome the proposed improvements in the Scottish child payment for the youngest children, but they are not in place yet. Those have been welcomed, but with a caveat, by some of the stakeholder organisations.

On climate, I say very clearly that, even if the budget funds the Government's current climate plan, that only means that it funds a slowdown on climate. Let us contrast the announcement today, finally, of a warm homes plan by the UK Government with the scrapping of the equivalent measure—the proposed heat in buildings bill—by the Scottish Government, which we will now not see. We need to recognise that we have to look at

fiscal sustainability across the piece, rather than silo by silo.

After today's debate, we will move on to the more party-political debates on the budget. I recognise that two measures that the Greens have argued for—the mansion tax and the private jet tax—are important but are limited in scale. However, if there is to be further progress towards a more progressive and more equal society, it is important that we make it clear to the public that we will target the super-rich first in order to justify the case for building that society.

I also welcome the additional support for workers affected by the closure of Mossmorran, and the increased investment in breakfast clubs and in just transition.

I do not have time to go into the number of other changes that we have argued for, and will continue to argue for, whether on expanding free public transport or improvements to childcare. However, I make the case that Greens have a strong track record of trying to achieve positive change by making workable and funded proposals to Government. The budget process would work much better if every political party was willing to do that instead of only demanding more spending and never saying how it is to be paid for.

16:45

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): This is not my final speech in the Parliament, which I will no doubt come to sometime in March, but I want to say some things about the scrutiny of budgets. What I have seen over my nearly 20 years in this place is that things are changing. Just as Douglas Ross intimated, I do not think that it is good enough. I am not casting aspersions on any one individual but on the process, because it is not strong enough. There is a frustration in the Finance and Public Administration Committee, for which I have the highest regard—not only for my colleagues but for the way in which the committee operates—that we spend much of our time going into considerable detail in budget scrutiny but that is not reflected in how the whole Parliament can contribute to the process.

I have argued time and again—and I continue to argue—that this place needs a finance bill process so that there is much more effective scrutiny by the whole Parliament as to exactly what each of the budget lines really means.

Fiscal sustainability is a huge issue just now. It does not matter which economic analyst we listen to; everyone is telling us that we have to get serious about the size of the gap between the projected expenditure and what we are going to take in. There is a really strong feeling and frustration, including among economic analysts,

that we are not taking this sufficiently seriously. I worry about that, because budgets are the most important thing that Parliaments do. We have to get it right, but at the moment we are not able to do that.

To go back to Michelle Thomson's point, we must understand not only what the Government's priorities are—and not just through straplines about tackling child poverty, dealing with the climate crisis or ensuring that there is economic growth—but which policies will best deliver on those broad targets and which could be deprioritised. I am sure that I do not have to tell the cabinet secretary that very difficult choices have to be made. Such choices will be easier to make if we understand which policies are most effective at delivering on the outcomes that we all want to see and which policies are perhaps not in that bracket. I do not think that the Parliament is very good at making such decisions. As I said, that is no reflection on any one individual or committee; I just do not think that we have got this process right.

When it comes to budgeting and understanding what the longer-term finances of the country will be and how they will be challenged, we must remove the short-termism in our approach. There is far too much short-termism in the Parliament, and I think that we have got used to it. We are not planning ahead in the way that we should be. That is a frustration, especially in the Scottish Fiscal Commission, which feels that we are not taking sufficiently seriously major challenges such as economic inactivity, productivity, economic growth and how we will deal with the demographic time bomb. Those are serious issues that confront the Parliament.

The Parliament has a lot of thinking to do about how to better inspire the members in the next parliamentary session to work on budgets and to do things a bit better.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: John Mason is the final speaker in the open debate.

16:49

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): I will touch on a range of topics in my speech. I will start on a positive note about preventative spend, which is a topic that the Finance and Public Administration Committee and others have spent considerable time on over the years. I fully accept that differentiating between preventative and reactive spend is not an exact science. However, I was pleased to see in the Government's response to the committee that it is

“testing a budget tagging method for tracking preventative spend”

and that it hopes to have initial results this coming summer. That looks like progress to me.

I consider the current fiscal framework to be unfair and biased against Scotland. It requires us to compete with London and the south-east of England, which most nations and regions have historically struggled to do. The whole purpose of the Barnett formula is to reduce the extra spending that Scotland gets, which was initially based on need. Our needs continue to be greater than in other parts of the UK because of rurality, historically poorer health and an ageing population. However, that is totally ignored by the fiscal framework. Wales probably suffers even more than we do.

The previous review of the fiscal framework was minimalist, to say the least. It was not what we had expected and there was next to no parliamentary involvement in it, here or at Westminster. I fully support the Government in seeking a much fuller review with the current UK Government as soon as possible.

We should also be interacting much more with Westminster on financial issues. Clearly, our finances are closely interlinked—that includes the dates of budgets, block grant adjustments, income tax, the building safety levy and so on—and yet, over the past five years, it has proved incredibly difficult to get Treasury ministers to give evidence to the finance committee. I accept that they are primarily answerable to MPs, but that is not a reason to refuse to interact with the Scottish Parliament.

Raising taxes overall is essential if we want to have quality public services. That applies to the UK and to Scotland. Most European countries are raising taxes these days, and Scotland and the UK are far from being high-tax countries. I realise that raising taxes is not generally popular, although perhaps more of the public would be willing to support higher taxes if they could see that the money was going to care services, colleges and so on.

That brings me to the topic of the general understanding of Scotland's finances, which has already been mentioned in the debate. The UK has a complex tax system and I accept that, because Scotland must add to an underlying complex system, things here inevitably become even more complicated. However, we need to make an increased effort regarding financial education, be that for young people in schools or for new MSPs after the election.

I will move on to a couple of more specific topics. Adding two more council tax bands is not nearly radical enough and will probably not raise a huge amount of money. We remain unclear about how any extra money will be shared out among

local councils. Council tax is a regressive system and, at the very least, we need a complete revaluation. However, my preference is for a tax that is more progressive and closely linked to the actual value of peoples' homes. Some property prices have increased more than others since 1991, and it remains my strong belief that poorer areas are losing out and increasingly subsidising richer areas.

The increase in housing investment is welcome. However, we are still facing a housing emergency, and I wonder whether some other capital expenditure should be trimmed back.

I was glad to see an increase in college funding, which was mentioned earlier. For once, I agreed with most of Douglas Ross's comments, which were fair. There is a question about whether the increase will really be £70 million compared with the 2025-26 budget or whether there will be an increase of only £40 million. I note the cabinet secretary's point that the core budget will increase by £70 million. However, the total budget that will go to colleges will increase by only £40 million, which is a bit unfair.

Shona Robison: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Mason is just concluding.

John Mason: I have nearly finished.

Given the fiscal framework that we are subjected to, it is a reasonable budget and I will be supporting it.

16:53

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): On 13 January, the Government set out a budget that supports our four main priorities: eradicating child poverty, growing the economy, tackling the climate emergency and ensuring high-quality, sustainable public services. Alongside the budget, we published the Scottish spending review and the infrastructure delivery pipeline, which provide greater fiscal certainty and support long-term financial planning.

In the debate, we have heard from committees on a wide range of issues, and I will take a few minutes to reflect on the discussion.

Craig Hoy: Will the minister take an intervention?

Ivan McKee: If I can make some progress, that would be helpful.

I will begin by reflecting the Government's—and my personal—commitment to reforming our public services so that they are fit to deliver the quality of

service that the people of Scotland rightly expect, within the resources that are available.

The Finance and Public Administration Committee and the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee both referenced the public service reform strategy. We know that PSR is essential to fiscal sustainability. Achieving that will require workforce reductions, a reshaping of the workforce, considered pay policies, smart use of technology, a shift towards prevention, and more efficient joined-up services. Indeed, achieving that will require the whole Christie agenda.

Although portfolio efficiency and reform plans demonstrate our progress towards achieving the 0.5 per cent annual workforce reduction, we have been clear that our approach is designed to protect and improve our front-line services.

Our PSR strategy sets out much of that and commits us to activities such as exploring preventative budget approaches and the invest to save fund, in which a further £29.9 million will be invested in 2026-27, through the budget, to encourage and support efficiencies in our public sector.

Some of today's debate was about committees—rightly, from their perspective—focusing on their own portfolio interests and allocations. However, increasingly, the solutions will require reform that cuts across portfolio silos. Indeed, removing those silos is a key part of the reform agenda.

Liz Smith: Will the minister take an intervention?

Ivan McKee: I will finish this part and then come back, if that is okay.

Likewise, shifting to a focus on preventative spending will necessitate an understanding of how spend in one area leads to savings in another. That direction of travel must accelerate, and it will raise additional challenges around tracking spend year on year and across budget silos.

In the debate, committee conveners have, understandably, focused on inputs, but it is important to recognise that that is only part of the story. The reform agenda and the adoption of efficiency measures should deliver improved outcomes and improved service delivery without necessarily a corresponding or proportionate increase in input resources. A shift to talking more about prevention across silos and on outcomes is a necessary part of taking the process forward.

On Douglas Ross's remarks in his speech, I note that it is not up to the Government to comment; it is for the Parliament to decide and design how the budget debate takes place. However, that might provide an opportunity to

focus more on some of the substantive issues that will increasingly come to the fore as we move forward to address the challenges.

Liz Smith: The minister is making a case as to why we need a finance bill. It is so important that we can work across different portfolios and that all members in this Parliament can scrutinise that on a cross-party basis. Does the minister agree? The Finance and Public Administration Committee members are pretty unanimous on that.

Ivan McKee: The Government's position has been that there could well be merit in having a finance bill, and we are very happy to continue to engage with the Finance and Public Administration Committee, and others, on that, to see how that could work. Clearly, it would require quite a bit of re-engineering of the process, and we would need to understand exactly how that would be taken forward. However, that is a conversation that we are very comfortable with having.

I will bring in Craig Hoy as he wanted to intervene earlier.

Craig Hoy: I understand that the minister does not necessarily want to dwell on portfolio spending, but will he comment on local government spending this year and in future years? Yesterday, when I asked Professor Graeme Roy about Shona Robison's claim last week that there is a 2 per cent real-terms increase in the local government budget, he said that that was not the Scottish Fiscal Commission's figure and that we would have to ask the cabinet secretary about that. He added that, under the current plans, the local government budget would be cut in real terms. Which is it—a 2 per cent increase or a cut?

Ivan McKee: The overall settlement for local government will increase by £650.9 million, which is a cash increase of 4.3 per cent or 2 per cent in real terms compared with the 2025-26 budget. I acknowledge that £144 million for ENICs was added to the 2025-26 budget following the budget's publication. It is really important that we are comparing apples with apples and not comparing documents from different points in the cycle. Those figures are all clearly set out in the Scottish budget, in table 4.15.

I do not have time to go through inputs from every committee, but I will draw out some of the highlights. The intervention from the convener of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee was very valuable, including the focus on prevention aspects. A huge amount of work has been done on that in health, and I have worked closely with health colleagues and officials on that work, particularly in the context of the two workstreams in the PSR strategy that focus on how we take forward prevention work in the budget. A tagging

exercise will improve our understanding of that work as we continue to develop it. It is important to recognise that the work of health colleagues on the service renewal framework and the operational improvement plans could deliver significant improvements in delivery by refocusing the existing considerable resources in the budget to make them more impactful. That is a very important point.

I recognise the comments made by the convener of the Criminal Justice Committee. We are working to allow the Scottish Police Authority and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to hold reserves and expand their borrowing powers. Those rules sit with the UK Treasury, and the Scottish Government has been clear that we would welcome reform to improve flexibility in that regard and more widely across public services. I recognise the comments regarding how the SFRS could reform and refocus its activities.

I also recognise the comments that Michelle Thomson made about the importance of productivity. Growing the economy is a key focus of the Government, and productivity is a key metric in that regard. It is interesting that, over the medium to long term, Scotland's economy, in relation to productivity, has grown at a significantly higher rate than that of the rest of the UK. The extra £70 million of investment in our colleges will support the skills agenda, which is critical to improving productivity.

The Government is proud of this budget, which focuses on our four priorities—

Finlay Carson: Will the minister take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister is just concluding.

Ivan McKee: If Finlay Carson had asked to intervene earlier, I would have taken an intervention.

The budget strengthens our public services and invests in Scotland's infrastructure and people. I thank members for their views and their on-going engagement in the budget process. I will watch with interest to see which format this particular debate takes in the next parliamentary session.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Michael Marra to conclude the debate on behalf of the Finance and Public Administration Committee.

17:02

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I am pleased to sum up the debate on behalf of the Finance and Public Administration Committee. I thank all members who have contributed to the debate—however reluctantly on some people's

parts. I thank our committee's outstanding clerking team for the real teamwork that takes place there.

One of the clear themes of today's debate has been transparency, which many members have mentioned. Transparency is not an esoteric idea or principle; it is necessary. I will set out why that is.

The committee has had a long-standing concern about transparency. In the past few years, we have asked that routine in-year transfers be baselined in the Scottish budget. Some of the issues in that regard have just been played out in the exchange between Mr Hoy and the minister. In this year's budget, the Government actioned £786 million of baseline transfers. However, it continues to resist baselining all routine in-year transfers, for reasons that, to be frank, are bewildering to members of our committee. Therefore, we ask that the Government explain why it is not making more progress in that area.

That was a significant area of concern at the committee's meeting yesterday, when we took evidence from witnesses including representatives of the Scottish Fiscal Commission. It has taken action by providing its own figures in its documentation to try to illustrate the real picture, as it sees it, because the Government has not taken that action.

For 2025-26, £606 million of resource internal transfers, against the autumn budget revision, have not been baselined, but there is no explanation for that. That leads to some very misleading claims in relation to portfolio comparisons between 2025-26 and 2026-27. I will give a couple of the most egregious examples. The Scottish Government claims that there will be a 6.6 per cent real-terms increase in the education and skills portfolio, but the Scottish Fiscal Commission, which has done the work that I mentioned, says that there will be a 0.8 per cent real-terms increase. The Scottish Government claims that there will be an 8.9 per cent real-terms increase in the housing budget, but the Scottish Fiscal Commission says that there will be a 3.9 per cent real-terms cut. Those figures really matter when people are trying to understand the budget, and the Scottish Fiscal Commission has set out its figures.

In his role as the convener of the Education, Children and Young People Committee, Douglas Ross mentioned college funding, which is an issue that has received some scrutiny in recent days. The idea that there is a £70 million increase in such funding is true only if last year's capital is removed from the baseline. The figure is, in fact, £40 million.

Shona Robison: No, it is not.

Michael Marra: Mairi Spowage, the director of the Fraser of Allander Institute, said that she had seen the commentary and that, to be honest, she did not know whether the figure was accurate, but that we should know. She also said that the Government needs to work with the Parliament to reduce the confusion about this sort of issue, so that, when it presents its draft budget, we are much clearer about what we are spending money on.

Shona Robison: I say again that the college sector has had a £70 million increase in core college funding available to the Scottish Funding Council: £61.4 million in resource and an extra £8.2 million in capital. Over the past five years, there has also been a significant investment of more than £150 million in the Dunfermline learning campus, which has been over and above the funding made available to the sector at large.

There is an issue about how those tables are set out, because they do not separate out the capital funding that the SFC can distribute across the sector from funding that is specific to a strategic project. That will be addressed—but the funding is £70 million extra.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Michael Marra, I can give you the time back.

Michael Marra: You have to recognise, cabinet secretary, that if somebody as eminent as Professor Mairi Spowage—and the Fraser of Allander Institute and all its analysts—cannot interrogate the budget documents and come to the conclusion that you have, then something has gone badly wrong in that instance.

There is also a real challenge in relation to social care pay, which Jackie Baillie raised in the debate. In the cabinet secretary's budget statement last week, she stated that it

“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” — [*Official Report*, 13 January 2026; c 14.]

However, in today's debate we have heard that the Government is refusing to meet the cost of the statutory increase but is prepared to meet the cost of the discretionary increase on top of that. There is no way that, having listened to the budget statement, people would come to that conclusion. That is absolutely not the case—and it is certainly not the conclusion that the sector came to. There is a real challenge around transparency in the way in which the budget is presented.

There was much less in the debate on the theme of fiscal sustainability. We are still, as a committee, seeking a full response to the Scottish Fiscal Commission's fiscal sustainability report as part of the Government's long-term planning. It is very difficult to claim that the budget documents

have risen to the challenge of addressing sustainability. The committee and, more broadly, the independent institutions have significant concerns about the challenges that our public finances face. Some of that was highlighted by conveners who shared evidence from their committees.

I will illustrate how the issues relate to both transparency and sustainability. The financial sustainability delivery plan and the Scottish spending review promise £1.5 billion of portfolio savings, but it is impossible to determine how any of that relates to closing the gap that the Scottish Fiscal Commission has identified. The minister is looking at me quizzically, but that is the view of Professor David Bell of Stirling University. To use Professor Bell's words, he is “completely confused” about how those two issues address each other. Perhaps we can hear evidence from the minister on that point at committee next week, because it is not apparent how those things interrelate.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Fraser of Allander Institute have been absolutely clear that they retain significant concerns about the long-term trajectory and the sustainability of public finances. Michelle Thomson highlighted in her contribution the “heroic”—in their words—assumptions on productivity that are being made by the Government in that regard. Both those independent financial institutions predict that the budget may very well not reach the autumn without an emergency budget from the Government, given the heroic statements. That is the account that has been given, and it has become a habit of the Government over recent years—that is absolutely clear.

The committee also asked for the methodology of the Scottish spending review to be set out to committees, so that we could understand how the review was carried out. However, our committee is not the only body that has asked for that. Yesterday, we asked the chair of the Scottish Fiscal Commission, Professor Graeme Roy, what he knew about the methodology, and he knew nothing. He does not know how the review was carried out, or the means by which the assessments were made, or how the plans were produced. That is not acceptable. I hope that ministers can provide that information to the committee ahead of next week, so that there can be proper scrutiny of that very important process, given some of the headwinds that colleagues, including Liz Smith, have identified.

We note that the Government has not committed to providing the information on the sustainability of social security spending that we have asked for several times. That includes information on how the Government is assessing

the effectiveness of outcomes, its approach to the delivery of benefits, and the impact on other parts of the budget. We believe that that must be provided without delay. It is absolutely critical that we have that information in front of us to enable us to scrutinise the process.

Last year, we asked the Government to set out the number of live strategies that it has in place. As of summer 2025, there were 100 of them. Anyone in the chamber would agree that, for a devolved Government that serves a nation smaller in size than London, that is far too many strategies. There are lots of strategies, but there is not much strategic intent.

Ivan McKee: Will the member take an intervention?

Michael Marra: No, thank you, sir. I am just coming to a close, and I am in my last minute.

The Government confirmed that it will, as the committee requested, provide an update on the steps that are being taken to monitor and reduce the number of live strategies, in line with the Government's priorities. It also plans to provide an updated list annually, which the committee welcomes. A new parliamentary session will provide the opportunity to rejig this kind of debate and, to be frank, a fresh start in the number of core strategies, which will improve understanding, transparency and alignment across the Government.

I thank all members who have contributed to the debate.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the Scottish budget 2026-27 on behalf of the Finance and Public Administration Committee.

Point of Order

17:11

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I rise to seek your guidance. We are all aware of the latest tragic situation that is under investigation at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital in Glasgow, where contaminated water has been identified as the likely cause of infection that led to the deaths of cancer patients. That is in addition to previously recognised failures, including infections that were caused by bird droppings in the ventilation system.

In its closing statement to the Scottish hospitals inquiry, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde said:

"Pressure was applied to open the hospital on time and on budget, and it is now clear the hospital opened too early. It was not ready."

The potential implications of that statement cannot be overstated, nor can we, as the Opposition—or, indeed, the Parliament—in all consciousness let that slide by unchallenged.

I seek your guidance under rule 13.1 of the Parliament's standing orders as to whether you would be minded to grant a personal statement to the chamber by a member in respect of the comments that were made by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde.

Although she is no longer a member of the Government, Nicola Sturgeon was both the Cabinet Secretary for Health when construction of the hospital began and First Minister when it opened. Given the tragic results of the pressure that was applied, it is essential that, as someone who bears the ultimate responsibility for the Government's actions at the time, Nicola Sturgeon must make a statement to the Parliament. I ask whether she has sought to make such a statement and, if so, whether you would be prepared to grant that request. Finally, would members have the opportunity to ask questions following such a statement, as was the case with Michael Matheson's personal statement on 16 November 2023?

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I have received no such request at this time. Any member may, at the discretion of the Presiding Officer, make a personal statement to a meeting of the Parliament. Any member who wishes to do so would notify the Presiding Officer of their desire. If the Presiding Officer were to decide that a personal statement may be made, the Parliamentary Bureau would be notified and would include notice of the statement in any business programme. A personal statement would not generally be debated. Certainly, whoever is in the chair as Presiding Officer would consider any such request.

Business Motion

17:14

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-20498, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 27 January 2026

2.00 pm Time for Reflection
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Topical Questions
followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill
followed by Committee Announcements
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 9.00 pm Decision Time

Wednesday 28 January 2026

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, and Parliamentary Business; Justice and Home Affairs
followed by Scottish Labour Party Business
followed by Motion on Legislative Consent: Sustainable Aviation Fuel Bill – UK Legislation
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.30 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Thursday 29 January 2026

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 11.40 am General Questions
 12.00 pm First Minister's Questions
followed by Members' Business
 2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Education and Skills
followed by Stage 1 Debate: Restraint and Seclusion in Schools (Scotland) Bill
followed by Stage 1 Debate: Greyhound Racing (Offences) (Scotland) Bill
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Tuesday 3 February 2026

2.00 pm Time for Reflection
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Topical Questions
followed by Stage 1 Debate: Prostitution (Offences and Support) (Scotland) Bill
followed by Stage 1 Debate: Desecration of War Memorials (Scotland) Bill
followed by Committee Announcements
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 4 February 2026

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Deputy First Minister Responsibilities, Economy and Gaelic; Finance and Local Government
followed by Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party Business
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.10 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Thursday 5 February 2026

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 11.40 am General Questions
 12.00 pm First Minister's Questions
followed by Members' Business
 2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Climate Action and Energy, and Transport
followed by Stage 1 Debate: Ecocide (Scotland) Bill
followed by Stage 1 Debate: Non-surgical Procedures and Functions of Medical Reviewers (Scotland) Bill
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 26 January 2026, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[*Graeme Dey*]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:14

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of three Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motions S6M-20499 and S6M-20500, on approval of Scottish statutory instruments, and motion S6M-20501, on committee membership.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Hydrolysis (Scotland) (No. 1) Regulations 2026 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Hydrolysis (Scotland) (No. 2) Regulations 2026 [draft] be approved.

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

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

Presiding Officer’s Response

17:14

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I wish to address issues that Mr Douglas Ross, MSP, raised in proceedings earlier. Notwithstanding Mr Ross’s disappointment at my decision regarding a question, standing orders require that all members in the Parliament respect the authority of the chair. Mr Ross’s discourteous comments fell short of that requirement, which is a discourtesy to the Parliament and to the chair.

I have an unprecedented record of selecting urgent questions regularly and often, requiring Scottish ministers to account for their actions in the chamber. I always act to ensure that as many members as possible have opportunities to scrutinise the Scottish Government and raise matters that they think are important.

I have regularly taken more topical questions than the slot might allow with ease, stretching that slot to the maximum; I have worked throughout this session to enable more members to put questions to the First Minister. I will continue to take those actions.

In my role, I am responsible for balancing the interests of all 128 members across the chamber and for managing parliamentary time effectively, according to our standing orders. In doing so, I act impartially and take account of the interests of all members equally. I ask Mr Ross to reflect on the comments that he made.

Decision Time

17:16

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S6M-20487, in the name of Kenneth Gibson, on behalf of the Finance and Public Administration Committee, on the Scottish budget 2026-27, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the pre-budget scrutiny undertaken by the Finance and Public Administration Committee, and other parliamentary committees.

The Presiding Officer: I propose to ask a single question on three Parliamentary Bureau motions. No member objects, so the question is, that motions S6M-20499 and S6M-20500, on approval of Scottish statutory instruments, and motion S6M-20501, on committee membership, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Hydrolysis (Scotland) (No. 1) Regulations 2026 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Hydrolysis (Scotland) (No. 2) Regulations 2026 [draft] be approved.

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

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Bridges

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-20178, in the name of Tim Eagle, on supporting Scotland's bridges. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

I invite those members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons, and I call Tim Eagle to open the debate.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises what it sees as the vital role that bridges play in connecting communities across Scotland, including in the Highlands and Islands region, supporting access to work, education, healthcare, emergency services and local economies; notes recent reported events highlighting the vulnerability of Scotland's bridge infrastructure, including the partial collapse of the Spey Viaduct and the ongoing closure, restriction or uncertainty affecting key local bridges such as Cloddach Bridge, Kirkcudbright Bridge and the Bridge of Alford; understands that many of these structures carry thousands of vehicles each day and serve as lifeline routes for both rural and urban communities; notes with concern reports that a number of local authorities, including Highland Council, have acknowledged that financial constraints mean that some bridges will be placed into managed decline, and recognises what it sees as the significant impact that bridge closures or long-term restrictions can have on connectivity, community resilience, local economies and public confidence in Scotland's transport infrastructure.

17:19

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I thank—[*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Could we have Mr Eagle's microphone on, please?

Tim Eagle: I will start again, Deputy Presiding Officer—thank you.

I thank all those members who will be speaking in the debate. Some might be wondering why, a few months out from a critical election, I am in the chamber talking about bridges. The truth is that each trip that we make, whether we are walking, going by car or on a bus or train, we will probably go over a bridge, often many bridges—sometimes without knowing. While many gaze at the wonder of the Forth bridges as they come into Edinburgh, few probably take a moment to recognise the many road bridges that connect us with our communities every day.

In truth, this is a debate about connectivity, how we keep communities together and how we ensure that, just because critical infrastructure is getting old and is costly to fix, the Parliament and the Government do not use that as a reason to ignore it. While the subject of bridges might not

dominate the evening news, it is absolutely vital to the daily lives of people in rural—and for that matter, urban—Scotland.

On 14 December last year, residents of Moray, including me, woke up to what we thought was a joke: artificial intelligence photos of a deeply popular 19th-century iron bridge connecting Spey Bay and Garmouth—the Spey viaduct—torn in two and lying twisted in the river. What seemed unlikely very quickly became reality. It was no joke—a popular bridge was no more. It formed part of the historic Moray coast railway and later became an important part of the national cycle network next to the Speyside way.

I can guarantee that, the day before, many people, including young children on bikes, would have been crossing it. I am thankful that, at the time when the bridge collapsed, no one was on it. Early engineering inspections suggest that scour soil erosion around the bridge's foundations—a slow process that undermines even our most enduring bridges—was likely a cause.

Some want to play the blame game; I want the bridge fixed. That iconic structure is now closed, with no immediate solution to reopen it, pending specialist inspections and—crucially—funding for either repair or replacement. I commend the communities of Garmouth and Spey Bay, particularly the Speyside Coffee Roasting Company and the WDC Scottish Dolphin Centre, for their strong support to see the bridge repaired.

Meanwhile, Cloddach bridge, which was built in 1905, has stood for more than a century as part of the River Lossie crossing near Birnie in Elgin. It was closed to motor vehicles in February 2022 after inspections showed that its condition had deteriorated to the point at which it could no longer safely carry heavy traffic. Weight restrictions had been progressively tightened over the years before its closure, and it remains open only to pedestrians and cyclists. However, without significant investment to replace or repair it, the bridge risks being lost entirely, with the communities that it serves left divided.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I was delighted when I secured significant investment from the United Kingdom Government towards the cost of reopening Cloddach bridge. The project was then agreed by Moray Council only after Heldon community council put forward a significant amount of money for further studies into the work needed.

Now that the Labour Government has, shamefully, withdrawn that funding, does the member agree that, at the very least, it should pay back Heldon community council? Those funds would be far better spent in the local area rather than being wasted on a project that cannot now go

ahead because of the UK Labour Government's decision.

Tim Eagle: I completely agree with that point, and I commend Douglas Ross for putting in a huge amount of work to secure that money from the UK Government at the time. It is a real shame that the Labour Government did not continue to agree to that funding, because Moray Council had planned for the project. As Douglas Ross laid out, the community had raised a significant volume of money to enable it to happen. I know that there are no Labour front-bench members in the chamber tonight, but I think that the Labour Government needs to reflect on that.

Both of those bridges are local and historic, but they share a much deeper commonality: they show how vital these physical links are to the people who use them every day and how fragile our rural connectivity has become under the strain of age, underinvestment and funding pressures.

It is not just a Moray problem. Across rural Scotland, bridges large and small are ageing and falling into disrepair. They are on councils' amber and red lists of concern, yet the works required to restore them are often not being done at the pace or scale that is needed. Councils are doing their best with constrained budgets, but local government funding simply does not stretch to cover the scale of maintenance and renewal that is needed for that critical infrastructure.

We have seen similar situations elsewhere. In Aberdeenshire, constituents in Aboyne have been campaigning for repairs to their bridge, which has been closed. Only now is strengthening work being agreed; I am sure that my colleague, Alexander Burnett, will highlight that later.

In Keith, another area in Moray, a landslip at Union bridge took more than a year to repair, and that was on the main A96—a critical road for the north of Scotland. That is an unacceptable timetable.

Further south, in Dumfries and Galloway, in Finlay Carson's constituency, Kirkcudbright bridge has faced closure and structural restrictions as a result of deterioration, requiring traffic management measures and long-term replacement plans.

I am pretty confident that I could name a bridge in every constituency in Scotland that has an uncertain future. Even on the same rivers we have problems, with Highland Council putting in several bridges into "managed decline", including the Spey bridge at Cromdale, which is a critical link between the village and Grantown-on-Spey.

Whatever the Scottish Government wants to tell me tonight about funding and support is not the reality on the ground. If it was, Cloddach, Aboyne,

Spey and Kirkcudbright bridges would be fixed much sooner, and perhaps there would already be a clear future for the Spey viaduct. I would rather not hear about what the Scottish National Party thinks that it has done; instead, I want to hear about how it will ensure that there is proactive, strategic support targeted at rural connections beyond headline infrastructure projects.

That means that we need more support for rural bridge maintenance and renewal, and practical support to enable councils to plan long-term programmes rather than firefighting crisis. It means ensuring that historic listed bridges get the specialist attention that they deserve, and consistent monitoring with specialist inspections, before problems become catastrophic collapses.

Richard Lochhead (Moray) (SNP): I thank the member for emphasising the importance of regular inspections. He may be aware that, following representations from tenacious members of the Garmouth community for the past few years, I was pressing Moray Council to carry out a full structural survey of the Spey viaduct, which did not happen. Regular surveys by local authorities have to happen in the future. With regard to the options for the Spey viaduct, the process has to be expedited, with a sense of urgency, to try to create and rebuild trust with the local community in Moray.

Tim Eagle: I agree with the point that regular surveys are required, which is why I put it in my speech. The problem is that Moray Council's funding has been so depleted over the years that it has not always been able to do that.

However, I do not want to get into an argument and play the blame game. Those in the Garmouth community—I know that they have made representations to Richard Lochhead, too—are telling me distinctly that that is not what they want. What they want, ultimately, is for the bridge to be fixed. On Monday, I spent an hour and a half with the Scottish Dolphin Centre, talking about exactly that.

We owe it to the people of Moray, to communities from the Highlands to the Borders and to every rural village and hamlet that relies on these connections. Our bridges do not simply cross rivers and valleys—they connect people, futures and livelihoods.

As with many things that we discuss in the chamber, this is an election issue. Our communities are looking to us for help with it, so let us, in the Parliament, act decisively to protect Scotland's rural bridges and recognise their vital place in our nation's infrastructure.

17:27

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I congratulate Tim Eagle on securing time for the debate and thank him for his attention on this issue. I hope that he, and colleagues across the chamber, would agree that I am quite keen in general on building bridges.

I have genuinely always had a real soft spot for bridges—so much so that, when I was in primary 7 and the kids in my class were told that we could do a project on anything we wanted, I chose bridges. I drew the Kessock bridge, the Golden Gate bridge and a little wooden bridge that crosses a burn near my house in Alness. I wrote about the complex maths that goes into their design and their different uses, and how the Kessock bridge connected my home of Alness, in Ross-shire, to the big city of Inverness.

While the overall improvements to journeys are welcome, the fact that my train home from Edinburgh no longer goes over the Forth rail bridge is a matter of deep regret to me, because I would always pause to admire the engineering and the scale of those incredible structures. Scotland should be more proud of our bridges and our story, from Thomas Telford to the Queensferry crossing, and we should be taking better care of the bridges that currently join up our communities but are too often taken for granted.

My family, and some of my teachers, were genuinely disappointed when I diverted to politics instead of engineering. When I first got elected to the Parliament, I joked that I might spend a session arguing for some bridges and tunnels and then go and help to build them. Scotland can do better if we are better connected. Our island communities, parts of cities separated by rivers or wide roads, and out-of-town universities or workplaces that were built without care for how folk were going to get there could all, with some bridges, see a boost in their opportunities and potential.

Thomas Telford and the Governments that commissioned his work understood that bridges—which are, on the face of it, about transport and connectivity—could be strong drivers for tackling poverty and depopulation. Many of the bridges that have prompted today's debate and are mentioned in the motion, and which come up in various other conversations across the country, were built in Telford's era, in areas that are still facing those challenges. Tim Eagle and I represent some of the communities that are most affected by depopulation, and we are both listing crucial bridges in those areas that are falling apart. Depopulation challenges will get worse if we do not protect what we have as well as building what we do not have.

Talk of managed decline is deeply concerning to me, because I do not simply picture a bridge crumbling and declining. I know that we are talking about the managed decline of beloved walks, of commutes to work, of heavily photographed tourist hotspots and—sadly—of whole communities.

I want to see more bridges, so my heart breaks a bit when I see coverage of the regular Infirmity bridge closures in Inverness over the years, or, this week, the very concerning closure of the Jubilee bridge in Nairn due to a sinkhole.

Yesterday in the chamber, we were debating positive destinations and routes to work. The bridge in Nairn is a literal path to education for small children. It is a safer route to school for many in Nairn—it is a cherished walk and a busy crossing that is used and relied on every single day.

We know that crisis management is more expensive and more disruptive to people than proactive maintenance. This is a national issue that is as much about attitude as finances, but I think that we need to see a change in both of those areas and agree that our bridges are worth protecting.

I look forward to hearing from the Cabinet Secretary for Transport and I hope that the Scottish Government shares some of the passion for bridges that we have heard so far in the debate. If we can build something as beautiful, complex and record breaking as the Queensferry crossing, we can look after Telford's bridges, and we can even build more to connect the Highlands and Islands.

17:30

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I congratulate my friend and colleague for bringing this important issue to the chamber.

Bridges in rural Scotland are far more than physical structures—they are lifelines connecting families to healthcare, pupils to their schools, local businesses to their customers and emergency services to the people who rely on them. When one of those crossings fails, the consequences are immediate, far reaching and often severe.

Tim Eagle spoke about the Spey viaduct, demonstrating, in the clearest possible terms, that even historic structures that we assume to be permanent are increasingly vulnerable. However, the Spey viaduct is not an isolated case. Across Scotland, councils are being forced into making impossible choices. Highland Council has already acknowledged that some bridges will now be entering “managed decline”.

Across the UK, the RAC Foundation continues to identify thousands of council-managed bridges

that are rated as “substandard”, which are restricted, weight limited or awaiting essential repairs that local authorities simply cannot afford to fund in the near term.

That is the national context into which the people of Kirkcudbright were thrust last year. I am speaking about the A755 Kirkcudbright bridge—not the other, famous, Telford bridge at Tongland. The Kirkcudbright bridge is a key crossing on which the town relies every single day.

On 21 March 2025, Dumfries and Galloway Council took the difficult, but necessary, decision to close the bridge to all vehicle traffic. Engineers had confirmed that it no longer met minimum loading requirements. Pedestrians and cyclists could still cross, but the vital road link—the practical everyday connection—was severed, and a five-mile detour was put in place.

By July, following further assessment with engineers, the bridge was reopened, but under severe restrictions. Those measures, while inconvenient, are a solution to avoid total closure—they are a clear engineering judgment that the structure is at the end of its working life. However, automatic number plate recognition and closed-circuit television enforcement had to be deployed because non-compliance posed a real risk. I hear that far too many people are still breaking the rules and are not being prosecuted.

Throughout that period, the community and businesses of Kirkcudbright showed remarkable patience and resilience. They adapted to the diversions, delays and uncertainty, and they lived with very real questions about what would happen if the bridge's condition deteriorated further, in particular regarding emergency access.

To its credit, the council recognised the scale of the challenge, and it has designated a replacement for the A755 Kirkcudbright bridge as a strategic priority. An initial budget allocation was approved last April, and approximately £100,000 is now being used to develop the outline business case. However, a full replacement bridge is a multiyear, multistage undertaking. It requires design progression, statutory processes, environmental and land surveys, procurement and—crucially—construction funding that no single authority can, or should be expected to, shoulder alone.

There has been much debate about Scottish Government intervention and project-specific funding. I called on the First Minister for support when the bridge first closed. I will not repeat the arguments that I made then, but the central point is that, if a bridge is essential to local and regional connectivity, as Kirkcudbright's bridge unquestionably is, Scotland needs a practical co-funding mechanism that will allow such projects to

move quickly and keep towns connected. I cannot overstate the impact on the local economy, including businesses from cafes and hotels to trades and tourist businesses.

Kirkcudbright is far from the only example, and the issues are not confined to road bridges. We will hear later, in a contribution from Craig Hoy, about footbridges in Annan. Such examples underline that rural Scotland is once more being asked to absorb infrastructure losses that it cannot afford to shoulder. I am therefore calling for future Governments to consider the creation of a multiyear, ring-fenced national bridge programme, jointly funded with local authorities. Priorities should be transparent and based on lifeline criteria such as healthcare access, education, emergency response, freight and tourism. We need accelerated replacement for structures where capacity is already structurally exhausted, as in Kirkcudbright. That means funding early-stage design, surveys and statutory work so that communities are not left waiting for years before construction can begin.

As a safeguarding exercise, we need strengthened weight limit compliance. Automatic number plate recognition enforcement has proven somewhat effective in Kirkcudbright, but more needs to be done. Rolling out similar systems nationwide will help to protect vulnerable bridges and extend their lifespan.

Our weather patterns are changing, and we need increased investment in climate resilience, particularly scour monitoring and river bed surveys, to reduce the risk of sudden failures.

The Scottish Government needs to recognise that councils are facing bridge backlogs measured in tens and hundreds of millions of pounds. We need long-term, predictable funding, not short-term pots that disappear before projects can advance.

The motion is about safeguarding connectivity, the rural economy and public confidence. Bridges hold communities together. When they fail, communities fail. Kirkcudbright bridge serves as a warning, but such situations are also opportunities—to modernise Scotland's local infrastructure and to protect rural communities that rely on such crossings every day.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I take this opportunity to remind members that back-bench speeches should be up to four minutes—as members have agreed to by their participation in the debate.

17:36

Davy Russell (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab): I thank Tim Eagle for securing the debate.

Roads and rail—and, once upon a time, canals as well—have been the vital arteries of our nation, which have driven prosperity in this country for hundreds of years. However, we all take for granted the key to that brilliant network functioning, which is its bridges, whether they are viaducts on a canal route, a wee narrow bridge on a country road connecting two villages or the mighty Forth rail bridge, oozing magnificence and strutting Scotland's past engineering expertise for more than 135 years.

However, with the exception of the many great structures, we have ignored this vital piece of Scottish infrastructure. Most bridges go unnoticed until there is a failure. That is usually caused by a lack of good inspection and maintenance regimes, which has been a common theme over the past 20 years. Maintenance and inspection budgets for structures have been reducing, which is a great pity, because we have thousands of these tremendous structures. Some of them are works of art, but we are putting them in danger, especially the older type of bridge that is prevalent throughout rural Scotland. General maintenance can take months, but a new bridge can take several years to build and can cost tens of millions of pounds, rather than tens of thousands.

Being a keen fisher, I have come across many bridges over the years: a bridge is the first thing that we look for when it starts to rain, as they provide a bit of shelter. We might usually have our piece and a cup of tea while under the bridge. Then, we start to notice the fine detail and precision. It makes us wonder how such bridges was constructed in the first place, considering that most of them were built before we were all born, when technology and equipment were primitive. That might be the civil engineer in me talking.

I could go very hard on the Scottish National Party and say that all that ministers seem to be doing is managing decline, rather than rolling their sleeves up and tackling the issues that affect structures such as bridges. I must recognise, however, that we have built a few bridges at the same time: the squinty bridge in Glasgow, the Queensferry road bridge and the eyesore that many members will have seen on the M8—the rusty bridge, which is what all the kids call it, anyway. It is a bit of a monstrosity, and very few people will put their name to it. It is there, nonetheless.

Bridges are a vital part of our heritage, and they are essential to the economy, regardless of how magnificent or ugly they are. As I mentioned

earlier, most go unnoticed; they are just performing the function that they were designed to fulfil.

More cross-party co-operation in protecting these valuable assets is needed. A sustainable funding model should allow communities to benefit from existing infrastructure, using solutions that economists and the people of Scotland will choose. We should look after and cherish what we already have, because it is only when it is gone that we miss it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Alexander Burnett, who joins us remotely.

17:40

Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): I thank Tim Eagle for bringing this critical issue to the chamber for debate.

In my Aberdeenshire West constituency, bridge infrastructure has been an issue since I was first elected a decade ago. Park bridge closed in 2019 and, seven years later, despite the community's wishes, there are no plans to reopen it, as Aberdeenshire Council simply does not have the funds. Now, the communities of Drumoak and Durriss are separated by a 16-mile round trip. Back then, I pointed out that, if Aberdeenshire Council had to spend £5 million a year to maintain its 1,800 bridges but was able to afford only half that amount, you did not need to be a bridge engineer to foresee the consequences. At that time, there were only 55 bridges on the critical list.

Roll on to 2023, and Aboyne bridge was closed to traffic, forcing people to make a 20-mile round trip over neighbouring Dinnet bridge, which itself is now on red alert. Early proposals suggested that Aboyne bridge would reopen in 2027, but, just before Christmas, investigations revealed that the damage was worse than was previously thought, and now the bridge might be closed to pedestrians and cyclists, too.

Repairs could cost up to £15 million, and a replacement could cost £30 million, but residents know that the council simply does not have the funds available to make the necessary repairs. It is worth highlighting that those costs are for just one bridge. More than 100 bridges in Aberdeenshire are now on the critical list—those bridges are either closed or at risk of closure in the next four years. Emergency vehicles are experiencing longer journey times, businesses are suffering through reduced footfall or increased costs, and communities are suffering as their links to other communities are broken.

The root cause of the problem is the Scottish Government's chronic underfunding of Aberdeenshire Council. After meeting with the

community on the bridge at Aboyne on Monday, I wrote to the First Minister, because enough is enough. This is not an ask; it is now a demand for John Swinney to come to Aboyne to rectify an intolerable situation that has literally divided the community. I hope that John Swinney will accept my invitation to visit the Fix Aboyne Bridge Community Action Group to explain why the Scottish Government has so far refused to provide the support for reopening this essential bridge.

I urge the cabinet secretary to listen to the cases that are being raised tonight and commit to ensuring that councils have the necessary funding to stop our rural communities from being divided.

17:43

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I am pleased to speak in the debate, and I appreciate the efforts of my colleague Tim Eagle in lodging the motion and bringing the debate to the chamber. From listening to the contributions from colleagues across the chamber, it is absolutely clear how much we depend on bridges. Bridges are not an abstraction—as Alexander Burnett has just said, they are the difference between whether or not people get to work, whether an ambulance takes the direct route or a long diversion, and whether a local business is able to cope or is closing its doors.

I remember when the replacement work was done on the bridge on Kerse Road in Stirling, which connected the city centre with the Springkerse industrial estate. The bridge was closed for nearly a year, which caused chaos, not just for traffic but for access to Stirling and for the businesses on the industrial estate.

Across Central Scotland and broader Stirlingshire, we see the value of such structures and the consequences of leaving maintenance work too long. Many of the bridges were built for a different age—the bridge on Kerse Road that I just mentioned was more than 100 years old when it was eventually replaced by Network Rail. Those bridges have served us well, but they are under increasing strain. Traffic is heavier—electric vehicles alone weigh a tonne—and the weather is harsher, and there have been years of constrained investment, as Alexander Burnett and Finlay Carson highlighted.

In Falkirk, the Jinkabout bridge near the golf club in Grangemouth is an example of what happens when decisions are delayed. Years of severe weight restrictions affected local movement and economic activity, and only full replacement restored capacity. It was the right decision, but it required capital funding, which it is increasingly difficult, if not nigh-on impossible, for councils to secure.

In Stirlingshire, the Cardross bridge between Arnprior and the Lake of Menteith is a good example. It is a historic crossing and a vital local route. The council invested more than £1 million to keep it in use but, even after that work, it will reopen only with a permanent weight limit. That tells its own story. We often no longer talk about improving capacity; we talk about preventing loss. There are similar pressures on other such structures, such as Blane Water bridge on the B834 road connecting Killearn and Croftamie, where intervention was essential simply to keep the route open.

What concerns me most—my colleagues, including Davy Russell, have talked about this—is the description of “managed decline”. That is not a neutral technical term; it is a policy choice and an act of selective neglect, driven by funding constraints, that accepts the gradual loss of vital infrastructure. Communities feel that loss through longer journeys, reduced resilience and declining confidence in the network on which they rely every day.

This is not about blaming councils, which are making hard choices with limited resources. In addition, there are significant shortages of bridge engineers, and councils are finding it harder to secure the specialist skills that are needed to keep structures safe and operational.

If we continue to neglect maintenance, we will continue to pay more later through emergency closures, rushed repairs and avoidable disruption. In Central Scotland and elsewhere, bridges are lifelines: they underpin economic activity, connectivity and public safety. Recognising the problem is necessary, but it is not sufficient. As Finlay Carson said eloquently, we now need a future Government to ring fence funds for a bridge fund in order to provide the sustained, realistic investment that is required. There needs to be a clear national commitment to stop vital infrastructure being allowed to fail by default and neglect.

17:47

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): I thank Tim Eagle for securing the debate.

Across Scotland, many bridges are in need of urgent investment, and we have heard about a number of them today. One of the most pressing cases in the areas that I represent concerns the project by the charity A Tale of Two Bridges in Annan, in Dumfriesshire. During a storm in October 2021, ferocious currents and rising flood waters swept away the Diamond Jubilee and Cuthbertson memorial bridges. The Scottish Environment Protection Agency recorded water levels on the River Annan as being at a 50-year

high. Those iconic and well-used crossings to the west and north of the royal burgh of Annan, which were loved locally, were lost to the elements.

The Diamond Jubilee bridge was built in 1897 to mark the 60th anniversary of Queen Victoria’s accession to the throne. The Cuthbertson memorial bridge dated back to 1957, when it was built to commemorate Lieutenant William Cuthbertson, but it was also dedicated to everyone from Annan who lost their lives in world war two. Those were not just local landmarks that showcased the beauty of the River Annan; they were used by walkers on the popular Annandale way route. After the bridges were swept away, the community quite rightly came to the view that everything that could be done to replace them should be done.

In 2023, the charity A Tale of Two Bridges was formed with the mission of using citizenship and community development to reconstruct the vital bridges. I have recently been in discussion with Stuart Thompson, a dedicated local volunteer who has been spearheading those efforts. I commend him and the charity for their efforts to raise the funds to scope out the replacement plan and bring forward a feasibility study, which I understand is now potentially in place.

Stuart and the team are liaising with Dumfries and Galloway Council and other public bodies, and they need cross-party support from elected representatives to drive the project forward because, as always, funding and technical and legal matters are impeding progress. For example, there is the question of who would take responsibility for the physical assets if and when the bridges are constructed, in an era in which councils and other public bodies are reluctant to add to their asset portfolio due to rising maintenance costs.

In recent weeks, the Scottish Government and the local SNP council have committed nearly £70 million to an expensive, unpopular and potentially ineffective flood defence scheme in Whitesands on the River Nith in Dumfries. Some of that money and some of the political capital that has been invested in that scheme could have been put into making the reconstruction of Annan’s two bridges a reality.

However, sadly, the money is proving elusive so far, as is the political will at the Scottish Government level. John Swinney visited Annan after the bridges were washed away, and, although he described the loss of the bridges as a significant blow to the community, little progress has been made by the Government. I echo the calls from colleagues for a specific bridge fund, because there are many such cases around Scotland.

Five years on, the community appears to be at a loss as to how to proceed. There is a potential solution, which my colleague David Mundell raised at Westminster last week. He urged the Secretary of State for Scotland to use unallocated funds in the Borderlands growth deal to progress the project, and he has met Scotland Office ministers this week to drive that forward. As he said, the important thing is to get the money out of the door. Given that several projects that were initially identified for Borderlands funding are now not proceeding, replacing the bridges in Annan could be a practical and sensible use of those funds.

I will close with an appeal to the Scottish Government. The loss of the bridges is a loss to the people of Annan and to the heritage of Dumfriesshire and the south of Scotland region. I hope that the Scottish and UK Governments can now work together at pace to identify the money that is necessary to restore those vital landmarks, not only for the people of Annan but for the wider region. I encourage both Governments to engage with *A Tale of Two Bridges* to make that a reality, as the bridges provide a lifeline for many.

17:52

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I had planned just to listen to the debate and had no intention of speaking in it, but I have been prompted to come to my feet to talk about a couple of issues.

I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests in that, jointly with my brother, I own a fishery on the river Spey. I have had some knowledge of rivers for 40 years, in which time I have learned that they change regularly and that they are alive and dynamic. In the past few years, I have learned that climate change makes them even more so. In the past, we perhaps expected rivers to stay within certain boundaries, but now we know that they move and shift and do not stay within them.

Increased flows and more movement of sediment and gravel make the maintenance of bridges far more important—and that is even before they fall down, not just when they do. Those of us who walk along riverbanks and look under bridges will have seen that the latter build up levels of gravel underneath them. The Spey viaduct was one of those bridges that moved from the original course of the river to one of the abutments and beyond.

If we are going to do maintenance work on bridges, it should be not only on their structures but on the riverbanks. The only way to do that is for people to get into the river and dig—that is it. However, something called the controlled activity regulations prohibits them from doing so. Those

complex regulations require the incurring of costs and the taking of a massive amount of consideration, especially in special areas of conservation and sites of special scientific interest, as is the case with the Spey viaduct. The regulations frighten people away from doing the work that they need to do around bridges.

While the cabinet secretary ponders the issue of money for the maintenance of bridges, I ask her also to ponder sending out a signal to the people who manage them, to say that if they want to take preventative action before the bridges fall down—by going into the river and digging it out to make it flow where it should, where it is channelled by those bridges—the Government and SEPA will do everything in their power to make that happen.

17:54

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): I thank members for their informed and passionate contributions.

The Scottish Government recognises the value and importance of bridges to Scottish society. They provide more than physical links; they deliver significant social value by contributing to prosperity and improving mobility. Our national infrastructure extends across Scotland, and trunk road bridges across rural areas, islands and estuaries are part of that national connectivity, which makes them fundamental to economic development and community wellbeing, as many members, including Emma Roddick, pointed out.

The safety of our bridges is key, and I am aware of the challenges involved in managing our ageing bridge stock. The Scottish ministers are responsible for more than 1,700 bridges, many of which are more than 120 years old. For example, the General Wade bridge on the A83 at Inveraray dates from 1776, and the bridge of Teith on the A84 dates from 1535.

As Davy Russell pointed out, it follows that there is a need for constant maintenance of those ageing assets. It is imperative that properly qualified inspectors carry out regular inspections, and data from such inspections forms the backbone of asset investment decisions. That is the approach adopted by the Scottish Government. Inspections are carried out in accordance with national standards. General inspections are carried out every two years and principal inspections are carried out every six years, with monitoring, reactive or special inspections being carried out as required.

One of the biggest risks to bridges is scour, which has been exacerbated in recent years by the effects of climate change. I am pleased that Edward Mountain raised that point in his contribution. I highlight that, following storm Babet

in 2023, scour affected many of our trunk road structures—for example, the A90 at Finavon. Such events require an emergency response in order to maintain public safety, in which case resources need to be diverted from planned activities.

Responsibility for the inspection and maintenance of, and investment decisions for, local bridges rests entirely with Scotland's local authorities. Those structures are owned and managed by councils, and it is for them to determine priorities, allocate resources and lead on the development of repair or replacement plans in line with local needs and asset conditions.

Craig Hoy: Does the cabinet secretary share the concerns of many local authorities—for example, Aberdeenshire Council—that the capital projections in relation to the budget announced last week are grim as far as Scottish councils are concerned, with a net £1 billion reduction feeding through? Will that not seriously hamper the routine maintenance burden that falls on councils, meaning that the condition of bridges will probably get worse rather than better as a result of the lack of capital investment by this Government?

Fiona Hyslop: I will address some capital issues that Craig Hoy might be interested in.

The Scottish Government has provided record levels of funding to local government. Last year, Aberdeenshire had a 7.2 per cent increase, Dumfries and Galloway had a 6.4 per cent increase, and Moray Council had a 6.6 per cent increase. The 2026-27 Scottish budget sets out multiyear spending plans covering three years of resource funding and four years of capital funding, in order to provide greater certainty for councils. That will certainly help with the planning aspects that members have asked for. Local authorities have autonomy to allocate funding to bridge and road maintenance, primarily through their general capital allocations, and they take their own decisions on investment priorities, reflecting local needs, risk and asset condition. In 2026-27, the local government settlement allocated capital grants totalling £681.4 million.

I highlight the specific example of the Spey viaduct, which is owned by Moray Council and which was affected by scour in December 2025. Aboyne bridge, which is owned by Aberdeenshire Council, has been subject to restrictions since 2023. Ultimately, it is for those councils to lead on the next steps. They will need time to work through the options, including by consulting and engaging with local communities, as they always do. However, for our part, the Government is more than happy to be part of those discussions.

We remain acutely aware of the financial pressures across the public sector, with high inflation, driven by global factors, alongside

reduced capital grant allocations from the UK Government—[*Interruption.*]

I would like to make progress.

Those pressures continue to impact the affordability and timing of infrastructure investment across Scotland. I remind members that, from 2020 to 2022, the SNP Government operated a local bridge maintenance fund of £32 million. Since then, however, we have had the period of capital grant cuts to the Scottish Government, including the infamous Liz Truss and Kwasi Kwarteng budget. There are implications in relation to capital cuts in that regard.

Although the Scottish Government is not responsible for local bridges, there have been specific circumstances in which we have been able to offer support for the wider community for strategic reasons. When I served as Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Tourism and External Affairs, I was pleased to secure funding through the rural tourism infrastructure plan for the new Lossiemouth footbridge. That investment restored vital access to the town's wonderful beach and helped to strengthen Lossiemouth's position as an important and welcoming tourist destination.

To elaborate on the Spey viaduct example, it is clear that the viaduct played a greater role for those in Moray than just a river crossing; it had cultural and historical significance, and it facilitated journeys and recreational activities for locals and visitors alike. Scottish Government officials continue to engage with Moray Council, HITRANS and What Wheel Cycle Trust to assist in minimising disruption and finding a solution. Local constituency MSP Richard Lochhead has sought and secured a meeting with me and has briefed me on the recent community meeting.

In the days following the incident, the priority was to make the area safe and investigate the cause of the collapse. The focus has now shifted to reopening the national cycle network route, the Moray coastal path and linkage points with the Speyside way, using an alternative crossing of the river and safe paths through the Gordon castle area. The new route has been confirmed and fresh signage has been put in place.

For a long-term solution, including consideration of repair or replacement, Moray Council has developed a plan with four key assessment steps that will provide clarity on the impact of the collapse on the river bed and the land surrounding the site. Significant funding is required to take us through those steps, and Moray Council is exploring the available options. I am pleased to confirm that the Scottish Government will provide £113,000 from the active travel infrastructure fund, which will allow additional engineering assessments, planning activities and alternative

route implementation works to be completed between now and the end of the 2025-26 financial year. Therefore, I hope that the Conservatives will support the active travel budget.

I will conclude by re-emphasising the Government's commitment to our bridge network. Working with local partners, we will continue to ensure its maintenance, its utility to the public and its potential to open up all kinds of associated activity, to the benefit of Scotland and its economy.

However, members must call not just for improved capital funding for local councils, but, perhaps in the spirit expressed by Davy Russell, for improved capital funding and, indeed, increased borrowing powers to allow longer-term planning across councils and the Government, for this Government and this Parliament.

Meeting closed at 18:02.

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