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Thursday 29 January 2026

CONTENTS

	Col.
GENERAL QUESTION TIME	**1**
Seasonal Agricultural Workers (Accommodation Standards)	1
National Health Service (Single-sex Spaces)	2
Poverty and Social Exclusion (Support for Projects in North East Scotland)	3
Nuclear Power Stations	4
Hospice Care Services	5
Non-medical Aesthetics Sector (Training)	6
Young Athletes Representing Scotland (Support)	7
US Trade Tariffs (Support for Scottish Businesses)	8
FIRST MINISTER'S QUESTION TIME	**9**
Benefit Spending	9
Queen Elizabeth University Hospital	12
Social Care (Assessments)	13
More Homes Scotland (Affordable Homes)	14
National Health Service Boards (Transparency and Accountability Improvements)	16
Walk-in General Practitioner Clinics	17
Mossmorran	19
Court System Error (Domestic Abuse)	20
Wemyss Estate Evictions	20
Illegal Puppy Trade	21
Forth Valley Royal Hospital Adult Mental Health Unit	22
Co-codamol Shortage (Lanarkshire)	22
Energy Profits Levy (Effects on Energy Sector)	22
Oil and Gas Sector	23
Whole-family Support	24
Community Organisations (Funding Arrangements)	25
Women Against State Pension Inequality	25
HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL DAY 2026	**27**
Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP)	27
Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con)	31
Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)	33
Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab)	34
Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green)	36
Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD)	38
Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)	40
Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con)	41
The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown)	43
BUSINESS MOTION	**47**
PORTFOLIO QUESTION TIME	**48**
EDUCATION AND SKILLS	**48**
Newly Qualified Teachers (Permanent Posts)	48
Newly Qualified Teachers (Employment)	49
Newly Qualified Teachers (Permanent Posts)	51
Teacher Recruitment (Rural Areas)	55
Centre for Teaching Excellence	58
RESTRAINT AND SECLUSION IN SCHOOLS (SCOTLAND) BILL: STAGE 1	**60**
Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)	60
Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con)	62
The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth)	65
Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con)	67
Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab)	68
Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green)	70
Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)	72

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP) 74
Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab) 75
Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP) 77
George Adam (Paisley) (SNP) 79
Paul O'Kane 80
Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con) 82
Jenny Gilruth 83
Daniel Johnson 86
GREYHOUND RACING (OFFENCES) (SCOTLAND) BILL: STAGE 1 89
Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green) 89
Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con) 91
The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie) 93
Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con) 96
Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab) 97
Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green) 98
Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP) 100
Davy Russell (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab) 101
Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP) 103
Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green) 104
Rhoda Grant 105
Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con) 106
Jim Fairlie 109
Mark Ruskell 111
COMMON ORGANISATION OF THE MARKETS IN AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS (FRUIT AND VEGETABLES) (MISCELLANEOUS AMENDMENT) (SCOTLAND) REGULATIONS 2026 [DRAFT] 114
The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie) 114
NATURAL ENVIRONMENT (SCOTLAND) BILL: STAGE 3 116
The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin) 116
Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con) 118
Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab) 121
Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green) 123
Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD) 125
Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP) 127
Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con) 128
Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab) 131
Mark Ruskell 132
Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab) 134
Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con) 135
The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie) 137
POINT OF ORDER 140
BUSINESS MOTION 141
Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Ind) 143
Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con) 144
The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey) 145
MOTION WITHOUT NOTICE 151
DECISION TIME 151
BUILDING LINKS WITH BHUTAN 156
Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP) 156
Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP) 158
Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con) 160
Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab) 162
The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson) 164

Scottish Parliament

Thursday 29 January 2026

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

General Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good morning. The first item of business is general question time—the shortest question time that we have in the week.

Seasonal Agricultural Workers (Accommodation Standards)

1. **Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what progress it has made on improving accommodation standards in relation to legislation that currently exists in Scotland for seasonal agricultural workers. (S6O-05435)

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): No one residing in Scotland, however temporarily, should have to live in substandard accommodation. There are currently provisions in the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987 that oblige a local authority to make byelaws with respect to accommodation for agricultural and seasonal workers. Those are in sections 314 and 315 of the act. I therefore expect local authorities to use existing law to make provision in their area, suited to their area and in response to activity in their area.

In the meantime, the Scottish Government will continue to develop a longer-term piece of work on considering whether a national set of standards would be appropriate.

Paul McLennan: During my time as housing minister, I was aware of the complexities of the matter, and the cabinet secretary is quite correct to say how important local authorities are in that regard. Scotland can lead the way in the United Kingdom and globally by commencing statutory standards for the accommodation of seasonal horticultural workers to help ensure that they have safe and dignified places in which to live.

What is the indicative timeframe for introducing legislation? What will be the scope of the legislation that the cabinet secretary referred to?

Màiri McAllan: I thank Paul McLennan for the work that he did as housing minister to advance this important area.

I have to reiterate that there is existing primary legislation on the matter. As I said, legal provision is set out in sections 314 and 315 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987, in respect of local authorities making byelaws for the situation as it arises in their area.

We are taking on longer-term work on considering a national suite of standards. That would require careful development, public consultation and, likely, primary legislation. I will be glad to keep Parliament up to date on the progress of that.

National Health Service (Single-sex Spaces)

2. **Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government, regarding any implications for its policy on single-sex spaces in the NHS in Scotland, what its response is to the recent ruling in the case brought by eight nurses at Darlington Memorial hospital. (S6O-05436)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): The outcome of the Darlington employment tribunal is a matter for the NHS trust and the claimants in that tribunal, and I will not comment on it.

However, in relation to single-sex spaces, health boards must ensure that all their facilities comply with relevant legislation, including the Equality Act 2010. We have written to health board chief executives to reiterate the importance of ensuring that the law is followed following the Supreme Court judgment.

Pam Gosal: The Darlington employment tribunal found that employers had indirectly discriminated against female nurses when they allowed a biological male to use single-sex changing areas. That case re-emphasises what we already know: the definition of a woman is based on biological sex.

Sadly, the Scottish National Party Government continues to betray women in Scotland by refusing to instruct all Scotland's public bodies to uphold the Supreme Court ruling. Is the Scottish Government prepared for more legal challenges funded by the taxpayer to keep defending the indefensible?

Neil Gray: We accept the Supreme Court ruling. The Scottish Government has made it clear that it accepts the Supreme Court ruling and it is taking forward the detailed work that is necessary following it.

Every key area of Government that is or might be affected by the Supreme Court judgment is carrying out assessments across legislation, guidance and policies. We have updated our guidance for the Gender Representation on Public Boards (Scotland) Act 2018, amended the public appointments recruitment process for public bodies that are subject to the act, moved to an interim trans and non-binary inclusion policy for Scottish Government staff and written to health

board chief executives to reiterate the importance of ensuring that the law is followed and that the Supreme Court judgment is implemented. Engagement with health boards is on-going.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): The Scottish Labour Government ended the use of mixed-sex wards in the NHS in 2005 but, in response to a freedom of information request in 2024, only two health boards—NHS Dumfries and Galloway and NHS Orkney—confirmed that they offered single-sex accommodation across all their wards. What assessment has the Scottish Government carried out of the number of mixed-sex wards? Will it ensure that all wards in NHS hospitals operate as single sex?

Neil Gray: Since 2005, we have expected NHS boards to ensure that all their facilities comply with the guidelines and recommendations on the elimination of mixed-sex accommodation. Further guidance concluded that there should be a presumption of 100 per cent single rooms in future hospital developments. That is confirmed as policy for NHS Scotland except in exceptional circumstances that are set out. The responsibility for complying with the requirements of the Equality Act 2010 rests with individual organisations.

Poverty and Social Exclusion (Support for Projects in North East Scotland)

3. **Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it will take to sustain the projects aiming to tackle poverty and social exclusion in the North East Scotland region, that are currently supported by the Investing in Communities Fund, beyond March 2026. (S6O-05437)

The Minister for Business and Employment (Richard Lochhead): Across the Scottish Government, we will continue to deliver on our priorities. The draft Scottish budget sets out £68 billion investment, which secures and expands the United Kingdom's most generous cost of living package.

The investing in communities fund has been a valued source of funding since 2019. It is delivered directly to communities and empowers them to address local challenges on their own terms. We continue to work across the Scottish Government to understand how the learning from the fund can inform future funding support for community-led action.

Maggie Chapman: Projects across the north-east rely on that funding to exist. I refer to projects such as Community Food Initiatives North East's Aberdeen partnership action communities together project, the Station House Media Unit's connecting communities project, the Murton Trust for Education and the Environment's education programme, or Maxwelltown Information Centre's Maxwell centre and garden. Without urgent clarity, those organisations and projects will be forced to plan for managed exits, with profound impacts on communities across my region. When will those projects and the people whom they support know about their future so that they can avoid the need to be scaled back or lost altogether?

Richard Lochhead: We very much value the fund, but it is nearing the end of its round. In light of the late budget from the UK Government and the situation that we face here, we have to consider how we support those organisations through a transitional period. We will write to them all this week with an update on the details of how we will do that.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): It is great that so many organisations and communities across Scotland have benefited from the investing in communities fund, including the Foyer, CFINE and SHMU in Aberdeen. Does the minister recognise the importance of the fund? Will he give comfort to those organisations so that they can continue their vital work in our most deprived communities?

Richard Lochhead: I assure the member that we will write this week to the organisations that are funded through the existing round, which is coming to an end. I advise the Parliament that we will fund transitional arrangements for those organisations for the next financial year.

Nuclear Power Stations

4. **Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will reconsider its stated position of opposing the construction of new nuclear power stations in Scotland. (S6O-05438)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): We do not support the construction of new nuclear power stations in Scotland under current technologies. Although we recognise the role that nuclear has played in the existing energy mix, new nuclear would take decades to deliver, comes at very high cost and creates long-term radioactive waste liabilities.

Scotland has abundant renewable resources, with the clear potential to meet electricity demand through continued deployment of renewable energy and storage. We are prioritising technologies that are quicker to deliver, lower cost and proven to maintain security of supply rather than new nuclear projects that would take decades to materialise.

Jamie Greene: I am afraid that that shows a complete lack of understanding of the nuclear industry and the technology around it. The Liberal Democrats have been on a bit of a journey on

nuclear energy because it complements renewables. The two are not mutually exclusive. The world is less secure. We should not be importing fracked gas into the United Kingdom or Scotland. Embracing nuclear energy will create jobs, growth and investment into the country.

The technology has moved on—so should we. If the Scottish Government will not end its ideological ban on nuclear energy, will it get in the way of any new nuclear development on existing sites and how would it achieve that?

Gillian Martin: Our stated position is no new nuclear, but, obviously, if existing sites are able to extend their life, that is a matter for them, and we would consider that to be a completely different proposition. However, on the cost of nuclear energy, I must point out that Hinkley C was expected to be completed in 2025 at a cost of £18 billion. Now, the cost is estimated at £46 billion, and it is delayed until 2031. I think that that is a lesson for us all. I do not want us to be saddled with something like that in Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: There is much interest but little time. I call Douglas Lumsden to ask a brief supplementary question.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): We know that the Scottish National Party hates oil and gas, and we know that it hates nuclear. The SNP is anti-science, anti-progress and anti-investment, and it wants us all to be poorer. Has the devolved Scottish Government carried out an economic impact assessment on its policy of turning its back on new nuclear investment, and if not, why not?

Gillian Martin: The Scottish Government commissioned a report, which was published in December 2023, which found that the reduction in traditional firm generation in Scotland, which includes nuclear, would be offset by vast increases in wind and solar installed capacity, along with the installation of storage technologies, which would provide continued security of supply in Scotland.

Hospice Care Services

5. **Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to protect hospice care services over the coming year. (S6O-05439)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): The draft budget for 2026-27 includes an initial £6.5 million to support independent hospices and help to ensure that front-line hospice staff who provide essential palliative care are paid in line with their national health service colleagues.

Although that funding will help to address immediate pay challenges, the Scottish Government acknowledges the importance of longer-term financial sustainability for hospices. I look forward to meeting representatives of the Scottish hospice leadership group and Hospice UK in early February to understand what more can be done to support hospices while respecting local commissioning arrangements.

Graham Simpson: The initial £6.5 million for hospices in the draft budget falls significantly short of the £13.3 million that hospices were calling for to fully match NHS pay for their staff. In fact, it includes only £1.5 million for hospices to match next year's NHS pay award, and they say that they need an extra £4.4 million. Will the Scottish Government promise to deliver on its existing commitment to pay parity for hospice staff by ensuring that funding for hospices in the final budget fully covers the cost to hospices of matching the 2026-27 NHS pay award?

Jenni Minto: As I indicated in my first answer, our budget includes an initial £6.5 million to support independent hospices. As I said, I look forward to meeting representatives of the Scottish hospice leadership group and Hospice UK in early February.

Non-medical Aesthetics Sector (Training)

6. **Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it had with non-medical aesthetic practitioners regarding training opportunities for the sector in advance of the introduction of the Non-surgical Procedures and Functions of Medical Reviewers (Scotland) Bill. (S6O-05440)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): The Scottish Government has met many non-medical aesthetic practitioners and listened to their views about issues, including training standards. However, neither the bill nor the Scottish statutory instrument that is currently before Parliament sets any such standards. We know that there are existing training options for practitioners and, before creating standards for the sector, we will continue engaging with a wide range of stakeholders.

Training and qualification standards are not included in the bill or the SSI because of the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020. I intend to continue working with the UK Government to introduce those important standards as soon as possible.

Colin Beattie: Public safety must be paramount, but I have received correspondence from businesses that have spent tens of thousands of pounds on training yet may now be at risk of closure. It is critical that we root out bad practice, but has the minister had any

engagements with educational institutions to facilitate a practical pathway for non-medical aesthetic practitioners?

Jenni Minto: I agree with Colin Beattie that public safety is paramount. In our work with regard to the bill and the SSI, we will be speaking to educational institutions to ensure that we get the right training standards if the bill is passed.

Young Athletes Representing Scotland (Support)

7. **Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what support it will provide to young athletes who will be representing Scotland in sport in 2026. (S6O-05441)

The Presiding Officer: I call the minister, Maree Todd.

The Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy and Sport (Maree Todd): Tapadh leibh, Oifigeir Riaghlaidh. Thank you, Presiding Officer. We are looking forward to a spectacular summer of sport, with the men's football world cup finals and the Glasgow 2026 Commonwealth games. No doubt there will be outstanding performances from Scottish athletes across many sports, demonstrating the strength of Scotland's performance system and further inspiring young people.

I note that sportscotland, working with Scottish governing bodies, provides athlete personal awards and specialist performance services from the sportscotland institute of sport. In addition, the winning students 100 programme offers financial support and academic flexibility for student athletes. The additional £40 million that has been announced in the Scottish budget will enable Scottish governing bodies to better support athletes across sporting pathways.

Liz Smith: That is all very good stuff, but last month I received representations from three different constituents whose daughters have been selected to represent Scotland in volleyball and hockey. They told me that there is no dedicated funding available to cover the costs of travel, accommodation and competition expenses. That has also been a recent issue with women's cricket.

Does the minister agree that this is an unacceptable situation for those who are selected to represent their country? Will some of the budget uplift that she mentioned go towards addressing that situation?

Maree Todd: The member will be aware that the investment that the Scottish Government makes in sport is funnelled through sportscotland, which is our national sporting organisation, and it works closely with the governing bodies for each individual sport to ensure that athletes are supported on the elite pathways. This has been a really successful programme, and that is why Scotland punches above its weight in sport. We are a sporting nation and we are very successful.

In the next week or so—I know that these two teams are close to the member's heart—we will see the Scottish men's cricket team going to the world cup in India and our curlers going to the winter Olympics. We have a system for investing in sport in Scotland. We have a system that is inspiring and encouraging young athletes, and we are successful at sport in Scotland.

US Trade Tariffs (Support for Scottish Businesses)

8. **Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it is working to support Scottish businesses, in light of the potential impact of additional US trade tariffs on the Scottish economy. (S6O-05442)

The Minister for Business and Employment (Richard Lochhead): Free and open international trade is critical to achieving growth in the Scottish economy. The recent threat of additional tariffs from the United States was inconsistent with that, so we all welcome the fact that that risk has now receded. However, the impacts of tariffs continue to be apparent. The Scotch whisky sector reported 1,000 job losses last year, and the sector estimates that a 10 per cent reciprocal tariff could result in up to £400 million of annual losses in exports to the US. Our six-point action plan for exports augments our existing support to respond to the global economic volatility.

Jackie Dunbar: During such global economic uncertainty, it is more vital than ever to champion our world-class Scottish products in both new and existing markets. Will the minister outline a bit more how the Scottish Government's new six-point export plan will help to enable that?

Richard Lochhead: The plan helps both companies and sectors in Scotland to take advantage of additional opportunities for exporting in emerging markets while maintaining footholds in critical existing markets. The additional support that is being made available ranges from increasing company-level support through Scottish Enterprise to extending the reach of our international trade partnership programme with Scottish Chambers of Commerce.

I inform the Parliament that the Government will publish tomorrow our evaluation report on the recent visit by ministers, along with companies from Scotland on trade missions, to the Osaka expo. That will make good reading, and it shows the effort that this Government is making towards promoting exports to the rest of the world, including countries such as Japan.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Benefit Spending

1. **Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con):** The safety net of social security is something that we all value, but Scotland's towering benefits bill stands at around £7 billion a year and is due to reach almost £10 billion by the end of the decade. I have said before and will say again that benefit spending is out of control. We know that it is unfair, unaffordable and unsustainable. Does John Swinney agree, or does he think that the Scottish National Party's benefits system is fair, affordable and sustainable?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I think that the approach that the Scottish Government takes to benefits is based on the principles of fairness and dignity that this Parliament legislated for. I am proud to associate my Government with those values, which are enshrined in statute. I believe that the benefit system in Scotland is sustainable, as is demonstrated by this Government's ability to ensure effective budget planning to meet all those commitments.

I make no apology whatsoever for being determined to protect the vulnerable in our society and to lift children out of poverty. That is what my Government is all about.

Russell Findlay: He is in a state of denial. [*Interruption*].

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Let us hear Mr Findlay.

Russell Findlay: That is not sustainable. Just this morning, the Scottish Fiscal Commission told Parliament that the only ways to plug the benefits gap would be either by having higher taxes or by cutting money from public services. John Swinney cannot admit it, but the SNP's benefits system is broken.

It is deeply concerning that, in some cases, the system acts as a deterrent to work. The Government's own review of the Scottish child payment revealed that some parents turn down extra work or stop working altogether and that some even told their bosses that they did not want a pay rise, because extra pay would reduce their benefits, meaning that they would end up with less money.

We say that limiting the payment to two children per family would be a fair way to address that. [*Interruption*].

The Presiding Officer: Colleagues, let us hear one another. Let us hear Mr Findlay.

Russell Findlay: Surely people should be better off working than being on benefits. Is John Swinney really content with a system that encourages people to turn down a pay rise?

The First Minister: The Government's approach to eradicating child poverty involves a number of measures, one of which is about putting in place effective support for employability to enable parents to get into employment. The measures in the budget also support that by providing wraparound childcare and breakfast clubs so that we can ensure that more parents can get into employment.

I want to see more parents getting into employment so that their families can be lifted out of poverty, but what I will not do and what I am absolutely determined that my Government will never do is punish the vulnerable in our society. Russell Findlay's support for the two-child cap is a demonstration that the nasty party is back good and proper in the Conservative Party.

Russell Findlay: I will read to John Swinney a line from his Government's report, which he has probably not even read. It comes from a parent who spoke to the report's authors.

> "I even asked my line manager not to move me up my annual pay award band because it would have meant maybe a £30 or £40 a month addition on my salary for myself, but it would have cost me around £300 in benefits."

Encouraging people not to work is absurd and harmful, but that is not the only problem with a benefit system that SNP politicians love to boast is "light touch". That might explain the following: in the rest of the United Kingdom, an average of 8,000 people are prosecuted for benefit fraud every year, but Social Security Scotland has reported only 29 cases to prosecutors in almost three years. Most claimants are honest, but those numbers strongly suggest that fraudsters are exploiting the SNP's light touch system and getting away with it—[*Interruption*.]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

Russell Findlay: Does John Swinney seriously think that there have been only 29 cases of benefit fraud in Scotland?

The First Minister: When we established Social Security Scotland, the Scottish Government included measures that were designed to tackle any fraud that is perpetrated within the benefits system. The development of all that activity has been pursued by Social Security Scotland, with reference to the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service when it is appropriate for individuals to be prosecuted.

I accept the importance of ensuring that payments are made only to those who are entitled

to them and that fraud should be pursued where there is any evidence of fraud. However, what I will not do is get into the gutter with Mr Findlay to attack vulnerable people in our society. The Government will ensure that there is proper support to vulnerable people as part of our efforts to lift families out of poverty. That is the mission of my Government.

Russell Findlay: John Swinney can hurl all the nonsense insults that he wants, but the reality is that Scotland cannot afford to pay for the SNP's spiralling benefits bill.

To recap, we know that the SNP's light-touch system deters work and is wide open to fraud, and that it spends—right now—more than £1 billion more on benefits than it receives in funding for them. Incredibly, Labour and Reform are okay with that. Four months ago, Audit Scotland said that John Swinney's Government had no plan to plug the benefits black hole. There is still no plan, unless John Swinney is keeping it a secret from us.

We do have a plan. We identify £1 billion—[*Interruption*.]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Findlay.

Russell Findlay: We identify £1 billion-worth of savings that can be achieved through a series of reasonable proposals. Those savings would be used to cut taxes for hard-working Scots who are being hammered by Labour and the SNP. Is it not the case that cutting taxes for the lowest paid, rather than increasing benefits, is the best way to lift people out of poverty?

The First Minister: Mr Findlay comes along to First Minister's questions and sets out his stall. We now have another chapter of that, with the hostile attitude towards vulnerable people in our society that is consistently represented by the Conservative Party. He also comes along and argues for £1 billion-worth of tax cuts for individuals in Scotland, without a scrap of evidence of being able to deliver any of those tax cuts, because they will undermine public services in our country. [*Interruption*.]

The Presiding Officer: I am sorry, First Minister.

It would be helpful if we could hear one another. I have a lot of colleagues who would like to get in today. Let us make sure that we can hear one another.

The First Minister: When it comes to the sustainability of the public finances, I will pay not very much attention to what Mr Findlay says to me. I will pay more attention to what the credit ratings agencies say about my Government. What they say is that—[*Interruption*.]

The Presiding Officer: Members! [*Interruption*.] If there are members who just want to come and have a good shout, perhaps they need to consider whether their behaviour is appropriate.

The First Minister: I will not listen to what Russell Findlay says to me about the sustainability of the public finances. I will rely on what the credit ratings agencies say, which is that this Government represents "prudent" financial management in Scotland. That is how we deliver sustainability in the public finances, and people can rely on an SNP Government to do exactly that.

Queen Elizabeth University Hospital

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** At the time that the Queen Elizabeth university hospital was opened, Nicola Sturgeon was the First Minister, John Swinney was the Deputy First Minister and finance secretary, who signed the cheques, and Shona Robison was the health secretary. We now know that the hospital was opened too early and when it was not ready, with devastating consequences, including avoidable infections and deaths. External pressure was applied to open the hospital. Why did Scottish National Party ministers put politics before patient safety?

The First Minister (John Swinney): That was not the case, and the reference for that is what counsel to the inquiry said on 23 January. They said there is no evidence of external pressure on NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde to open the hospital early or before it was ready to be opened.

Anas Sarwar: John Swinney is about to regret saying that, because we know that the culture of this SNP Government is to avoid putting things in writing, so that there is no paper trail. However, all it takes is for the guard to slip once.

I have in my hand official Scottish Government meeting notes. These notes, written by a Scottish Government official, relate to a series of meetings that were held on 16 December 2019, 19 December 2019 and 10 January 2020. Those meetings involved a Scottish Government official appointed by the then health secretary, the health board's director of facilities and a consultant who had been engaged by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde to review what went wrong. In the findings, it is stated in black and white that

"Political pressure was also being felt and no consideration was given to delaying the opening of the hospital despite the issues being faced with completion and operation."

Political pressure was also being felt.

Will John Swinney now tell members why political pressure was being applied to open a hospital that this note also makes clear was not ready, which led to people dying, or would he rather answer in the presence of his lawyer?

The First Minister: An inquiry that is exploring all those issues is under way, and evidence is being taken in the presence of Lord Brodie. It is a properly constituted public inquiry that is exploring all the issues that are at stake.

On 23 January, counsel to the inquiry said in the summary there is no evidence of external pressure on NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde to open the hospital early or before it was ready to be opened. That is what counsel to the inquiry said, and Lord Brodie is considering all these issues.

Anas Sarwar: He has been found out. This is a minute between a Scottish Government official appointed by the health secretary, the health board's director of facilities and a consultant who was appointed to look at what happened. I say once again that the official Scottish Government minute of that meeting expressly states in black and white that political pressure was being felt and that no consideration was given to delaying the opening of the hospital. That is damning.

The decision to open the hospital early has resulted in a decade of lies, deceit and cover-up, bullying and gaslighting of staff, families being lied to and denied the truth, and infections that led to the deaths of children and possibly also adults, all because politics was put before patient safety.

The evidence is damning. People died. I ask John Swinney, was it was worth it?

The First Minister: The points that I have put on the record are what counsel to the inquiry set out. As Mr Sarwar knows from my previous answers, the Scottish Government was first made aware of water contamination issues in the hospital in 2018. The Scottish Government has commissioned a public inquiry under the leadership of Lord Brodie, which enables the full consideration of all these issues, the evidence to be assessed and considered, and Lord Brodie to report, which is exactly what he will do.

Social Care (Assessments)

3. **Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** I told the First Minister previously about former care worker Margaret MacGill, who has been in hospital for more than 400 nights. She has been unable to get home because the carers she needs are not available. It has now cost the national health service nearly £200,000 to keep her in hospital when she does not need or want to be there. Three weeks on, she is still in hospital in Wick.

Margaret is not alone. This week, we learned that the number of people who are waiting for a care assessment or a care package has gone up by 20 per cent in the past year. Does the First Minister really think that his draft budget will fix the crisis in social care and get people such as Margaret home?

The First Minister: In addressing the issues around social care, it is vital that we provide the care that people require. We are investing £2 billion in social care integration, and that investment has increased over the lifetime of the Government. The Government's budget includes substantial increases in the resources that are available to local authorities and health boards as part of the measures that are required to deliver effective social care support.

The matter relating to Mrs MacGill, which Mr Cole-Hamilton has raised with me previously, rests on the availability of personnel to deliver that care. As I set out to Mr Cole-Hamilton the last time that we had exchanges on the matter, the issue is significantly affected by the availability of people of working age in areas such as Caithness to deliver such services. We work closely with the local authority and NHS Highland to do all that we can to support the availability of care staff. The measures that I have taken on access to workers from other countries will help in that respect.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: The First Minister knows that we are prepared to vote for his budget if the measures in it are right. We are here to get things done. The Scottish Liberal Democrats have already secured some big wins through our negotiations on the budget—money for backing young entrepreneurs, for colleges, for the removal of peak ferry fares from the northern isles and for faster assessments for autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. However, that is not yet enough to win our support. We will squeeze every penny that we can out of the budget process for business rates, for hospices and, for the sake of people such as Margaret MacGill, for social care. Is his Government prepared to go further to win our support?

The First Minister: I am aware that discussions about the budget process are still going on with the Liberal Democrats and other parties. The budget has not yet come to Parliament for stage 1 consideration, but I welcome the support of other parties for it. It has always been a priority of mine to attract the support of other parties for the Government's budget proposals, and we did that successfully last year.

Mr Cole-Hamilton has given a long list of the many reasons to vote for the Scottish Government's budget, and I confirm that those discussions are still under way.

More Homes Scotland (Affordable Homes)

4. **Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP):** To ask the First Minister how the Scottish Government's new national housing

agency will support its work to deliver more affordable homes. (S6F-04631)

The First Minister (John Swinney): More homes Scotland's mission is to bring simplicity, scale and speed to Scotland's housing emergency response. It will deliver for a generation of Scots new homes more quickly, more affordably and in more liveable, climate-friendly communities.

The 2026 draft budget includes the single largest funding allocation to affordable housing since records began in 1989. We have committed to invest up to £4.9 billion over the next four years, backed by a record £4.1 billion of public investment, helping to deliver 36,000 affordable homes and providing a place to live for around 24,000 children.

Willie Coffey: At a time when the cost of living is spiralling under the Labour Party, it is great to hear that the Scottish National Party Government is taking the action that is needed to deliver warm, affordable housing for families right across Scotland. Will the First Minister tell us a little bit more about how the new agency will support first-time buyers?

The First Minister: The initiative that we are taking with more homes Scotland will streamline and accelerate the delivery of high-quality, affordable homes. It will ensure that more homes will be available across Scotland, including for first-time buyers. Detailed objectives will be set out in due course.

We continue to support home ownership for first-time buyers through a range of interventions. Our low-cost initiative for first-time buyers scheme is helping people on low to moderate incomes to buy a home. Last year, 210 homes were purchased through the scheme, and an estimated 300 homes will be purchased in this financial year.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): I live in hope that the new agency will help to deliver the increase in house building that Scotland desperately needs. However, history tells us that SNP quangos rarely deliver for Scotland.

Almost two years ago, this Parliament declared a national housing emergency, and ministers in this chamber promised urgent action. Creating a new housing agency that will not even be operational until 2028 is not decisive action—it is kicking the can down the road.

What will the Scottish Government do right now—not in two years' time—to support the building of more homes by supporting the private sector and to tackle the appalling backlog in social housing?

The First Minister: The first thing that I would say to Meghan Gallacher is that Scotland has built more affordable homes per capita than England or Wales has in recent years—substantially more. Indeed, since 2007, we have helped deliver more than 141,000 affordable homes. That is 45 per cent more per head of population than in England and 69 per cent more than in Wales. We have a strong track record, but more needs to be done.

In the immediate sense, we are investing money to tackle void properties, and we have thousands of void properties coming back into use. We are putting money in place to acquire properties from the private sector so that more can be used in the affordable housing sector. The investment programme that the Government is setting out in the budget indicates long-term, stable funding for investment in housing for the years to come, and more homes Scotland will accelerate the pace of delivery. That is what my Government is prepared to do. We are prepared to put the resources and measures in place. I wonder whether Meghan Gallacher will support our budget to deliver that expenditure for housing in Scotland.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Given the recent publication of Shelter's Dundee housing emergency action plan and the city's well-rehearsed issues with reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete in residential properties, will the First Minister comment on the fact that Dundee is yet to declare a housing emergency, which would allow us to all act together on the challenges that Dundee faces in relation to housing and homelessness?

The First Minister: We work very closely with Dundee City Council and with housing associations in the locality that deliver significantly in relation to the affordable housing agenda. A decision about declaring a housing emergency in the city of Dundee is obviously a matter for Dundee City Council. It is not for me to dictate to the council, but I can assure Maggie Chapman of the resources and the support of the Scottish Government to advance on those issues, which will continue.

National Health Service Boards (Transparency and Accountability Improvements)

5. **Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking to improve transparency and accountability within NHS boards. (S6F-04616)

The First Minister (John Swinney): Transparency and accountability in our national health service is essential to maintaining public trust. We have strengthened expectations around leadership, information governance, record keeping and decision making across NHS boards. We have also reinforced assurance and escalation arrangements. There are very clear examples of this Government taking action when concerns

arise, and Liz Smith will be aware that we have escalated boards through those frameworks for a variety of different issues. Those measures demonstrate our commitment to strong governance, transparency and accountability.

Liz Smith: Not only are we witnessing the most appalling scandal in NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, but in NHS Tayside, we have the destruction of 40 clinical logbooks in the Eljamel case, despite the issuing of do-not-destroy notices, plus more revelations about serious blunders in jaw surgery. In NHS Forth Valley and NHS Grampian, we have on-going patient complaints about missing documents and non-compliance with statutory complaint procedures.

Those are all examples of the most serious failings of management in different health boards that are the direct responsibility of the Scottish Government. Will the First Minister finally accept that the cultural problem that he has identified in NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde is the exact same cultural problem that has existed in this Government for years and that it is preventing patients from getting to the truth?

The First Minister: The issues in relation to the conduct of healthcare are vital for individuals in our society. The Government intervenes to ensure that, on an on-going basis, NHS health boards are aware of their obligations to be candid and open with members of the public about their treatment. When that is unacceptable, the issues are pursued and addressed by the escalation of individual health boards for greater degrees of scrutiny, which health secretaries are prepared to undertake and apply.

In certain circumstances, such as in the Eljamel case, we refer those issues to independent inquiries. That is an indication of the fact that the Government believes that there must be openness and transparency in the handling of these issues, and that the assurance of the public about the safety and effectiveness of public services must be pursued at all times.

Walk-in General Practitioner Clinics

6. **Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP):** I remind members of my entry in the register of interests. To ask the First Minister how the Scottish Government's launch of walk-in GP clinics will support its work to bring down waiting times and ensure everyone gets the care they need. (S6F-04626)

The First Minister (John Swinney): Our new walk-in GP clinics will make it easier for people to access GP services without an appointment. We have listened to frustrations about the 8 am rush, and our £36 million investment in the initial 15 clinics will help more people to get the right care when they need it. The clinics will sit alongside the historic GP deal that was agreed last year, which delivers record investment in primary care and will complement existing GP services, NHS 24, community pharmacies and hospitals. Together, those actions reflect my clear focus on improving our national health service and delivering for the people of Scotland.

Clare Haughey: Although Labour talks about privatisation and Reform wants to charge people for using the NHS, only the Scottish National Party is committed to defending Scotland's NHS. It is investing to improve it through bold new initiatives such as the GP walk-in centres. [*Interruption*.]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Ms Haughey.

Clare Haughey: Under the SNP Government, we are clearly seeing progress in our NHS— [*Interruption*.]

The Presiding Officer: Colleagues, let us be courteous.

Clare Haughey: I, for one, want to thank our hard-working NHS staff for all that they are doing—unlike our Tory colleagues, it seems. Given that Labour cannot bring itself to do the same, will the First Minister remind our Labour colleagues what improvement we have seen under his leadership in the past year?

The First Minister: I join Clare Haughey in paying tribute to the hard-working staff of our national health service, whose dedication has made possible the improvements that we are seeing in Scotland's national health service— [*Interruption*.]

The Presiding Officer: I am keen for everyone who is gathered in the chamber to be able to hear what is going on.

The First Minister: Let me set out what improvements have been delivered in the national health service. Operation numbers are up; GP numbers are up; the number of nurses, midwives and dental consultants are up; long waits are down and have been down for six months in a row; out-patient waits are down; in-patient and day-case waits are down; and the risk of dying from cancer in Scotland is at its lowest rate on record. That is a record of delivery from the Scottish Government for the national health service, and we intend to continue delivering for the people of Scotland.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): The reality is that the SNP is busted. Today, we have seen that it keeps important information from the public and pretends that it is cleaner than clean. The Scottish Government promised 800 more GPs, but it has failed to reach its target. Despite that promise, there are fewer whole-time equivalent

GPs than there were a decade ago. Those GPs are seeing more patients. They now see 1,700 patients, compared with 1,500 in 2013. Primary care is under incredible strain, and both the British Medical Association and the Royal College of General Practitioners have been critical of the walk-in centres, calling instead for the money to go to existing GP services. How will the First Minister ensure that the walk-in centres are adequately staffed when that is not currently the case in local GP practices?

The First Minister: I reassure Jackie Baillie that GP numbers are going up under the Scottish Government's watch to make sure that we have in place the services that are required in our communities. The Government is going further with GP walk-in centres to make sure that there is even more access for members of the public. That is this Government listening to the people and delivering on the national health service.

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

Mossmorran

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): This is an incredibly worrying time for the workforce at Mossmorran, and urgent action is required. It is welcome that the Scottish National Party Government's budget includes £9 million over three years to help staff and communities who are affected by the plant's closure. Will the First Minister say more about how his funding will be deployed, and about whether he agrees that Anas Sarwar and Scottish Labour should be joining us in pressing their United Kingdom Government colleagues to support our energy sector, rather than letting their support for industry stop at the border?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am committed to ensuring that we do all that we can to support the workforce at Mossmorran. It is an incredibly difficult time for them.

We have engaged extensively with stakeholders to ensure that the funding that is available from the Scottish Government is prioritised to initially support the workers to transition to other employment opportunities and, then, to support efforts to secure a new future for the site. The Deputy First Minister is providing the necessary leadership to drive this crucial work, and Scottish Enterprise has begun work to secure new investment and a future for the site.

We are taking forward all those measures, an essential component of which is ensuring that the Government's budget is supported. I look forward to those colleagues who have an interest in supporting Mossmorran supporting the Government's budget when it comes to the Parliament for approval.

Court System Error (Domestic Abuse)

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): Will the First Minister address the case of my constituent, a mother of four and a survivor of domestic abuse, whose confidential refuge address was disclosed to her abuser due to an admitted failure by the courts during the imposition of a non-harassment order? As a direct consequence of the disclosure, my constituent and her children are required to leave their women's aid accommodation under safeguarding protocols, despite having done nothing wrong and the court formally acknowledging fault. Given that that harm arose solely due to an error by the justice system, what action will the Scottish Government take to ensure that my constituent and her children are provided with immediate, safe and suitable housing? What steps will be taken to ensure that no survivor of domestic abuse is ever again placed at risk due to such a safeguarding failure?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am very concerned to hear the details that Annie Wells has shared with the Parliament. The importance of protecting the privacy, safety and security of the victims of domestic abuse is central to the justice system. I acknowledge the point that Annie Wells has made, which is that the court system has acknowledged the error that it has made. I apologise to Annie Wells and her constituent for the error. It should not have happened. Obviously, there are many protocols and procedures in place to make sure that that does not happen—and it should not have happened.

I understand that Annie Wells has written to the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs. We will ensure that that is given prompt attention to ensure that there is support and assistance in place to address what is an unacceptable incident.

Wemyss Estate Evictions

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Last year, the Wemyss estate sold tenanted properties in West Wemyss and Denbeath to Torah Capital, which has now issued 30 households with eviction notices, with some being asked to vacate their properties by 22 March. That includes people who have been tenants of the estate for some 40 years. It is an extremely worrying and stressful time for all the tenants. What discussions has the Scottish Government had with Fife Council, which is working at pace to try to find a solution, including the possibility of bringing some 30 properties into public sector ownership? What financial support would it be able to offer, if required?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Cabinet Secretary for Housing is engaging with Fife Council on that question to try to find a solution for the individuals who are involved. This will be a very anxious time for those individuals, given the uncertainty about their housing arrangements. That work is under way and dialogue is proceeding. I give Claire Baker the assurance that that will be pursued by the housing secretary.

As I said in my answer to Meghan Gallacher earlier, we are actively engaged in the acquisition of properties to bring them into the public sector housing stock so that we have measures in place to support families to obtain the correct and appropriate form of accommodation. There are opportunities for us to engage constructively with Fife Council on that question, and I give Claire Baker the assurance that we will do so. The housing secretary will keep her updated.

Illegal Puppy Trade

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): The recent successful prosecution case against the Hamiltons, who are part of the cruel puppy farm trade, concluded after a five-year investigation by the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Thirty-three puppies were found in dreadful conditions.

The case was taken as a summary action. Although I fully respect the independence of the prosecution service and the courts, I am concerned that that approach may not be sufficient for such cases—the source of which are often serious organised crime—and that they should be brought under solemn procedure. All that happened in this case was that the Hamiltons got community service and were banned from having more than one dog for five years, which are minor penalties in my book.

The First Minister (John Swinney): I associate myself with the concerns that Christine Grahame sets out about the illegal puppy trade and the harm that is caused to the welfare of dogs as a consequence.

Decisions about prosecution matters are undertaken independently of the Government by the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service. Christine Grahame is an experienced solicitor and parliamentarian; she is familiar with that separation of responsibilities. It would be wrong for me to comment on the decisions that are made that are of a prosecutorial nature. It is important that all those cases are fully and properly investigated and that the Crown can come to its conclusions on those matters.

Forth Valley Royal Hospital Adult Mental Health Unit

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): An inspection at Forth Valley royal hospital's adult mental health unit has caused significant concerns. Issues have been raised about patient support and protection at the hospital. Individuals who should have been under continuous observation were allowed to gain access to open spaces and even to the roof. What measures can be put in place to ensure the safety of those vulnerable individuals?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The issues described in that inspection report raised serious concerns. For that reason, yesterday, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care and the Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing saw the leadership of NHS Forth Valley at my request, to make it abundantly clear that we expect the recommendations to be addressed and the performance to be improved. Ministers will hold the national health service board to account on all those issues.

Co-codamol Shortage (Lanarkshire)

Davy Russell (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab): I have been contacted by local general practitioners who are concerned about the sudden, unexpected shortage of co-codamol in Lanarkshire. The First Minister should be aware that some 40,000 people are addicted to that medication and that shortages will have consequences for everyone else who is in need of pain relief. Can he advise whether that is a short-term supply problem in Lanarkshire or a problem across the country? What action will he take to ensure that there is a continuing supply?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am not aware of a widespread issue with that. We will explore the details of the situation in Lanarkshire and act to address any shortages. There is a well-established system for ensuring that pharmaceutical interventions are available across the country. From time to time, there may well be individual locality challenges. However, we will take away the issues that Mr Russell has raised and explore what can be done to address it.

Energy Profits Levy (Effects on Energy Sector)

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): The shadow of the United Kingdom energy profits levy looms large over my area. Thanks to the Labour UK Government's tax on energy, reports this week have shown a slump in business confidence in the north-east and have warned that thousands of jobs in the energy sector are at risk, including in my constituency of Aberdeen Central.

There is a reason that the energy sector, academics, trade unions and charities are speaking with one voice on the issue, but the Labour UK Government continues to bury its head in the sand. In the face of that Westminster economic mismanagement, can the First Minister advise what steps his Scottish National Party Government is taking to support our energy sector? Does he agree that the impact of sustained Westminster mismanagement clearly makes a case for why we need a fresh start with independence?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The issues that Kevin Stewart raises relate to the balance that has to be struck between reductions in capacity in the oil and gas sector, which are the product of the North Sea being a mature basin, and the rise of alternatives in renewables. A key factor in regulating that is the ability to invest in the North Sea oil and gas sector. As I have said to the Parliament before, that ability is being hampered by the energy profits levy, which undermines investment decisions. I assure Mr Stewart that the Scottish Government has made every effort to persuade the United Kingdom Government to change its stance on the energy profits levy, because it is harming investment and the sustainability of the economy in the north-east of Scotland.

In the budget, we are implementing support for businesses, workers and communities, with more than £120 million already invested in the north-east through our just transition fund and the energy transition fund. Further resources are pledged in the budget that is before the Parliament for approval.

I associate myself strongly with Mr Stewart's point that Scotland needs to be able to benefit from our energy wealth. That is not happening at present, and the fresh start of independence will deliver that for the people of Scotland.

Oil and Gas Sector

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): This week, the Jobs Foundation released its report entitled, "Cliff Edge: Jobs in Aberdeen, the epicentre of the UK's energy transition". The report is a bleak read that reinforces what the Scottish Conservatives have been saying all along: we need to support the oil and gas sector until the transition to renewables has been further developed.

In the north-east, there is a jobs emergency. At Westminster, we have the extremist red Ed Miliband, who is doing all that he can to close the industry down. At Holyrood, we have a First Minister who offers no support to the oil and gas sector and, in jet-set Gillian Martin, an energy minister who is too busy racking up the air miles to release the much-awaited energy strategy.

When will the First Minister get off the fence, show some support to oil and gas workers, stop demonising the industry and finally back Cambo, Rosebank and Jackdaw?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I thought that it was customary to listen to what is said in Parliament and to perhaps adjust one's question to take account of that. I have just confirmed to Mr Stewart that the Government believes that the energy profits levy is a real obstacle to the sustainability of the oil and gas sector in Scotland. I raised that issue directly with the Prime Minister at the British-Irish Council in December, as I have done on previous occasions.

In our budget, we have previously committed to support the transition by supporting workers in the training centres and the various other initiatives in the north-east of Scotland. There is more planned in the Government's budget, but what is Mr Lumsden going to do in relation to that? He is going to vote against it, because he does not want to do the hard yards of supporting the workers in the oil and gas sector. [*Interruption*.]

While Mr Lumsden postures and fails to adjust his questions to take account of what I have said, I will carry on delivering for the north-east of Scotland. [*Interruption*.]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another, colleagues.

Whole-family Support

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Children First has said that the announcement on whole-family support in the Scottish budget will provide

"a lifeline to families who need help most",

and Oxfam has said that it will give families a better chance of making ends meet. Can the First Minister tell us more about the Scottish Government's plans to expand access to free after-school activities? How will that support its national mission of tackling poverty?

The First Minister (John Swinney): As I have set out in some of my other answers, the Government is expanding the support that is available to help with the cost of living and to help with lifting families out of poverty. The investment in the budget in the extra time programme, which complements our work on breakfast clubs, is designed to ensure that families are supported with the assistance that they require to move out of poverty.

Through our budget, we will invest £2.5 million to expand the extra time programme. In

partnership with the Scottish Football Association, we will work to assist families and ensure that provision is in place to enable individuals to sustain their participation and engagement in employment. That is part of a programme of wraparound support that the Government is putting in place to deal with the cost of living challenges that families face.

Community Organisations (Funding Arrangements)

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): Given the immediate and severe impact of the ending of the investing in communities fund, could the First Minister tell members when community organisations will be informed about the transitional funding or bridging arrangements that will be provided to prevent the collapse of vital local services?

I have been made aware that Dr Bell's community centre in Leith, which supports more than 600 families every year, will have to close its doors because of the abrupt withdrawal of that vital funding, which will leave families without the essential support that the community centre provides. Will the First Minister make a commitment to listen to those organisations across Scotland that are facing collapse, to give clarity and to act now?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am not sure whether Sarah Boyack was in the chamber earlier, but Richard Lochhead, the Minister for Business and Employment, confirmed that an extension for 2026-27 is being delivered. That was confirmed to the Parliament earlier this afternoon.

Women Against State Pension Inequality

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): In the past hour, it has been revealed that the United Kingdom Government will not compensate WASPI women. Does the First Minister agree that Labour's U-turn on a U-turn in betraying those women is a new low, even for it?

The Presiding Officer: Please answer to the extent of devolved responsibility.

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am grateful to Mr Gibson for advising Parliament of the decision of the United Kingdom Government. It is deeply regrettable that there will be no compensation for the WASPI women. Those women were promised, in good faith, that the Labour Party would address that historic injustice when it got into Government. It is just another example of the betrayal of individuals in this country by this Labour Government.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time. Before the next item of business there will be a short suspension to allow those who are leaving the chamber and the public gallery to do so.

12:45

Meeting suspended.

12:46

On resuming—

Holocaust Memorial Day 2026

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I encourage those who are leaving the chamber and the public gallery to do so as quickly and as quietly as possible.

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-20318, in the name of Kenneth Gibson, on Holocaust memorial day 2026: "Bridging generations". The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises that 27 January is Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD); acknowledges that the Holocaust was the brutal and barbaric murder of six million Jewish men, women and children by Germany's Nazi regime, and its collaborators, during the Second World War; understands that the date of HMD is the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the largest Nazi concentration and extermination camp, where 1.1 million people were murdered, 90% of them Jewish; notes that the official theme for HMD 2026 is "Bridging Generations", as a reminder that the collective responsibility of all to remember does not end with the survivors, it lives on through their children, grandchildren and all people; recognises that this encourages all to engage actively with the past, and to listen, learn and carry those lessons forward to build a bridge between memory and action, and between history and hope for the future; is aware that the Holocaust is a shockingly dark chapter in human history, and considers that HMD is a crucially important event in the calendar, which aims to highlight the reason why its lessons can never be forgotten and why a zero tolerance approach must always be taken against antisemitism and all forms of prejudice.

12:47

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): It is an honour to open the debate and build on the excellent contributions in debates in recent years that were led by Paul O'Kane and Jackson Carlaw, which makes it clear that the issue transcends party lines.

Holocaust memorial day is held on the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz on 27 January 1945 and is often mislabelled as a remembrance of a single dark chapter in human history in which the hopes, dreams and lives of 6 million Jewish men, women and children were brutally extinguished. An incalculable amount of creativity, innovation and talent in all areas of human achievement died with them—an aberrant, unparalleled crime severed from time. This year's theme—bridging generations—unsettles that illusion. When antisemitism—bluntly, Jew hatred—is confined to isolated events, it appears exceptional and anomalous. Viewed across generations, it reveals itself as neither accidental nor episodic, but endemic.

Antisemitism can be traced to antiquity, when Jewish differences in law, custom and faith in one God were recast as misanthropy, separatism and threat. In Hellenistic and Roman societies, that difference attracted civic suspicion, which embedded in the political imagination and laid the groundwork for persecution, then and later. In 136 AD, the crushing of the Bar Kokhba revolt resulted in catastrophic Jewish losses, famine, enslavement and expulsion from what is now Israel and Palestine. Jewish communities in exile became increasingly exposed to repression, including murder and forced conversion, from seventh century Visigoth Spain to the Beta Israel in 20th century Ethiopia.

In medieval Europe, antisemitism was increasingly articulated through theology, law and popular culture. The belief that Jews were collectively responsible for Christ's death, despite the inconvenience of the crucifixion being ordered by Judea's Roman governor Pontius Pilate, was widely enforced, legitimising exclusion and violence as religiously sanctioned acts. Jews were prohibited from land ownership, restricted to marginal employment and segregated legally and socially.

Between the 12th and 15th centuries, more than 150 documented blood libel accusations falsely alleged that Jews murdered Christians for ritual use. In 1965, during Vatican II, that was formally repudiated and the Pope removed those saints from the pantheon that was associated with it.

The massacre of 150 Jews at York in 1190 was followed 100 years later by the expulsion of all English Jews. Oliver Cromwell permitted their return in 1656. Scotland never had anti-Jewish laws, but few Jews chose to settle here.

In 1096, the first crusade massacred Jewish communities in the Rhineland. When black death struck in the 1340s, killing one third or more of Europe's population, Jews were scapegoated and accused of poisoning wells. In 1349, authorities in Strasbourg arrested the city's entire Jewish population and, on St Valentine's day, 2,000 were publicly killed. Survivors were expelled and their property was confiscated.

Similar pogroms occurred across Europe, including in Basel, Cologne, Erfurt and Mainz. In Spain, where persecution had been periodic, 4,000 Jews were slaughtered in Seville on 6 June 1391, and across Siberia, mobs murdered thousands more, annihilating long-standing communities.

Faced with death or forced baptism, large numbers of Jews converted to Christianity,

creating a substantial population of new Christians, who were commonly known as conversos. They were viewed with suspicion by old Christians, who questioned their religious sincerity. In 1413, Geronimo de Santa Fe, a converso backed by the church, led a 20-month one-sided theological debate, the disputation of Tortosa, to convert Jews by discrediting their beliefs and through intimidation. He was successful, and many converted.

Old Christians remained suspicious of the conversos, and in 1495 and 1497 many of Santa Fe's descendants were accused of corrupted Judaism and burned at the stake. Expulsion of Spain's remaining Jews took place in 1492, and Portugal followed two years later. France had already done so in 1394; they were readmitted only in 1791, after the French revolution.

Despite centuries of persecution, massacre and stigma, Jewish communities somehow endured. In Belmonte, Portugal, the Jewish community was forcibly converted in 1497. In 1974, the community of 300 re-emerged, revealing that it had secretly remained Jewish and had been practising endogamy for five long centuries.

Post-enlightenment, Europe became more tolerant. From Sweden to Switzerland, laws against Jews were gradually abolished, and many assimilated. Yet a particularly virulent strain of Jew hatred emerged—Nazism. By the 1940s, widespread acceptance of Jews after centuries of exclusion, scapegoating and marginalisation transformed an underlying but virulent antisemitism into a brutal convergence of bureaucratic efficiency and moral indifference.

Auschwitz-Birkenau occupies a central place in Holocaust remembrance, which is supported by extensive documentation and survivor testimony. Its immense death toll of approximately 1.1 million people, 90 per cent of whom were Jews, and its gas chambers, crematoria and barracks render its crimes both visible and symbolically representative of the horror that is the Holocaust.

However, genocide took place across Nazi-occupied Europe, with the Einsatzgruppen wiping out entire communities. In five other purpose-built extermination camps—Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, Chelmno and Majdanek—Jews were cruelly murdered and their bodies were burned.

Belzec underscores a critical challenge for generational remembrance, as its historical significance is obscured by the efficiency of its killing process. It was operational from 17 March 1942 and, by 31 December of that year, 434,508 Jews had been murdered, primarily in gas chambers. No one knows how many had died by the time the camp closed in June 1943. With only two known survivors—one was murdered soon after the war ended—Belzec was relegated to the margins of public memory, despite its central role.

Belzec's other survivor, Rudolf Reder, who was born in Debica in Austria-Hungary in 1881 and was deported with his wife and children to Belzec in August 1942, escaped in November of that year. He was aged 61 and was aided in his escape by Ukrainian women. His children had, however, been murdered, as had his wife. Following the Soviet takeover of Poland, Reder testified in January 1946 before the Institute of National Remembrance. A major memorial at Belzec was not opened until 2004, nearly sixty years after that.

For many Holocaust survivors, returning home meant renewed persecution. In post-war Poland, where only one in 10 of the 3.3 million in the Jewish community had survived, between 650 and 2,000 Jews were murdered, often while attempting to reclaim their homes and rebuild their lives.

Across eastern Europe, traumatised survivors were routinely met with discrimination and violence. On 4 July 1946, in Kielce, 42 Jewish survivors were slaughtered by civilians, police and soldiers, following a blood libel accusation. Among the dead were women and children. Nine victims were shot, two were bayoneted and the remainder were beaten to death.

Joseph Feingold, a Holocaust survivor who endured Nazi forced labour and a Soviet gulag, was released in 1946. He returned home on the day of the pogrom to find his home town overcome by mob violence. Feingold was beaten unconscious and left for dead. Reflecting later, he described the moment as a realisation that war against the Jews had not ended.

Hatred of the Jews is an ideology that seems eternal. It can be found among religious fanatics, atheists, capitalists and communists. It is a hatred that accuses Jews of being too white or not white enough and is rooted in a ludicrous mythical conspiracy that they are responsible for the ills of the world.

In the 1950s, communist parties across eastern Europe purged their Jewish members. Stalin's campaign against "rootless cosmopolitanism" was set to culminate in the deportation of all Soviet Jews to Siberia, had he not died in 1953.

Although Arab countries were traditionally more tolerant of Jews than the Christian world was, massacres took place in many of them, where Jews had lived since before Islam. In 1941, 180 were killed in Iraq, 133 in Libya and 97 in Yemen. Iraq's thriving 150,000-strong Jewish community dwindled to zero. Libya has had no Jews since 1969, and Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan also have none.

There has been a 97 per cent decline in Jewish populations across the Muslim world in 80 years. The vast majority emigrated to, and thereby strengthened, Israel, where half the world's 16 million Jews now live. That is hardly surprising, when attacks on Jewish communities can seemingly happen anywhere at any time.

From the murder of 11 Jewish athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics, through 285 people being killed in the 1974 Buenos Aires bombing, and dozens being killed in a series of Istanbul synagogue attacks between 1986 and 2003, to the attack at Bondi beach, where 15 were slain only last month, antisemitism is too often dismissed as marginal or incidental and framed as the actions of isolated individuals rather than a symptom of broader social currents.

Australian authorities identified the Bondi beach attack as being influenced by antisemitic ideology. Despite that, early commentary framed the violence as anomalous rather than part of a longer continuum of hatred. Among those who were killed was Alex Kleytman, an 87-year-old Holocaust survivor. On the 75th anniversary of the Holocaust, he publicly warned of rising antisemitic violence in contemporary society. Eight decades after surviving genocide, he was murdered celebrating Hanukkah.

Sadly, here in Scotland, Jews report feeling increasingly unsafe. Events in the middle east lead to Jews here being collectively blamed for acts of a Government that they did not vote for in a country that they do not live in. Bridging generations begins with understanding that remembrance is not a passive act. As Hannah Arendt observed, the real risk lies in thoughtlessness—the tendency to overlook familiar patterns of hatred until they repeat themselves. Each generation inherits not only the memory of antisemitism but the responsibility to recognise its reality. Remembrance, then, is not just about the past but about paying careful attention and challenging antisemitism today.

12:58

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): In the first book of his seminal autobiographical quartet, "Growing up in the Gorbals", the accomplished psychologist and economist Ralph Glasser reflected that, growing up, he tended to hide the fact that he was Jewish in view of the prejudice prevailing in the society of his day, which

"burdened every step of our lives"

and resulted in the need

"to bury it beneath some protective colouring, so that we might go our private ways like everybody else".

Growing up in the 1970s among Scotland's largest Jewish community as I did, I have reflected before on the impact of Dr Jacob Bronowski, in his landmark series "The Ascent of Man", standing ankle deep in the detritus of Auschwitz—not somewhere that it was possible to routinely visit in those days—and looking at the prospect that his relatives were among the ashes at his feet. Two years later, in 1976, Sir Jeremy Isaacs's landmark series on ITV, "The World at War", was the first to use graphic footage of what had happened and brought the full consequence of the Holocaust to the attention of a world that had perhaps known but not fully addressed it.

I thought that I would try to find answers myself. Forty-two years ago, I travelled along the corridor from West Germany to Berlin, thinking that in Berlin I would perhaps find some answer to what had happened. I stood outside Spandau prison, in which the only remaining architect of the Holocaust, Rudolf Hess, was still a prisoner. The buildings next door, which are all now demolished, held some of the execution chambers where Hitler hung with piano wire not just those who stood against him but Jews who were uncovered in Berlin in the later stages of the war.

Despite the beauty, still, of the Tiergarten, I am afraid that there was nothing about Berlin that offered any answers at all. It was a city still devastated, and the political quarter was still undeveloped. Talk then of reunification seemed far-fetched, but in fact reunification was not that far away.

I went to Vienna, a city about which Angus Robertson has written a remarkable book, but it was very reluctant to address its support for Hitler. The Imperial hotel, where Hitler addressed the masses, is curiously reluctant to admit to playing any part in celebrating the Anschluss at that time or to its complicity in the war that took place. I found no answers there.

I thought that perhaps if I travelled to Auschwitz, which I did 15 years ago, there would be something that would reveal what had happened. I visited Auschwitz again just last November—this time in beautiful sunshine, only to realise that evil itself takes place under the sun, not just on the dark, desolate days that are typically portrayed when one watches movies of the Holocaust—and there stood the most extraordinary apparatus of industrialised murder. More than a million people—not just Jews but homosexuals, Gypsies and goodness knows how many others—were brutally exterminated in that camp.

How extraordinary it was, on that beautiful day in November, when I was standing at the end of the railway track in Auschwitz, where the trains came, to imagine, as I have seen in the

photographs, young children jumping off the train after that perishingly brutal journey, thinking that they had arrived at their destination, that this was it and that they were going to live a better life, only to be marched literally 40 yards either way to the two more recently built crematoria at the top of Auschwitz to be exterminated there and then.

There is no answer but that of the testimony that Kenny Gibson has just given in his very powerful speech—that antisemitism has been rooted in society not for decades, not for centuries, but really since Judaism was founded as a religion. It falls to us now, as the testimony about those who were exterminated in the Holocaust becomes not first-hand testimony or second-hand testimony but historical event, to confront antisemitism. It relies on us and those who follow us, the fantastic ambassadors that we have in Scotland for the Holocaust Educational Trust and all those who are determined to ensure that we confront and fight that legacy of antisemitism.

As I found in Poland when I attended the European Jewish Association conference in November, which was the reason why I then went to Auschwitz, it is not just here—it is across all Europe. Antisemitism is on the rise and it has to be confronted; otherwise, "never again" will not be never again—"never again" will be now, and that will be our responsibility. We have to stop it ever happening again.

13:03

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I advise members that the Deputy Presiding Officer has permitted me to leave the chamber after the speech following mine, due to a conflicting and long-standing obligation that has arisen only because of the rescheduling of this debate. I very much regret that, as I certainly would have preferred to hear all contributions.

What I have to say initially is in no way to diminish the horrors of the Holocaust. Today, antisemitism is on the rise, and, in part, the conflict in Gaza gives some the fuel for an excuse for that. It is the elephant in the room, which I will address sensitively, I hope.

The atrocity of 7 October—the brutality when 1,200 Jewish people were murdered, more than 5,400 were injured and more than 200 were taken hostage—is without any defence. The international outrage that followed was absolutely right, but the actions of Benjamin Netanyahu and his allies in exacting revenge—ostensibly on Hamas, but in Gaza—are an outrage with every appearance of genocide. The death toll is more than 69,000, including 17,000 children, and at least 170,000 people have been injured. In the West Bank, the death toll is more than 1,000, including 200 children, and 6,000 people have been injured. Ninety per cent of Gaza's population have been displaced, and the entire surviving population faces an acute lack of food, with the deliberate actions of the Netanyahu Government preventing access to food and medical aid. I add that those statistics are not from Hamas but from the Red Cross.

I make an emphatic distinction between Netanyahu and the majority of the Israeli population, who have demonstrated against his actions and who are also denied a truly free media. Netanyahu has blockaded not just their press and the aid convoys, but the international press in Gaza. No wonder those actions have been a fertile ground for stirring hatred of the Jewish community wherever it is. For that, there is no defence, but that connection has been fostered by Netanyahu. On 7 October last year, he said to the UN:

"Hamas carried out the worst attack on Jews since the Holocaust."

I was born in 1944 and I became aware of the Holocaust from my parents. Later, I read the diary of Anne Frank when I was about 15—the same age that she was when she was eventually exposed and later executed. She hid for two years, from 1942 to 1944, which is the year in which I was born. She died in Belsen in 1945, one of more than 6 million who died in the Holocaust. The connection, given her age and mine, made her more real to me and her story more heartbreaking. Her account of her life shows her optimism on the brink of adulthood, sheltered in the attic, as well as the reality of occupation and the courage of those who sheltered her. For her, that day-to-day life was normal. Her diary is one true account among those of the millions of individuals who were brutally murdered and whose lives were lost. Not many European nations could escape having blood on their hands as the death camps industrialised that murder.

We must not allow the collective memory of the Holocaust to be diminished or tarnished by the action of the Israeli Government in Gaza. The Hamas atrocity does not permit atrocities in Gaza. Gaza atrocities do not permit antisemitism. Sadly, in this month of the bard, it all reminds me of the continuation of man's inhumanity to man.

13:07

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): This is the fifth debate on Holocaust memorial day in the current session of Parliament. It has been an honour for me, in my time in Parliament, to participate in each of those debates, alongside colleagues from across the chamber. Holocaust remembrance in this Parliament has been a

collective endeavour across the parties. I pay tribute to Kenneth Gibson for leading our debate today, and I pay tribute to Jackson Carlaw for his efforts over the years, along with myself. Indeed, I pay tribute to both members for their collaboration on the commemoration events in the Parliament last week and for their collaboration over many years.

At this point in the parliamentary session, it is important that we all rededicate ourselves to Holocaust remembrance and education and that we put on record today the importance of continuing that into the next Parliament. We can try to read the runes, but none of us knows what that Parliament's make-up will be. It is important that, whether we are hoping to come back or not, we all rededicate ourselves to ensuring that this place continues to lead the nation in our remembrance and our calls for education.

One of the most encouraging things in the past five years, which have often been difficult years in terms of geopolitics, as members have referenced, has been the voices and the participation of young people in this Parliament and across Scotland in remembering the Holocaust, educating their peers and learning for themselves, often through encountering for themselves the places that Jackson Carlaw touched on and broadening their horizons and their understanding of the Holocaust and subsequent genocide.

We can reflect on the wonderful ambassadors of the Holocaust Educational Trust and of the Anne Frank Trust; on the vision schools Scotland programme, which does such great work in our schools; on the drama work done in schools by Beyond Srebrenica; and on the time for reflection leaders that we heard from this week. We have heard a rich and diverse range of young voices in Parliament—they have been passionate and eloquent, and they have led by example.

That really speaks to this year's Holocaust memorial day theme of "Bridging Generations", because it is the duty of all of us to ensure that we are bridging the gap that now exists between living survivors and subsequent generations. We now have a generation of young people who will encounter the Holocaust only through secondary sources and will not have the opportunity to meet survivors, many of whom, although they were children when they escaped the Holocaust, are now advanced in age. I pay tribute to the survivors who continue doing everything that they can to educate.

In my remaining time, I will touch on something else that is really crucial this year. Scotland's senior rabbi, Rabbi Moshe Rubin, who will be known to many here, spoke at the East Renfrewshire Holocaust memorial day commemoration on Monday night and raised concerns that the number of schools in the United Kingdom participating in events to mark Holocaust memorial day is reported to have fallen by 60 per cent since the 7 October terrorist attacks on Israel. Surveys also show that many young adults—indeed, a third of young adults in the UK—are unable to name Auschwitz or any other concentration camp or ghetto where the crimes of the Holocaust were committed. When asked if they had encountered Holocaust denial or distortion on social media, 23 per cent of young people surveyed said that they had and 20 per cent of survey respondents more widely in the UK believed that 2 million or fewer Jews were killed, while others did not know that 6 million Jewish people had been killed in the Holocaust. Those figures should concern every one of us, and it should be our duty to renew the call for education and remembrance among young people.

As I said, we have wonderful examples of that happening in Scotland. I pay tribute to the Government, which continues to invest in that work, and I believe that there is a collective will across this Parliament to do that. However, there are really clear examples of what can happen when we do not educate, do not allow a space for debate and discussion or do not encourage young people to ensure they are accessing reputable and true sources.

As we end this session of Parliament, my call to those of us who are fortunate enough to be here in the next session is for a rededication and for an effort to ensure that all young people, and all people more generally, can have high-quality Holocaust education and remembrance.

13:12

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this members' debate on Holocaust memorial day, and I thank Kenny Gibson for lodging his motion.

On 27 January, we mark the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. The date stands as a symbol both of unimaginable horror and of survival against all odds. We remember the 6 million Jewish men, women and children murdered by the Nazi regime and its collaborators and remember, too, the Roma and Sinti people, the disabled people, the LGBTQIA+ people, the political dissidents and the many others who were persecuted, brutalised and killed because they were deemed unwanted, dangerous or less than human.

Holocaust memorial day is not only about remembrance; it is about responsibility, and the 2026 theme of "Bridging Generations" speaks powerfully to that duty. As survivors age and fewer

remain to tell their stories in person, the responsibility to remember does not fade but deepens. Their memory must live on through children, grandchildren, communities and institutions, and through our actions as lawmakers.

I have spoken here before about the importance of listening to testimony, to survivors and refugees and to those whose lives have been marked by violence and displacement. Testimony is not passive: when we truly listen, we are changed and are called to act. To bridge generations means to ensure that remembrance does not become a ritual without meaning but is a living commitment to justice, peace and dignity.

We cannot honestly remember the Holocaust without acknowledging what followed. The promise of "never again" was made in the ashes of Europe, yet, in the 81 years since the end of the second world war, genocide and mass atrocities have scarred our world again and again—in Cambodia, in Rwanda, in Bosnia, against the Yazidi people, and today, for all of us to see, in Palestine. To say this is not to diminish the Holocaust; it is to honour its lessons. The dehumanisation that enabled the Holocaust did not vanish in 1945. It reappears whenever whole peoples are reduced to threats, statistics or collateral damage. When civilians are starved, burned, bombed, displaced and denied basic humanity, we must have the courage to name what is happening and to insist on accountability, protection of human life and an end to violence.

Holocaust memorial day calls us to a zero-tolerance approach to antisemitism, and that commitment is absolute. Antisemitism is real, it is rising and it must be confronted wherever it appears. However, that commitment sits alongside—not in opposition to—our responsibility to challenge all forms of racism, Islamophobia, anti-Roma prejudice, homophobia, transphobia, ableism and all dehumanisation and bigotry. Justice is not selective, and human rights are not conditional.

As Greens, and as parliamentarians committed to peacemaking, we believe that security comes not from domination or erasure, but from justice, equality and respect for international law. Remembering the Holocaust demands that we reject the idea that some lives matter less than others, whether that is because of religion, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality or disability.

Bridging generations also means speaking honestly to young people. They see the world as it is—fractured, violent and unequal—but they also bring clarity and moral courage. They ask why lessons that we claim to have learned are still being ignored. We owe them more than platitudes—we owe them action.

Holocaust memorial day is a moment of solemn remembrance, but it is also a call to conscience. To remember is to resist; to remember is to stand against hatred in all its forms; and to remember is to act for peace, justice and a future in which "never again" is not a slogan but a reality for all.

I will close with words from Holocaust survivor Eliezer Wiesel in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech:

> "I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented."

13:17

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I thank Kenny Gibson for bringing this important debate to the chamber. There have been many great speeches, and I am not sure that my contribution will be as good as anybody else's, but I shall try.

I am sorry—I will have to sit for a minute.

Paul O'Kane: Would Beatrice Wishart take an intervention?

Beatrice Wishart: Yes.

Paul O'Kane: I am grateful to Beatrice Wishart for taking my intervention and I am sure that her speech will be as good as the others in the debate.

This is obviously a difficult subject to discuss, but does Beatrice Wishart agree that young people are really important in relation to the Holocaust commemoration debate? I am sure that she will have seen—in Shetland and her community—young people standing up to speak and contributing to ensuring that we all continue with Holocaust remembrance.

Beatrice Wishart: I thank Paul O'Kane for his intervention and for giving me a minute to breathe. I also thank the two young Holocaust Educational Trust ambassadors for their powerful contributions in the chamber earlier this week at time for reflection.

The theme of this year's Holocaust memorial day is bridging generations. As the number of living camp survivors dwindles, we seek to continue to pass on their testimony—the lived experience of the horrors of the Holocaust—to young people, so that future generations learn, in the hope that history does not repeat itself.

It is our duty to ensure that the brutal and barbaric murder of 6 million Jewish men, women and children by the Nazi regime and its collaborators during the second world war is not forgotten. There is no place for antisemitism, but—as other members have said—it is on the rise and it must be called out.

We hear the voices of those from the Jewish community in the UK today, who fear for their own, and their children's, safety. We must root out and challenge Holocaust denial and revisionism wherever we find it. Today, we rightly focus on the victims of the Holocaust, and we also remember others who perished at the hands of the Nazi regime.

Like Christine Grahame, I learned about the Holocaust when I was quite young. Both my parents signed up to serve King and country in the second world war: my father was an Army film cameraman out in Burma, and my mother was in the Women's Royal Naval Service—the Wrens—and was stationed in London for part of the war, when bombs were being dropped on the city.

In those days, news came via the radio, newspapers or newsreels in the cinema. Near the end of the war, news seeped out about death camps and gas chambers in Europe. I remember my mother recalling her shock at seeing in the newsreels the haunting images, with which we are all now familiar, of the liberation of camps with names that have gone down in history: Dachau, Bergen-Belsen and Auschwitz-Birkenau. She could not comprehend that people could inflict such horror, brutality and degradation on other human beings. That was more than 80 years ago, but we would be wrong to think that genocide is consigned to the history books—sadly, we have seen it in too many other places in the intervening years. Like Christine Grahame, I read Anne Frank's diary when I was in my teens.

Shetland has its own unique place in the history books. During the second world war, a fleet of small fishing boats crossed the North Sea between Norway and Shetland under cover of winter darkness. It became known as "taking the Shetland bus", bringing to safety those who were fleeing persecution and whose lives were at risk in Nazi-occupied Norway. The fishing boats returned to Norway with supplies for the clandestine operations of the brave Norwegian resistance. Around 350 refugees came to the UK via the Shetland bus route, including some Jewish people, and each person was a life saved.

When we pass the important history of the Holocaust down the generations, we should instil the timeless democratic ideals of pluralism, difference and diversity. It is crucial that we hold on to openness, human rights and co-operation in global affairs and in our domestic politics. Words matter, as does action. We look around the world today and we see prejudice and persecution, and people being targeted, such as those at Australia's Bondi beach last month. Nowhere is immune.

In bridging generations, we must stamp out prejudice in all its forms.

13:22

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I thank Kenneth Gibson for bringing the debate to the chamber, and I pay tribute to the wonderful contributions from members across the chamber, in particular the exceptionally moving contribution from Beatrice Wishart.

These debates matter, because they give us the space not just to reflect on history and on the past, and to think of all those who were lost, but to consider what that history asks of us here, now, today. Marked on 27 January, Holocaust memorial day falls on the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz—a place that has come to symbolise the sheer scale of the brutality of the Holocaust. Six million Jewish men, women and children were murdered by the Nazi regime and its collaborators, but alongside them, there were people, not necessarily Jewish but with other characteristics, who were murdered, too: Roma people, disabled people, deaf people, LGBT people, political opponents and others who were deemed unworthy of life. That was not an accident of history—it was a result of ideology, dehumanisation and systems being turned against people.

I recently attended the Holocaust memorial day event in the Scottish Parliament, and I want to reflect on that experience because it has stuck with me, as these events often do. We heard directly from a Holocaust survivor. She spoke about her childhood during the war: about the fear that was constant, about hiding and about the calculations that she and her family had to make again and again simply to stay alive. Those were not abstract decisions—they were human ones, made under unimaginable pressure, where a single mistake could cost the family everything.

She spoke about living in France—in occupied territory—and explained that her family was hiding from not just Nazi SS soldiers but the Vichy police—ordinary police officers, wearing uniforms, representing the institutions that people were meant to trust. She did not draw parallels to the present day, and I am not claiming to do that on her behalf, but it was a reminder to me of something deeply important—that threats do not always look like what we might expect. Sometimes, they look official; sometimes, they look legitimate; and, sometimes, they present as order.

She went on to describe how Jewish people were stripped of their humanity, gradually, through language, labelling and being spoken about as lesser, a problem and something to be managed. As I sat listening, it was impossible not to reflect on the power of language and how easily harm can be justified once people are never seen as fully human.

The theme for Holocaust memorial day this year is bridging generations, and it was great to see at that event a pupil, Finlay Cleland, from Banff academy in my constituency, reciting a poem that he had written after visiting Bosnia, where another horrific genocide was committed. It gives me hope to see young people taking note. Seeing our efforts to pass down that history being picked up and guarded is exactly what we must aim for because, without that, remembrance risks becoming something that we mark rather than something that actually changes us.

It is about not just remembering the dead but protecting the living. I hope that we listen, learn and carry the lessons forward, not just in words, but in deeds and in the choices that we make to protect our human rights and values and have humanity every day.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Stephen Kerr is the final speaker in the open debate.

13:26

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Karen Adam is right. There have been some excellent speeches—in fact, all the speeches in the debate have been excellent. I thank Kenny Gibson, Jackson Carlaw and Paul O'Kane for the work that they have done in keeping the spirit of remembrance and connection with Holocaust memorial day in the Parliament.

I also pay tribute to Beatrice Wishart, who gave a very moving speech. She brought to my memory the famous broadcast of Richard Dimbleby reporting from Belsen. Members will be aware that, when he filed his report, the management at the BBC were reluctant to broadcast it. It was only because Richard Dimbleby threatened to resign if it was not broadcast that it was broadcast at all. I am afraid that that, too, is an apocryphal story, about the nature of man's inhumanity to man and perhaps our determination at times to hide away from brutal realities.

Holocaust memorial day was created not simply to remember the past but to guard the future. The 2026 theme, "Bridging Generations", as has been said by many members, could not be more necessary than it is now. We are living through a period in which the facts of the Holocaust are not just fading with time and the passing of generations but are being openly challenged, distorted, mocked and weaponised. That should alarm every one of us.

After the horrors of the 1930s and 1940s, we said collectively, as a human race, that what happened to Europe's Jews would never happen again. Maggie Chapman has, rightly, identified a whole list of occasions since 1945 when that lesson has not been remembered and that vow has not been kept. We said that the systematic attempt to eradicate an entire people—men, women and children—would stand for ever as a warning to humanity. However, today, antisemitism is re-emerging with a confidence that would have been unthinkable even a decade ago—not whispered or hidden but shouted, shared online, excused as politics and, too often, indulged by institutions that should be holding the line, including schools and public bodies that quietly step back from Holocaust education or commemoration because it is seen as too difficult or too controversial.

Since 7 October, something deeply troubling has happened. The events in the middle east have been used as a licence by some to reopen the sewer of anti-Jewish hatred—hatred that is racial in nature, whatever language it dresses itself up in; that holds Jewish people collectively responsible; that denies their right to safety; and that treats their fear as something to be dismissed.

The consequences are not theoretical. Jewish people in this country—people who have lived here for generations—now speak openly about feeling unsafe, about hiding the symbols of their faith and about considering whether this country is still a place where their children can grow up without fear. That should shame us. We saw last year in Manchester how quickly hatred turns into violence; as has been referenced, we have seen similar events around the world, including on Bondi beach. These are not isolated incidents. They are symptoms of something darker—a culture in which historical truth has been weakened and moral boundaries are blurred.

Therefore, Holocaust education has never been more important, not as a ritual or as a box to tick, but as a defence against lies. The Holocaust is now being challenged in ways that are new, and on a scale and with a confidence that is incredible. Young people are being exposed to denial, trivialisation and outright conspiracy online. The language of genocide is being distorted and the facts are being blurred. The intent is clear—to erode and distort memory and, with that, any sense of collective responsibility.

I do not accept that the pathway that we are on is an inevitability. Freedom of expression matters, but it must never become a cover for propaganda or fake history. There is a difference between debate and denial, between criticism and dehumanisation. A society that forgets that difference does not stay free for long.

Today, we remember the victims and we honour the survivors, but above all we recommit ourselves to the future, to education, to vigilance and to the courage to confront hatred wherever it appears, because memory alone is not enough. What we do

with it now will decide whether future generations inherit truth or something far more dangerous.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Kerr. I now invite Siobhian Brown to respond to the debate. Minister, you have around seven minutes.

13:32

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): First, I thank Kenny Gibson for lodging the motion for today's debate, which provides us with an invaluable opportunity to commemorate Holocaust memorial day. Whenever we have this debate, I always find it deeply moving to hear all the heartfelt reflections that members offer, but I find it equally uplifting that, during such a vital period of remembrance, we can all stand shoulder to shoulder.

There were so many excellent speeches; every single one was excellent, but I am just going to highlight a few. Kenny Gibson gave a very powerful speech. Kenny, I sometimes think that you are a walking encyclopaedia—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, could you please speak into the microphone?

Siobhian Brown: I am sorry. I sometimes think that Kenny Gibson is a walking encyclopaedia. He gave a very in-depth historical overview, outlining how deep-rooted Jewish hatred can be and how it must be challenged.

Jackson Carlaw set out his very personal journey, over many years, of trying to understand why this happened, only to find that there is no answer. He made it clear that antisemitism is on the rise and that we all have a responsibility to challenge it and to confront it at every opportunity, and the same view was echoed by Maggie Chapman and Beatrice Wishart.

Paul O'Kane and Stephen Kerr raised the importance of education. As Mr O'Kane said, our Parliament must move forward in leading the nation in remembrance and also education. We need to bridge the gap and ensure that living testimony continues through education.

I thank Beatrice Wishart so much for her very emotive contribution. Genocide is not consigned to the history books, and it is important that we bridge the generations.

Today, we honour the 6 million Jewish men, women and children who were murdered as well as the millions more who were targeted, persecuted and killed by the Nazis. We also pay our respects to the countless number of innocent people whose lives were callously cut short in the genocides that followed in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur.

Holocaust memorial day marks the liberation of Auschwitz, a place of unspeakable cruelty and an inescapable reminder of the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazi regime. It is vital to understand that that crime against humanity was not sudden in nature, nor was it inevitable. It was instead the result of creeping yet purposeful dehumanisation of the Jewish people, whose very basic human rights were eroded in a climate of the most extreme hatred.

When I had the privilege of visiting Srebrenica last year with fellow member Paul O'Kane as part of a delegation to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the Bosnian genocide, I was overwhelmed by the care that was given to building a lasting legacy to the 8,000 Muslim men and boys who were massacred by Bosnian Serb soldiers. That was the largest incident of mass murder in Europe since the second world war, but much like the Holocaust, its roots can be tracked back to intensifying levels of prejudice, which sowed the seeds of the genocidal acts that would later follow.

Such deplorable events have left lasting scars on our world, and they are a stark warning of the terrible consequences if we stand idle in the face of bigotry and discrimination. Committing to confronting and learning from the horrors of the past must never serve only as words but must be a moral obligation and a call to action that unites each and every one of us. The recent horrific attacks that occurred in Manchester and at Bondi beach, in my home city of Sydney, show us that there must be a zero-tolerance approach to antisemitism. That is why the Scottish Government is taking decisive measures to ensure that all our diverse communities are robustly protected against those who seek to cause them harm.

Our hate crime strategy aims not only to ensure that victims of prejudicial criminality are cared for and supported but to strategically address the roots of such behaviour by engaging constructively with partners in the justice system. Schools play a vital role in supporting children and young people to challenge prejudices such as antisemitism, and they help our young people to value a diverse and respectful Scotland. By educating our young people about all cultures, faiths and belief systems, we support them to become responsible and truly global citizens, while helping to counteract prejudice and exclusion at the earliest opportunity.

We see Holocaust education as a vital component of that work, which is why we continue to be committed to providing opportunities for Scotland's children and young people to learn about the Holocaust and contemporary antisemitism in our curriculum. That includes providing grant funding of up to £200,000 in this

financial year to the Holocaust Educational Trust's lessons from Auschwitz programme, which gives students and teachers an opportunity to visit Auschwitz. We also give £40,500 of funding to Vision Schools Scotland, which encourages effective school-based Holocaust education by supporting teachers in their teaching of the Holocaust and in addressing antisemitism.

Before I close, I would like to take a moment to reflect on the Scottish ceremony that was kindly hosted at the Parliament last Thursday night by our friends at the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, which Karen Adam referred to in her contribution. It was an honour to share the platform with two remarkable individuals: Joan Salter, a survivor of the Holocaust, and Var Ashe Houston, a survivor of the Cambodian genocide. They shared with us very personal and, at times, emotional and heartbreaking yet inspiring stories of survival in the face of some of the worst adversities that one could possibly imagine. Also in attendance and providing a range of poignant reflections, as Jackson Carlaw referred to in his contribution, were a number of young people, including ambassadors from the Anne Frank Trust and the Holocaust Educational Trust. Their compassionate and considered contributions brought to light why the message of this year's theme—"Bridging Generations"—is so vital in these precarious times and why, by carrying forward the voices of the past, we can work collectively towards a better future.

We are now, more than ever, duty bound to preserve the memories of Holocaust survivors. This responsibility takes an even greater resonance as we seek to guard against growing distortion and those whose motivation is to undermine the truth and the horrors that human beings can inflict on one another. By remaining unified in our resolve to resist exclusionary and dehumanising narratives and instead champion the inclusive values that underpin our society, we together can have a Scotland where each of us may flourish, in safety and in peace.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. That concludes the debate.

13:39

Meeting suspended.

14:15

On resuming—

Business Motion

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-20610, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on changes to business.

Motion moved,

after	
followed by	Scottish Government Debate: Common Organisation of the Markets in Agricultural Products (Fruit and Vegetables) (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2026 [draft]
insert	
followed by	Stage 3 Proceedings: Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill
delete	
5.25 pm	Decision Time
and insert	
6.25 pm	Decision Time—[*Graeme Dey*].

Motion agreed to.

Portfolio Question Time

Education and Skills

14:15

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is portfolio question time. The portfolio this afternoon is education and skills. I remind members that questions 2, 4 and 6 are grouped together. I will take supplementaries on those questions after all three have been answered. If a member wishes to ask a supplementary question, they should press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question.

Question 1 has not been lodged.

Newly Qualified Teachers (Permanent Posts)

2. **Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the availability of permanent teaching posts for newly qualified teachers. (S6O-05444)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): Under the Education Act 1980, local authorities are solely responsible for the recruitment and employment of teachers. Notwithstanding that, since 2021, the Government has provided in excess of £800 million to support enhanced salaries for Scotland's teachers, ensuring that they remain the best paid on these islands, with the top of the classroom teacher salary scale now standing at £52,614.

In addition, the Government provided extra funding in this year's budget, which uplifted the ring-fenced funding for teacher numbers to £186.5 million. Our budget for 2026-27 maintains that financial commitment to safeguard teacher numbers.

Alexander Stewart: Figures show that nearly nine in 10 newly qualified primary teachers are stuck in temporary posts or doing supply work, without a permanent job. That is not what they signed up to when they trained to become teachers. How does the cabinet secretary explain the collapse of permanent primary teaching jobs after years of Scottish National Party promises to expand the workforce?

Jenny Gilruth: On the issue of permanence, I very much welcome that this year's statistics show a slight improvement. The overall number of those who have gained employment post probation has increased from 65 per cent last year to 69 per cent. However, there are substantive problems in relation to primary teachers, which I accept.

The improvement that we have seen has been delivered as a result of the extra funding that I spoke about in my original answer, which was secured through the budget. I was grateful to colleagues across the chamber who were able to vote for the budget, and I hope that Conservative colleagues will find themselves able to vote for the budget this year to protect funding for teacher numbers, which has paid dividends in the past year alone.

We also provide extra funding to Scottish councils via the Scottish attainment challenge. We know that, across the country, that is helping to support the employment of around 3,000 extra staff, of whom approximately 700 are teachers. That is welcome.

In addition, we have recently announced a recruitment campaign that I am sure colleagues will be aware of, which is very much focused on filling the gaps that we know exist in secondary schools in particular. One of the options that I have been exploring with the Geneal Teaching Council for Scotland, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the teaching unions is how we might provide funding to enable primary teachers who are unable to obtain jobs to qualify in secondary subjects for which they might already have some of the necessary qualifications.

I talked about that in a bit more detail at the Education, Children and Young People Committee last week. We will be meeting colleagues to discuss the issue in the coming weeks, and I will be happy to give Mr Stewart a written update on the progress that we make.

Newly Qualified Teachers (Employment)

4. **Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to ensure that newly qualified teachers are able to secure stable, long-term employment, in light of recent reports that only one in four newly qualified teachers secured permanent posts in 2024-25. (S6O-05446)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): I welcome this year's statistics, which, as I have outlined, show some improvement in the overall post-probation employment levels, which increased to 69 per cent from 65 per cent last year. That improvement has been supported as a direct result of additional investment from the Government's budget.

It is worth while reminding members that the overall percentage of teachers in permanent posts has remained relatively stable at more than 80 per cent over the past 10 years. However, I am keen to enhance the number of permanent teaching posts, which is exactly why funding has again been protected in this year's draft budget.

As a result of this year's additional funding for local authorities, this year's census data shows an overall increase in the number of teachers for the first time since 2022.

Willie Rennie: With that kind of answer, it is no surprise that the education secretary got heckled at the Educational Institute of Scotland hustings last week. She has failed to deliver the 3,500 extra teachers that she promised, failed to deliver the permanent contracts that she promised and failed to reduce teacher contact time by 90 minutes. She blames the councils and the unions, and now she blames the teachers for being paid too much. She has given the impression that she has given up on delivering on all those promises. Has she given up, or is she gonnae meet those promises?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Mr Rennie, as ever, for his question. I recall that, at a certain point during the hustings that we attended, there were some heckles for Mr Rennie, too. We will just leave it at that. [*Interruption*.]

However, it is important to say that, since 2021, significant investment has been provided to support Scotland's teaching profession, not least in relation to teacher wages. I provided detail of that in my response to Mr Burnett.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): It was Alexander Stewart.

Jenny Gilruth: Apologies—I meant Mr Stewart. Apologies, Mr Stewart. Thank you, Mr Kerr, for the heckle.

That additional investment is helping to enhance teachers' salaries and to ensuring that Scotland's teachers remain the best paid on these islands.

A number of different data sets published in recent months have also shown real progress in relation to the investment that we are providing to Scotland's schools. Class sizes are coming down, according to the most recent data, which was published in December. We continue to have the lowest pupil teacher ratio on these islands. In November, we secured another record pay deal for Scotland's teachers.

I am certainly not complacent about the challenges. I accept Mr Rennie's point that negotiations remain on-going, but it is important for teachers' morale to remind ourselves of the strengths in our schools and of the significant investment that the Government has protected in our budget for schools—with, of course, the support of Mr Rennie's party in the previous budget and, I sincerely hope, with the support of his party in this year's budget, too.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Stephen Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: I hope you noted, Deputy Presiding Officer, that the cabinet secretary said, "Thank you, Mr Kerr, for the heckle."

Jenny Gilruth: I am always gracious.

Stephen Kerr: I shall move on.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, for the record, I am not really privy to whatever ministers' request or members seek in terms of heckling, interventions and so forth. I note what you say, but do not draw me into your issues. Thank you.

Stephen Kerr: I do not really have an issue with the cabinet secretary when she says things like that.

Newly Qualified Teachers (Permanent Posts)

6. **Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government how many new teachers, who qualified in the last three years, are now in permanent teaching posts. (S6O-05448)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): Figures from the 2025 teacher census show that there are 2,798 full-time equivalent teachers in permanent posts who were part of the last three teacher induction scheme cohorts. Since 2014, the percentage of teachers in permanent posts has remained at 80 per cent, and additional Scottish Government investment has led to an increase in the number of teachers in the past year. The permanent employment of teachers is a matter for local authorities, which currently employ Scotland's teachers.

Stephen Kerr: A few years ago, in this Parliament, I used to stand up and say that one in eight teachers are on temporary contracts. Now the figure is one in five, or something like that. That is shocking. We have gone backwards at a rate of knots. Further reflection of that reality is the statistical fact that one in 10 primary teachers who are qualified do not have a permanent job in their first year. That is not success.

Whatever happened to the funding agreement with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities that was going to guarantee teacher numbers? At what point will the cabinet secretary get really serious about the issues that we keep raising in the chamber and bring forward a properly thought-out and planned workforce projection?

Jenny Gilruth: Mr Kerr has touched on a number of points. One relates to the issue of primary teachers. He may be aware of the reduction that I have delivered in the number of primary teachers that we are training. In the past year, we have reduced the number of primary teachers for the exact reasons that he has set out. I also gave some detail of that in my response to Alexander Stewart.

There is potential for primary teachers to move into the teaching of secondary subjects where there are currently gaps. The member will be aware of the marketing campaign that we launched recently that targets some of the areas where there are known gaps. We also know that there are primary teachers with the prerequisite qualifications who may be able to move to fill those gaps and vacancies, as and where they exist.

Mr Kerr also mentioned the COSLA agreement, which was negotiated through last year's budget. It provided £186.5 million to increase teacher numbers or, for some local authorities, to maintain them at 2023 levels. That is important in relation to Mr Rennie's point about reducing class contact. We need the right number of teachers in our schools to deliver on that commitment. I know that Mr Kerr welcomed the progress that we have seen in the past year, with teacher numbers increasing for the first time since 2022 as a direct result of that COSLA agreement and investment.

Again, I encourage Mr Kerr to consider supporting the Scottish Government's budget, because it maintains that investment, which we know has made a real difference in the past year by increasing teacher numbers and allowing us to make progress on reducing class contact.

The Deputy Presiding Officer : There are a number of supplementaries.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary think it acceptable that some local authorities advertise full-time permanent posts only to tell successful applicants when offering a job that the post is, in fact, temporary? Working with local authorities and teaching unions, what steps will she take to end that deceptive practice?

Jenny Gilruth: I do not think that the points that have been set out by Kenny Gibson are acceptable. It is important to state that the Scottish Government plays no role in the direct employment of Scotland's teachers. We have 32 local authorities with various approaches to recruitment practices. That allows for inconsistency, but the issues that Mr Gibson has alluded to should not be happening with fair approaches to employment and employment practices more broadly.

We will continue to work with COSLA on that. I spoke to some of the detailed work on teacher training that has been undertaken with COSLA, the teaching trade unions and our initial teacher education institutions, to provide a more consistent approach to the employment of teachers and the support that they receive in relation to initial teacher education.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I raised with the First Minister last week at First Minister's question time the cabinet secretary's comments, when, in response to the issue of teachers moving abroad to access jobs, she said that people are

"opting not to travel to jobs"

in Scotland, and that they are

"much more expensive to employ".

The First Minister accused me of skating past his stellar record on education, but I suggest that he somewhat skated past the defence of the cabinet secretary's comments. To go to the point that Willie Rennie made, does the cabinet secretary why teachers are so angered by what she said? Does she also accept that a recruitment campaign at this stage in the current parliamentary session, in which she promised recovery and made a very clear pledge on teacher numbers, is just not going to cut it?

Jenny Gilruth: I think that some of my commentary has been taken out of context. There are a number of teaching vacancies across the country, but I have said publicly that I accept that not everyone can travel or move. As members will know, I have used my own example of moving to Moray for a year, because I ticked the box to go and as a result, I received £6,000. There are financial incentives attached to that. I know that Mr O'Kane will be delighted to hear that it has now been increased to £8,000 to incentivise people to move.

The interesting thing, from Mr O'Kane's point of view, is that we see teachers opting not to tick the box in ways that they did previously. That might be for good reason, but since the pandemic, people are opting not to move in ways that they might have done. We therefore need to work with local authorities on different ways to support teachers in obtaining employment.

It has always been the case that people need to apply for jobs after the completion of probation. People are not guaranteed a job in their local authority area, and I do not think that anyone in the chamber would suggest that that should change. Instead, we need to work with local authorities on a partnership basis.

One of the things that I am interested in exploring further with COSLA, through our review of the probationer scheme, which has not been reviewed since 2002, is how we can jointly, with local authorities, work on a partnership approach to funding that. At the current time, it is solely funded by the Scottish Government. It is in the region of £40 million of investment, and at the end of probation, we do not ask local authorities for anything else. I do not think that that is good

enough. We have to have a partnership approach. We also—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary, I have been very generous in giving you a lot of latitude. You are well aware of what the response time is supposed to be. I am keen to get in those who are desperate to ask a question.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The recent figures that the cabinet secretary mentioned show that there has been an increase in the number of Scotland's teachers. How will investment in the 2026-27 budget support furthering that progress?

Jenny Gilruth: The investment that has been delivered as a result of extra funding that was provided for in last year's budget increased the number of teachers in our schools by 63—the first increase in teacher numbers that we have seen since 2022. I would like to see more improvements in that regard.

It is notable that some local authorities took additional funding from the Government and reduced teacher numbers. That is not politically credible to our constituents and the communities that we all represent and my officials are working with a number of local authorities who chose to take that additional investment and reduce teacher numbers.

To the member's substantive point, we can enhance teacher numbers by protecting funding in the budget. This year's budget does so, and I encourage colleagues to consider supporting a budget that will support an increase in teacher numbers.

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The NASUWT has described the situation as a "dysfunctional teacher supply system" that is clearly failing teachers, pupils and the taxpayer. It is right, but let us focus on the pupils for a moment. We know how critical a stable teacher-pupil relationship is to children's learning and wellbeing. Does the cabinet secretary accept that the overreliance on short-term contracts for newly qualified teachers risks undermining educational continuity for pupils? Has the Scottish Government done any assessment of the impact of that on children's attainment?

Jenny Gilruth: Roz McCall raises a hugely important point. I will go back to the probationer scheme, which I attempted to speak on in my response to Mr O'Kane—although I accept that I spoke for far too long, Presiding Officer. When it was established in 2002, that scheme was intended to be in addition to the staffing complement that schools received. However, for many years, that has not been the case. It certainly was not my experience when I started teaching in Elgin high school in 2008, when I replaced somebody who had retired. Notwithstanding Roz McCall's points, it is important that probationers have support and time in school to learn how to become teachers. People do not come out of probation as fully formed teachers—they need to learn, and they need that support and time. It is important that we create the necessary conditions for that.

I absolutely agree with Roz McCall's points about consistency and about pupils' experience of churn in the system not being good for educational opportunities or attainment more broadly. Those issues are being discussed as part of the wider work that I alluded to in my response to Mr Stewart earlier, and I would be more than happy to give Roz McCall a written update on that before dissolution, in which we will address in more detail the issue that she has raised today.

Teacher Recruitment (Rural Areas)

3. **Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to improve the recruitment of teachers in rural areas. (S6O-05445)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): Last week, we launched a new national teacher recruitment marketing campaign, which includes activity designed to encourage those thinking about a career in teaching to consider teaching jobs outwith the central belt and in more rural areas. In addition, probationer teachers can receive a preference waiver payment of up to £8,000 if they are willing to complete their probation anywhere in Scotland, as part of the Government-funded teacher induction scheme. We have manually allocated PWP probationers in recent years, which has resulted in more probationers in hard-to-fill subjects being allocated to remote and rural areas. I have also convened a round-table discussion with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, trade unions, the General Teaching Council for Scotland and other key partners to explore urgent collective solutions to the challenges that were outlined in Alexander Burnett's question and other teacher recruitment and retention challenges.

Alexander Burnett: As part of its budget, Aberdeenshire Council is expecting £9.4 million from the Scottish Government to maintain or increase teacher numbers and to reduce class contact time. However, that funding is at risk because teacher numbers have decreased as Aberdeenshire receives an insufficient number of newly qualified teachers through the Scottish Government's teacher induction scheme, having failed to get nearly 40 per cent of the primary teachers and 70 per cent of the secondary teachers that it had requested. That trend is

happening across all rural local authorities, because the Scottish National Party is not providing enough support to attract newly qualified teachers to those areas. Will the cabinet secretary confirm whether education in Aberdeenshire will be further penalised for the educational recruitment failings of the SNP Government?

Jenny Gilruth: I will walk Alexander Burnett back to my comments in response to his colleague Roz McCall, in which I alluded to the fact that, when the probationer scheme was introduced in 2002, it was meant to be in addition to the staffing complement.

I hear the challenge that Aberdeenshire Council is facing, and I have met with it a number of times to discuss those issues. Aberdeenshire has benefited from the manual allocation of PWP probationers by gaining more probationers. However, probationers are meant to be in addition to the staffing complement. In the past year, Aberdeenshire Council was one of the local authorities that took additional funding from the Scottish Government to the tune of just over £9 million and chose to reduce teacher numbers.

I am also aware that Aberdeenshire Council is currently led by the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, so there is a political incoherence between Alexander Burnett's question—although I am sympathetic to that question—and the actions of his local authority, which have been to take the funding that I protected centrally in national Government and to cut teacher numbers. That is not a coherent approach. I would be more than happy to engage directly with the local authority on those issues, but we must remember that, when central Government protects funding for teacher numbers, communities should expect to see that play out in their communities. That is not what has happened in the case of Aberdeenshire.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): We have a shortage of teachers in Moray, but not necessarily a shortage of people who are willing to teach. With the large military footprint of RAF Lossiemouth and Kinloss barracks in the area, a number of the spouses of those serving there who travel up with the rest of their family are qualified to teach in England but are barred from teaching in Scotland unless they get a Scottish qualification. It would ease the efforts of Moray Council considerably if that issue could be resolved. I have raised the issue repeatedly with the cabinet secretary, and I think that she was sympathetic to it. Can we just get a solution?

Jenny Gilruth: I am sympathetic to Mr Ross's points. Of course, matters pertaining to the registration of teachers in Scotland are for the GTCS to address. I encourage Mr Ross to engage with it directly. I see that he is nodding and indicating that he has done so. I am more than happy to raise the matter myself with Pauline Stephen at the GTCS.

It is the case that different qualifications are required in Scotland, not least the requirement to have a degree-level qualification to deliver teaching in Scotland, which does not necessarily exist in other parts of the United Kingdom. That is an important feature of our education system, and it is one that we would want to protect.

I am more than happy to speak to the GTCS on Mr Ross's behalf, but I encourage him to engage directly with the organisation, too. It is difficult for me, as cabinet secretary, to comment on the specifics of individuals without first understanding their qualifications. That would be a matter for the GTCS, which is independent of Government, to give an opinion on.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): This is another example of poor workforce planning. To be frank, we are having real difficulty, with a surplus at primary level and, by and large, a shortage at secondary level. In remote areas in particular, that is a challenge. The incentive scheme is not enough. What other measures is the cabinet secretary prepared to consider to ensure that every part of the country has the specialist teachers that it needs?

Jenny Gilruth: I agree with the sentiment behind Mr Rennie's question, but I return to the points that I made to Mr Burnett. Consider the kingdom of Fife, in which Mr Rennie and I represent our respective constituencies: in the previous financial year, Fife Council was in receipt of significant additional investment from the Government of close to £13 million. It took that funding and cut teacher numbers. Fife Council is run by a minority Labour administration that is supported by the Conservatives, Reform and, of course, Mr Rennie's Liberal Democrat colleagues. I accept the points that Mr Rennie raises, but it is politically incoherent to come to the chamber to ask for additional investment for hard-to-fill subjects while his council colleagues are taking funding from the Government and voting to cut teacher numbers.

I agree that we need to work on the issues in relation to where there are gaps. Those will be identified in the work that we are doing via the marketing campaign. There is also the work that I spoke to in relation to the role of the GTCS, which is very clear that there are opportunities for people to have further qualifications in subjects and to teach in secondary where we know that there are subject gaps.

I encourage Mr Rennie to work with his Liberal Democrat councillor colleagues, who I am sure will be considering whether they are able to vote for

the upcoming Labour budget in Fife Council. Last year, they supported it, which resulted in teacher numbers falling.

Centre for Teaching Excellence

5. **George Adam (Paisley) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the establishment of the centre for teaching excellence. (S6O-05447)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): I visited the centre at the University of Glasgow this week to hear about the substantial progress that it has made following its launch in September 2025. Three research hubs are already open, providing accessible resources and professional learning, aligned with priorities that have been identified by Scotland's teachers. A further three hubs will open this spring, including—crucially—one that is focused on additional support needs, on which I updated the chamber a couple of weeks ago. Teachers can access the latest research and evidence through the centre, with structured support to apply insights to their practice. There are already 46 seconded teachers acting as points of contact for colleagues in schools, ensuring that research is relevant to and practical for our classrooms.

George Adam: I am extremely pleased to hear that additional support needs is a focus of the centre, because my eldest granddaughter has additional support needs. With that in mind, will the cabinet secretary say more about the role that the centre will play to improve practice to support children with specific learning needs?

Jenny Gilruth: I cannot tell colleagues what a positive visit I had this week, meeting the seconded teachers who are already working at the centre for teaching excellence. They are making a real difference in our schools, listening to the profession and formulating the exact type of support that Mr Adam spoke about in relation to additional support needs.

The centre will have a dedicated hub on pedagogy for inclusion. That will open this spring, and it will have a specific focus on ASN. The hub will give teachers access to the latest research and evidence and will provide practical support to allow our teachers to apply their own insights in their own classrooms. It will allow teachers to share learning across communities of practice, engage with expert panels and develop classroom-ready resources, and they will be supported by teachers who are seconded to the hub. I was delighted to meet a group of those teachers yesterday, who are already helping to make a difference by supporting teachers in our schools in relation to ASN. I note that the hub's work will link to and be shaped by the short, sharp review that I announced on 15 January.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): The cabinet secretary will know that the difference between a mediocre and an excellent school is an inspirational school leader, and we know that we have a shortage of school leaders in our country. What part of the work of the centre will be devoted to the development of school leaders? How will the cabinet secretary incentivise more potential qualified school leaders to take the career path to school leadership?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Mr Kerr for his question. I met a group of seconded teachers yesterday, including a couple of school leaders who are now part of the centre and driving that work forward, and we had a really interesting discussion. Mr Kerr makes a number of points in relation to driving improvement, and, with the support of the Parliament and the Presiding Officer, I would like to write to him to outline in a bit more detail the evidence that I was provided with yesterday.

I also encourage Mr Kerr and colleagues who are interested in the work of the centre to go to the University of Glasgow, visit the centre and hear for themselves about the work that colleagues are undertaking and the collaborative approaches that are being supported all over the country by local authorities the length and breadth of Scotland. The work that those teachers are leading on is inspiring and positive. I will provide Mr Kerr with a more substantive written update on the points that he has outlined.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 7 has been withdrawn, and question 8 has not been lodged.

That concludes portfolio questions on education and skills. There will be a short pause before we move on to the next item of business.

Restraint and Seclusion in Schools (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-20519, in the name of Daniel Johnson, on the Restraint and Seclusion in Schools (Scotland) Bill at stage 1. I invite those members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak button, and I call Daniel Johnson, the member in charge of the bill, to speak to and move the motion.

14:40

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): It is a huge privilege to move the motion in my name, which seeks the Parliament's support for the purposes and general principles of my bill. I begin by thanking the Education, Children and Young People Committee for its diligent and detailed report. The insights that it has provided the Parliament with will strengthen the legislation. Likewise, I thank the Government for the on-going dialogue, particularly with Jenny Gilruth. That dialogue has been constructive and extremely useful. The non-Government bills unit is a jewel of this Parliament and must be acknowledged, as must my office team—in particular, Philip Miller.

However, the greatest acknowledgement must go to Beth Morrison. Her tireless campaigning on the issue began when her son Calum returned home from school in 2010, covered in bruises. He had been pinned down by four adults, face down in a prone restraint, simply because he did not want to get off a bike. In 2015, she lodged a petition, which urged the Parliament to create Calum's law to deal with the issue.

When, in 2022, Beth asked me whether I would take that proposal forward, I was pleased to do so, because I knew that Beth's and Calum's experiences were not isolated ones. In 2018, the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland published a report, "No Safe Place: Restraint and Seclusion in Scotland's Schools", which identified 2,674 incidents of restraint and seclusion related to 386 children. It also found that only 18 of the 32 local authorities were recording that information and that even fewer were doing so comprehensively at the level of the child. Those findings have been reinforced by several subsequent reports from many trusted organisations, such as Enable, Positive and Active Behaviour Support Scotland, Children in Scotland, the National Autistic Society Scotland and Scottish Autism. They were also raised in the Morgan review on additional support needs, which was commissioned by the Government.

Through the last parliamentary session, I listened to many parents' anguish and pain as they told stories about how they had struggled to find out why their children had returned home with bruises—children who were overwhelmingly of primary school age; children with autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and learning difficulties; often, children who had diminished communication. I felt compelled to act and to do what I could to make Calum's law a reality. That is why I bring this bill before the Parliament today.

Let me set out the bill's four key provisions. First, it would create a duty on the Scottish ministers to issue statutory guidance on the use of restraint and seclusion in schools, refreshing the existing non-statutory guidance. That is not to create something new; it is simply to put the guidance on a statutory footing and to ensure that long-standing inconsistencies are eradicated by ensuring that we have clear and consistent practice across Scotland.

Secondly, it would create a duty on schools to inform parents and carers promptly if their child has been restrained or secluded. We have to end the anguish and frustration that is experienced by so many parents who face that situation. Schools act in loco parentis, and if physical interventions or seclusion take place, it is vital that parents and carers are informed promptly.

Thirdly, it would require recording and reporting on the use of restraint and seclusion in schools. Despite their being part of Scottish Government guidance for almost a decade, we still do not have consistency of recording or a clear national picture of the frequency of, or variation in, those practices.

Fourthly, it would create a duty on the Scottish Government to maintain a list of approved training providers, to ensure safe practice. The bill does not seek to stop the use of physical interventions, but we must ensure that, when they do occur, the best possible practice is used and support is provided to those practitioners who need to use them. Overall, however, we should seek to minimise the use of restraint and seclusion in schools and to ensure that it is used only as a last resort and where there is an immediate risk of harm.

I acknowledge that there are concerns about the proposals that are set out in the bill, but I make it clear that the bill simply puts on a statutory footing what should already be happening. Its obligations will rest with local authorities and schools, not individual teachers. It is vital that those practitioners who may need training get the best possible training. My bill will certainly not require all teachers to be trained.

That is what my bill will do. It should improve matters for practitioners, parents and, above all, children.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): In articulating his points, would the member in charge of the bill like to address the campaign email that MSPs have received from the Educational Institute of Scotland, which urges us to oppose the bill? He articulated his views on that very well in an email to MSPs, but it would be useful to get those on the record.

Daniel Johnson: I am afraid that I have only six minutes, and I would also like to address the points that the committee made.

Essentially, what I am proposing is not new—the bill seeks to reinforce what should be existing practice. The obligation will be on local authorities and schools. Above all else, I would say that the use of physical intervention is a very serious matter, and it is vital that we have the most robust framework around it.

I will turn to the committee's recommendations. I do not have time to go through all of them, but I think that the most important one was about definitions. It is important to be clear that the definitions primarily set the scope for guidance. However, I note the committee's highlighting of concerns about potential ambiguity, particularly in relation to what should be reported and recorded, so I commit to lodging amendments at stage 2 to address those specific concerns about the definitions of recording and reporting.

I will close with this observation. All parents will be familiar with the slips of paper that come home with their child when they have done something such as grazing their knee after falling in the playground. If that is the level of recording, monitoring and reporting that is required when a child is injured accidentally, surely, if an injury occurs because of a deliberate physical intervention, we need just as robust a framework to sit around that.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Restraint and Seclusion in Schools (Scotland) Bill.

14:47

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am delighted to speak on behalf of the Education, Children and Young People Committee. I begin by thanking the member in charge of the bill, Daniel Johnson, for introducing such an important bill. I also apologise for intervening on him five minutes into his speech—I did not realise that he had only six minutes.

Daniel Johnson's proposal gave the Education, Children and Young People Committee, as the lead committee, the opportunity to discuss the important issue of how to ensure that restraint and seclusion are used only as a last resort in schools. I thank my committee colleagues for their work on the bill and everyone who provided evidence, either in person or by responding to our call for views. In addition, I thank the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee and the Finance and Public Administration Committee for their scrutiny of the bill.

I put on record the Education, Children and Young People Committee's thanks to everyone at the Donaldson Trust who generously gave their time and shared their thoughts and insights on the bill when the committee visited the campus in Linlithgow last year.

However, the biggest praise must go to two individuals without whom we would not be here today. Beth Morrison and Kate Sanger have been campaigning for more than a decade for a change in the law on restraint and seclusion. I know that Kate cannot be with us today because she is attending a family funeral, but I saw Beth and Calum coming into the public gallery. Without doubt, Kate and Beth are the most determined, passionate and articulate campaigners for change, and this Parliament has an opportunity to reward their hard work by voting for the bill tonight. I believe that we simply would not be here today were it not for their efforts.

We must think about the fact that Kate and Beth got involved as a result of terrible circumstances in their families. In dealing with the issues that Laura had to face, Kate, as a mother, could have tried other routes to get answers and not embarked on a campaign that has taken years to get here. When Calum came home from school that day, unable to articulate what had happened to him, Beth could have sat there and thought about what she could do. She could have complained or done various other things, but she tried to get change. When that did not happen, she lodged a petition. When the petition did not work, she put forward the bill, along with Daniel Johnson. It is that type of tireless effort that makes me very proud to be standing in Parliament today, supporting the bill.

The committee unanimously agreed to the general principles of the bill and welcomed the aim of putting the current guidance on a statutory footing. I am pleased to say that the Scottish Government accepted all of the report's recommendations, some of them in part. We were concerned to hear of instances of inappropriate use of restraint and seclusion in Scotland's schools, particularly in relation to children and young people with additional support needs or a disability.

As with all of the committee's scrutiny, the devil is in the detail, and there were a number of areas that we felt needed to be addressed should the bill progress further today. First, consideration needs to be given to the definitions of restraint and seclusion. Although those definitions are broadly similar to the definitions in the current non-statutory guidance, we shared the concerns of witnesses that those broad definitions could lead to legal ambiguity or unintended consequences. Teaching staff, parents and carers all need clarity, and it is important that physical interventions that are not of obvious concern are not captured by the bill.

As our report makes clear, communication with parents and carers is key, and the bill would create a duty on schools to inform parents and carers when their child has been subject to restraint or seclusion. Like the member in charge of the bill, we were disturbed to hear that that was not happening already. In some cases, parents and carers were not told when their child or young person had been restrained or secluded. Given that, we said that such notification must take place on the same day and that a report should be made on any intervention no later than 24 hours after the incident occurred. The bill's recording and reporting provisions are welcome and will provide an opportunity for school staff to conduct post-incident reviews and establish any lessons learned following an incident.

Finally, although the bill does not include provisions on mandatory training in the use of restraint and seclusion, it says that the guidance must include details of training for school staff. It also provides that the Scottish Government will maintain a list of approved training providers.

The Education, Children and Young People Committee supports the general principles of the bill. However, as I have set out today, there are issues that need to be addressed, and we have had an assurance from the member in charge that he is keen to address them. I say that on behalf of the committee.

On a personal note, I will end by saying that, when I vote yes to the bill tonight, I will be doing so to progress an important piece of legislation. More important, it will be my individual way of thanking and recognising Beth Morrison and Kate Sanger and the many other families they have represented on this long journey. At decision time, their efforts will, I hope, see the bill take a step forward towards bringing about improvements for our children and young people for which we have been waiting for so long.

14:52

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): I congratulate Daniel Johnson on the progress that he has made thus far in legislating on restraint and seclusion. Mr Johnson and I have been engaged over the course of this session—for months and probably years—and I am grateful to him for the extremely collegiate way in which we have been able to discuss and debate the issues that are pertinent to this stage 1 debate. For clarity and, again, for the record, the Scottish Government will support the general principles of the bill.

As we have heard, there are a number of others to thank, by no means least the families of those children who have experienced restraint in distressing environments. As we have heard from Douglas Ross and Daniel Johnson, Beth Morrison and Kate Sanger are to be applauded for their tenacious efforts in driving the changes that come before Parliament today. I am very pleased that Beth and her son Callum are with us in Parliament today, and I look forward to meeting them again following the debate.

I am grateful to the Parliament's Education, Children and Young People Committee for its instructive role, and also to stakeholders, families, campaigners and practitioners for their support thus far. I am sure that members of the Scottish Parliament across the chamber will agree that our collective understanding of the issue and its impact has been strengthened by the willingness of parents of young people to share their personal experiences.

The Government is clear that restraint and seclusion should be used only as a last resort, to prevent injury. As members will be aware, in November 2024 we published our non-statutory guidance for schools on physical intervention, which reinforces that position. We are currently reviewing the effectiveness of that guidance. Although the Scottish Government's intention was to conclude a review of the guidance before considering legislative options, I have nonetheless engaged constructively on Mr Johnson's bill since it was introduced in March last year. In June last year, I wrote to the committee to confirm the Scottish Government's support for the general principles of the bill, while reserving the right to seek to amend any provisions where necessary. That remains the Government's position. I very much share the committee's clear commitment to ensuring that all children in Scotland's schools are supported in ways that uphold their dignity, rights and safety, and I welcome the committee's stage 1 report and its conclusions.

I was pleased to meet Mr Johnson earlier this week. As ever we had a productive discussion on areas where we would like to work together and

strengthen the bill at stage 2. This is a member's bill, and Mr Johnson will retain responsibility for its passage through Parliament. However, I agree with committee members that the statutory definitions of restraint and seclusion need to be workable, clear and aligned with children's rights.

As the committee stressed, it is important that a distinction is made between restraint and physical interventions that do not raise wellbeing concerns. Such distinctions will help to reduce the risks of overreporting and overburdening on our school staff. I have agreed to work with Daniel Johnson to develop stage 2 amendments to address the concerns on that.

The committee also raised important points regarding national reporting routes and the avoidance of duplication. I accept the recommendation that further, joint work is needed, particularly on approaches for independent and grant-aided schools and for situations involving care settings. Accordingly, Mr Johnson and I have agreed that an amendment should be lodged at stage 2 to allow independent and grant-aided schools to report directly to ministers rather than via local authorities, which will help to ensure clarity and proportionality.

I have discussed the financial implications of the bill with Mr Johnson, and he shares my desire for the associated costs to be kept to a minimum. Should Parliament agree to the general principles of the bill today, I commit that the Government will lodge a financial resolution during the coming weeks.

The bill will place a duty on the Government to produce statutory guidance. As I alluded to, the Government produced our 2024 guidance, and that guidance will form the backbone of the statutory guidance that will be required under the bill. I therefore welcome the alignment that Mr Johnson has sought with our existing guidance in many areas.

Daniel Johnson: I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for her kind words. Does she agree that it is important to stress that, although that guidance was published in 2024, the 2017 guidance also made clear the requirement to record and monitor, and said that training should be provided? Therefore, those requirements are not new, and they were not introduced by my bill or the 2024 guidance.

Jenny Gilruth: I am happy to support the points that Mr Johnson made. The guidance will be familiar to teaching staff and those who work in our schools. It is important to remind colleagues and stakeholders that, for many staff who work in our schools, the approaches that are being taken will not be new. The differentiation is that the guidance will become statutory through legislation.

I welcome the committee's acknowledgement of the importance of trauma-informed training being grounded in clear national standards. Training is key to the successful implementation of the bill and the guidance, but, as the committee has acknowledged, restraint is not a practice that the vast majority of our school staff will need to use. Therefore, restraint training will be necessary for only a small number of our school staff. That is an important point, which we discussed at committee during stage 1.

On national data collection, the committee is absolutely right that the reporting system must support transparency, accountability and learning. However, as the committee has acknowledged, the creation of league tables of restraint data needs to be avoided at all costs. I therefore welcome the committee's agreement with the Government's position that the publication of school-level data would not be appropriate.

I commit to continuing to work constructively with the member in charge and, of course, with the committee to strengthen the bill at stages 2 and 3 and to ensure that its implementation leads to meaningful and positive change for some of Scotland's most vulnerable children, young people and their families.

14:58

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I, too, pay tribute to Daniel Johnson for the work that he and his office have undertaken on his member's bill. Having taken forward two consultations, I know just how much pressure that work will have put on his office. I want to use this opportunity, as other members have, to pay tribute to the member for getting the bill to where it is today.

It is a few years ago now that I had the pleasure of meeting Beth, Peter and Calum Morrison in Parliament at a round-table event that Daniel Johnson held so that Parliamentarians from across the chamber had an opportunity to hear what the issue was. I remember keeping a document that Beth gave us, which outlined the experience that Calum had, and that takes me back to why we are here today.

On Friday 24 September 2010, when the school bus dropped Callum home at 3.25 pm, his face was ashen, his lips were blue and he was wearing different clothes from those that he had left in the morning—a thin T-shirt, shorts and plimsolls, no underwear and no coat. His own clothes were soaked in urine and stuffed in a plastic bag. That should not be happening in Scotland in this day and age and I hope that, through the opportunity that the bill presents us with today, we will ensure that no parent or carer in our country ever faces a similar situation.

A number of constituents have told me of their children's experiences. In every case, they have not been able to get answers from those who they trust with their children's education, safety and wellbeing. A number of parents have highlighted to me the current postcode lottery not only in how schools use restraint but how they record incidents and communicate with parents what has gone on in the school day.

As the convener of the Education, Children and Young People Committee has already put on record, we need to understand and learn from the concerns that the EIS is expressing. The committee did not shy away from trying to probe those because the concerns that have been highlighted cite workforce pressures and the legal standing of the bill. There will be cross-party support for the bill, but we have an important role as parliamentarians at stage 2 in the committee and at stage 3 before the election to ensure that the EIS's questions are answered. The Education, Children and Young People Committee's consideration of, and unanimous support for, the bill has provided that critique as well.

It is unacceptable for children to return home having been restrained and for their parents and carers to be provided with no information that an incident has taken place. It is unacceptable that such incidents are not recorded and that, when we are often talking about non-verbal children, we do not know what restraint has taken place. Calum was restrained at age 11 by four adults. The training is also not being recorded and we do not know what level the training providers are training people up to. De-escalation should always be the first point of call.

I acknowledge that Scottish National Party ministers have looked to improve guidance. That alone was never going to be good enough to protect children, so I welcome the Scottish Government's move to support the bill and ensure that it passes through the Parliament. A legal framework should establish not only lines of responsibility, training standards and a reporting requirement but the safety that every one of us expects children in our schools to enjoy. For that reason, Scottish Conservatives will support the general principals of the bill at decision time.

15:02

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I join colleagues from around the chamber in thanking my friend and colleague Daniel Johnson for his work on the issue and the bill. It is no small feat to bring together a member's bill. Given his success with the Protection of Workers (Retail and Age-restricted Goods and Services) (Scotland) Act 2021 in the previous session of the Parliament, he knows that more than most. I also pay tribute to his staff, who have carried out the work with great aplomb and good humour in the Labour corridor even when they have been busy preparing to get to this day.

As Scottish Labour's education spokesperson, I am pleased to confirm that Scottish Labour will support the general principles of the bill at decision time—much, I am sure, to the relief of my colleague Daniel Johnson, who sits beside me on the front bench.

We have heard already about the tireless work of campaigners that has brought us to today. I declare an interest: looking at the public gallery is, for me, to look at a group of old friends because, as colleagues who are in the chamber know, for seven years prior to coming to the Parliament, I worked for Enable Scotland. I am still a member of Enable Scotland. That is where I first got to know Beth, Peter and Calum and to work with some extraordinary people on these issues.

As we have heard already, Beth is a ferocious campaigner. She is tenacious but she has compassion and her family brings her much joy in her life. That is her motivation in the campaign. Not only does Beth campaign and not only has she worked on the issues to bring us to this point but she educates. That is important. Everything that I know about the issues and about the alternative interventions that can be provided I probably know through her work. I associate Kate Sanger with that as well. She has worked closely with Beth and others in this space. That is the reason why we are here and why Daniel Johnson introduced the bill.

In some ways, becoming shadow education spokesperson just in time to lead on the bill for Labour was probably meant to be, given my association with the early parts of the campaign.

Today, we build on work by organisations such as Enable Scotland and the National Autistic Society, and by people who have supported the campaigners to drive forward these issues and ensure that they do not disappear off the agenda and, with the coming elections and changes in Parliament, are not forgotten about somehow.

The bill is built on the substantial work that has been undertaken, such as the children's commissioner's "No Safe Place: Restraint and Seclusion in Scotland's Schools" report and Enable Scotland's "In safe hands?" work. There is a myriad of data and reporting that share people's experiences of some of the dreadful things that have happened to our children in school settings and other settings across Scotland.

In concert with colleagues, I recognise that we have an opportunity today to make a legislative change that will be a turning point. It can be a moment when we say that this sort of seclusion

and restraint is no longer acceptable, and that the recording and the duty of candour that will exist will be put on a legislative footing, which is important.

Like colleagues, I recognise the concerns that have been raised, not least by the EIS and others. Daniel Johnson will very clearly outline his response to that. He is very willing to engage and has engaged throughout the process, and stages 2 and 3 will allow us to do more of that.

I recognise at the outset of the debate that there is a genuine will across the Parliament to ensure that we get this right by putting it on a statutory footing that no young person will have to experience the situation that Calum and other young people have experienced. We must make a statement from this Parliament that says that children will be protected and equally safe under the law.

15:06

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I begin by thanking and congratulating Daniel Johnson on his bill and all the work that he has put into it. I thank the committee for its meticulous scrutiny during stage 1, and I want especially to recognise Beth Morrison. We would not be here without her tireless campaigning to prevent anyone else from going through what she and her son Calum went through.

The bill responds to the very real experiences of children and families who have told us time and again that restraint and seclusion can be frightening, humiliating, deeply traumatic and, most importantly, often avoidable. It should be a rare occurrence and a last resort, but it is used in some cases on a daily basis.

This Parliament is on a journey towards enshrining and protecting the rights of children and young people. With the United Nations convention on the rights of the child now part of our laws and my Green colleague John Finnie's bill ending legal physical punishment of children, it is a natural next step to ensure that restraint of children and young people becomes a thing of the past, except in the rarest of circumstances.

The strong backing of the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland and The Promise Scotland should give Parliament confidence that the bill is both necessary and proportionate. It sets a clear expectation that restraint and seclusion are measures of last resort used only to prevent harm, and never as punishment, for the shortest possible time and within a transparent rights-based framework that protects children and staff. No more must parents and guardians find out about restraint from seeing the bruises on their child, as the committee heard. The bill provides a guarantee that parents must be informed within 24 hours—that is crucial.

Many children and young people who are restrained have additional support needs. When those actions prove necessary, it is not because the child or young person is at fault but because their needs have not been met. That is often because we have nowhere near enough support in our schools for children with additional support needs.

I was struck particularly by Kate Sanger's evidence. In many cases, a child's scream is not aggression but communication. Understanding why a child vocalises the way that they do seems so obvious. Her communication passport should be commonplace.

I want to address directly the concerns raised by the EIS, in good faith, given its commitment to the wellbeing of its members and the young people it teaches and supports. However, I do not accept that a statutory framework inevitably creates a blame culture. On the contrary, inconsistency and unclear expectations are what leave staff exposed. A framework reinforces that restraint is about safety and that staff acting within guidance should be supported.

Concerns have also been raised that the definitions could be too broad and inadvertently capture ordinary caring physical interactions, as we have heard this afternoon. I support the refining of the definitions at stage 2 so that restraint is clearly understood as a serious physical intervention.

The bill will not require all teachers to undergo training in physical intervention techniques. What it will require is statutory guidance on training and an up-to-date list of approved providers—things that already exist on a non-statutory basis. Decisions about who needs specialist training will continue to be made, sensibly, by front-line professionals, but with the support of guidance and a strong emphasis on de-escalation and prevention.

I understand the EIS's concerns about workload but, given the seriousness of restraint and seclusion, recording cannot be optional. Evidence to the committee showed that recording and parental communication are currently inconsistent across local authorities, and a proper system of recording is necessary to address that.

On resources, I whole-heartedly agree with the EIS that reducing restraint depends on investment in staff, specialist support, time for relationships and early intervention. The bill should not be a substitute for that investment, but is a necessary foundation for it.

The bill is about rights, transparency and support. It is about keeping children safe and ensuring that the workforce that cares for them is properly guided and protected. The Scottish Greens will support the bill at stage 1, and we look forward to improving it as it progresses.

15:11

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I congratulate Daniel Johnson on getting this far with the bill. He has done a very professional job in convincing all sides of the bill's merits, and it has lots of merits. However, if anybody has any doubt about the bill, I would advise them to go and meet Beth Morrison. Anybody who wants to go up against her should think again. She is an effective and forceful campaigner, and that is in part why Daniel Johnson has been so successful.

I am an original supporter of the bill, which I signed up to, but that did not prevent me from asking difficult questions in committee, because it is our role in committee to ask those difficult questions. I welcome the Government's support for the bill. It was cautious in the early days, so it is even more significant that it is now prepared to support the bill.

In one respect, the bill is simple. As Daniel Johnson said, it seeks to move the guidance that already exists from its current status on to a statutory footing. It also covers training and recording. However, we should always be careful when guidance is put on a statutory footing. Although that gives it extra priority and means that it is considered with extra seriousness, it also has the potential to introduce greater caution, which can be unhelpful at moments when clear and decisive decision making is required. I will return to that.

Like others, I am grateful to the EIS for raising the issues that it is concerned about, because that is part of the accountability process. Issues of culture, resources, timing, workload and training were raised in the evidence sessions, and two of those are particularly important.

First, at a critical moment when a decision is required about the safety of a child, what we want is not caution but clarity about what is required to happen. If a member of staff is too cautious because the matter is covered in statute, a child could be harmed as a result. We must be mindful of that when we are considering the matter.

Secondly, it is easy to work out what great practice is and what dreadful practice is. It is the bits in the middle that are really hard to determine. We need absolute clarity—that feeds into the first point—about what the right thing to do is, and that is why putting the guidance on a statutory footing is essential. We have had guidance for years, but it has not been given the emphasis, priority or seriousness that it deserves. Putting it on a statutory footing will help to bring clarity and decisiveness at critical moments.

We have to be clear to the teaching profession and to staff, because this is not just about restraint. There are wider debates about behaviour, about violence in schools and particularly about additional support needs. The percentage of young people with such needs is now over 40 per cent. There is a debate about inclusion and how we manage young people and give them specialist additional support in schools.

Jenny Gilruth: I am thinking about Mr Rennie's points in relation to behaviour by pupils with additional support needs. Is it his view that the Government should, in future, consider putting other pieces of guidance on a statutory footing? I am interested in that point because we have legislated in a number of areas during this session of Parliament, not least in our passing of Liz Smith's Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill, and we now have Daniel Johnson's member's bill on restraint before us.

To my mind, taking that approach would change quite a lot of the way in which educational governance is provided for in this country, so I am interested in how guidance could be strengthened. There are issues at the moment about the way in which national guidance percolates into our schools when it is not on a statutory footing.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I can give you the time back, Mr Rennie.

Willie Rennie: The children's commissioner raised that point during her evidence. She said that she was in favour of putting the current guidance on a statutory footing but that much of the landscape is not an statutory footing and should be considered. The more that we legislate, the more complicated those interactions become, so we must look at how to take a whole-system, considered approach across the landscape.

That is also part of the wider debate and discussion about behaviour, violence and additional support needs. We must be crystal clear in what we say to staff and teachers about what we expect of them, because contradictory messages sometimes come from here and from the Government. I would be sympathetic to taking a look at the legislative landscape.

In conclusion, the real benefit of the bill is that it will bring clarity and a sense of priority and will give staff confidence about what we expect them to do and how they should conduct themselves as professionals. For all those reasons, the Liberal Democrats will support the bill today.

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

15:16

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I, too, congratulate Daniel Johnson and thank him for bringing the bill to the Parliament. I also thank my colleagues on the Education, Children and Young People Committee, our clerks and those who gave evidence to us. As other members who have already spoken have said, our particular thanks should go to Beth Morrison and Kate Sanger, who have worked tirelessly on the issue of restraint and seclusion in Scotland's schools.

This is a good bill. There is widespread recognition of the need to do more about restraint and seclusion in schools, and the bill is largely helpful on that. I fear that its timing might prevent the bill from being the best that it could be, but that does not mean that I am against it.

A few months before the bill was introduced, the Scottish Government published guidance on the use of physical intervention in schools, and there is a fairly substantial overlap between that guidance and the bill's provisions. The guidance was introduced in November 2024 and its one-year review is currently under way, with the final report expected in March.

Clearly, the bill intends to go further than guidance would, but, in an ideal world, and given the overlap in the subject matter, we would want to see that report before proceeding with, or completing, our work on the bill. The bill would be stronger for it, and the results for young folk would be better, but our timelines will not allow for that before the Parliament dissolves for the election. If we were to wait, the bill would be pushed into the next session of Parliament to restart its progress, and so we would be pressing the pause button on much of the good that the bill seeks to achieve.

The idea of not letting the perfect become the enemy of the good probably sums up where I am on the issue of timing. The bill could be made better if the review had been completed by now, but it has not, and I cannot justify pausing the bill until that happens. I am pleased that the committee recommended that, if the bill should pass, its provisions should not commence until after the review is finished.

Thankfully, other reports are available to inform any changes to the bill, one of which is the stage 1 report from the Education, Children and Young People Committee. I will use my remaining time to highlight some of the changes that we are keen to see.

We would like to see the definitions of "restraint" and "seclusion" being tightened up and refined, because there is a fear that the bill's current broad definitions of those terms could cause legal ambiguity and unintended consequences.

Some of our witnesses were keen to see examples being included. Such an approach cuts both ways, because examples can also make clear what is not included in a definition—for example, that giving someone a bosie is not restraint—but we maybe need to make that part of the bill clearer.

The other key change that I fully support is ensuring that parents and carers are informed on the same day—or within 24 hours—that restraint or seclusion has taken place. Ben Higgins from the Restraint Reduction Network summed that up pretty well:

> "I think it is good practice that when a child falls over and gets a scratch, a mark, a bump or a bruise, the parents are informed. Why would that not apply in the case of restraint or seclusion?"—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 24 September 2025; c 44.]

There is broad agreement about the principles of this bill and the changes that we want to see, so let us get it moving forward and continue our efforts to make Scotland the best country in the world in which to grow up—for every child.

15:20

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): The background to the bill has been well set out this afternoon by Daniel Johnson, and I congratulate him on its reaching stage 1.

The issue of restraint and seclusion has been a topic of discussion for some time. Like other members, I have met parents and campaigners and heard why they feel that legislation is necessary. I have listened to their concerns about incidents of inappropriate restraint, and I recognise that many of them have shared personal and upsetting stories of their children's distress in order to inform the bill's progress. As Daniel Johnson did, I acknowledge the roles of Beth Morrison and Calum, who represented other families and their children in the pursuit of this legislation.

I recognise that some people, including in the teaching profession, have concerns about the bill, which I will come on to. However, I note that the Education, Children and Young People Committee has scrutinised the bill and is in unanimous support of its general principles. I also welcome the briefing from the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, which sets out its support in line with the UN's recommendations.

I know that the member in charge of the bill has indicated that he will be happy to work with the Scottish Government and others to reach agreement on a definition of "restraint" that is suitable without encompassing everyday

interactions. I also welcome the fact that work is being undertaken to develop a human rights law-compatible definition that would apply across education, care and health service settings, so that we can ensure a consistent legal framework.

Some teachers in my region have raised practical concerns, particularly around unintended consequences and staff confidence. They are right to highlight the pressures that the profession already faces. The EIS is clear that restraint and seclusion should be measures of last resort. It is concerned that proposals to introduce statutory guidance could negatively impact the need for open discussion of intervention, which could lead to a culture of fear and anxiety for teachers and staff who are worried about potential consequences.

To be clear, placing existing guidance on a statutory footing is about achieving consistency, clarity and accountability, so that the guidance is consistent across local authorities, is clear to pupils, teachers and parents, and is in line with the promotion of positive relationships and behaviour and of early intervention. The bill aims to underline the preventative approach while providing clarity around processes that should be followed. All those principles are already in the current guidance.

The impacts of additional training and the recording of incidents have also been highlighted, including the implications for workload and training for staff who are already under significant pressure. It is always worth underlining the vital role that teachers and their educational staff play, and the consequences for individuals in the teaching profession of the increasing workload demands that they continue to face. The lack of sufficient time, staffing and resources in teaching is a recurring issue that is much broader in scope than that of the bill. We know that investment in education is needed. I accept that the legislation could introduce some additional workload on recording and reporting requirements, but there seems to be an acknowledgement that that is necessary and achievable. Wider failures in resourcing education cannot be used as a reason for avoiding necessary reform of pupil safeguarding measures.

The recording of incidents and the provision of high-quality training in physical intervention for teachers are important measures. We know that part of the reason for the bill was the inconsistency that exists across local authorities in recording and communication. The guidance in this area would need to ensure a balance between consistency and practicality.

My colleague Daniel Johnson has been clear that not everyone in the profession would require training in physical intervention. The bill would require the Scottish Government to publish statutory guidance on the training of staff—something that has already been done on a non-statutory basis—and for it to maintain an up-to-date list of approved training providers.

The bill is all about achieving clarity, consistency and child protection. If, at the next stages, work could be done on definitions and the management of practical impacts, it could deliver strong safeguards for children while supporting staff. For those reasons, I support the bill's principles and its progression.

15:25

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I will start my remarks where the public conversation on the bill started, which is with the parents and the carers who have had to live through something that we should never normalise in any school setting—not for any child, and not in any part of Scotland. I pay tribute to campaigners Beth Morrison and Kate Sanger for their strength and determination, to Daniel Johnson for believing in them and in their plight, and to the Education, Children and Young People Committee for its measured and thorough report.

Restraint and seclusion should only ever be used as a last resort, to prevent injury. That is the Government's position, which I support. Use should be rooted in children's rights, safety and basic human dignity. For too many families, harm has been caused not just by an incident itself but by what comes afterwards—the uncertainty, the delay in getting answers, the lack of clarity and, sometimes, the feeling that they are being kept at arm's length from information about their own child. That is why parents and carers have pushed for consistency, transparency and change that are real, and not just well meaning.

I come to this debate not just as an MSP but as a parent of children with additional support needs. I have witnessed restraint and seclusion being used on my own children in primary school. Even now, that memory causes frustration. I send my whole-hearted support to parents, children and young people affected by this issue. I share their frustration, and I understand.

The petition that was lodged in the Parliament back in 2015, and another lodged with the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland in 2018, highlighted inconsistent practice across local authorities and a lack of monitoring. Those are not small issues. If practice is inconsistent, rights are inconsistent. If monitoring is weak, learning and trust are weak—and trust is what families need most.

I therefore welcome the Scottish Government's guidance that was published in November 2024, which is built around relationships and rights, prevention, de-escalation and post-incident support. That guidance matters, and it was developed with the engagement of stakeholders, including parents, education staff, local government and unions, which is really important. I am glad to see that the one-year review is now under way, with a final report expected in March 2026.

I do not see this as an either/or situation. The bill would put key expectations on a statutory footing. I note that the Government will support the general principles of the bill at stage 1, while being honest about the amendments that might be required. I think that that is a responsible approach, because it respects the complexity of the matter while giving us the chance to get the detail right at stage 2.

What I hear from parents and carers is not a desire to punish staff; it is a desire to be treated as a partner, to be informed promptly, to have an accurate record, to know that there is clear national expectation, and to ensure that children's rights are not optional or dependent on a postcode.

I also note and understand that schools are operating in really tough conditions. Distressed behaviour has increased, workloads are heavy and staff safety matters, too. That is exactly why we must get our approach right for everyone involved. I believe that we can both protect children's rights and support staff with clear, workable expectations, training and a culture that learns rather than blames. We must refine definitions to avoid ambiguity and we must ensure that the practical operation strengthens relationships rather than weakens them.

I support the motion to agree to the bill's general principles at stage 1, with parents and carers at the very forefront of my mind and with a clear expectation that definitions can be tightened at stage 2. Families deserve consistency, children deserve dignity, and staff deserve a system that supports them in keeping everyone safe.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: George Adam is the final speaker in the open debate.

15:29

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): This has been a difficult bill to fully get my head around, not because the problem that it seeks to address is unclear but because we must be honest about how it would work in the real world—in our classrooms, on the toughest of days for teachers and staff who are already under immense pressure.

I am also the grandparent of a wonderful young woman—if I can call an 11-year-old a young woman—with autism. We must take in her toughest days and the pressure that she feels and undertake to understand what she is feeling at that time.

For me, one of the most important parts of our committee's evidence taking on the bill was hearing from parents and carers who have campaigned tirelessly for it. They talked about real harm, trauma and failure in the system. The evidence that we heard was heartbreaking. Families spoke of their children sustaining broken bones, severe bruising and deep psychological scars. One mother told us that her daughter was restrained on her first day of secondary school and that, 20-odd years later, she still cannot tolerate closed doors. That should worry every one of us.

My colleague Karen Adam spoke about the need for understanding of young people and children with additional support needs. It came out in the evidence that some teachers were under pressure or did not have that understanding. As a grandparent, I know how that can be difficult. My daughter, Jessica, seems like a superhero to me as she deals with Daisy and some of these issues. We have a three-year-old in the family who is being looked at to see whether she is on the spectrum, too, so we have a rather nice, neurodiverse family unit in our family. We need to understand.

It can be difficult for people when they see a young person who is like that. I remember seeing some of my grandchildren's first breakdowns related to autism. It can be scary and frightening at times, so I can understand why it would be difficult for teachers in a professional position.

However, ignoring the very serious concerns that the EIS has raised is not an option. During stage 1, the EIS's evidence was clear and consistent in its message, and Tom Britton of the EIS told us something that we cannot brush aside:

> "Without the context of more funding and more staff, it is difficult to get beyond that."—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 1 October 2025; c 102.]

He is absolutely right. We cannot legislate as if staffing levels, workload and resources are abstract issues. To make the bill work properly and safely, we will require more staff. That raises very real questions. Are we talking about additional teaching staff, specialist support staff or administrative staff to handle reporting and monitoring duties? Those decisions will land squarely at local authority level, and they cannot be ducked.

Our teachers are already working in a very challenging environment. They are managing increasingly complex additional support needs and growing administrative burdens. The EIS warned

us that, if the bill is poorly implemented, it will risk creating a report culture that is based on fear rather than learning. That is not scaremongering; it is a legitimate concern from a workforce that wants to get it right. We should be clear that our teachers are not the problem.

For the bill to deliver on its aims, several issues need to be addressed at stage 2. First, as has already been said, the current definition of restraint is so broad that it risks capturing ordinary, benign interactions with children.

Secondly, seclusion is the most difficult and sensitive issue in the bill. Many witnesses described seclusion as deprivation of liberty and potentially of human rights. We need to get that definition right. Data reporting is also an important concern, because we do not want to be in a situation in which data, rather than being used as a tool to make things better, is used as some kind of league table.

We must protect our children's rights and support teachers without creating fear, bureaucracy or unintended consequences. There is a lot of work still to be done on the bill, and I am happy to work with others to ensure that we make the bill the best that it possibly can be.

The Deputy Presiding Officer : We move to closing speeches.

15:33

Paul O'Kane: I will begin by picking up on what we have heard this afternoon, starting with the Education, Children and Young People Committee's work, which has been very important. We have heard it referred to throughout the contributions, including those from members of that committee. I was not a member of the committee when it took evidence on the bill. However, it is clear to me—particularly now that I have been inducted into the committee's lengthy meetings on Wednesday mornings—that the committee spent a lot of time looking forensically at the detail of the evidence that was presented, and that is reflected in the report. We also heard about that work from Willie Rennie, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills and the committee's convener.

That was about ensuring that there was strong scrutiny of the bill—Daniel Johnson was put under that scrutiny so that he would explain how he felt the bill would progress—and that the voices of campaigners were heard, as we have heard already, as well as those of teachers and other school professionals who have concerns. I know that Daniel Johnson will turn to those points in his closing speech, but we also have an opportunity, as the bill progresses, to address some of those points more fully.

In reflecting on some of the process that sits around the bill, what Daniel Johnson said about the non-Government bills unit was correct. That unit is the unsung hero of Parliament in ensuring that bills are well drafted and well considered and that they can be brought to Parliament for scrutiny and for us to discuss the issues, decide on the general principles—as we will this afternoon—and then move forward into the subsequent stages.

In opening, I reflected that I worked for Enable Scotland for seven years. In my time there, we produced a number of important pieces of work and reports on seclusion and restraint in schools and the abuses that have happened, which we have heard reference to this afternoon. However, Enable tried to look more widely at the school experience of children and young people who have a learning disability, autism and neurodivergence. We tried to reflect on their experience and, crucially, how we could make it better for them and for their parents.

I remember a statistic that came from the report "#IncludED in the Main?!" At that point, the hundreds of parents and carers of young people with a disability whom we surveyed said that they found their experience of the school system stressful and a battle—those were the words that were used—and that they felt alone and cut off from decision making. That is probably what has been reflected most in this afternoon's debate.

We are trying to set things right for children and young people who have experienced the inappropriate use of seclusion and restraint, but we are also trying to support parents and carers who face daily challenges and often find it hard to get to the truth of what is happening to their children and young people and to move beyond that to build a strong relationship with those who, as Daniel Johnson said, are in loco parentis.

I hope that, as a result of agreeing today that the bill should proceed and as a result of the work that we will do to progress the bill to stages 2 and 3 and put it on the statute book, when we return to Parliament in the next session, we can look back and reflect on the work that will be carried out in our local authorities, in the hope that we will have reduced the burden that parents have felt. We hope that there will be fewer parents who describe their school experiences as stressful or a battle or who feel alone or cut off.

15:38

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I add my congratulations to Daniel Johnson on doing the wheen of work that goes into bringing a bill to this stage. I also congratulate, as many members have done today, Beth Morrison and Kate Sanger, who have also done a wheen of

work. It is important to mention that it is incumbent on all of us in this place to take this forward, to look at where we are now, to progress and to make sure that we make the bill the best that it can be for them. This is not the end of the road—it is just halfway along.

This debate has made one thing abundantly clear. Although the majority of our teachers and school staff act professionally and with the utmost care and compassion every single day, the system of restraint and seclusion in Scotland is not working as it should. We must be clear that restraint and seclusion should never be a routine practice. That was mentioned in the submissions by Miles Briggs and Karen Adam regarding de-escalation, and that has to be the first port of call. Restraint and seclusion should be used only as a last resort in circumstances in which there is an immediate risk of harm to the child and to others, and it should always be used within the framework that prioritises dignity, rights and wellbeing, with relevant staff and support for the child involved.

It is consistency that matters here, not only for pupils and families but for staff. Teachers and support staff deserve clarity. Willie Rennie made a good point when he talked about the middle-of-the-road circumstances that do not fit. However, I think that it is the other way round. It is the more extreme circumstances that the guidance does not quite match, and that is where we have the problem.

The fact is that clarity is required, regardless of how we look at it, and that is what we are trying to achieve. We need clarity, training and robust guidance so that teachers and children are supported proportionately and with confidence in the most challenging of situations.

Kate Sanger said to the committee:

"The reasons that are given for restraint include non-compliance, children making poor choices, sensory overload, bad language and screaming."

She went on to explain that some children and young people

"do not have language skills or verbal skills, and screaming is a way of communicating their needs."—[*Official Report*, 24 September 2025; c 2-3.]

Imagine being restrained for trying to explain yourself. That is just not acceptable.

There is clear evidence that the use of restraint and seclusion is inconsistent across Scotland's schools. Practices vary widely between local authorities and between individual schools. It is not acceptable that parents are not informed when serious interventions are used. We have all heard in our casework of circumstances where that has happened. No parent should discover that their child has been restrained or secluded because their child has come home distressed, withdrawn, unable to explain what has happened to them or covered in cuts and bruises or with broken bones.

It is that lack of transparency that causes real harm. It can compound trauma in children—particularly those with additional support needs, who may struggle to communicate their experiences or to process the distressing events. For families, being kept in the dark undermines trust and makes it harder for them to advocate for their child or to work constructively with the schools to put the right support in place. We need clear safeguards, proper recording and meaningful parental involvement.

As has been mentioned by Daniel Johnson, Maggie Chapman and Willie Rennie, the bill affords us the opportunity to move support on to a statutory footing, and that is what we are trying to achieve. It recognises that relying on non-statutory guidance has not been enough. It acknowledges the living experiences of children, young people and families who have raised concerns over many years, and it signals a commitment to learn from those experiences and to do better.

The Conservatives support the general principles of the bill. We do so in the spirit of constructive engagement, and we will work with the Government and stakeholders to ensure that the legislation is clear, proportionate and effective in practice. Every child in Scotland deserves to feel safe, respected and protected in their school, and every family deserves honesty, transparency and confidence in the system that is meant to support them.

15:43

Jenny Gilruth: I thank members from across the chamber for their contributions to today's debate, which has been remarkable for the conciliatory tone that we have had across the chamber so close to dissolution and for being on a topic on which we all agree. I also thank our partners in local government; our teaching trade unions; all education staff; and, of course, parents, who, as we heard today, have supported our work in this area. The Government will continue to engage with all those partners, and more substantively with Daniel Johnson, on the bill and its progress at stages 2 and 3.

Today, we have heard the will across the Parliament to build on the actions that have already been taken by the Government. Our long-standing position, as is known, is that restraint and seclusion should only ever be used as a last resort, and we are committed to protecting Scotland's children and young people.

I will address some of the comments that were made by colleagues across the chamber this

afternoon, although I am aware that time is short. Miles Briggs reminded the chamber of Beth Morrison's son, Calum, and Douglas Ross said that we would not be here were it not for Beth Morrison and Kate Sanger. Paul O'Kane spoke to the dreadful things that have happened to families, which highlights the necessity of the debate that we find ourselves having today**.** As Maggie Chapman rightly reminded the chamber, there has been a tireless campaign, which, I observe, has been largely led by mums—mums whose experience of our education system has not been what it should have been, and mums who have had to fight.

There are many parallels between the legislation that is before Parliament today and parental experiences—for example, of local support for additional support needs. In listening to colleagues' contributions, I reflected on my constituent Niamdh Braid and the fight that her mother and father had to lead against Fife Council to obtain the support that she required as a British Sign Language user in school in Fife.

Willie Rennie spoke to the need for the guidance to be put on a statutory footing to bring decisiveness and clarity. I note the concerns of my former trade union, the EIS, which has been mentioned in the debate today, about the issue. I have already written to the EIS and I have committed to further engagement with it ahead of stages 2 and 3. I know that the member in charge has engaged with it, too, and I look forward to working with him on that topic. It is worth saying that the teaching trade unions were involved in the development of the Government's guidance, and we will continue to engage with them in relation to the review and, of course, stages 2 and 3, working with the member in charge.

Jackie Dunbar spoke to the interplay between the national guidance and the bill that is before the Parliament. I am pleased that the review, which is well under way, will report in March. She was right to talk about commencement dates—a matter on which I have already engaged with Daniel Johnson—and we are in agreement that lessons from the review must inform how the act is delivered in practice in educational settings.

Claire Baker was right to talk about inconsistencies in recording practices, which I think Roz McCall touched on, too. We see that issue across our educational landscape, and the bill will have a key role to play in strengthening the quality and consistency of data, which we have already actively started to consider in relation to additional support needs, as colleagues will know from the update that I provided earlier this year.

Karen Adam spoke about the need for parents to be treated as partners. To that end, I very much agree with the committee's approach to reporting on the same day. Families, staff and children deserve dignity, and much of that has to be about better communication.

George Adam spoke of the heartbreaking experiences that the Education, Children and Young People Committee has heard from families, which I know will be familiar to colleagues who sit on the committee. His observations on additional support needs are salient to our recent debates in the chamber and are another reason why the review of initial teacher education provision, which I spoke to earlier this year, is so important. Teachers need support, but we must recognise that needs in our classrooms are changing, and the way in which we support the profession is required to adapt accordingly.

George Adam was correct to guard against the creation of league tables. We often see that issue in relation to behaviour in schools, with schools and teachers fearful to report and concerned how that might reflect on their practice or their school. However, if we do not have accurate data, whether on behaviour, ASN or the use of restraint, how can any Government target support to where it is needed most? We need far greater transparency in all those matters, less protectionism and far more engagement and support for the teaching profession.

I thank Daniel Johnson for bringing the bill before the Parliament. I pay particular tribute again today to Beth Morrison, Kate Sanger and all the other parents, children and young people whose lives have been impacted by these issues. No family should have to endure the experiences that members have heard, some of which have been narrated in the debate, but we have an opportunity today to change lives and to create positive, inclusive and safe school environments. The Scottish Government is therefore happy to support the general principles of Daniel Johnson's bill.

15:47

Daniel Johnson: I almost do not know how to respond to the overwhelming and universal compliments that I have received this afternoon. I cannot claim not to occasionally use a theatrical flourish in the Parliament, but I try to approach my work in a collegiate way, to deal with things matter-of-factly and to work with people from right across the chamber, and I hope that some of that is reflected.

I, too, reiterate my thanks to Beth and Calum Morrison and Kate Sanger. Kate and Beth are a dynamic duo and a dream team. I will just reflect on something that Douglas Ross touched on. I believe in the Scottish Parliament, because it brings power closer to people and makes the

possibility of change much more realistic for people. If we pass the bill, the process will demonstrate to Beth and Kate that it is delivering on that promise to Scottish people.

We should always be clear on what we are talking about. Restraint and seclusion, in the most serious instances, are about children—often vulnerable children—being pinned down and held in stress or prone positions. We are talking about seclusion and being put in a locked room, which is sometimes called a chill-out room but is not—it is a cupboard with a lock or, sometimes, a padded room. That is not right—not in this day and age. If that has to happen, we need the most robust procedures around it. Whenever the state intervenes physically, using force, we rightly expect and demand that that has robust monitoring and supervision. Why would we not have that expectation for our children?

We must acknowledge the EIS's concerns. Maggie Chapman did an excellent job of dealing with them, but let me reiterate its key concerns, which were around timing, legal questions for individual teachers, training, workload and league tables.

In relation to timing, it is not true that the provisions of the bill are new and were only introduced in the 2024 non-statutory guidance. The 2017 guidance made it clear that local authorities should have clear procedures and training available for teachers and went on to say that all instances of the decision to use physical intervention

"must be recorded and monitored."

That was in 2017—it is not new. I reflect that, often, we legislate without having detailed guidance to implement the measures in the legislation until after the passage of the bill. We have an advantage here in that a decade or more of guidance to build on, so we know what we are talking about.

On the legal question, let us be clear that the obligations will be for local authorities and for schools, not for individual teachers. That is not to say that individual teachers will not be asked to play their part but, critically, the obligations rest at a different level. Likewise, on training, the bill restates what is already in guidance about the training being made available. There is no point in this legislation at which it says that all teachers must be trained.

On workload, I am clear that there should be no additional workload. If, as the EIS agrees, such incidents should already be recorded, there should be no additional workload. Critically, we know that accidental injuries are recorded in a comprehensive way—that is part of current practice and, if the recording is being omitted when the interventions are deliberate, there are bigger questions for us to ask.

Finally, on the matter of league tables, the legislation sets out that the information will be gathered at local authority level and passed on to the Scottish ministers. There are two safeguards there: first, the information will be provided to ministers not on the basis of the school but on the basis of the local authority. Secondly, I deliberately left it to the discretion of ministers to decide how that would be detailed, because we need to take care about it and jigsaw identification must be avoided.

We should note that not only was the General Teaching Council for Scotland broadly supportive of the bill, it made the point that perhaps we need to go further. That reflects on many of the points raised by the cabinet secretary. The Association of Directors of Education in Scotland has also taken a constructive approach.

I am almost out of time—as the member in charge of the bill, between the six minutes for my introduction and the five minutes to conclude, I have a lot to pack in.

On definitions, we need to ensure that, particularly in recording and reporting practice, we are not inadvertently capturing other things. As some members pointed out, hugs are not restraint. A supportive hand on the shoulder is not restraint. Although the definition in the bill talks about removing the ability to voluntarily move, we can tighten that definition. I will look at that—things such as the deliberateness of the use, the length of time, the risks involved and the nature of the intervention need to be captured, particularly in relation to the recording and reporting, so that we do not create unnecessary work. That is doable.

I am keen to work with the trade unions, other relevant bodies, the Government and everyone in this chamber to make sure that we get those definitions right and on other points that have been raised. I think that all the points raised by the committee are right and I hope to work on amendments, either directly myself or with others, to ensure that we improve this bill.

I thank everyone for their contributions this afternoon.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the Restraint and Seclusion in Schools (Scotland) Bill at stage 1. There will be a brief pause before we move to the next item of business, to allow members on the front benches to change over.

Greyhound Racing (Offences) (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-20527, in the name of Mark Ruskell, on the Greyhound Racing (Offences) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1. I call Mark Ruskell, the member in charge of the bill, to speak to and move the motion.

15:55

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I am very proud to bring to the chamber a bill that gives us a momentous opportunity to end greyhound racing in Scotland and the suffering that those wonderful dogs face.

I acknowledge the hard work that it has taken to get here—of my staff, the non-Government bills unit and the tireless campaigners and members of the public who have consistently highlighted the suffering of greyhounds. Some of those people are in the public gallery this afternoon. I also thank the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee for its scrutiny of the issue over a number of years; the Scottish Government for its constructive approach to considering the bill as it has evolved; and members of all parties in the Parliament for their support.

The bill is necessary and long overdue. Scotland is considered a world leader in animal welfare, but it is one of only eight countries where commercial greyhound racing is still legal. Of those eight countries, New Zealand, Wales, the US and the state of Tasmania are in the process of introducing bans on the activity.

We have a unique opportunity to end this dangerous activity. There is huge public support for such a measure, and the industry is in decline. My bill was inspired, in part, by petition PE1758, which was brought to the Parliament by Scotland Against Greyhound Exploitation and signed by more than 30,000 members of the public. It is clear that greyhound racing is no longer welcome in Scotland. Polling shows that 68 per cent of Scots back the proposed ban.

The risk of injury and death is embedded in the design of greyhound racing. Greyhound racing on oval tracks is inherently dangerous. Racing at speeds of up to 40mph on an oval track exerts excessive force on the left fore and right hind limbs, leading to leg breaks and injury in the dogs. Collisions often occur at the first curve of the track due to the impacts of centrifugal force and the dogs bunching to keep the lure in their sight. Dogs collide with one another or the fencing, or stumble, resulting in catastrophic injuries that have lifelong impacts that are rarely seen in other dogs.

Many members have had the pleasure of meeting Sasha, an ex-racing dog who has visited Parliament on a number of occasions. Members might have noticed that Sasha has a limp and wears a shoe on her back right foot. That is because Sasha fell hard on the first bend of a trial race, resulting in her leg being broken in several places and leaving her with a permanently misshapen leg and paw. Her trainer was talked into surrendering her to a charity for further care and rehoming, rather than simply euthanising her. That injury was completely preventable and is exactly what the bill will put an end to in Scotland.

The sport is administered by the Greyhound Board of Great Britain, whose own data shows the inherent evidence-based risk of injury and fatality. Between 2017 and 2024, there have been more than 1,000 trackside deaths and more than 30,000 injuries across the United Kingdom, and, in 2024, there was an increase in the number of track fatalities.

There is no legal requirement for independent tracks such as Thornton—the only track that is left in Scotland—to record or publish data relating to fatalities and injuries. However, the Scottish Animal Welfare Commission has stated that there is no reason to believe that the risks at unlicensed tracks in Scotland are any different from or less than those at tracks elsewhere in the UK. Thornton, the last remaining track in Scotland, is nearly identical in size and track surface to the licensed track at Shawfield, at which there were 197 injuries and 15 deaths between 2018 and 2020, when it closed.

Some members will be thinking, “Why do we need this bill if the industry is in decline in Scotland and there is no active racing?” However, if the bill is not passed, there will be nothing to prevent greyhound racing from restarting, which would put more greyhounds at significant risk of injury and death. That is exactly what happened in Wales. The unlicensed Valley track in Wales became GBGB registered in 2023, racing increased fourfold and more dogs were injured as a result. Whether it is one or 100 greyhounds, that unnecessary harm should not be allowed to happen. Only by ending greyhound racing permanently can we ensure that that suffering ends.

My bill will achieve that by making it illegal for a person knowingly to use or permit the use of greyhounds in racing at race tracks. The offences set out in the bill cover oval tracks and therefore apply to racing at licensed and independent tracks, and they relate to any racing activity, such as races, timed trials and sales trials. Given that all

race tracks in Scotland are oval, the bill should ensure that no further racing takes place. However, it also includes a provision that would allow Scottish ministers to regulate to include other types of tracks if they were to be opened and deemed to pose a risk to greyhound welfare. Should someone be convicted of an offence, they could be subject to a fine or prison sentence and might have other penalties imposed on them, such as being prevented from owning a greyhound.

My bill is tightly drawn, with the clear aim of ending the suffering that is caused directly by racing on oval tracks. However, I share wider concerns in relation to breeding, kennelling and transportation of dogs to tracks outside Scotland, and I encourage wider work by the Scottish Government, separate to the bill, to address those concerns. As long as greyhound racing remains legal, we will see injuries and deaths. I urge members to support the general principles of the bill. Let us take that first and critical step to ending the suffering of greyhounds in Scotland.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Greyhound Racing (Offences) (Scotland) Bill.

16:01

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I congratulate Mark Ruskell on getting his bill this far. However, I am here to speak on behalf of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee and to set out the findings of our stage 1 scrutiny of the Greyhound Racing (Offences) (Scotland) Bill.

In commencing its stage 1 scrutiny, the committee ran a targeted call for views between August and October 2025, which was followed by evidence sessions with the minister and the member in charge of the bill. On behalf of the committee, I thank everyone who has contributed to our scrutiny of the issue.

The committee has considered the issue over an extended period, having previously held a short inquiry into petition PE1758, which urges the Scottish Government to end greyhound racing in Scotland. We agreed to pause consideration of the petition when the bill was introduced in order to let the bill complete its passage through Parliament.

The committee as a whole supports the general principles of the bill. However, not all committee members are persuaded that the evidence gathered to date justifies a ban. Tim Eagle, Rhoda Grant, Beatrice Wishart and I take the view that a sufficiently robust case has not so far been made.

Before I speak directly to the bill's provisions, I want to lay out how the committee's scrutiny has highlighted important questions, which we look forward to discussing in the debate. At the time of our petition inquiry, the Scottish Government's view was that, although statistics relating to injuries at tracks that were regulated by the Greyhound Board of Great Britain were "unacceptable", there was insufficient evidence that the welfare risks at independent tracks are comparable to those at GBGB tracks.

For those who do not follow greyhound racing in detail, there is one track in Scotland—the independent track at Thornton in Fife. In our report on the petition, we asked the Scottish Government how it intended to gather data from that independent track. Although there has been no new data since our petition report, the Scottish Government supports the bill. The minister told the committee that he believed that there are inherent welfare risks associated with greyhound racing at speeds on oval tracks—risks that, in his view, cannot be fully eliminated through regulation or good practice.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): The member makes the point that, without data, we do not know what the situation is for an unregulated track. Would the assumption not be that it will be worse than at a track that is regulated?

Finlay Carson: Throughout our evidence sessions on the bill and the petition, we heard no evidence of dog injuries or reports to the Scottish SPCA to suggest that there was any cruelty. We were just dealing with the data that was put in front of us. We were not making assumptions—it is simply that such evidence was not available.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Does the member agree that, given that there is evidence of cruelty, animal fatalities and injuries on licensed tracks, it would therefore follow that there would also be such things on an unlicensed track?

Finlay Carson: We are dealing with tracks in Scotland and with banning track greyhound racing in Scotland, and we have to be careful about using the term "cruelty". The issues were about dogs that were injured. We have to be very careful about our language and using words such as "cruelty".

The minister told the committee that he believes that there are inherent welfare risks associated with greyhound racing at speeds and with oval tracks, and, in his view, those risks cannot be eliminated through regulation or good practice. In the light of the committee members' differing views on the case for a ban, the committee asked the Scottish Government for a fuller explanation of why it now considers welfare risks to be comparable between independent and GBGB-regulated tracks.

I thank the minister for his letter to the committee, which responded to that request ahead of this afternoon's debate. Although no new data has been provided, I acknowledge the Scottish Government's position that its move to support the bill is based on previous evidence that demonstrates the inherent risk of racing on oval-shaped tracks, including the Scottish Animal Welfare Commission's 2023 report.

The committee notes that the bill would not prevent greyhounds that are kept in Scotland from racing elsewhere in the UK, and notes the minister's recent correspondence, which states:

"It is unfortunate that greyhounds kennelled in Scotland which are raced in other parts of the UK will have a different level of protection afforded to them".

Although the immediate impact of the bill would be very limited, given that greyhound racing is not currently taking place in Scotland, it would still prevent racing from recommencing at the Thornton track and would prevent the establishment of any new oval tracks in Scotland.

On the bill's provisions, should a ban be introduced, we agree with the bill's approach of making it an offence to allow a dog to race both for the greyhound's owner and for the track operator.

Statistics show that the highest welfare risks are associated with oval tracks. Therefore, the committee also agrees that, if a ban is introduced, it should apply specifically to oval tracks. We are content with the penalty provision in sections 1 and 2, as drafted, and note the Scottish Government's intention to amend the provisions in sections 3 to 9, on enforcement, to ensure that they are consistent with existing animal welfare legislation.

I look forward to hearing colleagues' views on the bill during the debate.

16:07

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): I begin by recognising the vitally important role that all dogs play in our communities, and their contribution to society. One of the biggest losses that I have had since becoming an MSP is the fact that I no longer have a dog that I can spend hours having endless fun with. It is important to recognise that we want to have the best relationship with our dogs that we can, and that welfare is a vital part of that.

I remind the Parliament that, when the bill was first proposed, the Government took a neutral stance. At that stage, the proposal sought to prohibit all greyhound racing in Scotland. Given the breadth of the proposal and the fact that the details of precisely what would be prohibited were still being developed, it was entirely pragmatic for the Government to reserve its position until the final content of the bill was known.

As the Parliament will be aware, the Scottish Government is also considering the feasibility of introducing statutory licensing for greyhound racing and whether that would drive the animal welfare improvements that we all want to see. The bill that is now before the Scottish Parliament is far more focused in scope, and it seeks specifically to prohibit the racing of greyhounds on oval tracks.

Currently, the Welsh Government is proposing a complete ban on greyhound racing in Wales. At this point, we believe that there is sufficient evidence to prohibit greyhound racing on oval tracks, but not on all tracks.

The Scottish Government is committed to setting the highest standards of animal welfare, and we believe that the stated aim of the bill is to address the inherent risks that are associated with running dogs at speed on oval tracks. Those are risks that, even with good practice, cannot be eliminated entirely, and risks that licensing would not be able to eliminate. Having carefully considered that evidence, the Scottish Government has agreed to support the general principles of the bill, recognising that it represents a proportionate response to those risks.

Finlay Carson: I am confused that the minister's position changed when it was quite clear that there was no type of racing of greyhounds in Scotland other than on an oval track. When the petition was being heard, the minister was quite content to allow that to continue.

Jim Fairlie: We have rehearsed this on numerous occasions and went round the same question numerous times when I give evidence to the committee. We were looking at the broad principle of the bill as it was previously presented, not the one that we have before us.

Let us be clear: there are studies and veterinary reports that have found that, when dogs run into bends at high speed, they experience strong sideways forces that make them more likely to lose balance, collide with each other or hit the track barriers. An Australian report calculated that

"Approximately 80% of all Catastrophic and Major injuries were caused by congestion and incidents such as checking, collision, galloping".

I provided a link to that report in my response to the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee's stage 1 report.

The Scottish Animal Welfare Commission's 2022 report on the welfare of greyhounds in racing concluded that oval track design is a key factor in injuries and deaths due to the combination of bends and the speeds at which racing dogs enter those bends, and that those risks cannot be fully

mitigated. Similar concerns are echoed by animal welfare organisations and veterinary reviews, which point to thousands of recorded injuries and numerous fatalities internationally each year that are linked to the racing conditions.

Taken together, that evidence provides a solid animal welfare basis for demonstrating that greyhound racing as practised on oval tracks exposes dogs to a significant risk that cannot be eliminated by other measures.

As I already highlighted to the committee and to Mr Ruskell, we will seek some amendments to the bill and I very much look forward to working with Mr Ruskell on those amendments in the coming weeks. However, although we support the principles of the bill, we are mindful of the implications for the individuals and communities that are connected with greyhound racing in Scotland, particularly those that are involved in the Thornton track in Fife.

In recent years, the activity at Thornton has been on a small scale and largely informal. For many people who have continued to run their dogs there, it has been less about serious competition and more about companionship. It is a chance to meet friends and others with a shared interest, socialise and give their dogs a run on the track. I put it on record that I absolutely understand their disappointment. I do not doubt for a moment their dedication and their love for their dogs but, of course, I recognise that the bill will not prevent greyhound owners from meeting and socialising with others to exercise their dogs. They will commit an offence only if the dog is run on an oval track. Nonetheless, we must be cognisant of the social and community aspects and the bill's impact on those people.

I commend Mark Ruskell for his commitment to bringing the welfare of greyhounds to the Parliament's attention. He has been a staunch advocate for them and has identified and highlighted an inherent risk in racing on oval tracks.

I also thank the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee for its detailed scrutiny of the bill's proposals and the preparation of its stage 1 report, which made some helpful recommendations.

We recognise that the bill addresses legitimate welfare concerns that, given the current minimal activity at Thornton, will affect only a small number of individuals and animals while preventing oval tracks from being set up for racing elsewhere in Scotland. I look forward to hearing the rest of the debate and to working closely with Mark Ruskell and the committee as the bill progresses.

16:13

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I recognise the work that Mark Ruskell MSP has put into the bill and I am genuinely grateful for the discussions that we have had on the issue in recent months. Although I have not been through the member's bill process myself, I understand that it can be demanding.

There is no doubt that the welfare of animals matters deeply to all of us and that the intention behind the bill—to protect greyhounds from harm—comes from genuine concern. However, I have to be honest that I struggle to believe that it is a priority for the Parliament, given the important issues that the people of Scotland look for us to act on.

As the stage 1 report from the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee made clear, not all members are convinced that a ban is justified now. Although I note that the committee narrowly supported the general principles of the bill, there were concerns that there was insufficient new evidence to firmly establish the need for a ban.

A question also remains for me about proportionality. No licensed greyhound racing is taking place in Scotland, with the last fully licensed track having closed several years ago. That raises a fundamental question: are we legislating to end an activity that already no longer exists and, if so, is a blanket prohibition the best or most proportionate way to address welfare concerns?

I also place on record a concern about how we have arrived at this point. My understanding is that, during earlier consideration of the issue, the Scottish Government was clear that a ban was not necessary and pointed instead towards regulation and licensing—I am conscious that Jim Fairlie just touched on that—but, during the progress of the bill, that position has changed.

It is important for me that legislation of this nature should be driven by clear reasoning and transparency. A properly designed licensing and regulatory framework, which I understand the Government already has powers to introduce, could have gone further in safeguarding the welfare of greyhounds throughout their lives, whether they race in Scotland or elsewhere.

There are existing animal welfare protections in Scottish law, most notably the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006, which already makes it an offence to cause unnecessary suffering to a protected animal and gives ministers powers to set codes of practice and licensing for animal-related activities. Some stakeholders argued that strengthening regulation, licensing and oversight could better protect greyhounds throughout their life cycle, rather than an outright ban that might

drive activities underground or simply displace concerns across borders.

Animal welfare remains an important priority for me and the Scottish Conservatives. Although I see the motivation behind the bill, because of what I have set out, I am afraid that we cannot support it at stage 1.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Rhoda Grant joins us remotely.

16:15

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I, too, congratulate Mark Ruskell on taking a member's bill to this stage. This is the fourth member's bill that we have had in this Parliament regarding the welfare of dogs, but there has been no action whatsoever by Government.

I will not vote for the general principles of the bill, because there are no greyhound racetracks in operation in Scotland at the moment. At best, the bill might prevent one from opening, but to open a track you need planning permission, which is not a simple process. Indeed, it is difficult to see how that could happen in the current climate. The Scottish Government proposed a licensing scheme for greyhound racing, but pulled back on that, as was mentioned earlier. Putting that aside, I do not need to tell members about the time pressure in this Parliament after the experience of this week. Unfortunately, that is going to be the norm over the next eight weeks.

Essential legislation that we need to pass is coming forward—legislation that will make a huge difference to people's lives. I am not convinced that we have the luxury to spend time on legislation that will have little or no effect when we risk losing impactful legislation because of it.

The bill does not deal with animal welfare issues, so greyhounds will still be bred, trained and housed in Scotland, albeit that they will continue to be raced in England. We need the Scottish Government to introduce legislation to deal with the welfare of dogs, be they greyhounds or other breeds. We have puppy farms and illegally imported dogs, all held in terrible conditions. No dog should be mistreated, and the Government needs to act. It is simply not good enough to keep having random members' bills that, although well meaning, do very little to tackle the welfare of dogs.

The bill bans only oval racetracks, which will leave a loophole, and, although straight tracks are seen as much safer, that ban could lead to figure-of-eight tracks being developed, which I assume would be more dangerous.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I do not think that many of us in the chamber would disagree that we need action on things such as puppy farms, illegal breeding and all the things that Rhoda Grant listed. None of those things means that the bill should not go through. I am confused about her logic there. Why can we not do one thing that is positive for animal welfare while keeping up the pressure to do other things that are positive for animal welfare, too?

Rhoda Grant: To be fair, all that the bill does is put on pressure. There are no greyhounds being raced in Scotland at the moment, and should the bill pass, that situation will be exactly the same. It does not take into account the welfare of greyhounds that are raced elsewhere. It seems to me that it is just sending a signal, which is a luxury that we cannot afford when there is so much time pressure on the Parliament.

I said that the bill bans only oval greyhound racetracks; it does not ban straight ones, which committee evidence suggested were safer. There is nothing to prevent anyone from opening, say, a figure-of-eight track, which, given the sharper bends, would surely be more dangerous.

There are powers in the bill to allow ministers to change the definitions by subordinate legislation, but that would cause a delay, so I am concerned about that as well.

That being said, Scottish Labour is committed to improving the welfare of dogs. We need to deal with the complex issues that surround the breeding, selling, theft and mistreatment of all dogs. We will therefore abstain on the bill at stage 1. Should it progress—should it have time to progress in this session—we will work hard to improve it. [*Interruption*.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you. I think that Ms Harper wanted to intervene, but Ms Grant has concluded her speech.

16:20

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I am proud to speak in this debate in whole-hearted and enthusiastic support of Mark Ruskell's Greyhound Racing (Offences) (Scotland) Bill. I pay tribute to Mark for his tireless, compassionate and principled leadership on the issue. For years, he—as well as his beloved Bert—has stood alongside campaigners, charities and members of the public, all of whom have asked a simple question: why does a modern Scotland still permit the suffering of animals for entertainment?

The bill gives us a clear and humane answer. At its heart, this debate is not really about regulation or licensing schemes; it is about values. It is about whether we accept the torture, injury and

premature death of gentle dogs as an acceptable price for gambling and spectacle—for what some might call fun and entertainment. I do not accept that, and I know that many members across the chamber do not accept it, either. Greyhounds are not disposable commodities; they are sensitive social animals that feel pain, fear and distress just as profoundly as any dog that shares our homes, yet the evidence is overwhelming that racing them at speed around oval tracks exposes them to inherent and unavoidable risks of serious injury and death. Broken legs, spinal injuries, head trauma and lifelong pain are not rare accidents.

Finlay Carson: Will the member take an intervention?

Maggie Chapman: Perhaps Finlay Carson, in his intervention, will explain why none of that is cruel.

Finlay Carson: We are at risk of getting into an argument about who supports animal welfare and who does not. I firmly support animal welfare and I love my dogs as much as anybody else loves theirs, but we are legislators and we are here to legislate. There are currently no dogs that would benefit from the bill. The pressure should be on the Government to bring forward licensing and proper legislation that will protect dogs, whether they are raised in Scotland or in England. The bill would not do that.

Maggie Chapman: If Finlay Carson cares about animal welfare as he says he does, maybe he should care about future proofing our legislation as well. The bill may not do everything that we might want it to do, but that does not mean that this step is not an important one.

Broken legs, spinal injuries, head trauma and lifelong pain are not rare accidents but are predictable outcomes of an industry that is built on speed, strain and profit, and no amount of tweaking can change that fundamental reality. As the Scottish Animal Welfare Commission has made clear, regulation cannot remove the inherent harms of greyhound racing. I say to Mr Carson that the only way to protect these dogs is to end the practice entirely.

I recognise the phenomenal work of the organisations that have brought us to this point. Scotland Against Greyhound Exploitation, OneKind, the Dogs Trust, Blue Cross, the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and so many others have worked with compassion, rigour and determination to expose the realities of greyhound racing and advocate for a kinder alternative and a ban. Their briefings for this afternoon's stage 1 debate do not deal in abstractions; they tell the stories of individual dogs who have been left injured and traumatised or discarded. Sometimes, if those dogs are lucky, they are patiently rehabilitated by charities when the industry could no longer profit from them. Those organisations understand something fundamental: that our responsibility to animals does not end when they stop being useful to us.

Public support for the bill is strong and consistent across Scotland. People know that the practice belongs in the past. Other nations are moving on, and Scotland, with its proud history of animal welfare leadership, must not be left behind. This is a modest bill with a profound moral purpose. It seeks to prevent future suffering and draw a clear line against cruelty, and it says that, in Scotland, compassion matters more than profit.

I urge colleagues across all parties to support Mark Ruskell's bill at stage 1 this afternoon and to stand on the right side of history and the side of humanity.

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

16:25

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I whole-heartedly congratulate Mark Ruskell, because I know how tough it is to bring forward a member's bill. You have to be resilient, negotiate and stay the course—which is not meant to be a pun. I have done it myself, having had two successful members' bills and one that failed.

I say to Rhoda Grant, who thinks that members' bills can be random, that my Control of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2010 brought in the ideas of the deed, not the breed, and blaming the person, not the animal and was pioneering. My Welfare of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2025 included the idea of bringing in a code for what happens before people get a dog and tried to cut demand, because the supply of dogs is coming from puppy farms and we cannot make laws to deal with matters outwith our jurisdiction.

I say to Tim Eagle and to anyone else that, unless there is a change to the standing orders, every member of Parliament is entitled to bring forward two members' bills per session. I do not see why the Government, whoever that is, should have its own way on legislation all the time. It is far better to keep Parliament democratic.

I will make another point in my short contribution.

Finlay Carson: Will Christine Grahame take an intervention?

Christine Grahame: I have only two minutes.

If you look at it, the bill is not about an outright ban but about a ban on oval tracks, because that

is where the damage is done. I do not have the statistics in front of me, but I say to Finlay Carson that the cross-party group had the Greyhound Board of Great Britain in front of us and that we saw those stats. Animals get injured. When they are no use any more, they are sometimes dumped at the side of a road or motorway so that someone will kill them. I have seen that myself in Midlothian. Some dogs get their ears cut so that they cannot be traced back to an owner. There can be unscrupulous and nefarious goings-on when a dog is past its sell-by date—imagine talking about an animal as if it is a thing to be sold.

The amending stage of the bill is still to come, but I notice that the bill says

"Scottish Ministers may by regulations modify the definition of 'racetrack'"

which would be done by the affirmative procedure, as it should be.

Mark Ruskell is absolutely right: welfare is at the heart of this bill, which deals with only certain racetracks. The track record—I am sorry to make that pun—of injuries, abandonment and death is terrible, and we have all heard about that stuff.

I end my submission by saying that I support member's bills. I do not want to see them undermined or attacked, and I hope that we will continue having them.

16:27

Davy Russell (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab): My concern is that the bill will have minimal benefits—if any—for animal welfare and that Parliament risks wasting time banning something that does not happen anyway, which does not sit well with me.

The bill would also have a detrimental impact on certain constituent groups, namely elderly gentlemen who like a wee bet on the dogs or the horses. It is a recreational activity from former mining areas, where people couldnae afford a horse but could afford greyhounds and used to run them. That is how this kind of thing started. Will horse racing, or even pigeon racing—which some people still do—be next? The fact is that greyhound racing is legal in the rest of the UK, so any market demand would simply shift over there. It does not happen here anyway.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I understand the member's points and the strong views on the subject, but the committee looked at that. Neither the committee nor the Parliament can be expected to legislate for what happens in England.

Davy Russell: Greyhounds have been selectively bred for thousands of years, since the time of the Egyptians, and losing their place culturally will accelerate the extinction of the breed. Due to their huge feeding and exercise demands, greyhounds are not a natural wee pet. They are not easy household pets. I am sure that their owners love them dearly, and I know that they have very good temperaments, because I have friends who have greyhounds.

As with other issues, the urge for members to jump on the ban button is too great, but, if there are concerns about the animal welfare in greyhound racing, surely the solution is to improve the standards and monitoring. If Mr Ruskell wants to look at animal safety and welfare, perhaps he should look at the venture capital acquisitions of veterinary surgeries, which are having far wider impacts on owners of potentially all domestic pets, as well as on farmers, by putting costs through the roof in relation to the welfare of pets and animals and treatment for any illnesses that they have.

With regard to whether this is a reserved matter, some areas are reserved and some are devolved. Animal welfare standards are devolved. The UK Labour Government is introducing reforms to the private veterinary sector to make sure that prices are competitive, and further inquiry outcomes are planned.

By choosing to tackle a niche sport, which, as members will already be aware, does not currently operate in Scotland, Mr Ruskell's bill is chasing headlines rather than chasing a shared sense of the need to preserve and improve animal welfare and standards overall. A raft of other issues are higher up the list of Scottish people's concerns—national health service waiting lists, housing waiting lists and the cost of living crisis, to name but a few. As a Labour MSP, I want to see the life of an animal valued and I recognise that there are people who feel strongly about the issue, but I want the limited bandwidth for such issues to be used for more meaningful and less niche issues.

I believe that the bill points a judging finger at my older constituents, who sometimes go for a walk down to the bookies and put a wee bet on the dug racing. That is them. The bill does nothing for the welfare of the greyhound breed, and it would take greyhounds a step closer to extinction or, at best, accelerate their addition to the rare breeds list. We recognise that the bill will change at subsequent stages, though, and we will look at how it can be improved.

16:31

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): The bill has been a long time coming, and I thank Mark Ruskell for all his work and determination in getting it to stage 1.

I am not going to mince my words. Greyhound racing is barbaric and I abhor it. I am completely baffled by Rhoda Grant and the Labour Party, and Finlay Carson and the Tories, who talk about animal welfare but are not prepared to agree to the general principles of the bill. It just does not make any sense at all.

Animals are not a product or a commodity to be used for human entertainment and profit. Between 2017 and 2020, 15 greyhounds died at Shawfield stadium in Glasgow, which is a licensed stadium. Countless greyhounds were injured or disposed of, which is often referred to by the sector as wastage. It is disgusting. Thankfully, Shawfield is now closed. To go back to the convener's point, Thornton track is not licensed or regulated, so we will never know how many animals die or are injured and suffer at that facility, and no vet is ever present when the dogs race.

Great work by campaigners has highlighted serious welfare concerns for racing greyhounds, including a culture of drugging dogs, giving them a poor diet and, once their so-called career is over, an uncertain fate, which often includes euthanasia. I recently saw a horrific video of a dog being trapped in the pen as it tried to run out when the starter gun fired. No animal should suffer like that. These beautiful, gentle dogs spend most of their time in often dank, dirty kennels and suffer untreated wounds and injuries. They may be constantly muzzled, which is unbearably stressful for them. They are forced to race during 32°C heat, and that is downright cruelty.

Enough is enough. The abuse of these beautiful, gentle dogs must end now. Scotland now has the chance to end that barbarity and prove that we are a caring, compassionate nation in which animals are treated with the respect that they deserve. In the name of kindness, I urge members to support the bill at stage 1.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches. I call Gillian Mackay, who joins us remotely, to close on behalf of the Scottish Greens.

16:34

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): I will begin, as other members have, by extending my thanks to my wonderful friend and colleague Mark Ruskell for introducing the bill. Mr Ruskell has been a long-time champion of this issue, and it is wonderful to see his efforts and the efforts of many tireless campaigners coming to fruition. Having been through the member's bill process myself, I know that it cannot be overstated how this process can take over a member's entire life.

A huge thanks should also be extended to the campaigners, the non-Government bills unit and Mark Ruskell's staff team, who have processed hundreds of responses to his consultation. Many members will know how personally committed Mark Ruskell is to the welfare of greyhounds, and no wonder. For too long, greyhounds have suffered cruelly and unnecessarily in the name of gambling.

Some contributions this afternoon have been outright confusing. Rhoda Grant simultaneously claimed that the bill is unnecessary because there is no racing and because anyone who wanted to open an oval track would have other barriers to overcome, and that the bill does not go far enough because it does not include other tracks that would also have to overcome those same barriers. How on earth Davy Russell can say that the bill will not improve welfare is incredible, when there is clear evidence on how often these dogs are injured.

These dogs make incredible pets and they should be treated kindly and humanely. In its report on the welfare of greyhounds used for racing, the Scottish Animal Welfare Commission listed

"several causes of welfare concern, particularly the risk of injury or death at the track … the conditions under which they are reared, a significant part of a dog's life that may be spent in kennels with restricted social contacts, and risks of neglect and poor veterinary care once their racing careers are over."

That same report concluded that

"Greyhound racing is not inherently dangerous for the dogs involved."

The report also cited the oversupply of puppies as a significant harm. It is estimated that around 6,000 greyhound puppies are culled in Ireland each year as a result of overbreeding. That is heartbreaking—these are dogs, not commodities. An end to racing is the only way to ensure that the suffering ends. Regulation cannot protect greyhounds from the inherent risk of injury and death or address wider welfare concerns.

The Greyhound Board of Great Britain's data shows that the number of trackside deaths has increased annually since 2022. Injuries also remain far too high. Some injured dogs are made to race, compounding their injuries and making it harder for them to heal. According to Dogs Trust and the Blue Cross, injuries and long-term conditions include fractures, muscle, ligament and tendon injuries, ruptured skin wounds and osteoarthritis.

The evidence is clear. Without a ban, greyhounds will continue to suffer excruciating injuries that impact the length and quality of their lives. Research has shown that the turns or bends of an oval racetrack provide unique risks for racing dogs for a number of reasons, including asymmetric training and racing, centrifugal force

and congestion. The risk of death and injury is built into how the tracks operate.

The bill will help greyhounds across Scotland. It will help them to live full, fulfilling lives, as every dog deserves to do. So, for Bluesy, Bob, Kass and the always wonderful Bert, it is time to back the bill and end greyhound racing for good.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Rhoda Grant to close on behalf of Scottish Labour.

16:37

Rhoda Grant: I will first apologise to Christine Grahame. I certainly did not mean to diminish her role in introducing legislation on dog welfare. I understand how difficult it is to introduce a member's bill. I have done so, so I did not wish to diminish what she has done. However, I think that she, and most people, would agree that we need a comprehensive bill that deals with dog welfare—indeed, animal welfare with regard to pets.

We have had a number of members' bills, which represents a piecemeal approach towards the welfare of dogs. We have had Christine Grahame's bills.

Christine Grahame: First of all, I thank you for your kind words, Ms Grant. We have worked together for many years on a parliamentary and personal level, so thank you for that. I support what you say—I think that we need a consolidation act—

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

Christine Grahame: I beg your pardon. I am always doing that, convener. I mean Presiding Officer. It has been a long week.

I agree that we need a consolidation act, because anybody who is trying to enforce the legislation wants to find it in one place, not higgledy-piggledy here and there.

Rhoda Grant: I absolutely agree with Christine Grahame that we need to pull the current legislation together into one act. However, we also need to add to it, because I believe there are things missing from the current legislation. It does not cover issues such as housing, or breeding, which is a big issue, especially when animals are imported. One of the matters that we also discussed was the illegal importation of dogs into the UK, including Scotland. Many of those animals come into the country ill and have been bred in poor conditions. People pay huge amounts of money for them, but they might be buying a dog that is not going to survive. All those issues have to be dealt with.

Davy Russell talked about the cost of vet care, and it is spiralling out of control. People who buy dogs illegally from other countries are often buying dogs that need huge amounts of veterinary care, and that can be very difficult for them to provide. We need to discourage people from importing dogs illegally, and we also need to look to help people to afford veterinary care. Too often, we hear of families having to put to sleep the family pet, which is very much part of their household, just because they cannot afford to get the animal the care that it needs.

There are many animal welfare issues that we need to deal with that probably should be put in legislation beyond this bill. The bill covers activities that do not happen in Scotland, and there is so much that we should be doing that it does not cover, and that is where my concern lies. Therefore, we need to look hard at ensuring that the next Parliament brings forward comprehensive legislation on animal welfare. That could really make a difference to greyhounds as well as to every other breed that is sought after for various reasons. I hope the next Government will look at the issue and make sure that animal welfare legislation is consolidated, as well as added to.

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

16:41

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I congratulate Mark Ruskell on bringing his member's bill to stage 1. Wherever we may fall on the content of the bill, it has clearly been the product of a lengthy process and considerable effort on his part that has been motivated by a legitimate concern for animal welfare. I would also like to thank the committee for all its work in producing the stage 1 report.

As we have heard, we are in the unusual position of being asked to consider legislation to ban something that does not happen within the jurisdiction of this Parliament. That ban remains, however, an issue that can evoke strong feelings in its advocates. It is also an issue that might have practical implications in the future, which I will consider later. On the other side of the coin is a sport that evokes real passion and a dedication to a breed that was bred specifically for coursing and racing.

Several organisations provided evidence on the bill in response to the committee's call for views. Those respondents can be broadly broken down into animal welfare groups, which are overwhelmingly positive about the proposed ban, and those involved in greyhound racing, who are very much not. Those are, of course, two very

entrenched and polarised positions. Both sides have, however, expressed great concern for the welfare of the animals.

It is welcome that the racing sector has pointed to the immense improvement in both the on-track and off-track welfare of these dogs. The Greyhound Board of Great Britain has highlighted a range of steps that have been taken in England through licensing.

We are all aware that no system will protect every dog from cruelty. Whether they are racing dogs, working dogs or pets, in all too many cases dogs are victims of abuse and ill-treatment at the hands of humans that any right-thinking person would find abhorrent.

The member's consultation and the responses to the call for evidence included accounts that were very much at odds with each other when it comes to welfare, and particularly off-track welfare. Many who are involved in the sector wrote of racing greyhounds being treated as pets and cared about deeply by the majority of trainers. However, there were also several stories of presumed mistreatment that were documented by greyhound rehomers, who observed mental and physical impacts in former racing dogs. There clearly needs to be a greater understanding of the issue and, above all, appropriate policing and investigation of animal welfare cases. That is of particular concern where advocates of greyhound racing have raised the prospect that a ban would push activities underground, into a space that is unregulated and beyond open scrutiny.

I turn to the bill in more detail. Mark Ruskell has been candid about the focus on oval tracks, and the bill leaves racing on any other form of track to regulations. The Scottish Government should be open on its position here. Is it waiting to criminalise racing on the straight or other track types? If so, why does it not provide clarity on that position now?

The bill is also breed specific, and the potential loopholes resulting from that are considerable. Whippet racing currently lacks the commercial element of greyhound racing, but it looks very similar.

Where dogs are used in activities other than racing on an oval track, whether it is agility shows or working activities, do we not accept that there are some risks of the same? I mention this because legislation of this type is walking a tightrope between creating legal and illegal alternatives to established practices on the one hand and capturing unintended activities on the other. That is only made more pressing by the earlier point that the practice that the bill seeks to address is not happening in Scotland.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Will the member take an intervention?

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I am sorry, but I do not have time. My colleague Fin Carson, speaking on behalf of the committee, highlighted that the committee did not agree on the need for the bill. Tim Eagle highlighted the recognition of some stakeholders' belief that regulation would be more effective for the welfare issues that have been raised.

Like all of us, the minister recognises the value of dogs. I am very much with him on missing having a dog; I had a Labrador, so there is no chance of a dog like that being raced any time soon. However, I think that we all recognise the affection that people have for their dogs.

Rhoda Grant asked whether the bill was a priority given that, because of the lack of activity in Scotland, it would change nothing. Maggie Chapman's rhetoric around the torture of animals for the entertainment of humans was perhaps unfortunate, but it maybe highlighted where we are coming from. I will not ask, because I do not have time to take the intervention, but I am concerned about where Maggie Chapman might want such bans to end. Davy Russell's approach was very combative and talked about priorities with which I agree, but I think that Mr Ruskell's bill has the best intentions, rather than just being about highlighting and showboating.

I recognise that I do not have a lot of time left, but I believe that there is a wide recognition of what the bill is attempting to achieve. However, it is using greyhound raising as a proxy for wider dog welfare issues. There is an acceptance that the bill is so narrow that it addresses a problem that we all recognise does not exist. Rather than legislation, I would like to see a commitment from the Scottish Government to investing in the proper policing and enforcement of animal welfare cases, whether they arise in the course of racing or any other activity.

16:47

Jim Fairlie: I thank all members for their contributions to the debate. I am glad that Rhoda Grant reminded herself of the enormous amount of work that Christine Grahame did on her Welfare of Dogs (Scotland) Bill. Our officials are working with Christine Grahame on the code of practice.

I will mention some of the other things that the Scottish Government is doing on animal welfare. We were involved in the UK bill to control the import of dogs, cats and ferrets. We are looking at the regulation of canine fertility clinic activities. We are looking at licensing for dog-related activities such as dog walking and boarding. I understand that people are saying that all that should be in one

piece of legislation, but right now we do not have the ability to do that. The legislation that we are putting in place demonstrates that the Government takes animal welfare seriously.

Going back to the subject of the bill that we have in front of us, I continue to believe that the bill's stated aim is to address the inherent welfare risks that are associated with running dogs at speed on oval tracks—risks that, even with good practice, cannot be eliminated entirely, and which licensing could not eliminate. The Government supports the principles of the bill because it is targeted—it is a proportionate response to a specific welfare risk that is associated with tracks of an oval design.

Licensing can undoubtedly improve standards. It can bring transparency and ensure accountability, but it would not remove the welfare risks that are inherent in racing greyhounds on tracks of an oval design. In its current form, the bill would address those risks.

Finlay Carson: I will go back to the point about what is missing here. We do not think that the bill will address Mark Ruskell's concerns. The minister said:

"at this time the Scottish Government is not persuaded of the need to ban greyhound racing in Scotland. In particular, we are not convinced that such a ban is a proportionate and fair response to the animal welfare concerns".—[*Official Report, Rural Affairs and Islands Committee*, 22 May 2024; c 4.]

When he made that statement, was the minister aware of any racing of greyhounds in Scotland other than on ovals?

Jim Fairlie: We have narrated that so many times that I am beginning to get dizzy.

Finlay Carson: I just want a straight answer.

Jim Fairlie: In the initial committee session that I attended, we were talking about a bill with a much broader scope. Mr Ruskell then brought back the bill that we have in front of us. The Government has decided to support this bill on the basis that it focuses on oval designs.

Finlay Carson: That is not true. That is not accurate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer : Mr Carson.

Jim Fairlie: Mr Carson is sitting there and chuntering away; he talks about there being only an oval track. I do not know where members are on this, because Davy Russell, Rhoda Grant and Jamie Halcro Johnston have all said that no racing is happening in Scotland, but there is a track in Scotland. It is in Thornton, and it still has the ability, with an oval track, to race greyhounds.

Patrick Harvie: I wonder whether the minister finds it as difficult as I do to understand the line of argument that this particular form of racing is not happening. Does he share my cynicism that, had the bill been introduced a few years ago, the very same members who are making that argument would be telling us that we have no business shutting down an economically viable business? They would be using a different argument to achieve the same effect.

Jim Fairlie: I will not put thoughts in the minds of other members, as they are more than capable of making those points for themselves, but I understand the point that Mr Harvie is trying to make.

I will go back to the Thornton track, because I want to put it on the record that we absolutely understand and respect the social value that Thornton provided to a small community, and we recognise that those who attended to race their dogs will be disappointed that we are supporting the bill's principles. However, a study by the University of Technology Sydney says:

"The low number of spectators attending race meets does not warrant or justify the continued usage of oval-shaped tracks."

The welfare of Scotland's animals must be protected, and the bill will do that.

We do not expect major rehoming issues—a concern that was also raised—to arise in Scotland as a consequence of the bill. I note that the Dogs Trust and the Scottish SPCA have supported the bill. We will continue to engage with rehoming charities. We will monitor the situation closely and offer support where it may be required.

I emphasise that the Government's position on the bill relates solely to the specific welfare concerns that were raised, based on the evidence that was presented regarding racing greyhounds on oval tracks. It should not be interpreted as indicating a wider position on other animal-related sports, as was mentioned by someone else. For each track, there will be separate circumstances, a separate regulatory framework and a separate evidence base to consider.

I note that there is huge public support for the bill. The petition to ban the activity was the most-signed petition in the Scottish Parliament's history. I commit to working with Mark Ruskell and the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee on the bill, to ensure that it addresses the inherent welfare risks that are associated with running dogs at speed on oval tracks.

16:52

Mark Ruskell: I thank all members for their wide-ranging contributions. I note the contributions from Mr Carson, who has spent quite a lot of the debate bolstering what was a minority view in the committee, rather than the view of the majority of

committee members, who accept that there is an evidence base to push ahead with a ban.

I thank all the members who have spoken in favour of the ban and my bill—Gillian Mackay, Christine Grahame, John Mason, Rona Mackay and Maggie Chapman. I thank other members who have not been able to speak but who are deeply passionate about the issue, have engaged with the evidence—unfortunately, it appears that Mr Russell has not done so—and have concluded that we absolutely need to ban greyhound racing. Their personal support for me and for the work that my team and I have done on the bill has been superb over the past few years.

I am saddened that some members still feel that there is insufficient evidence. I am absolutely dripping in evidence—evidence that has come to the committee and to the Parliament over years and years, including from the industry itself. The saddening figures that come out every year detailing the injuries and deaths represent real dogs. It is incredibly sad to see that evidence coming in. We have also had the testimony of people such as me and hundreds of others across Scotland who have rehomed greyhounds and seen the long-term impact of injury and trauma on those dogs.

It is fair to say, on the issue of licensed or unlicensed tracks, that the committee had no evidence to show that the inherent risk of racing greyhounds at an unlicensed track was lower than that of racing a dog at a licensed track.

It makes no difference to the dog who the owner of a greyhound racing track is. The laws of physics do not magically change if the dog races at a track at Thornton, Newcastle or anywhere else. The evidence is the evidence, and the minister pointed to the scientific studies that show the impact on the dogs and how it results in injury and death.

A number of members have raised the prospect of the activity going underground, but we can see a greyhound track from space. These are fast dogs that need big spaces in which to race. If the bill is passed, ministers will have the power, should they choose to use it, to define a track. Rhoda Grant's suggestion that we will suddenly have figure-of-eight racetracks—a kind of Scalextric for greyhounds—is bizarre. I am not sure what would happen when they crossed over in the middle. That is fantasy stuff. The bill is well defined, and ministers would have the power to define a track, should they need to.

Members have spoken of concerns about dogs that are being kennelled and traded in Scotland and then being taken over the border to England.

Finlay Carson: Will Mark Ruskell give way?

Mark Ruskell: I do not have time—I have a lot to get through.

In addition, if we do not ban greyhound racing in Scotland, dogs will come from England, Wales and Ireland to race in Scotland, so I am concerned about those dogs, too.

We can only legislate for Scotland. I would love greyhound racing to be banned in Newcastle and Sunderland, but we are in the Scottish Parliament. If Rhoda Grant wants greyhound racing to be banned across the UK, she should speak to her colleagues in Wales, who are pushing a bill through right now to achieve that in Wales, and she should speak to her UK Government colleagues, who have the opportunity to do the same at Westminster.

The one thing that I would pick up in regard to the Welsh Government's work on the issue is that it has made a commitment to review wider licensing of the transport, kennelling and breeding of greyhounds. That is an area on which the Scottish Government should work with the Welsh Government.

Finlay Carson: Will Mark Ruskell give way on that point?

Mark Ruskell: I need to make progress.

There is unfinished business in that regard. Although that is not part of the bill that I have introduced, which is narrowly drawn, the Scottish Government must certainly do work on that.

To answer Tim Eagle's point about the existence of the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006, I would say that that has not been effective. It has been extremely difficult to prosecute for "unnecessary suffering", because greyhound racing is an inherently lawful activity. He points to licensing being the way forward, but licensing is the problem. We have licensed greyhound racing at the moment, and injuries and deaths are happening on licensed tracks as well as on unlicensed tracks. It is just not the case that licensing will be a solution.

I see that time is moving on, Presiding Officer, so I will conclude. There is an opportunity for MSPs to be on the right side of history tonight. If there are members such as Rhoda Grant, Davy Russell, Finlay Carson and Tim Eagle who want to see a resurgence of greyhound racing in Scotland, with all the resultant injury and death to dogs, they are free to vote against the bill and to send a signal for racing to start up again and expand in Scotland. I point to the comments of the owner of the Thornton greyhound racing track, who has said that the only reason why he has not expanded greyhound racing at the track is because of the campaign and the bill. Those are the only things

that are preventing greyhound racing from expanding in Scotland.

For the rest of us, who want to end the suffering of the dogs, let us vote for the bill at stage 1. Let us get the ban over the line before dissolution.

Common Organisation of the Markets in Agricultural Products (Fruit and Vegetables) (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2026 [Draft]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-20579, in the name of Jim Fairlie, on the draft Common Organisation of the Markets in Agricultural Products (Fruit and Vegetables) (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2026. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak button.

16:59

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): I am pleased to open the debate. The draft instrument was considered by the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee on 17 December, but the committee did not approve it. However, many of the concerns that members raised relate to matters that are outside the specific scope of this Scottish statutory instrument.

During that committee session, two members indicated that they would support the instrument in the chamber, provided that there were clarification and reassurance on the issues that they had raised. Since then, I have worked constructively with a range of members and stakeholders on the points previously raised. I have sought to address the concerns raised and to provide points of clarification about the importance of the fruit and veg aid scheme for our Scottish producers.

The draft regulations will do the following key things: they will provide stability to stakeholders that receive funding via the fruit and veg aid scheme; and they will enable the Scottish Government to better plan the budget allocation for the scheme and, importantly, to ensure that Scottish Government funding for Scottish producers remains.

The fruit and veg aid scheme is a legacy European Union scheme that has been a success here in Scotland. It relies on collaborative working that encourages innovation, sustainability and investment at scale, which growers could not benefit from on an individual basis. It is valuable and it remains an important source of support for the fresh produce sector in Scotland. I recognise, however, that the model does not suit everyone—particularly because the power to recognise our producer organisations, which is a prerequisite for

the scheme, lies with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

The scheme should not be the sole support mechanism for the sector and I am committed to doing more for small producers. We will work with stakeholders at pace to understand what they need, including by providing funding for an audit to understand the shape of the small fruit and vegetable producer sector and the forms of support that it needs in order to thrive.

If this SSI is not approved, we risk facing increases in budget requirements that put other valuable agricultural funding at risk. I hope that members agree that the proposed changes are necessary and I urge them to agree to the motion and approve the draft regulations.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the Common Organisation of the Markets in Agricultural Products (Fruit and Vegetables) (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2026 [draft] be approved.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As no other member has indicated that they wish to speak, that concludes the debate on the draft Common Organisation of the Markets in Agricultural Products (Fruit and Vegetables) (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2026.

I will briefly suspend the meeting before we move on to the next item of business. I hope that all the members who are supposed to be here for the next item will be here very soon.

17:02

Meeting suspended.

17:03

On resuming—

Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill: Stage 3

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Before we move to the debate on the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill at stage 3, I call Gillian Martin to signify Crown consent to the bill.

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): For the purposes of rule 9.11 of standing orders, I advise the Parliament that His Majesty, having been informed of the purport of the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill, has consented to place his prerogative and interests, in so far as they are affected by the bill, at the disposal of the Parliament for the purposes of the bill.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move on to the debate on motion S6M-20549, in the name of Gillian Martin, on the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill. I call the Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy, Gillian Martin, to speak to and move the motion.

17:04

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): I open the debate by thanking members across the chamber and members of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee for the positive spirit in which they have engaged, over many weeks, with me and my Government colleagues during stages 1 and 2. I firmly believe that their detailed scrutiny, feedback and thoughtful challenge have shaped the bill for the better, from the inclusion of measures to help specific species such as the swift to measures that will protect our internationally important wetlands. I also thank all the stakeholders who gave evidence.

Mairi Gougeon, Jim Fairlie and I have spent much of the past few weeks meeting members, listening to and discussing their concerns and working through proposals. Indeed, that engagement led to many of the positive amendments to protect Scotland's nature that were agreed to yesterday and on Tuesday. That is a timely reminder that constructive dialogue leads to better and more effective law.

I again thank our diverse stakeholders, including the environmental organisations, land managers, crofters, farmers, fishers, gamekeepers, community trusts and public bodies, such as NatureScot and the Scottish Environment

Protection Agency, for their input and expertise, which have been absolutely invaluable to all of us.

Today's debate offers all of us the opportunity to send a clear and strong message that this Parliament stands on the side of nature, and I encourage all members to take that opportunity.

I appreciate that members may disagree on some of the mechanisms or on the pace of delivery, but I do not think that anyone disputes the urgency of the challenge that is in front of us or the responsibility that we all share. That shared understanding has been evident not only in the broad support for the bill's aims, but in the number and breadth of amendments that have been lodged. Together, they reflect a collective determination to ensure that the legislation is as ambitious as possible and is genuinely responsive to the realities that our natural environment faces. That willingness to test, strengthen and stretch the bill demonstrates that the Parliament is determined to set a stronger, more far-reaching framework for environmental stewardship.

That framework is rooted not only in protecting what we have left, but—crucially—in restoring what we have lost. Scotland's ambition must not simply be to conserve our natural environment but to lead globally in repairing it, restoring habitats, rebuilding resilience and renewing the ecosystem that sustains us.

I want to address directly the removal of part 2 of the bill, which contained powers to amend elements of the environmental impact assessment legislation and the habitats regulations. I understand the depth of feeling that was expressed at stages 1 and 2 on the issue. Many stakeholders and members made it clear that they wanted stronger safeguards, particularly in relation to non-regression amid concerns that future Governments might weaken standards. Those concerns were sincerely held, and they were heard. I hope that the removal of part 2 strengthens confidence in the bill as a whole.

However, I must make it clear that, as a result of the removal of part 2, we still face a legislative gap that was created by Brexit. In the short term, we can use the powers under the UK Withdrawal from the European Union (Continuity) (Scotland) Act 2021, but, looking further ahead, we need to consider a long-term solution. We will now take time to carefully consider options, and I will continue to engage with stakeholders and members. However, I strongly believe that any future proposals must reflect our commitment to maintaining high environmental standards and must provide more than a temporary solution to fixing that gap.

The bill demonstrates the Scottish Government's and the Parliament's firm and shared commitment to protecting and restoring Scotland's world-class natural environment. If it is passed today—I hope that it will be passed overwhelmingly—the next phase will be to bring forward statutory targets to give full effect to the framework that the bill establishes. Those targets, which will be developed through engagement with the Parliament and stakeholders, will provide clear direction, accountability and ambition for nature recovery. We are now entering the final phase of the four-step process to develop recommendations for statutory targets. In doing so, we are working in close collaboration with the independent experts of the programme advisory group. We look forward to bringing forward those recommendations and to continuing our constructive engagement with stakeholders as we consider the careful development and refinement of the targets.

However, today, our focus is on the amended bill before us, which creates the strongest statutory framework that Scotland has ever had for nature recovery. The bill is strengthened by cross-party work and reflects a shared commitment to protect and restore our precious natural environment.

The crisis that we face is urgent, but it is not hopeless. We know that biodiversity is in crisis, both globally and at home. However, with clarity, collaboration and long-term determination, Scotland can chart a different course—one where restored habitats, healthier ecosystems and thriving species are not exceptional but expected. This Parliament has an opportunity today to lay the foundations for that future, to send a clear signal across Scotland and beyond that we intend to leave our natural environment in better condition than we found it, and to ensure that future generations do not inherit the consequences of inaction but the legacy of commitment and hope. I look forward to listening to members' contributions to the debate.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill be passed.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Tim Eagle to open the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives.

17:10

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I start by reminding members of my entry in the register of members' interests.

At stage 3 of the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill, it is right that we step back and ask not only what this legislation seeks to do but whether it will genuinely deliver better outcomes for nature, communities and those who manage our land.

There are parts of the bill on which there was once genuine consensus. The removal of part 2 on protected areas was a clear example of that. That section was taken out, because members across parties recognised that it was not ready, not workable and not supported by those who were expected to deliver it.

Scotland is not new to biodiversity plans. We have had strategies, frameworks and action plans stretching back decades. They have often been well intentioned and carefully drafted, yet too many have failed to halt decline. That failure has not been because of a lack of targets on paper but because of inconsistent political will, fragmented delivery and, in recent years, changes to budgets. Against that backdrop, the Scottish Conservatives do not believe that statutory targets, however well meaning, will succeed where previous approaches have struggled.

Targets alone do not restore habitats, support species or rebuild trust—practical, co-operative action on the ground does that. That is why co-operative deer management matters so much. For years, voluntary deer management groups have worked across boundaries, balancing environmental outcomes with animal welfare and the needs of rural economies.

Deer management is not just an environmental issue; it underpins jobs, sporting activity, tourism and fragile local supply chains. Changes proposed in the bill, when taken alongside the Wildlife Management and Muirburn (Scotland) Act 2024 and the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024, have contributed to a growing sense in the rural sector that decisions are being done to them rather than with them and of a Government moving to make big changes in an area that needs time.

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): First, Tim Eagle talks about the fact that rural deer managers have managed deer effectively over a number of years, yet we have a crisis with the number of deer and the damage to the environment. Everyone in the debate has agreed that we need to bring down deer numbers.

Secondly, Mr Eagle talks about the support that we are giving to the agricultural community. We are the only part of the United Kingdom that continues direct support, upland sheep support—with the Scottish upland sheep support scheme—and the less favoured area support scheme. Those things are warmly welcomed by the agricultural community. Where does the member get the idea that this is a Government that is not working for the people of Scotland?

Tim Eagle: I could spend the next hour telling the minister the ways in which the Government does not support the people of Scotland, but I will not go into that. If the minister were to give me details of the rural support plan, perhaps we can have a further discussion.

The point on deer is slightly more valid. I am happy for organisations such as Scottish Land & Estates and the British Association for Shooting and Conservation to contribute, but I think that I am right in saying that the deer management sector was ready to work proactively with the minister, without needing a lot of the stuff in the bill. If more deer needed to be killed, we could have done it in a different way.

I cannot overstate how damaging I feel that the erosion of trust has been. Land managers, farmers and estates feel that the traditional rural economy is increasingly under threat and that they are not supported as a partner in environmental delivery. If we genuinely want to improve biodiversity outcomes, that is not a healthy place to be. I feel as if I have been saying for my whole career that my advice to the Government is to stop focusing on telling landowners, farmers and crofters to complete ever more complex paperwork, and to start having a positive relationship with them on the ground.

The bill also touches on national parks. During the amendment stage, Fergus Ewing and I picked up on a glaring missed opportunity in that area. Before embarking on discussions about new national parks, no formal comprehensive review was carried out on how existing parks have performed, what has worked well and what has not, and crucially, how local communities view that experience. Such a review could have been the golden ticket. It could have strengthened public confidence, addressed long-standing concerns and created a model for parks that genuinely thrive economically, socially and environmentally. By skipping that step, we missed the chance to learn lessons and to bring communities with us.

I imagine that the breadth of the bill is also striking to everyone. There is so much that could have been included, such as mechanisms to protect our natural environment against wildfires. That is a critical issue, and I am personally deeply worried about it.

I am sympathetic to members across the chamber who have sought to use the legislation to address other long-standing gaps where the Scottish Government has yet to act. That speaks to a wider frustration about delivery and follow-through.

Rural Scotland has a vital role in protecting and enhancing our natural environment, and in truth, much of the rural sector has been doing exactly that for years. What is needed now are practical, locally flexible schemes that recognise the

differences between our rural communities, and not abstract, paper-based targets that risk hampering that work rather than heralding a new chapter.

Get this right and rural Scotland will thrive and deliver for nature and the economy together. Get it wrong and there is a real risk of destabilising the communities that we rely on to manage our land and that are vital in protecting our food security.

Having considered all of that, the Scottish Conservatives do not believe that statutory targets will achieve what voluntary, co-operative approaches have struggled to do. We do not believe the case for national parks has been properly made; it clearly required review. The proposed changes to deer management still do not sit comfortably or ensure a real, living, co-operative approach. For those reasons, the Scottish Conservative group has decided not to support the bill at stage 3.

17:16

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I apologise to the cabinet secretary and colleagues for not being in the chamber at the start of the debate. I missed the entire opening speech because I was chairing a Commonwealth Parliamentary Association branch executive meeting. I will look it up in the *Official Report* after this meeting.

As we reach the end of stage 3 of the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill, it is clear that we have all been through an amazing process. The bill has generated an enormous level of engagement. I acknowledge the work of the committee, our clerks and our staff. The amount of support that we have received in the Parliament has been huge. We do not normally have late-night sittings. The effort made to get us to this point has been huge.

From Labour's perspective, as regards the many amendments that were debated at stage 2, after the detailed scrutiny of our committee colleagues—and even at stage 3, when there were still huge numbers of amendments—the volume and quality of contributions from stakeholders, experts and communities have been remarkable. That engagement has shaped our approach throughout. I hope that, collectively, our efforts have strengthened the legislation and underlined how vital it is. The future of our biodiversity is uncertain in the age of the twin climate and nature emergencies, so having strong legislation and clear guidance will be critical if we are to secure a more sustainable future.

Scottish Labour has been consistent in its core aim of improving the legislation where possible and making it more ambitious, more accountable and more capable of delivering the nature recovery that Scotland urgently needs. We have lodged a series of amendments to part of the bill—not to obstruct it, but to enhance and strengthen it, and sometimes to get issues on the official record.

Those reflect proposals and detailed evidence from: Scottish Environment LINK, which has done superb work in pulling stakeholders together; the Marine Conservation Society; the Sustainable Inshore Fisheries Trust; and the Scottish Creel Fishermen's Federation. A huge amount of work has been done by them and other organisations, such as the Woodlands Trust and RSPB Scotland. I cannot list all the organisations concerned in the way that I normally would, as there are so many, but the engagement process to strengthen transparency, improve reporting and ensure that commitments are backed by clear mechanisms for delivery has been important.

I welcome the fact that some of our proposals were accepted and received cross-party support—indeed, colleagues even assisted us in drafting them. That shows that constructive engagement can lead to better lawmaking.

Not all our amendments were successful, and we are disappointed about that. However, as I said, we have put lots of issues on the record, and I hope that in the next session new ministers will provide the leadership and action that will be urgently needed right across those issues.

Our commitment will not stop today. We will continue to work with all the stakeholders, environmental organisations, business organisations and community groups to ensure that the issues that they raised do not fall away simply because the bill has been passed. Many of the decisions involved debates about how different pieces of legislation would impact different communities. Monitoring and reporting on the bill will be critical. Delivery will matter.

I thank the committee for its consideration, and I thank the clerks. Honestly, a huge amount of work was involved. The pre-stage 1 work, moving all the way through stage 2 and having a good level of engagement at stage 3 have all been critical. It has also been vital to hear directly from people who work in our landscapes and on our rivers, our lochs and our seas.

I will reflect briefly on the marine sector in particular. Throughout the process, the passion, expertise and urgency expressed by those who work in our marine and fishing environment stood out to me. We need to do more to ensure that our seas are restored and resilient.

I will focus on that. We heard repeatedly that the Scottish Government will continue to work through all the options. I would like more clarity on what that will mean in practice. We heard concerns that the UK marine strategy requires Scotland only to

contribute to UK-wide reporting on progress towards good environmental status in regional sea areas. It does not require the Scottish Government to show that progress for Scotland or to give the Scottish Parliament scrutiny powers for Scotland-specific progress. It is vital that the Parliament examines that issue in the next session, because we cannot just rely on the UK marine strategy. We have devolved powers that can and should be used to set out how we will meet nature restoration targets in our own waters.

I mentioned that I was grateful to the cabinet secretary for engaging constructively on those points, but work needs to continue. The sector is ready to contribute to the solutions that we need. I know that some work is under way, and I welcome that assurance, but delivery, transparency and accountability will determine whether the bill succeeds.

The values that underpin the bill—collaboration, ambition and a willingness to listen—must continue long after today's vote, because nature recovery is not a short-term, tick-the-box process but a long-term exercise. It has impacts for all of us, for our health and wellbeing and for future generations, so we need sustained political support from members across the chamber.

Scottish Labour will support efforts to strengthen our natural environment and will keep pushing for the action, ambition and accountability that Scotland's biodiversity crisis demands. That is why we will support the bill.

17:22

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): The purpose of the bill is to tackle the nature emergency. We should be in no doubt that, sadly, Scotland is a nature-depleted country. However, the green shoots of recovery are everywhere—from beaver-built wetlands to urban meadows that are teeming with pollinators and people. I pay tribute to the communities, conservationists and land managers who have made so much progress over the years. I hope that the bill will turbocharge their future efforts.

Before returning to Holyrood, I sat on the Scottish biodiversity forum as a representative of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. At that time—more than a decade ago—I saw inertia and inaction. There were no targets. There were no action plans. I am proud that, in this session of Parliament, my colleague Lorna Slater, as a minister, rebooted the biodiversity strategy and set the wheels in motion for the bill. It is right that the international commitments that she signed us up to at the biodiversity conference of the parties are now enshrined in the bill, and I am delighted that her amendment to achieve that has passed into the bill.

Tonight, we will agree on the requirement for action-focused targets to get on to a faster track to restoring nature. That will need a degree of flexibility in how sites are designated if we are to realise the much bolder ambition of landscape-scale restoration. However, a case for the wholesale reform of regulations at the backbone of nature protection was not made by either the Government or stakeholders. It is right that the ministerial powers to amend those laws in part 2 of the bill were removed. We have seen at Westminster the threat to the environment from the watering down of nature law. That must not happen here, either now or in the future.

However, if there is a case for more precise surgery on the habitats and environmental assessment regulations, it will be for a future Government to bring those proposals back to the chamber. In the meantime, the cabinet secretary's commitments to update the guidance are welcome. That will provide the clarity that will be needed if we are to get on with the job of nature restoration at scale.

It is clear that we cannot deliver a full-scale restoration of our woodlands and peatlands without properly managing deer to finally bring their numbers down permanently. In part 4 of the bill we now have reforms that give NatureScot and land managers the best chance of delivering the action that is needed for us, at last, to get to sustainable deer numbers. However, there is still more work to be done to roll out the recommendations of the independent deer working group. We must continue to work hard to realise the legacy of Simon Pepper and his colleagues. The group did incredible work back in 2017, and I say to the minister that there is still work to be done on that aspect.

I hope that, in time, parts 1 and 4 of the bill will prove to be transformational. Thankfully, part 2 is gone. For me, part 3, on national parks, represents unfinished business. It feels as though the Government wants to keep the lid on national parks at a time when we need them more than ever if we are to deliver the right opportunities for people and nature in some of the most sensitive landscapes that we have in Scotland.

Sarah Boyack: I am proud to have delivered for our national parks. It is key that we learn lessons from the good that has been done there and about what more needs to be done. We need more such parks in Scotland, and there will be big lessons to learn from this parliamentary session. Does Mark Ruskell agree?

Mark Ruskell: The big lesson is that we need political leadership, and I am not just talking about

from whoever happens to be the minister at the time. We need leadership on the ground, and we need people who back national parks in their communities to stick their heads above the parapet and say, “This is going to be good for our communities.” I live in a national park area, and I see its advantages every day.

There was clearly an appetite from communities across Scotland for more parks, and there was a quiet confidence that we were going to get them. That is not going to go away, despite NFU Scotland’s campaigning. All politicians need to recognise that.

In my closing remarks I will turn to some of the amendments that have strengthened the bill. For now, though, I say that Scottish Greens will be very happy to vote for the bill at stage 3.

17:27

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I am pleased to speak this evening for the Scottish Liberal Democrats. Throughout the bill’s process, it has been encouraging to see the passion and care for the environment that is evident among members of the Parliament.

I place on record my thanks to the convener, members and clerks of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee and to the legislation team. I also thank the Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy, the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands, the Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity and Scottish Government officials for their constructive engagement with me. I also thank all the stakeholders who gave evidence at stage 1, sent briefings and met me to discuss the bill and to share their expertise. In particular, I thank Scottish Environment LINK, RSPB Scotland and Scottish Land & Estates for working with me on amendments.

Scottish Liberal Democrats recognise that the climate crisis and biodiversity loss are not separate issues but are deeply intertwined. Scotland is on the front line of biodiversity loss, with one in nine species at risk of national extinction. Scotland ranks 212th out of 240 countries for biodiversity intactness. Part 1 of the bill enables the Scottish ministers to set targets for improving biodiversity. Targets have the potential to focus efforts to address the biodiversity crisis.

I was pleased that my amendment at stage 3 was agreed to. It explicitly links the new statutory targets to the existing biodiversity duty, so Scotland’s public bodies and office holders will have to take the biodiversity targets into account when fulfilling their public sector biodiversity duty. That will align the whole public sector behind the implementation of the targets, removing the risk of a top-down approach and improving the consistency of approach to biodiversity ambitions across the public sector. Invasive non-native species, or INNS, are a key driver of biodiversity loss in Scotland. Although in the end, I did not move my amendment that would have given legal underpinning to the forthcoming national INNS action plan, the debates that we have had on the issue have underscored the need for action, and I note that the cabinet secretary has put on record the Scottish Government’s commitment to doing so.

I look forward to the outcomes of the Environmental Standards Scotland INNS investigation, and I trust that the recommendations resulting from that work will feed into the INNS plan in collaboration with stakeholders. Although I will not be here then, I will be watching.

Several marine issues were raised in the debates on amendments. Although, according to the bill, targets may be created for both terrestrial and marine environments, it is not the appropriate vehicle for other marine matters that require appropriate evidence bases, consultation and co-design with stakeholders. Amendments were proposed that would have cut across existing and on-going marine work including the inshore fisheries management improvement programme and the new national marine plan, where nature recovery will be a key objective alongside addressing climate change and supporting a sustainable marine economy. However, I hope that the Scottish Government takes note of the strength of the frustration that has been expressed about the length of time that those things are taking and the concerns about the resourcing of the marine directorate. My comments on those matters are well documented.

Part 2 of the bill was removed by the committee at stage 2 due to concerns that its provisions could weaken nature protections in Scotland. I appreciate that the Scottish Government listened to those concerns and did not attempt to re-insert those provisions.

Part 4 of the bill modernises the provisions of the Deer (Scotland) Act 1996. As I underscored at stage 1, it is important that the changes do not impact the trust in the sector that underpins voluntary deer management, which is vital for controlling deer numbers in Scotland. Consultation and co-design with stakeholders will be vital to ensuring that we get the code of practice right.

I was pleased to lodge amendments to ensure that local communities and neighbouring land managers will be properly considered when deer control schemes are proposed, giving them greater involvement in processes that might affect them. I am also pleased that my amendments on

the muirburn licensing scheme, which was created by the Wildlife Management and Muirburn (Scotland) Act 2024, were supported. The changes will enable high-quality muirburn training to take place under licence and improve regulatory clarity for the making of muirburn on peatland while retaining strong environmental oversight.

At stage 1, I stated that we had an opportunity to take action on the environment. By passing the bill this evening, we will take an important step towards realising that opportunity. Scottish Liberal Democrats will support the bill at decision time.

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

17:32

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The 26th President of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt, noted:

> "Conservation means development as much as it does protection. I recognize the right and duty of this generation to develop and use the natural resources of our land; but I do not recognize the right to waste them, or to rob, by wasteful use, the generations that come after us."

The Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill seeks to ensure that the people of Scotland do not waste our natural resources or rob future generations.

The twin crises of climate change and nature loss are interdependent risks and they need to be tackled together, which the bill seeks to do. The bill will establish the framework for targets, including high-level topics against which specific targets will be set, while the actual targets, such as the detail of the figures, will be provided in secondary legislation. That approach will allow targets to be adapted in the light of circumstances and will ensure that parliamentary scrutiny is maintained throughout.

The bill also brings together other measures that will enable us to restore and protect nature and support delivery of the Scottish Government's net zero and biodiversity goals. Those measures include provisions to modernise the aims and powers of national parks by amending the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000 and provisions to reform the way in which deer are managed by amending the Deer (Scotland) Act 1996, through implementation of many of the recommendations that were made by the deer working group.

As members have said, there is an urgent need for effective deer management across much of rural Scotland, and that is regularly raised with me by my constituents. I am pleased that an amendment that I lodged at stage 2, which built on existing legislation to widen the legal right of occupiers of land to cull deer to prevent damage to unimproved land as well as improved land, was successful. Although I appreciate that some estates have raised concerns about that part of the bill, I believe that the Government's stage 3 amendments on notification requirements, along with the guidance that will be set out in secondary legislation, will provide reassurance on animal welfare, food safety and income from deer stalking.

The proposal was initially recommended and supported by the deer working group, which the Scottish Government established in 2017 as a result of its concern about continuing issues to do with the standards of deer management in Scotland and the levels of damage to public interests caused by deer. It is clearly essential for stakeholders to continue working together, as they already have been doing, to help to reduce deer numbers and support biodiversity recovery across Scotland. Improving our biodiversity is one of our best opportunities to adapt to, and to prevent, climate change and to ensure that we can continue to enjoy nature's benefits, on which we all depend.

As other members have pointed out, this has been a long but, I think, successful parliamentary process. There has been a lot of engagement with the public, and, like other members, I convey my thanks to committee members and staff for doing that work.

As someone who represents an island constituency, I believe that the provisions in the bill before us are necessary to support communities as they respond to our biodiversity crisis and that the bill therefore deserves our support.

17:35

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): My remarks will focus not on any one provision in the bill but on its underlying principles. As my colleague Tim Eagle said, my colleagues and I will not be supporting the bill at decision time, and I will be clear about why. It is not because we lack ambition for Scotland's natural environment—far from it—but because the bill takes a wrong approach that risks replacing delivery with paperwork, collaboration with uncertainty and practical restoration with legal process.

Scotland's nature needs more than aspiration. We have bucketloads of aspiration in our rural communities, but we need workable policies that are grounded in evidence and shaped in partnership with the people who deliver on the ground, and those policies must be accountable to this Parliament through clear reporting, not courtroom targets.

Although it attracted little comment at stage 3, the most controversial element of the bill has been the removal of the broad enabling powers over environmental assessments, which originally sat in

part 2 of the bill. The committee was right to insist at stage 2 that such sweeping and undefined powers should not sit on the statute book without full consultation or clarity. Sadly, as we see far too often, SNP members blindly supported the Government's position, choosing not to heed the views of every single non-Government witness and stakeholder, all of whom were deeply concerned about that part of the bill.

Restoration does not start with targets; it starts with policy, funding and practical projects. It starts with guidance from practitioners and with guidance that practitioners can use. Targets may sound decisive, but they rarely plant a tree, restore peatland or bring a habitat back to life. Targets too often produce a one-size-fits-all timetable, defensive compliance exercises and a drift towards litigation that displaces genuine collaboration.

If ministers want accountability, there is a simpler and better route. They should bring to Parliament time-bound delivery plans that are costed and linked to budgets and milestones. MSPs should be able to scrutinise progress openly, with practitioners shaping the detail through guidance that is responsive rather than rigid. The Government should use primary legislation where there is a specific regulatory gap and not as a catch-all vehicle for unresolved policy questions.

That brings me to the wider way in which the bill approaches change. Practitioners, whether they are farmers, land managers, conservation organisations, fishers, foresters or volunteers, are not obstacles to environmental recovery; they are the people who make it happen. Any legislation that affects them must be designed with them, which means publishing criteria, thresholds, definitions and evidence in advance of commencement, and it means tailoring policy to local circumstances rather than imposing universal figures that ignore geography, habitat type and community context. That has never been more true than with deer management.

Trust should be treated as something to be earned and maintained through transparency, dialogue-first processes and proportionate enforcement. Nowhere is that more important than with the provisions that will impact on rural livelihoods. What is missing from so much of the SNP Government's approach and its attraction to framework bills—including this one, the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024, and the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022—is clarity and direction. We need a transition that keeps supply chains running instead of suddenly putting barriers in front of them. We need clarity about fees, timelines and support long before new duties begin.

Good environmental legislation—indeed, any legislation—is not just about ambition; it is also about pragmatism and the capacity to deliver. If we lose belief or lose sight of outcomes, we lose buy-in from our bigger businesses. If volunteers, small landholdings, community groups and microbusinesses find the rules too confusing, costly or sudden, we will have weakened—not strengthened—our ability to restore nature.

I will also address the scope and conduct of stages 2 and 3. This bill is now much broader than the one that entered Parliament. It may be a bit hypocritical of me to say this, because I lodged one of the stage 3 amendments, but the lack of meaningful progress in many areas of rural policy inevitably leads to members trying to find other ways to address this Government's shortcomings. Those shortcomings have meant that entirely new topics have appeared, such as marine matters, forestry matters, enforcement frameworks and funding mechanisms. Some have merit, but many lack adequate consultation or evidence. Substantive new policies, particularly in sectors as technical as marine management and forestry, should be brought forward through focused, stand-alone legislation with proper scrutiny and impact assessments. Late additions at stage 3 are not the way to make good law and risk creating confusion that will fall on regulators and practitioners alike. They also reveal a lack of pace and leadership from this Government in sectors such as sustainable fisheries, where action is overdue. We need a more urgent focus if we are to protect coastal communities and our fishing industry while creating a healthier marine environment. If the bill passes this evening, the process for setting headline targets must ensure robust, fit-for-purpose co-design with practitioners, and outcomes must be published well before commencement.

We cannot support a bill that does little to deliver nature restoration in practice, creates uncertainty and risks eroding trust. Scotland deserves better law making than that. We will vote against the bill tonight, but we stand ready to work constructively on tighter, clearer, better-scoped legislation and on the practical programmes that restore nature—project by project, place by place.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Mercedes Villalba is the final speaker in the open debate.

17:41

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): Throughout the passage of the bill, I have consistently made the case that it should seek not simply to prevent further degradation of the natural environment but to restore and regenerate it, because Governments have repeatedly failed to

meet their environmental targets, failing us and our shared moral obligation to the world. We have seen centuries of habitat destruction due to overexploitation, the release of invasive non-native species and pollution, meaning that Scotland is now one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world.

Our peatlands, which are vital in sequestering carbon, are damaged. The Caledonian forest, which once covered around 1.5 million hectares, is now reduced to just 1 to 3 per cent of its original size. A number of our iconic native species, such as the red squirrel, have been driven to near extinction. Although the bill represents a positive step forward, it will not be enough alone to outpace the rate at which biodiversity is declining. Our Parliament and our Governments must go further and faster than ever before.

Although I am delighted to see strong steps forward in the bill, I had understood that the Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy would work with me on some areas of amendment, and I am disappointed that that did not come to fruition. Even though we were not able to make headway in the bill on a polluter-pays principle, ecological connectivity, the invasive non-native species action plan or exemptions under the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011, progress has been made.

We have worked constructively to agree to an amendment to ensure that the vital role that Environmental Standards Scotland currently plays in upholding environmental law remains independent from Government and business. I welcome that, but it is not enough.

A polluter-pays principle would put the ethical and financial responsibility on to the developers and private companies that are causing harm to the environment. In doing so, it would relieve the pressure on NatureScot, which uses its stretched budget to mitigate the damage caused by private companies.

I am pleased that more progress has been made on forestry, and I thank Ms Gougeon for working with me on amendment 40. Agreeing to it and giving the UK forestry standard a statutory footing is a huge step in the right direction. It outlines responsible forestry standards to help forests become resilient to environmental degradation. However, simply creating the power is not enough, and it is incumbent on this Parliament to ensure that the next Scottish Government uses it.

It is my hope that the next Parliament will address some of the issues that I have outlined today, because they are not going to go away. The longer that we wait to take decisive and ambitious action, the more costly and complex the necessary action will be. However, action we must take. We, on the Labour benches, will vote for the bill tonight, and we look forward to seeing it become an act.

I am deeply disappointed that we do not have further protections relating to invasive non-native species, particularly Sitka spruce, because the issue of seed rain is far more relevant in Scotland than it is across the rest of the UK. Future legislation on that topic must address the issue head on.

It is my hope that some of the issues that I have outlined today will be addressed in the next parliamentary session, as they are not going to go away. The longer we wait to take decisive and ambitious action, the more costly and complex the necessary action will be. But action we must take, so we, on these benches, will vote for the bill tonight and look forward to seeing it become an act.

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

17:45

Mark Ruskell: I take the opportunity to thank the clerks of the committee, my fellow committee members, the Scottish Parliament information centre and all the witnesses who gave evidence. In particular, I thank members of Scottish Environment LINK and RSPB Scotland, which organisations bring considerable expertise and wisdom as conservationist land managers and policy specialists.

The bill has been a single opportunity to make progress in this parliamentary session to tackle the nature emergency, but we need another bill in the next session. It is clear in areas such as clean water that we are falling out of alignment with the European Union—we are way behind on that. It is also clear that in how we reform the management of our seas, coastal waters and fisheries, we are slipping behind the rest of Europe and, sadly, we are slipping behind England as well. We have seen frustrations from coastal communities being reflected in many of the amendments to the bill that have been lodged at stage 2 and stage 3.

I point to amendments from Ariane Burgess and Sarah Boyack that tried to fill a huge gap in the bill, but there was not time to unpack all that. Finlay Carson made a good point—although he perhaps did not make a good point about greyhounds earlier on—about the gap in marine management that will have to be filled in the next session if we are to have a hope of moving forward.

On deer management, at this point I am not entirely sure what the minister's national venison food supply chain management plan will look like. There are still questions in my mind about who will be setting the ambition. Will it be NatureScot or

Sainsbury's? I am watching to see whether the plan will align with the recommendation of the independent deer working group.

On national parks, as I said earlier, the Government needs to be in a position to feel confident in leading a debate on national parks, and to feel confident in celebrating national parks, in expanding them and in designating new parks. A good basis for doing that in the next session of Parliament will be for the Parliament to review what has happened with national parks and the benefits that have been delivered over the 20 years since their establishment, and to explore some of the misinformation in the public narrative around national parks.

We should value national parks and empower them to protect our environment more and to support the communities that live in them. Earlier, we talked about lessons. There are certainly lessons from the Flamingo Land debacle, which I do not think have been fully reflected into the bill; however, those lessons will need to be learned.

We have seen progress on many individual issues in the bill. I appreciate that that was a challenge, because many of those issues were not part of the original bill, and it has been a challenge for committees to scrutinise them. On swift bricks, Holyrood showed how it can be fleet of foot. It has taken four years of trying at Westminster to get action on the issue, and it has still not achieved it. We have managed to do it in a matter of weeks through having a consensual conversation. It shows how devolution can work well to make progress on these islands.

I am pleased that my colleague Ariane Burgess got through the amendment to incorporate Ramsar sites in the bill. That will certainly be welcomed by her constituents at Coul links.

I am also pleased that the minister, Jim Fairlie, managed to finally close the loophole on grouse moor licensing. It is important that the licensed area moves beyond the narrow area where shooting takes place to where raptor species nest. I have been working on and highlighting that campaign since the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill. It is great that the minister has found a robust solution to that in this bill.

Many more issues have been dealt with and many more issues have been raised, which I hope will be dealt with in the future.

The Greens absolutely support the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill at stage 3. It is an important foundation for further action to tackle the nature emergency, but there is so much more that needs to come.

17:49

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I thank all those who assisted with the scrutiny of the bill, including Parliament staff who support the committee. I offer a very special thank you to the legislation team, which helped members frame amendments to the bill. I was reminded of the work that that team does when I received emails from them late yesterday evening while we were debating amendments. I also thank all the stakeholders who engaged on it. The bill is wide ranging, so there were many stakeholders involved. It was very hard to keep on top of the correspondence as we neared stage 3, and I apologise to all those to whom I have not responded. Their input was very much appreciated—in fact, not only was it appreciated, it was essential, because MSPs are not specialists on all the issues. We build up our knowledge over time, but we depend on specialists allowing us to use their knowledge and experience in order to do our job well.

As Sarah Boyack said, we face the twin challenges of the climate change and nature emergencies, and we need legislation to help us meet those challenges. She was also clear that the bill is not a quick fix but legislation that needs to be built on for the wellbeing of not only our generation but future generations.

One of the real challenges for the Rural and Islands Committee in scrutinising the bill was that we had a steep learning curve when it came to parts 1 and 2. I remember chatting with the committee after the bill team had given its briefing but before we started our scrutiny, and our surmising that parts 1 and 2 would be straightforward to deal with, but the other parts, with which we were much more familiar, would require amending. That was before we took evidence, and how wrong we were. I guess that the lesson to be learned for the next Parliament is to put proposed legislation to the appropriate committee and not be swayed from doing that.

I also want to thank the minister and the bill team for their constructive assistance with amendments on deer control. As Sarah Boyack said, we have sought to work constructively with stakeholders and with Government to improve the bill.

Mercedes Villalba laid bare the challenges that we face. She spoke about her own work on non-native species, clearly underlining that this bill is not job done but a framework for redoubling our efforts. Those sentiments were echoed by Mark Ruskell.

Beatrice Wishart spoke about her amendments that were aimed at dovetailing this legislation with targets in other legislation. It is incredibly important that all legislation and strategies to protect our

environment, nature and the planet work together simultaneously.

Scottish Labour has been constructive. We have worked hard to improve the legislation wherever possible, to try to give voice to the concerns of stakeholders as they brought those to us, and using their knowledge and expertise to frame amendments to the bill. We believe that that inclusive approach leads to better legislation. It garners wider support for the bill and the aims that it seeks to pursue. I am pleased that we will support the bill when it is voted on tonight.

17:53

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests. I am a partner in a farming business and a member of NFU Scotland, SLE and the Royal Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland.

I start on a positive note. Despite differences over the content of the bill, the aspirations to protect and enhance Scotland's natural environment are shared around the chamber. Scotland has, by some metrics, suffered some significant nature depletion, and we are slowly coming to terms with that legacy. At various stages of the bill, members have spoken about the impact of changes to the environment within their lifetimes, including in their personal experiences. We can point to the fact that there has been a 15 per cent decline in average species abundance since the mid-1990s, but it is direct experience that often gives this issue its urgency.

It is welcome that we have reached a time of broad acceptance of the human role as custodian of our environment and of an appreciation of what we can do to reverse some of the losses. The need for nature restoration and positive stewardship is, however, something that many farmers, crofters and land managers have recognised for many years, long before a Government strategy was put in place. Private initiatives have often led the way in improving biodiversity. Where flexibility is available and innovation allowed, outcomes are often better.

Despite the shared aspirations, we have ended up with almost 200 amendments at stage 3 and plenty of points of contention. Stage 2 was far from straightforward and I commend the work of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee on that. Part 1 of the bill was improved considerably at stage 2 by a spirit of holding the Scottish Government to account on targets and a recognition that ministers have—to be charitable—struggled with such targets in the past. We now have a range of provisions in the bill providing for the setting of targets in more detail and, just as importantly, for reporting and reviewing progress against them.

At stage 1, I pointed out that action to promote biodiversity and meet the targets that will be required by the bill must be a twin test of effectiveness and sustainability. These amendments move us closer to a position that can be achieved. Part 2 of the bill has been removed, while part 3 has received a number of purposeful amendments, including those of my colleague Tim Eagle, to require national parks policy statements to be made on a 10-year basis, clarifying the purpose and approach to the park authorities.

Part 4 could fill a lengthy speech in itself, and I recognise the extensive work that my colleague Edward Mountain has done with the deer management elements of the bill in the hope of improving the Scottish Government's approach.

I have pushed my own proposals around goose management. My native Orkney, for example, has no deer but it has suffered considerable ecological damage from visiting geese populations. We must recognise the shared principles of population management and, while taking species-specific approaches, acknowledge that there can be similar challenges across species and in different parts of the country. That is a short way of saying that a one-size-fits-all approach to Scotland's natural environment will not work, nor will an approach that simply prioritises rewilding at the expense of our rural economy.

Rural Scotland is a daily workplace for hundreds of thousands of people. It provides the food that we eat, as well as being home to thousands of businesses that support our communities. It is nothing new to say that a balance must be struck between competing interests in the countryside. When the bill addresses detail and often leaves those questions for the future, it too often seems to get that balance wrong.

For example, my amendment on ecological focus areas and their application in the islands sought to recognise the distinct position and challenges of farming on Scotland's island communities. The balance is different there from farms in the central belt—the margins are lower and greening more difficult to achieve. As an islander, I know all too well the problems that ill-considered legislation can cause in places when Edinburgh is so distant. This legislative process has been a chance for the Scottish Government to recognise Scotland's diversity and acknowledge that there is not one natural environment but many, but too often it has failed to do so.

This bill is one best framed in terms of missed opportunities from the bill's introduction to today's proceedings. There has been as much commentary on what the bill has not done as what

it will do. That is disappointing and, once again, rural Scotland is left looking for more answers than the Scottish Government is willing to provide. The bill was a long time in the making and subject to extensive pre-legislative consultation. We might therefore have expected a package of measures that was a little more complete, but this is the bill that we have. It is better for having gone through the parliamentary process, but few will be satisfied with the outcome.

17:58

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): I want to take a moment to thank, from the bottom of our hearts, on behalf of Gillian Martin and Mairi Gougeon, our bill teams, our legislation teams, our policy development teams, our officials, our private office and the parliamentary staff. They have put in a hell of a lot of work to get the bill to where it is today, and we owe them an enormous debt of gratitude. I thank them very much from all of us.

I also want to say, as this is Mairi Gougeon's final bill, that she will be an enormous loss to the Parliament. She has been an amazing person to work with, and rural Scotland has been bettered by the work that she has put in.

At its heart, the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill is about respect for nature, for our land and for the people who steward it and care for it. It is a bill with both people and nature at its heart, and that is something that I care deeply about. It will deliver for nature and people with ambition and balance at its core. That is why, for the first time, we are putting in place statutory nature restoration targets, which will drive positive on-the-ground actions that will keep us on the trajectory to restore and regenerate nature by 2045.

If future Governments are found to be wanting in that ambition for nature, the bill contains the mechanisms to ensure that the Scottish Parliament can hold them to account. However, it does much more than that. It strengthens the legislation underpinning our two fantastic national parks, and it provides us with additional tools to manage our deer in a way that will be positive for the environment while creating entrepreneurial opportunities as we develop our world-class venison product, delivering new jobs and healthy food for the Scottish nation.

Through the amendments that members have championed, the bill will, if passed, deliver in a range of areas. It will give the Scottish ministers new powers to develop legislation relating to wildfire management and forestry management and new rights to enable crofters and tenants to control deer. That is to name but a few of the progressive amendments that have been added to the bill.

The twin crises of climate change and biodiversity loss represent the existential threat of our times. Scotland's natural environment underpins our economy, our agriculture, our wellbeing, our quality of life, and the pride that we all feel in this land. We all know that not doing anything now is absolutely not an option—it is not an option for any responsible Government. If we want the Scotland of tomorrow to be one in which we have healthy communities, sustainable and quality food production, food security and vibrant rural industries, we need to ensure that our ecosystems thrive.

The bill is not about environment over economy; it is about both. They are two sides of the same coin, and we cannot have one without the other. The bill matters, not because of what it symbolises but because of what it will enable us to deliver. It will create a practical delivery chain and ambitious targets, which will drive real action on the ground—action that will be delivered not just by Government but by the people who know the land best.

The Scottish Government is determined to ensure that its key stakeholders have the tools and support that they need to protect and restore nature in a way that works for rural land managers and communities while building on their stewardship and recognising and respecting their role as the custodians—which we all are—of our iconic land and the species that coexist with us. We will continue to work in partnership with our farmers, crofters, keepers, stalkers, land managers, environmental non-governmental organisations and community organisations to ensure that the measures that we put in place are proportionate, workable and successful and that they deliver benefits not just for nature but for the people of Scotland.

Of course, one bill cannot do everything, although we have certainly packed plenty into this one. Members and stakeholders have raised important points and demanded more action in areas such as marine protection, non-native species, guidance, monitoring and delivery frameworks. We are making headway in those areas, but some issues, particularly those requiring specific technical detail, are better delivered through secondary legislation, strategies or implementation programmes. It is crucial that we focus resources on delivery rather than introduce greater complexity and duplication of effort.

As we draw the debate to a close, it is worth reflecting on the shared effort that has brought us here today. The bill reflects the Parliament at its best. It has been shaped by members across the

chamber. We have improved it through engagement, and we are building consensus, including through today's debate. I hope that the unity of purpose shown by members to tackle the biodiversity crisis and to push the Government to go faster and further to deliver the nature-positive outcomes that we all want will now be reflected in members' support for the bill.

However, I have to say that I am disappointed in the Tories, because we have made significant efforts to find solutions to the many issues that were raised. We brought them in and asked for their input so that they could contribute to making the bill the success that it is. I can only imagine that it is politics that is getting in the way of passing good legislation.

I welcome the great co-operation from the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats and all the other—

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Will the member take an intervention?

Jim Fairlie: No. The debate is finished, Mr Halcro Johnston.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: No, you have just raised a point.

Jim Fairlie: We have had these discussions, and I really am disappointed—[*Interruption*.]

The Presiding Officer: Let us not shout at one another.

Jim Fairlie: I am disappointed that the Conservatives will not vote for a bill that has had so much work put into it by everybody. I welcome the support that we are getting from the other parties in the chamber, but I am disappointed in the Tories. I commend the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill to the Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill.

Point of Order

18:04

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. In your guidance on conduct in the chamber, which is underpinned by our standing orders, it says that members, including ministers, have a personal responsibility to be accurate and truthful in their contributions during parliamentary proceedings.

I am concerned that the First Minister may have erred at First Minister's question time today when attributing a quote to counsel to the Scottish hospitals inquiry. The First Minister stated—as a quote—that

"there is no evidence of external pressure on NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde to open the hospital early or before it was ready to be opened."

However, it appears that no such statement has been made by counsel to the inquiry. I seek the Presiding Officer's guidance on how a member could rectify such an error if it had occurred and set the record straight.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): As Martin Whitfield and all members will be aware, the accuracy of a member's contribution is not a matter for the chair to rule on, but, as a matter of courtesy and respect, I expect all members to always strive to be accurate in their contributions. Members are also aware of the mechanisms that are available to them if they wish to correct the record.

Business Motion

18:06

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-20611, 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 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 Motion on Legislative Consent: Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill – UK Legislation

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.55 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 Motion on Reconsideration of a Bill: European Charter of Local Self-Government (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.40 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

Tuesday 10 February 2026

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Community Wealth Building (Scotland) Bill

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

7.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 11 February 2026

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:

Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands;

Health and Social Care

followed by Scottish Labour Party Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.10 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 12 February 2026

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:

Social Justice and Housing

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Budget (Scotland) (No. 5) 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 2 February 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*]

The Presiding Officer: I call Ash Regan to speak to and move amendment S6M-20611.1.

18:06

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Ind): Through my amendment, I am asking the Parliament for something that should not be controversial: time—having the time to do our jobs properly by respecting the gravity of our task and acknowledging the reality of those whose lives are central to the debate.

Having been involved in the member's bill process after progressing many Government bills, I very much feel the lack of parity of esteem that is given to members' bills. I believe that the Parliament should reflect on that for the next parliamentary session.

Yesterday's scheduling by the Parliamentary Bureau of 80 minutes for such an important debate shows the complete disconnect between the Parliament and public interest and survivor reality. This is not an abstract policy discussion such as the one on greyhound tracks, which are no longer operational in Scotland. There are women and children being exploited less than a mile from here and all across Scotland, and it is a growing problem. It is about violence, inequality, coercion and trauma, and it is about our children and women.

The Parliament last legislated substantively on prostitution in 2007—nearly 20 years ago. Over the past two decades, survivors have organised, spoken out and repeatedly asked to be heard. Next week, their long wait will be over. They have shared painful experiences at the Criminal Justice Committee, at parliamentary events and in the media—often at great personal cost to themselves—in the hope that lawmakers in the Scottish Parliament will finally listen to them. After almost 20 years, I would think that the very least that we could offer them is a full debate and proper scrutiny by their elected representatives.

Let us be honest—this is not a new conversation that we are having. The approach has been Scottish National Party policy for many years, and members know that. It has also been established in the Scottish Government and Convention of Scottish Local Authorities' equally safe policy for more than 10 years, and the direction of travel has been clear. The cross-party group on commercial sexual exploitation in its inquiry on the subject was clear that we must now move on from talking to acting.

My unbuyable bill is not sudden, unexpected or rushed. We have a five-year parliamentary session, and we cannot again tell survivors, "Not yet, but soon". That would be a failure for them and of this Parliament in acting for them.

Public engagement on the issue is now intense. Over the past couple of days, members from across the chamber have approached me to say that they do not think that they will be able to speak in the debate and that they desperately want to take part. That is deeply troubling, and it is not equitable, either. Over the years, we have had two-hour-plus debates on many bills. Recently, we considered the Assisted Dying for Terminally Ill Adults (Scotland) Bill at stage 1, when we debated—rightly—for more than four hours. Members' bills deserve parity of esteem, and they deserve timing that is dependent on the breadth and depth of the debate.

In my opinion, the sensitivity of the issue means that it deserves more time, not less. It demands space for evidence to be tested, for voices to be weighed carefully and for members to fulfil their responsibility to deliberate thoughtfully. I urge the Parliament to grant us the necessary time for a full, thoughtful debate, to allow us to give the issue the right amount of time before members reach their decision.

I am grateful to the bureau for listening yesterday and for extending the time slightly. However, I urge members to support my amendment and give the debate the time that it deserves.

I move amendment S6M-20611.1, to leave out from "*followed by* Stage 1 Debate: Prostitution (Offences and Support) (Scotland) Bill" to "5.55 pm Decision Time" and insert:

"*followed by*	Stage 1 Debate: Desecration of War Memorials (Scotland) Bill
followed by	Stage 1 Debate: Prostitution (Offences and Support) (Scotland) Bill
followed by	Motion on Legislative Consent: Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill – UK legislation
followed by	Committee Announcements
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
6.30 pm	Decision Time".

18:10

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I put on record that I support Ash Regan's amendment to move decision time to 6.30 pm on Tuesday 3 February. The Prostitution (Offences and Support) (Scotland) Bill has generated a lot of interest among members of the Scottish Parliament and many—me included—want to speak in the stage 1 debate.

I cannot emphasise enough how important the subject is, especially to women and girls. In the past, multiple members have been allowed to

speak on certain topics. Under the business motion, my party would get fewer speakers than it would have when the debate was due to run for 80 minutes. That does not seem right. Ms Regan's amendment would resolve the issue.

It is also my understanding that Meghan Gallacher and Ash Regan are happy to swap the order of the stage 1 debates for their bills. Our business manager has put a request for that to the bureau but it has yet to agree to it. Therefore, I hope that MSPs vote for Ash Regan's amendment.

18:11

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey): The bureau puts a great deal of thought into the scheduling of business. The challenges around accommodating all of the wide variety of business that has to be fitted into the closing weeks of this parliamentary session are acute—as demonstrated by the fact that four stage 1 proceedings are taking place next week, not to mention Opposition business.

In making that work, we seek to treat all aspects of business appropriately and fairly and, wherever possible, accommodate the reasonable asks of our committees. In two instances in recent weeks, we have acceded to requests from the Criminal Justice Committee in relation to the Prostitution (Offences and Support) (Scotland) Bill. The first involved extending the stage 1 deadline by a fortnight in order to help committee members to agree their report. The second came yesterday, when the committee convener asked for additional time next Tuesday to discuss the bill at stage 1 in the chamber.

For the benefit of members, I should say that business managers agreed unanimously to extend the time allowed for that debate, which has now been extended by 40 minutes to two hours, as is covered by the business motion that is before us. I am surprised to hear the contribution of Pam Gosal because, I reiterate, that was a unanimous decision by the bureau.

By any reasonable judgment, the bureau has been extremely accommodating, recognising the interests of members in the bill and the varying opinions on its merits. It seems, however, that reasonableness only cuts one way—at least when it comes to the member in charge of the bill. She, too, sought an extension to the time for debating the bill. As I noted, the bureau granted that. However, tonight, in challenging the business motion, Ash Regan not only wants even more time to be set aside but seeks to direct how the business of this Parliament should be ordered on Tuesday.

At times, decisions taken by business managers can frustrate colleagues. However, I would hope that it is acknowledged that, when it comes to scheduling business, we do so fairly and equitably. Therefore, I ask members to support the business motion, which provides the Prostitution (Offences and Support) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1 with more than a fair hearing, and to reject the amendment.

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that amendment S6M-20611.1, in the name of Ash Regan, which seeks to amend motion S6M-20611, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

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

18:14

Meeting suspended.

18:15

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We move to the division on amendment S6M-20611.1, in the name of Ash Regan, which seeks to amend motion S6M-20611, in the name of Graeme Dey. Members should cast their votes now.

For

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Ind)
Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)

Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Abstentions

Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-20611.1, in the name of Ash Regan, is: For 28, Against 83, Abstentions 1.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-20611, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of 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	Motion on Legislative Consent: Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill – UK Legislation
followed by	Committee Announcements
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.55 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	Motion on Reconsideration of a Bill: European Charter of Local Self-Government (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill
followed by	Business Motions

followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.40 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

Tuesday 10 February 2026

2.00 pm	Time for Reflection
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by	Topical Questions
followed by	Stage 3 Proceedings: Community Wealth Building (Scotland) Bill
followed by	Committee Announcements
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
7.00 pm	Decision Time
followed by	Members' Business

Wednesday 11 February 2026

2.00 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.00 pm	Portfolio Questions: Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands; Health and Social Care
followed by	Scottish Labour Party Business
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.10 pm	Decision Time
followed by	Members' Business

Thursday 12 February 2026

11.40 am	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
11.40 am	General Questions
12.00 pm	First Minister's Questions
followed by	Members' Business
2.30 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.30 pm	Portfolio Questions: Social Justice and Housing
followed by	Stage 1 Debate: Budget (Scotland) (No. 5) 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 2 February 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.

Motion without Notice

18:17

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

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey): After the week that we have had, I am delighted to do so.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time be brought forward to 6.17 pm.—[*Graeme Dey*]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

18:17

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S6M-20519, in the name of Daniel Johnson, on the Restraint and Seclusion in Schools (Scotland) Bill at stage 1, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Restraint and Seclusion in Schools (Scotland) Bill.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-20527, in the name of Mark Ruskell, on the Greyhound Racing (Offences) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)

Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Abstentions

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-20527, in the name of Mark Ruskell, on the Greyhound Racing (Offences) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1, is: For 69, Against 27, Abstentions 19.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Greyhound Racing (Offences) (Scotland) Bill.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-20579, in the name of Jim Fairlie, on the draft Common Organisation of the Markets in Agricultural Products (Fruit and Vegetables) (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2026, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Common Organisation of the Markets in Agricultural Products (Fruit and Vegetables) (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2026 [draft] be approved.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-20549, in the name of Gillian Martin, on the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill, be agreed to. As this is a motion to pass the bill at stage 3, the question must be decided by division. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Ind)
Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)

Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

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

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-20549, in the name of Gillian Martin, on the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill, is: For 90, Against 26, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill be passed.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time. I would be grateful if members who are leaving the chamber were to do so quickly and quietly.

Building Links with Bhutan

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-19514, in the name of Michelle Thomson, on building links with Bhutan. The debate will be concluded without any questions being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes the financial and administrative support from the Tam O'Shanter Trust for the recent parliamentary visit to Bhutan, and thanks Bhutan Homestay and the Loden Foundation for the additional in-country support, including arranging insightful meetings with entrepreneurs, parliamentarians and others; notes that Bhutan has a population approaching 800,000 and is set amidst the Himalayas, bordered by India and Tibet, and that its culture and governance are very different from Scotland; acknowledges its vibrant Buddhist heritage and magnificent cultural assets, including its numerous fortresses and temples, the best known of which is The Paro Taktsang, also known as the Tiger's Nest, which is a legendary monastery that hangs precariously on the edge of a 3,120m-tall cliff; appreciates that Bhutan is notable for its use of a national happiness index to assess progress and is ranked as one of the top 20 least corrupt countries in the world; understands that its political and institutional development is less mature and very different from Scotland's, but that there are areas where a sharing of innovative practice may prove mutually beneficial, such as on climate change, population retention, entrepreneurship, and education and skills; commends the work undertaken by the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh to document and conserve Bhutan's rich plant diversity; notes the view that there are opportunities to further develop relationships with Bhutan and that active consideration should be given to forming a Cross Party Group on Bhutan, with members from both Scotland and Bhutan, and including academic and cultural communities; further notes the view that there could be a useful focus on developing cultural links to enjoy and appreciate the countries' different cultural assets, and notes the invitation for the Loden Foundation to work with friends in Scotland, including those in the Falkirk East constituency.

18:24

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): It gives me great pleasure to open the debate and formally move the motion on building links with Bhutan.

Never in my wildest dreams—nor, I suspect, those of my fellow members of the Scottish Parliament—did I expect to be given the honour of leading colleagues from our Scottish Parliament on such a fascinating visit to Bhutan.

Without the financial help, administrative support and leadership of the Tam O'Shanter Trust, the visit would never have happened. In addition, we had excellent support from the Loden Foundation and Bhutan Homestay, which allowed us to meet parliamentarians, entrepreneurs and many others. I thank them all profusely for giving us such a remarkable experience, from which we

have learned a great deal. We have much to reflect on as a result.

I welcome Lesley Kennedy from the Tam O'Shanter Trust and Tshering Dorji, a Bhutanese national who is working for the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, who are both sitting in the public gallery.

Bhutan is set amid the spectacular Himalayas and is bordered to the south, east and west by India and to the north by Tibet. The Bhutanese are surrounded by the two most populous countries in the world—India, with 1.46 billion people, and China, with 1.42 billion people—while Bhutan has a smaller population; it is approaching 800,000.

Bhutan has a close relationship with India but a troubled one with China. China claims that it has rights over Bhutanese territories in three sectors—the north, west and east—and, since 1984, Bhutan and China have had 25 rounds of border talks. It would therefore be wrong and too simplistic to see Bhutan as an untroubled, idyllic place. Like the rest of us, it faces geopolitical challenges.

Bhutan is famed for a culture and governance that are very different from Scotland. Since 2008, it has become a constitutional monarchy, with the king as head of state. Executive power is vested in a council of ministers and legislative power in a bicameral Parliament. It was not until 2008 that Bhutan adopted its first modern constitution, which codified the institutions of government and the legal framework for a democratic multiparty system.

It is notable for a vibrant Buddhist heritage and magnificent cultural assets, including its numerous fortresses and temples, the best known of which is the Paro Taksang—also known as the tiger's nest. It is a legendary monastery that hangs precariously on the edge of a 3,102m tall cliff. We know that because we climbed it.

My experience in Bhutan has persuaded me that to be Bhutanese goes beyond nationality. It embodies a deep connection with nature, and its Buddhist heritage influences everything. I notice, too, the values that are embedded in the national psyche—compassion, consensus, self-reflection and humility, to name a few. That has allowed change to evolve through people rather than happen to people, although key groups, such as women, are still too underrepresented in the Parliament and Government. However, Bhutan is not alone in that. Despite being surrounded by giants, Bhutan has nevertheless carved out its own unique attributes.

Take, for example, corruption. Transparency International's annual corruption perception index ranks 180 countries and territories worldwide by their perceived levels of public sector corruption. The least corrupt country, ranked at number 1, is Denmark. Bhutan comes in at 18, whereas China is ranked at 76 and India at 96. As a matter of interest, the UK is ranked below Bhutan, at 20.

I should also add that, as we strive for a future that is carbon neutral, Bhutan is unique in being a carbon-negative country. However, that said, it, too, faces the challenge of climate change, which does not respect borders.

Bhutan has become internationally notable for developing its own gross national happiness index. The measurement is useful for policy making and policy incentives for Government, non-governmental organisations and businesses of Bhutan and to increase societal wellbeing and happiness. When we were there, it was hard to make an honest assessment of how that was operating in practice and in policy making. We know about that in Scotland, too, with the challenges of our national performance framework. I watch with interest to see how that can be developed and sustained, particularly as Bhutan develops its capital markets and financial sector.

I will now reflect on how things might be taken forward to the mutual advantage of both Bhutan and Scotland. There are multiple areas where a sharing of innovative practice might prove mutually beneficial, such as environmental management, climate change, sustainable tourism, population retention, entrepreneurship and democratic governance.

There are opportunities to further develop relationships with Bhutan and I encourage the Loden Foundation to work with friends in Scotland. I strongly believe that, after the elections, active consideration should be given to forming a cross-party group on Bhutan. The membership should come from Scotland and Bhutan and a good starting place could be to include our academic and cultural communities. At that point, I will no longer be a member of the Parliament to take that initiative forward, but I encourage interested members in the next session to do so.

It could also be useful to focus on developing cultural links to enjoy and appreciate the different cultural assets. We have much to learn from the intriguing country of Bhutan and I, again, give grateful thanks for the experience that I have gained.

18:30

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I never thought that I would open a debate on the Holocaust and speak about the wonderful country of Bhutan on the same day, but that is how the Scottish Parliament works sometimes.

I thank Michelle Thomson for bringing the debate to the chamber but, most of all, I thank Angus Tulloch and the Tam O'Shanter Trust, ably supported by Lesley Kennedy and Tess Sampson, for taking me, Michelle, Pam Gosal and Claire Baker to Bhutan, along with Tshering Dorji, last October.

It was an astonishing trip. I never thought that it would happen either. When Michelle asked me whether I would be interested in going along, she did not have to twist my arm too much. The sheer beauty of the place and how clean the air and atmosphere were in that wonderful country were astonishing. From every angle, the Buddhist culture of that nation permeated of us. It is an historically strong country with deep culture and traditions. It has many languages and is very diverse despite having a population of less than 750,000.

When we were there, we wanted to explore opportunities for co-operation, environmental management, education, healthcare and sustainable tourism. Bhutan does not want to overload itself with tourists. It wants people to go there who will appreciate the country for what it is and not change it to something that it is not. Not only is the country is unique but it will, I believe, remain unique.

Michelle Thomson talked about a possible cross-party group. If such a cross-party group is established in the next parliamentary session, and if I am re-elected, I would certainly want to be part of it. I hope that the colleagues who were with me last October would also join that group. We could do many different things, from cultural evenings and screening Bhutanese films to social networking, community learning and engaging with academics and the business community in Scotland and Bhutan.

The trip that we were on was exhilarating. It was also exhausting. When we went to the bottom of a very large mountain with a well-known monastery known as the tiger's nest at the top, Pam Gosal and I were both delighted to find some lovely and willing ponies to carry us half way up as some of our colleagues applauded.

We did not just climb hills and have an exciting cultural experience, although we had an exciting cultural experience meeting film director Tashi Gyaltsen and seeing one of his most important films. We also met the Prime Minister and the leader of the Opposition, visited Parliament and met business leaders.

It is quite a culture shock to arrive in Bhutan because the airport itself is unique. I do not think that there are many places where you see a mini Buddhist monastery in the middle of the carousel where you collect your suitcase but that is what you have when you visit Paro.

There is a lot that we can learn from a country such as Bhutan and it is important that we have strong economic links with it. It might not be the biggest market in the world but it is extremely important and the links should involve looking at how Bhutan can diversify and work with Scotland. There is much that the Bhutanese can learn from us and much that we can learn from them. It is about working together in partnership and looking at how we can help them to preserve their local festivals and culture, and how they can perhaps help us to appreciate more of ours.

Demography remains a problem in Bhutan, with many people emigrating, particularly to Australia. Reversing that will be a major issue for the people of Bhutan as years go forward. One of the things that I have suggested is that Bhutan could learn from countries such as Lithuania, with its create Lithuania project, and Poland and Ireland, which have successfully attracted return migration through education, market diversification and investment incentives. Rural depopulation, which is mirrored in many places in the world, is also an issue there, and is also something to address.

Without further ado, I will pass on to one of my colleagues, as I believe that my time is up.

18:35

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I begin by thanking my colleague Michelle Thomson for lodging the motion, as well as all the MSPs who supported it. It is great to have cross-party support for this topic.

I also thank the Tam O' Shanter Trust for organising and providing funding for the trip to Bhutan that we took in October. I give a special thank you to Michelle Thomson, who organised and led the whole trip. What an experience—it is something that I will never forget. I welcome Lesley Kennedy and Tshering Dorji to the public gallery.

The reason we visited Bhutan was to see what Scotland could learn from that beautiful country. The two countries are similar in many respects. Much of Bhutan is covered with mountains and therefore sparsely populated, with agriculture and tourism the major industries. When we say there were mountains, I can certainly say that there were mountains to climb. My colleague Kenneth Gibson mentioned ponies, which helped us, but, believe me, these legs did a lot of work in Bhutan.

It was so good because not only did we learn about the educational, economic and cultural side of things, but it was also very spiritual. We all, across different parties, need to think about what

we say and what we do, but having that spiritual downtime helps.

Unfortunately, Bhutan shares similar alcohol and drugs problems with Scotland, as well as the shortage of young entrepreneurs who want to stay in the country and start new businesses. During our trip, we were lucky enough to meet the Prime Minister, the head of the Opposition party, members of Parliament, non-governmental organisations and entrepreneurs to learn and share information about our respective countries and legislatures.

Some of the lessons that we learned during our trip to Bhutan and hoped to bring to Scotland included the fact that positive cultural values facilitate good governance and that political systems work best when they reflect the development stage of the relevant country and its cultural values. We should aim to reduce the present confrontational nature and short-termism of Scottish parliamentary politics by learning from Bhutanese experiences.

Something that struck me during the trip to Bhutan was the focus on wellbeing and happiness metrics. Bhutan's focus on gross national happiness provides an opportunity for Scotland to learn about approaches to improving and measuring national wellbeing, which my colleague Michelle Thomson mentioned we were very interested in, and we need to learn more about that.

As both countries have a rich cultural heritage, they could benefit from a partnership between cultural bodies, museums and universities by enabling skills exchange, research collaboration and joint cultural preservation projects.

Our countries could also work together when it comes to promoting participation of women in politics, which I know the Presiding Officer has been doing a lot of work on. Bhutan has a low number of female members of Parliament, so a series of exchange visits, round-table discussions and shared learning events could highlight successes and challenges in advancing female participation in politics.

Finally, tourism is a major part of both economies. Scotland could help Bhutan to promote itself more effectively to certain markets, such as the religious pilgrimage and trekking markets, but that can happen only if we work together.

I hope that we will continue to work on strengthening relations between Scotland and Bhutan, including after the election in May. Our trip has shown what good cross-party work can do. As Michelle Thomson mentioned, the first step would be to establish a CPG on Bhutan. As convener of the CPG on India, I know at first hand the importance of CPGs and the great work that they do.

Through the CPG on India, we have managed to do so much, including the trip to India in October 2023, not to forget the facilitating of the signing of the memorandum of understanding on fintech collaboration between Scottish Financial Enterprise and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry to promote economic and cultural prosperity. I hope that a CPG on Bhutan will manage to do the same and more.

18:40

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I thank Michelle Thomson for securing this evening's debate and for her excellent introduction to our discussion. I, too, welcome our guests to the gallery, both of whom were so central to our positive experience. Opportunities for back-bench MSPs to engage with parliamentarians from other countries and take part in cultural and economic exchanges are not particularly frequent, and I thank the Tam O'Shanter Trust for taking a delegation of MSPs to Bhutan last year. I was very fortunate to be part of that experience.

Bhutan is a fascinating country. It is breathtakingly beautiful, with clear rivers and spectacular mountain ranges. If you hike high enough, you can see the Himalayas. You can also see what is the world's highest unclimbed mountain, as there is a height restriction on hiking in Bhutan. I note that, although Kenneth Gibson said that other colleagues plodded up to the Tiger's Nest, I reached it more quickly than anybody else. [*Laughter.*] With the help of donkeys and ponies, I got to the top.

Bhutan is a largely Buddhist country, and faith is at the centre of its society and its politics. In comparison with the UK, the economy is narrowly focused, and tourism plays an important part. Most visitors come from India, and Bhutan applies a substantial daily visitor levy as a means of fostering sustainable tourism, which helps to protect its natural environment.

Our meeting with the leader of the Opposition of the National Assembly of Bhutan was fascinating. The high levels of integration and co-operation between the two parties lead to government by consensus. In some ways, that echoes the early ideals of the Scottish Parliament, which has, however, developed into a more oppositional Parliament. Although the co-operation in Bhutan is positive, it does raise questions about scrutiny and transparency, and the prominent role of the king in the political system further complicates the issue of scrutiny in decision making. However, we must be careful, because it can be too easy for us to

forget that this is a very new democracy, and it is not one that the population particularly called for. The first democratic elections were held in 2008, and that process was driven by the monarchy.

I had several discussions about Bhutanese languages, recognising that there is more than one. There are reportedly two dozen languages spoken in Bhutan. Although the national language, Dzongkha, must be spoken in Parliament and in films, children in school are taught in English and they increasingly consume English-language media. The ability to speak English is very high, and it is important to the Bhutanese economy. The expectation is that children will learn to speak Dzongkha at home. However, I am aware of the risk of losing it as a spoken language. Sonam Nyenda shared concerns with us not only about the extent to which English is spoken, but about the fact that its phrasing and expressions are very different from those of the official language, which is diluting understanding. I would be concerned that the daily use of native languages could diminish quite quickly in the next generation. We have faced similar challenges with Gaelic, and we could share our experiences of measures that we have taken to sustain that language.

Michelle Thomson talked about the Bhutanese economy and the gross national happiness index. We had excellent engagement with entrepreneurs and the Loden Foundation, which encourages and supports entrepreneurship. As well as being a Labour MSP, I am a Co-operative Party MSP, and I note that Bhutan could benefit from engagement with co-operative, mutual and social enterprise models. I think that those models are a good match with the values of Bhutan, and they would have the benefit of empowering employees and giving them a stake in businesses.

An economic model that is built around co-operatives would also have the benefit of strengthening democracy by encouraging people to engage more directly in their future, and it would increase knowledge of democratic structures.

I will finish on a more serious note, as our trip did. The Bhutanese Parliament is predominantly male, and women are underrepresented. We had a number of discussions about barriers to women's participation, including the perception of politics, caring responsibilities, language issues and the level of education that is required to be a parliamentarian.

A screening of the film "The Red Phallus" on our last evening raised questions about sexual violence in silence. It raised questions about how a socially conservative society deals with sexual violence and child abuse. When he talked about the censorship of his film, the director wondered whether a society with cultural sensitivity could be suppressing discussion or recognition of those issues.

The lack of women in politics contributes to the lack of discussion and awareness of issues that impact directly on women and girls. Bhutan is not alone in its underrepresentation of women in politics, and I was encouraged that the challenge has been recognised.

This is a short debate, and it is not possible to discuss the range of shared opportunities and learning exchanges that exist for Scotland and Bhutan, but I hope that today will be the start of a relationship that this Parliament and Government may wish to explore fully.

18:45

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak today about the potential for building links with Bhutan. I congratulate Michelle Thomson on securing the debate, and I listened closely to the positive contributions from Kenneth Gibson, Pam Gosal and Claire Baker. It is always a delight when there is cross-party consensus on this Parliament—and, by extension, this Government—having good and ambitious external relations.

I will take a moment to recognise the importance of Bhutan as the world's only carbon-negative country, as well as its ranking as one of the top 20 least corrupt nations in the world. As we have heard in the course of the debate, Bhutan is also distinguished by its vibrant Buddhist heritage, which shapes not only its cultural life but its values, governance and sense of collective purpose.

That spiritual foundation has helped to foster a society that places deep importance on compassion, balance and community wellbeing. Perhaps most notably, Bhutan has offered the world a distinctive lens through which to measure progress, through its pioneering use of the gross national happiness index. By placing wellbeing, sustainability and social cohesion alongside economic indicators, Bhutan has challenged global assumptions about what truly constitutes national success. That approach continues to resonate far beyond its borders and provides strong lessons that Scotland can learn from.

Even though Bhutan's political and institutional development is very different from that of Scotland, it is important to acknowledge that difference with respect, and there are also areas of shared practice and mutual learning that can benefit both nations.

There are clear opportunities to further develop the relationship between Scotland and Bhutan,

and I take inspiration from the K5 Himalayan whisky, which was created to commemorate the coronation of the fifth King of Bhutan. This whisky features a blend of eight and 12-year-old Scottish malts with Bhutanese grain spirits and Himalayan spring water. If K5 whisky can successfully blend Scottish malts and Bhutanese spirits into a balanced whole, it suggests that our two nations, working in the right spirit, can also combine our strengths to tackle the challenges of climate change.

Academic and cultural exchange must remain central to all relationships that Scotland forges. Scotland has much to gain from reflecting on Bhutan's experience by considering how broader measures of wellbeing might inform our own policy discussions. Equally, the development of strong cultural links allows both countries to celebrate difference, build understanding and enrich our respective societies.

I commend the outstanding work undertaken by the Royal Botanic Garden in Edinburgh, whose long-standing partnership in documenting and conserving Bhutan's rich plant diversity has made an important contribution to global biodiversity conservation. This collaboration exemplifies how scientific co-operation can strengthen international relationships while delivering tangible environmental benefits.

Finally, I recognise the vital role of the Loden Foundation, whose commitment to promoting education, nurturing social entrepreneurship and preserving Bhutan's cultures and traditions continues to make a profound impact. Its work demonstrates how investment in people, values and heritage can support long-term national resilience and international partnerships.

Taken together, these themes point towards a relationship rooted not only in diplomacy but in shared values, respect for nature, commitment to integrity, belief in the wellbeing of future generations and, of course, a shared love of whisky.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate.

Meeting closed at 18:49.

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