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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?

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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

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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)

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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

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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.

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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.

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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

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£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.

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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.

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

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?

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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

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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.

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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

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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.

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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.

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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".

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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

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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 year, 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

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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.

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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

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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

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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 General 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.

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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

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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?

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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

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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,

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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.

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