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Wednesday 11 February 2026

CONTENTS

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PORTFOLIO QUESTION TIME **1**
RURAL AFFAIRS, LAND REFORM AND ISLANDS **1**
Salmon Numbers (Rivers) 1
Avian Influenza (Support for Poultry Producers) 2
Good Food Nation (Local Procurement, Local Produce and Food Miles) 4
Marine Protection Vessels (Marine Scotland) 5
Ecological Focus Area Activities (Orkney Agricultural Sector) 7
Remote Electronic Monitoring (Fishing Vessels) 9
Tree Planting (2025-26 Targets) 10
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE **11**
Dental Provision (NHS Western Isles) 11
Bed Capacity (Dr Gray's Hospital Elgin and NHS Grampian) 13
Budget 2026-27 (National Health Service Waiting Times) 14
National Health Service (Waiting Times) 15
Cancer Treatment Waiting Times 17
Renfrewshire Health and Social Care Partnership 18
Sodium Valproate Redress Scheme 20
Surgeries Carried out Abroad 21
QUEEN ELIZABETH UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL **23**
Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab) 23
The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray) 26
Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con) 29
Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green) 31
Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD) 33
Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab) 35
Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP) 36
Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab) 38
Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con) 39
Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP) 41
Gillian Mackay 42
Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con) 43
Neil Gray 45
Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab) 48
COMMUNITY POLICING **51**
Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab) 51
The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance) 53
Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con) 56
Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green) 57
Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD) 59
Davy Russell (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab) 62
Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP) 62
Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab) 63
Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con) 65
Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP) 67
Maggie Chapman 69
Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con) 70
Angela Constance 72
Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab) 75
FINANCE (NO 2) BILL **78**
BUSINESS MOTION **78**
Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind) 80
Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con) 82
The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey) 83

PARLIAMENTARY BUREAU MOTIONS **87**
DECISION TIME **88**
NATURE CHAMPIONS **101**
John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind) 101
David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP) 104
Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con) 105
Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab) 106
Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green) 108
Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD) 109
Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP) 110
Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con) 111
Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP) 112
Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con) 113
Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP) 114
Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green) 116
Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con) 117
Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Reform) 118
Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab) 119
The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon) 120

Scottish Parliament

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

Portfolio Question Time

Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Good afternoon. The first item of business is portfolio questions, and the first portfolio is rural affairs, land reform and islands.

Salmon Numbers (Rivers)

1. **Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to restore salmon numbers in Scotland's rivers. (S6O-05483)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): I take the issue of declining wild Atlantic salmon populations very seriously. Under our wild salmon strategy and the accompanying implementation plan, we are taking urgent action with partners to ensure the protection and recovery of this iconic species. Most recently, as a result of passing amendments that were lodged by Emma Harper, we increased penalties for the most serious and damaging fisheries crimes through the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill.

Since 2021, we have awarded more than £5 million through marine fund Scotland for projects that directly benefit wild salmon and more than £8 million through the nature restoration fund to support projects to improve Scotland's freshwater environment. Over the past 12 years, we have also awarded £12 million through the water environment fund on barrier removal and easement projects.

Alexander Burnett: I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests regarding the River Dee.

Despite valiant conservation efforts, such as the River Dee Trust's one million trees campaign, numbers of wild Atlantic salmon have declined by 70 per cent under the Scottish National Party, and they are now an endangered species. Wild fisheries contribute more than £100 million annually to our national economy—they support tourism, jobs and local businesses. However, NatureScot is in denial about seal predation and acoustic solutions that are neither workable nor affordable.

Does the cabinet secretary even understand the issue and the impact that it is having on our local economy, or is she content that her legacy will be that of the extinction of Scotland's iconic wild salmon?

Mairi Gougeon: Straight off, I do not appreciate the patronising tone of that supplementary question from Alexander Burnett. To blame a political party for the decline of a species, which is due to climatic conditions and a whole host of other factors, is entirely ridiculous and does not treat the issue with the seriousness that it deserves.

Alexander Burnett: Come and speak with my constituents.

Mairi Gougeon: If Alexander Burnett would care to listen, he would hear that I have outlined the work that has been undertaken through the wild salmon strategy, the accompanying implementation plan and the funding that is going towards that.

The member might also be interested to know that I will meet the Dee District Salmon Fishery Board and the River Dee Trust tomorrow to hear their concerns directly. We work together with them and other partners because we know that the matter requires urgent action, which we are taking.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Given that the River Tweed is an iconic salmon river that provides around £24 million to the economy and 500 jobs, what action is the Scottish Government taking to ensure that sewage treatment works and overflows along the Tweed are not damaging water quality or undermining salmon recovery?

Mairi Gougeon: I can get back to Rachael Hamilton on those particular points if she follows up on them with me in writing. We should take all action to mitigate any damage to the Tweed, and I am happy to look into the issue in more detail.

Avian Influenza (Support for Poultry Producers)

2. **Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what financial or practical support is being made available to poultry producers affected by the latest avian influenza outbreak. (S6O-05484)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): The Scottish Government pays compensation for healthy birds that are humanely culled in order to prevent the spread of avian influenza. Compensation payments are based on Great Britain table valuations, which are regularly reviewed and updated in order to ensure that they reflect current costs and different production systems.

The Animal and Plant Health Agency, which is the Scottish Government's lead operational partner, provides support directly to owners of premises that are affected by avian flu as part of the disease control response. That includes on-farm support as part of disease control activities and detailed advice on biosecurity.

Pauline McNeill: Glenrath Farms, one of the biggest egg producers in the country, has been hit by multiple bird flu outbreaks. As recently as this year—2026—customers in Glasgow have struggled to purchase eggs due to bird flu. Several supermarkets, including Asda and Tesco, have had no eggs available on the shelves, and other retailers have limited sales to two boxes, which I experienced recently.

Given that, what long-term preventative strategy is the Scottish Government putting in place to protect the poultry sector from recurring avian influenza outbreaks and to raise public awareness about the importance of the issue for people's daily shop?

Jim Fairlie: Pauline McNeill is absolutely correct to point out that there has been quite a large outbreak of avian influenza this year. Since November 2025, 1.5 million hens have been culled. However, there is more resilience in the national flock than there has been for a while. An article in *The Scotsman* on 29 January quoted Nick Allen, who is the chief executive of the British Egg Industry Council, as saying:

"In terms of supply, the national laying flock is currently in a stronger and more resilient position than it has been for a number of years so we do not anticipate this incident resulting in shortages for consumers."

The Scottish Retail Consortium, which represents major supermarkets north of the border, said:

"Grocery retailers have become accustomed to a degree of supply chain disruption from Bird Flu and other events in recent years",

and they adapt accordingly.

On Pauline McNeill's point about long-term resilience, keepers should be aware that avian flu is a naturally occurring issue and should ensure that their biosecurity is in hand. By doing that, they will protect their flocks.

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): Will the minister remind the Parliament of the vital importance of stringent biosecurity measures when it comes to protecting poultry flocks from avian influenza?

Jim Fairlie: I am glad that Evelyn Tweed has asked that question, because I should have said in my previous answer that there is good practical biosecurity advice on how to protect birds on the gov.scot avian influenza web pages. Such measures include cleaning footwear before and after visiting birds, placing birds' food and water in fully enclosed areas that are protected from wild birds and removing spilled feed regularly. It is important to prevent the incursion and spread of avian flu and, if farmers carry out those measures, they will better protect their stocks.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 3 is from Elena Whitham, who joins us remotely.

Good Food Nation (Local Procurement, Local Produce and Food Miles)

3. **Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on how its good food nation journey encourages local procurement, promotes local produce and reduces food miles. (S6O-05485)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): Our first national good food nation plan, which was published on 17 December 2025, sets out how we will work collectively across the Government to meet our good food nation ambitions. Public procurement is key to ensuring that everyone has access to healthy, fresh and seasonal food. We are committed to exploring all legislative and policy opportunities to maximise the impact that procurement can have on public bodies in relation to our excellent Scottish produce. Our good food nation plan contains information that directs suppliers towards resources that will help them to participate in public procurement, including specific support for small and medium-sized enterprises and third sector organisations.

Elena Whitham: Will the cabinet secretary advise how the Scottish Government is supporting the prioritisation of local Scottish food in public procurement? Does that include supporting investment in publicly owned or community-owned regional processing facilities and food hubs, which strengthen local food resilience and further community wealth building aspirations?

Mairi Gougeon: I welcome Elena Whitham's question, which raises some important points. Our local food resilience and community wealth building aspirations are realised, strengthened and supported in a number of ways. One of those ways is through our food for life programme, which we have supported for a number of years. The programme, which tries to increase the amount of healthy, locally sourced produce in our schools and local authorities, has supported Argyll and Bute Council, in partnership with Wild Jura Ltd, to supply venison products to local schools across Islay and Jura.

Through the food for life programme, we have also been working with the Soil Association to expand such work more broadly across the public

sector. For example, a specific pilot project in Glasgow has been looking at that issue.

We try to do a lot within the regulations in which we have to operate, and we support local food resilience in a number of ways. A good example is the small producers pilot fund, through which we have provided funding to support the private kill service in our abattoirs, because we know that that is critical to local supply chains. We are also—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please conclude, cabinet secretary.

Mairi Gougeon:—making capital funding available for our small producers.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Rhoda Grant, who joins us remotely, to ask a supplementary question.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): The cabinet secretary is aware that there were concerns that the Scottish statutory instrument on the good food nation plan that she introduced last year was drawn very narrowly and omitted crucial sectors such as agriculture and fisheries. Has she had time to reflect on that? Does she plan to expand the scope of the instrument?

Mairi Gougeon: First, to be clear, the SSI that was laid at that time was framed in a very particular way and was focused on specified functions. It needed to be framed in that way to enable the good food nation plan to be taken into consideration when those powers and functions were exercised. To say that it did not include agriculture and fisheries is not necessarily the case, because those sectors were to be considered through the rural support plan and in the national marine plan.

We are taking into consideration the views that were heard during the discussions on the SSI, but it is not possible for me to introduce another SSI in the time that is left in this session of Parliament. However, the work will continue, because we want to ensure that, when the good food nation plan is taken into consideration, it is done in a meaningful way that will have a tangible impact.

Marine Protection Vessels (Marine Scotland)

4. **Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the procurement of marine protection vessels for Marine Scotland. (S6O-05486)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): The Scottish Government remains committed to replacing its marine protection and research vessels, with MPV Minna and MRV Scotia both approaching the point for renewal.

Last year, a private information notice was issued to signal the future opportunity to the market. The next step is to issue a single procurement document. Before that happens, wider consideration is being given across Government to vessel procurement routes and subsidy control, including implications for publicly owned shipyards. It is important that ministers take decisions on all vessel programmes on a consistent and legally robust basis.

Stuart McMillan: The cabinet secretary will be very much aware of our correspondence and discussions on the replacement of the existing vessels. I believe that Ferguson Marine is perfectly placed to deliver those vessels. It has the experience, as it built MPV Minna in 2003 and MPV Jura in 2005. Allocating the direct award would be a boost for the workforce, and it would also begin to provide a pipeline of orders. Will the cabinet secretary advise on whether ministers are pursuing that approach? If so, when will a decision be made on that?

Mairi Gougeon: I appreciate Stuart McMillan's interest in, and his writing to me on, the issue.

The Scottish Government is committed to supporting Ferguson Marine, but we have not made any decisions regarding the contracting routes for the marine protection and research vessels. Any contract award, whether that is made through competition or directly, must comply with stringent procurement and subsidy control requirements, to avoid the risk of legal challenge.

Direct awards in the shipbuilding sector are particularly complex, due to the sensitivity of the industry under the United Kingdom Subsidy Control Act 2022 as well as the highly competitive nature of the global market. Ministers will consider each vessel contract in due course, ensuring that any chosen route to market is lawful, robustly assessed and capable of withstanding comprehensive legal scrutiny.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): The Scottish Government has not placed a contract for a ship in Scotland in the past decade, and we are facing a significant challenge regarding the future of Ferguson Marine. There is a remedy in the procurement of those vessels, because, although they are not naval vessels, they have an obvious national security application. I know that UK Government ministers are interested in discussions with the Scottish Government about applying section 45 of the Subsidy Control Act 2022 in relation to the procurement and would look at options for doing so. Will the minister engage with UK Government officials and ministers on the option of securing a section 45 exemption and a direct award to Ferguson Marine?

Mairi Gougeon: Paul Sweeney will be aware that I have answered similar questions previously. Defence and national security are reserved to the UK Government, and Scotland does not commission independent naval vessels.

The design of the replacement vessels reflects the operational needs of the marine directorate. It does not include warship specifications or military capability, which could misrepresent the vessels' authority at sea. MPVs are built and operated to merchant vessel standards, with Crown servant crews accountable to the Scottish ministers. As merchant-class vessels, they fall outside the defence-related exemptions that are referenced in section 45 of the 2022 act.

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): There is no doubt that marine protection and enforcement are important, but, following the removal of the Airtask Group's aircraft, which is based at Inverness, I still worry that they have taken a hit. Does the cabinet secretary believe that new vessels, when they come, will ensure that we have in place strong protections and monitoring, given the loss of experience and the speed of response that we once had at Inverness airport?

Mairi Gougeon: It is not correct to frame the situation in that way, because what we have are additional capabilities with a lower cost. I need to be clear on that. We still have access to the same number of aerial surveillance hours under the new contract, with the ability to add more, so it does not diminish our capabilities—if anything, they are being enhanced through the use of new technologies, such as drones, as I outlined in discussions on the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill. We are always looking to increase and make improvements to those capabilities, particularly in relation to those vessels. I agree that such capabilities are important. We have a large marine area to cover, and we need to make sure that we have all those aspects in place.

Ecological Focus Area Activities (Orkney Agricultural Sector)

5. **Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government what engagement it has had with the agricultural sector in Orkney on changes being made to ecological focus area activities. (S6O-05487)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): The Scottish Government has undertaken extensive engagement, which has ensured that enhanced greening requirements are proportionate for farmers, crofters and small farms. We have worked with stakeholder organisations, including the National Farmers Union Scotland and the Scottish Crofting Federation. We have involved farmers and crofters directly through user research and workshops with advisers across Scotland, including in Orkney.

That collaborative approach has led to the introduction of four new ecological focus areas and updates to existing EFAs, providing greater flexibility to reflect the diversity of farming systems, including local practices in Orkney. Advisers in Orkney also secured funding to analyse academic modelling that is specific to the islands and to organise roadshows to help farmers and crofters prepare for the changes. Two letters, a targeted email, articles in *The Scottish Farmer*, social media posts and the Farm Advisory Service's videos and webinars have raised awareness of the changes.

The greening scheme, with a budget of £142 million, supports agriculture and the environment. That complements the other significant support packages, which the Scottish Government continues to provide—in stark contrast to the policies elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

Liam McArthur: Farmers in Orkney have consistently raised with me their concerns about the EFA proposals, the impact that an increase to 7 per cent of all land will have on the overlap with existing agri-environment schemes, and the lack of suitable options for grassland systems such as those that are used in Orkney. I know that the minister is well aware of those concerns and of the calls for an island exemption. If he does not believe that such an exemption is possible or justified, what further steps will he take to ensure that the EFA obligations are properly island proofed?

Jim Fairlie: Liam McArthur will be aware that we have had many discussions about what the EFA will do. We included four new options, and specific work was done for the Orkney Islands. When the first EFAs were brought in, in 2015, there was a huge upsurge in people saying that they were a disaster and would not work. However, by 2016, once people had understood exactly what was being asked of them, there were no other issues.

I recently met two young Orcadians who came down to speak to me directly to raise those issues. I had a conversation with them in which we went through all the options available to them. I said to them, "Please do this in good faith. Let's see where we go, and if, in two or three years' time, there's an issue, we'll come back to look at it." We are asking farmers to do more, but we are taking clear action to protect farmers and livestock units, particularly in Orkney. We are going in the right direction, and we will do so in collaboration with the farming community.

Remote Electronic Monitoring (Fishing Vessels)

6. **Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government when it will implement remote electronic monitoring on vessels fishing in Scottish waters. (S6O-05488)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): From 7 March 2026, all relevant pelagic vessels fishing in Scottish waters must have an REM system on board. For Scottish-registered pelagic vessels, that requirement applies regardless of where they are operating. It is already a legislative requirement for all scallop dredge vessels operating in Scottish waters to have an REM system on board. As part of the development of the Scottish-led demersal fisheries management plans, we have committed to developing a road map for further roll-out of REM in priority fisheries around the United Kingdom, with clear prioritisation criteria and an implementation timetable. Those fisheries management plans are currently subject to public consultation.

Ruth Maguire: Some vessels—particularly long-line vessels and gill netters—pose a significant threat to seabirds. Does the minister agree that REM is a key tool that can fill data gaps and help to reduce the bycatch of seabird species such as the fulmar, the northern gannet and the Manx shearwater, and that its implementation can benefit fishermen who are operating in accordance with best practice by evidencing sustainable practices through objective, verifiable data?

Mairi Gougeon: I absolutely agree with that last point. It is great that we have been leading on that in Scotland and that other nations have been looking at the technology, too. The wider use of remote electronic monitoring technologies will help us to better monitor fishing operations, effort and catch, and to deliver on our obligations to minimise and, where possible, eliminate bycatch of seabirds and other sensitive species as part of our wider efforts to ensure the sustainability of our fishing fleet.

Observer programmes are in place across the United Kingdom that collect data on the incidental bycatch of protected species, including seabirds, by commercial fishing vessels, and there is a focus on high-risk fisheries and regions. Further roll-out of remote electronic monitoring beyond the scallop and pelagic fleet segments is being planned, and options will be developed for that alongside our future catching policy work.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Given that members of the Scottish scallop fleet report that they still have no access to the REM data that is gathered on their own vessels, despite being told that it would support and improve their operations, and given that the cost of maintaining REM equipment is rising year on year, what assurances can the Government give that the system will deliver any practical benefit to fishers? When will the scallop fleet finally be given access to its own data?

Mairi Gougeon: It is my understanding that members of the scallop fleet can access their data through the REM equipment on the vessels. However, if there is an issue, I would appreciate it if Finlay Carson could follow up with me, so that I can look at it in more detail.

I understand the concerns that have been expressed about the cost of REM systems. Of course, the Scottish Government cannot influence that, as it is up to the REM providers. However, vessels can use alternative providers, as long as the equipment meets the technical specifications.

If Finlay Carson writes to me, so that I can look into any issues that he is hearing about directly, I will follow up with a more detailed response.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 7 has not been lodged.

Tree Planting (2025-26 Targets)

8. **Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests, which shows that I own a farm in Moray, which includes some trees.

To ask the Scottish Government whether its tree planting targets for 2025-26 will be reached. (S6O-05490)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): We are currently in the middle of the tree planting season. Reporting on the tree planting target is provided through the official statistics on woodland creation, which will be published by Forest Research on 25 June. Therefore, I cannot comment on the final position at this time.

Edward Mountain: For Scotland to get back on track, in every year between now and 2029, we will need to plant another 3,277 hectares over and above the Scottish Government's target of 15,000 hectares per year that has already been set. That is roughly 7 million more trees each year. Personally, I doubt that that is achievable, which makes our net zero targets unachievable, and it will certainly not be achievable unless we have further grant aid and a reduction in bureaucracy. Will the cabinet secretary commit to driving forward the latter, which was started by Fergus Ewing five years ago?

Mairi Gougeon: I think that it is achievable. I know that Edward Mountain has been looking at the climate change plan in his capacity as convener of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport

Committee. I appeared at the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee in relation to the aspects of the climate change plan that relate to my portfolio. In that plan, we have set out our planting targets for the next few years. In the budget for the coming financial year, and for the spending review period, we have the funding to match that and for the targets to be delivered. The targets are achievable and we have the budget to deliver them. We now just need to get on and do that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mercedes Villalba has a brief supplementary question.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): I apologise for being late to the chamber today, Presiding Officer.

What proportion of the trees planted towards the target have been, or will be, native broadleaf species rather than invasive non-native species such as Sitka spruce?

Mairi Gougeon: I cannot speak for future planting, but I think that, in relation to what we have planted so far, in recent years, roughly half of what has been planted has been native. I want to make sure that I have that absolutely right, so I will follow up with Mercedes Villalba. I think that our target was about 40 per cent, but we have gone over and above that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on rural affairs, land reform and islands. There will be a brief pause before we move on to the next item of business.

Health and Social Care

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next portfolio is health and social care. I remind members that questions 3 and 7 are grouped together and that therefore I shall take any supplementaries on those questions after both have been answered.

I call Alasdair Allan, who joins us remotely.

Dental Provision (NHS Western Isles)

1. **Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its discussions with NHS Western Isles regarding dental provision across the islands. (S6O-05491)Dental Provision (NHS Western Isles)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): Officials are meeting monthly with the director of dentistry for the Western Isles, to understand local service provision and concerns. We recognise that access remains more challenging in rural and island areas, which is why our operational improvement plan commits to reviewing and refreshing the financial incentives available to the dental sector, to better support patient access in rural and island areas. That work is under way and we anticipate that revised incentives will be introduced in the 2026-27 financial year.

Alasdair Allan: I appreciate the work that the Scottish Government is undertaking to improve the situation. However, people in many communities across the Western Isles have not been able to get on a waiting list for a local dentist for several years—much less to access check-up appointments or anything other than extremely urgent dental care. Prevention is far preferable to later treatment. Can the minister outline the steps that are being taken to ensure that all my constituents are able to begin accessing regular check-ups and routine dental work on the national health service?

Jenni Minto: As I noted in my earlier answer, we are committed to the review and refresh of financial incentives to support the workforce and patient access in rural and island areas. That work is at an advanced stage. It is my hope that, once in force, the revised allowances will encourage renewed uptake of high-street provision in island areas such as the Western Isles, and support patients in engaging in regular check-ups and routine dental work.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): There are five major dental vacancies across the Outer Hebrides, including three in Uist and Barra. Those include a critical senior dental officer role. Patients who cannot register with a dentist are being told not to make emergency appointments unless they cannot sleep due to the pain.

I understand that there are issues with ventilation and fallow time in the surgeries, which limit the number of daily appointments that can be taken. What is the minister doing to address those issues and to ensure that dentists are recruited and retained and that surgeries are upgraded to allow a continuous flow of patients?

Jenni Minto: As I indicated in my answer to Dr Allan, we are in the process of reviewing the dental access improvement schemes and the funding that is available to dentists, to ensure that practices are set up. That is an important part of the work that we need to do.

I highlight that I am disappointed about the restrictions that the United Kingdom Government has put on visas for dental technicians. Those visas would allow us to improve our workforce in Scotland and across the UK, to ensure that people get the right support from their dentist as they need it.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Over the weekend, I was shocked to read that all dental practices in the Outer Hebrides are now shut to

new adult patients. It seems to be yet another extreme example of a substantial failure of workforce planning, leading to island residents once again paying the price. It is clear that simply changing incentives is not going to be good enough in some more remote areas. Could the minister consider the expansion of public dental provision so that direct salary dental vacancies are created in the islands?

Jenni Minto: I have been clear in my responses to other questions that we are willing to look at whatever solutions there are. Two years ago, we reviewed the fees that dentists receive, which has improved uptake for dentists. We are also reviewing the governance to ensure that we can get as many dentists in Scotland as we need and that we can increase the intake of dentistry students in universities.

Bed Capacity (Dr Gray's Hospital Elgin and NHS Grampian)

2. **Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to increase the number of available beds in Dr Gray's hospital Elgin and throughout NHS Grampian facilities. (S6O-05492)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): It is for national health service boards and their planning partners to design and deliver healthcare services that meet the needs of the local populations that they serve in a way that is consistent with national policies, frameworks and best practice.

NHS Grampian is making good progress, under new leadership and its escalation improvement plan, to stabilise services and release capacity by improving hospital flow across its sites, not least through the Government's additional investment in initiatives to effectively shift the balance of care, such as hospital at home, frailty services and discharge to assess.

Tim Eagle: That answer was really just a case of passing the buck. The cabinet secretary must know that corridor care is now commonplace, and that that is having a massive effect on patients and staff. Dr Gray's is regularly operating beyond funded bed numbers, which is putting more and more pressure on services. I understand that NHS Grampian currently has the lowest bed base in Scotland, at around 1.4 beds per 1,000 people. The long-term decline in capacity is contributing to pressures.

Will the Government set out why, after another year has passed, bed capacity has still not been increased? What immediate steps will the Government take to ensure that patients are treated with dignity and that staff are supported with the resources that they need?

Neil Gray: It is a statutory responsibility of NHS boards to plan, design and deliver healthcare services that meet the needs of the local population. However, Tim Eagle will be aware that we have escalated NHS Grampian to level 4 because of its financial position and other elements of its performance. As part of that escalation process, we are looking at precisely the types of areas that Mr Eagle has suggested. I am confident in the progress that is being made under the new leadership of Laura Skaife-Knight, and I am confident that the assurance process is ensuring that the board's general performance and its financial performance are improving.

Budget 2026-27 (National Health Service Waiting Times)

3. **Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to reduce NHS waiting times through its draft budget 2026-27. (S6O-05493)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): Through this year's targeted investment in planned care, we have seen waits of more than 52 weeks reduce for seven consecutive months. I want to maintain momentum and build on that progress, which is why our draft budget for 2026-27 includes the record figure of almost £22.5 billion for health and social care. We will scale up productivity and efficiency programmes to create additional capacity.

In addition, health boards have been directed to take forward a new collaborative subnational planning approach, which will involve boards working together to best use and optimise available capacity to ensure that patients receive the care that they need as soon as possible.

Jackie Dunbar: It is welcome that the Scottish National Party Scottish Government has taken bold, decisive action on our NHS, which has resulted in waiting times coming down for a seventh month in a row, as he said, while waiting lists remain high in Labour-run NHS England. How will the Scottish Government continue to build on that success? I am thinking, in particular, of its investment in our innovative general practitioner walk-in centres.

Neil Gray: Jackie Dunbar's question is timely, especially the latter part of it, because today marks the opening of Scotland's first GP walk-in service pilot, which is a milestone in improving access to care. As part of that £36 million pilot programme, 15 services will initially be rolled out across Scotland. Those services will allow people with minor, urgent, non-emergency needs to see a clinician the same day, without having to go through the 8 am rush for appointments. Staffed by GPs and advanced nurse practitioners, the services focus on minor urgent issues that cannot

wait but do not require treatment at accident and emergency. They are not a replacement for someone's own GP for issues such as long-term conditions—they complement existing practices.

National Health Service (Waiting Times)

7. **George Adam (Paisley) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update regarding NHS waiting times. (S6O-05497)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): The latest published statistics show the sustained progress that we are making in reducing waiting times, with long waits having been reduced for the seventh month in a row.

In the 12 months to December 2025, 274,638 operations were performed, which represented a 5.6 per cent increase on the previous 12-month period. Between July and December 2025, new out-patient waits of more than 52 weeks reduced by 40.1 per cent. Long waits for in-patient and day-case procedures have fallen every month since July 2025, and waits of more than 52 weeks decreased by 23.9 per cent over that period.

Those latest figures show that our plan is delivering for the people of Scotland, and I am committed to continuing to maintain momentum and building on that progress.

George Adam: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer. Perhaps Jackie Dunbar and I should communicate with each other more often.

It is always good to tell people good news more than once, so can the cabinet secretary advise how the Scottish Government will continue to drive down those waiting times?

Neil Gray: I remember the former Speaker of the House of Commons, John Bercow, saying that repetition is not a novelty in politics, and George Adam is certainly living up to that today.

This year, we have provided more than £135.5 million to reduce waiting times, with a further £20 million allocated in the last quarter to support boards in targeting specialties with the longest waits. I want to maintain that momentum and build on that progress. That is why our budget includes a record £22.5 billion for health and social care, and why we are working closely with boards to increase and optimise capacity and efficiency and improve productivity to ensure that patients receive the care that they need as soon as possible.

In 2026-27, we have commissioned more than 50,000 diagnostic tests and procedures through our national treatment centres and the Golden Jubilee university hospital in 2026-27.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Today, I spoke to the Royal College of Emergency Medicine, the Royal College of Midwives, the Royal College of Nursing and the British Medical Association. They paint a very different picture from the one that the cabinet secretary is alluding to. They talk about corridor care, staff not being able to deliver the care that they want to, staff harm and patient harm, and they say that there are no beds available. When will we fix the whole system so that the back door of the hospital is sorted and beds become available?

Neil Gray: Our approach to turning the health service around and making sure that it continues to turn the corner in the way that it has done over recent months involves looking at the whole system. Brian Whittle is absolutely right to raise those concerns, and I am sure that he recognises the substantial and demonstrable progress that has been made in waiting times for elective procedures. However, I also recognise the concerns that there are from the likes of the Royal College of Emergency Medicine, which I meet regularly and routinely, as well as the other colleagues whom Mr Whittle references, about the areas that still need to see progress. The accident and emergency waiting times figures that were released this week demonstrate that there is still more to be done. Indeed, that measure shows that there is more to be done across the whole system—not just in our accident and emergency departments, which are incredibly efficient, but in the wider system, including social care, which needs to ensure that it is picking up the same productivity gains that we are seeing in elective capacity.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Spin is clearly not a novelty with the Scottish National Party Government, because the First Minister said that he would end waits of more than a year by March this year, yet, according to Public Health Scotland, there were almost 63,000 waits of more than a year and more than 8,000 waits of more than two years, compared with just a few hundred in England. Does the minister accept that the First Minister has broken yet another promise and that patients are waiting too long for treatment? Is this the usual case of the SNP promising the world but delivering absolutely nothing?

Neil Gray: Given that recent revelations show that the NHS in England has been paying trusts to incentivise them to remove patients from lists, that is probably not the best route for Ms Baillie to go down in terms of a comparison between Scotland and England, because we certainly do not deploy that tactic in Scotland.

We are making demonstrable progress in reducing waiting times, not by incentivising our boards to remove patients from lists but by increasing capacity and improving patient delivery.

Cancer Treatment Waiting Times

4. **Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to reduce waiting times for cancer patients. (S6O-05494)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): The performance for the 31-day standard is 95.1 per cent, which is above the 95 per cent target, with the median wait for treatment being just two days.

We are investing £14.24 million of the £137 million of planned care funding that was made available in 2025-26 directly in efforts to reduce cancer waiting times, supported by increasing radiology capacity to support seven-day working, and by publishing and implementing optimal diagnostic pathways for lung, head and neck and colorectal cancers, with a total of almost £7.5 million of investment to ensure that patients have cancer ruled in or out faster. We have also established the six rapid cancer diagnostic services, which help us to more quickly find the hardest-to-spot cancers in particular.

Graham Simpson: Waiting times for the most serious cancer cases could be reduced if we caught people early. That is why we need a national screening programme for lung cancer, not the pilots that the Scottish Government has promised. In England, screening is available to people aged between 55 and 74 who have ever smoked, and 77 per cent of lung cancer cases are now diagnosed at stage 1 or 2, compared with stage 4 in Scotland. Screening saves lives and money, and I want it to happen throughout Scotland. When will we get a national lung cancer screening programme here?

Neil Gray: I recognise that some progress has been made on a lung screening programme in England. The programme is not consistent or universal, because there are challenges in standing it up. We are seeking to overcome those challenges on a consistent, national and universal basis, so that the lung screening programme that we have committed to is up and running as quickly as possible. I give Graham Simpson the assurance that I gave at a recent cancer conference: we are looking at every possible step to expedite a universal lung screening programme in Scotland, for the very reason that Graham Simpson has outlined, which is that it absolutely can save lives.

Renfrewshire Health and Social Care Partnership

5. **Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government when it last met Renfrewshire health and social care partnership and what issues were discussed. (S6O-05495)

The Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing (Tom Arthur): Scottish Government ministers and officials meet regularly with representatives of all health and social care partnerships. The Renfrewshire health and social care partnership representative attended the collaborative response and assurance group on Monday this week. The meeting focused on delayed discharge performance.

Scottish Government officials met the Renfrewshire health and social care partnership on 8 April 2025. A number of issues were discussed, including local system pressures, financial challenges and engagement.

Neil Bibby: Social care is in crisis under the Scottish National Party, and vulnerable people across Scotland are paying the price. As a Renfrewshire MSP, the minister will know that there are, in Renfrewshire alone, proposals to cut respite support, cut support for those with autism and close vital facilities, such as the disability resource centre in Paisley. After public pressure, decisions on those proposals have been delayed until June—after the election.

The First Minister has refused my request to step in and stop those cuts, and the Scottish Government's budget does nothing to help in the social care crisis. Why is the Government not doing anything to prevent those cuts, which will impact on the most vulnerable people in Renfrewshire?

Tom Arthur: I thank Mr Bibby for bringing those important matters to the chamber. Government officials and ministers, including the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, are committed to on-going engagement. The draft budget that is before Parliament commits more than £15.7 billion to local government and almost £22.5 billion to health and social care.

Decisions for integrated joint boards are, of course, for those boards to take. That is the view that the Parliament ultimately came to about where responsibility and accountability should lie. However, the Government is, of course, committed to on-going engagement and, through the annual budget process, there is always the opportunity for members of all parties to put forward their views on the overall allocation of resources to both local government and health and social care.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I fear that Mr Bibby is unaware of the irony with which his question is tainted. Just last week, his own colleagues quietly submitted a motion to annul an order giving disabled people and unpaid carers on IJBs such as Renfrewshire's the voting rights to decide how the funding that he has referenced would be spent. Will the minister join me in calling out Scottish Labour for once again politicising our health and social care services, and will he outline how all IJBs will be funded in a way that best meets the needs of all service users over the next financial year?

Tom Arthur: I thank Clare Haughey for her supplementary question. I was somewhat surprised, perplexed and, frankly, appalled that a motion was submitted by the Labour Party to annul an order that would extend voting rights to lived-experience members. However, I am pleased that the Labour Party has seen sense and withdrawn its motion—or, to use another phrase, made a U-turn. I agree that Labour colleagues should explain to groups with lived experience—those who use social care, unpaid carers and third sector organisations—why they sought to annul the extension of voting rights on IJBs. It is for Labour to explain that.

The Government is determined to ensure that those who access and support community health and social care services have an equal say in shaping the decisions that affect their communities. That is why we have moved to deliver the extension of voting rights on IJBs, despite the Labour Party's trying to block that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Carol Mochan has a brief supplementary question.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): The Government has provided no extra funding to IJBs to support any of that work.

The minister knows that that is the proper procedure to allow me to discuss such matters and bring to the attention of the Parliament issues from trade unions, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and local government. If you cared at all, you would be prepared to talk properly—

The Deputy Presiding Officer : Always speak through the chair.

Carol Mochan:—about how we discuss these matters and ensure that we can do so like adults.

Tom Arthur: The member might have a point, if it was not for the fact that I spent a considerable amount of time at committee last week discussing these matters. I accept the arguments about process, on which I provided reassurance; I also explained the work that the Government is undertaking.

The question is one of principle. Do you stand with unpaid carers, with people who use social care and with the third sector? Once again, Labour stood against them.

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

Sodium Valproate Redress Scheme

6. **Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what progress has been made on the redress scheme, as recommended in the 2024 Hughes report, to compensate people in Scotland who were harmed by sodium valproate. (S6O-05496)Sodium Valproate Redress Scheme

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): The United Kingdom Government has still not responded to the Hughes report. We are two years on from the report's publication, and the delay is unreasonable and unfair for affected people and their families. I made that point strongly when I met last month with the UK health minister, Dr Zubir Ahmed. The Scottish Government has still not received any proposals for financial redress schemes that would support the implementation of Dr Hughes's recommendations. We stand ready to consider any proposals and to work constructively on a four-nations basis.

Willie Coffey: My constituents, Charlie and Caroline McKerrow, who are in the public gallery, have been fighting for years for justice for their daughter Claire and many others who have been harmed by sodium valproate, a drug that is given to pregnant women who are at risk of epilepsy.

The UK Government has had the Cumberlege report for six years and it has now had the Hughes report for two years. The Hughes report recommends that a redress scheme be introduced, but that has still not been agreed, leaving victims waiting and wondering whether they will ever get any justice from the Government for the harm that was done to their children.

Can the minister assure us, families such as the McKerrows and potentially thousands of other families that the Scottish Government will continue to press the UK Government on the matter? If the UK Government continues to let the families down, what action can we take in Scotland to help right that terrible wrong?

Jenni Minto: I absolutely recognise how difficult and distressing the situation continues to be for affected individuals and their families. I was very pleased to meet and speak to Willie Coffey's constituents, the McKerrows, in Parliament earlier.

As Willie Coffey will know, there was a debate about the issue in Westminster Hall this morning.

As I understand it, the Department of Health and Social Care gave no new undertakings on redress and no commitment on the timing of a response. That is greatly disappointing, given the calls for action from the Scottish Government and the other devolved nations. I recognise that there is cross-party support in the Scottish Parliament, so I hope that Labour colleagues in this Parliament will work with us to encourage their Labour colleague, Minister Ahmed, to finally take action.

We remain firmly committed to pushing for a resolution. I remain ready to work with the UK Government and will continue to push it to provide clarity about its position on financial redress. In parallel, the chief pharmaceutical officer is exploring how support for people who are harmed by valproate might be improved in Scotland.

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): The minister referred to the second anniversary of the Hughes report. Embedded in the Hughes report was the redress scheme that was recommended in respect of mesh women, as well as that for the condition that we have just heard about. There was cross-party support across all the parties in the Parliament—we stood united as a Parliament. I hope that the minister will exercise some influence and that our Labour colleagues will find some spine to stand up to the United Kingdom Government and say that this must not be another U-turn.

Jenni Minto: I agree with what Jackson Carlaw has said. I also reflect on the important work that he has done to ensure that women who are living with the consequences of mesh implants remain at the forefront of all our thoughts.

My officials have met UK officials on a number of occasions to try to move the issue forward and, as I said in my earlier response, along with my colleagues from Wales and Northern Ireland, I met Minister Ahmed to try to push it forward. The three nations are certainly working together on the issue.

Surgeries Carried out Abroad

8**. Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of any impact on NHS Scotland of complications arising from surgeries carried out abroad by patients upon their return to Scotland. (S6O-05498)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): The Scottish Government has not undertaken an assessment of the impact on NHS Scotland of complications arising from surgeries abroad. NHS Scotland provides emergency care based on patient need, regardless of where previous treatment was received. If complications from procedures undertaken abroad require national health service treatment, information on whether prior surgery was undertaken abroad is not routinely nor systematically recorded, so the impact cannot be quantified.

The Scottish Government encourages patients to consider the risks of treatment abroad and to ensure that aftercare arrangements are in place.

Evelyn Tweed: Further to that, has there been any engagement with United Kingdom counterparts regarding improving public awareness of the risks of travelling abroad for surgery?

Neil Gray: We have shared our concerns on this important issue directly with the UK Government and the other devolved Governments for some time. We continue to discuss with them how best we can all protect public safety, given the implications that Evelyn Tweed raises.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on health and social care. There will be a short pause before we move on to the next item of business to allow front-bench teams to change positions.

Queen Elizabeth University Hospital

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-20731, in the name of Jackie Baillie, on the safety of the Queen Elizabeth university hospital.

14:52

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): I begin by paying tribute to the late Jeane Freeman. My thoughts and those of all members of the Scottish Labour Party are with Jeane's partner Susan and Jeane's friends, family and former colleagues.

Jeane and I had many political disagreements, but I have to pay tribute to Jeane Freeman, because the progress that families, doctors and I have been able to make on the Queen Elizabeth university hospital was possible because Jeane Freeman was willing to listen, to reflect and to act. I put on record my thanks to Jeane for her commitment to Scotland and her commitment to public service. [*Applause*.]

I also firmly believe that, if Jeane Freeman was still the health secretary, we would not be having this debate today. Let me start by saying unequivocally that I will always put patient safety before politics, and I wish that that was the case with this Scottish National Party Government. If it was the case, we would not have had the devastating consequences that we have seen at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital. We need transparency and answers now, so that we can rebuild public confidence and ensure patient safety.

It is now clear, after more than two weeks of questioning of the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care and the First Minister, that the Queen Elizabeth university hospital—every unit and every ward—has not been validated. That is serious. That is not an acceptable place for the country or for the Government to be, and it does nothing to reassure people after everything that has played out over the past 10 years of the Queen Elizabeth university hospital scandal.

Many questions about what happened and why remain unanswered, while families still have to fight for justice and truth and whistleblowers are still to be recognised for their heroic role. I recognise again the bravery and determination of Dr Penelope Redding, Dr Teresa Inkster and Dr Christine Peters. For nearly 10 years, those women have been bullied and dismissed by the very organisation that they serve. If they had been listened to, we would not be facing this situation now. I restate to the Parliament again: if those doctors are not satisfied, I am not satisfied, and not a single MSP in the Parliament should be satisfied.

Many of the wider issues will come out in the public inquiry, but this debate is about the here and now. Last week, Neil Gray announced the creation of another oversight board, this time to look at infection control issues. Although that is welcome in principle, it cannot be a repeat of previous oversight boards, which were used as political cover to protect the interests of those in power. It must do the urgent hard work, correct mistakes and ensure that patient safety is the only priority.

The Government now needs to be very clear on these questions. What is the timetable for the verification and validation of every ward and every unit of the hospital? When is the Government going to publish any current reports and any upcoming reports so that the public can have confidence? Will it give a cast-iron guarantee to include, and to be led by, the doctors who have been proven to be right in everything that they have said for the past 10 years? Will it guarantee that those who have been proven to be wrong in the past 10 years will not be the ones who are relied on to give the right answers this time?

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

This is a very serious matter. Children have died, and it is vital that we hear from everyone in exactly the way that Anas Sarwar has just set out. However, several Scottish Labour councillors and SNP councillors were on the board during this period. One is Patricia Ferguson, who is now chair of the House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee, and another is Martin McCluskey, who is a United Kingdom Government minister.

Scottish Conservatives called for Nicola Sturgeon to give a personal statement to MSPs, which the member and his party supported. For the same reasons, would Anas Sarwar back my calls for Patricia Ferguson and Martin McCluskey to make a personal statement in the House of Commons?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back, Mr Sarwar.

Anas Sarwar: It is really important that members of the board that had responsibility for appointments are told why information was withheld from that board by board executives and board managers and by Government—they need to answer those questions.

Finally, on the questions that need to be answered, will the Government guarantee that there will be genuine independent oversight of the validation and verification process? In order to rebuild public confidence and ensure public safety,

the Government must publish all the documentation: everything that it has right now and everything that follows. Anything less than a full commitment on those questions is not good enough, and any equivocation will only demonstrate that the Government has not learned the lessons of the past and is just repeating the same mistakes.

However, I will go further and make a firm commitment today. If the Government does not take the appropriate action, I will. I am very clear that I will ensure that we have an open process and that we will verify and validate the hospital. I will have a transparent and public process. If that means that remedial work has to be done, I will pull out all the stops to make sure that that work happens so that patients can be safe and have confidence. I will not compromise patient safety, so if I have to temporarily close individual wards or units, I will, because I put patient safety before politics, always.

I make it clear that amazing things happen as a result of amazing staff in the hospital every single day. I also accept that there is always a risk of adverse incidents in the NHS—that is the nature of healthcare. However, we have to stop the deliberate misjudgments and a rotten culture of secrecy and cover-up that adds risk to patient safety, and adds higher risk to immunocompromised patients.

The Government needs to put patient safety, truth and transparency at the forefront, and it must stop hiding behind a public inquiry when it comes to operational decisions and patient safety today.

The QEUH was Scotland's super-hospital: a crown jewel in the SNP Government's record. That record is now stained with scandal, shame and flat-out corruption. People have died, families have been betrayed and staff have been bullied. The situation is so serious that deaths that are linked to avoidable infections at the hospital are being investigated by the Crown Office, yet no minister and no official has ever taken responsibility or accountability. It is quite the opposite—people have been rewarded.

That cannot happen again. It is time to put patients before politics and to ensure that those who are in need in our hospitals are kept safe.

Let me end by repeating my commitment to the families and staff. I will not be silenced; I will not rest; I will not stop until they get the truth and the justice that they deserve.

I move,

That the Parliament is concerned that the Scottish Government is unable to state clearly that the ventilation and water systems at the Queen Elizabeth University Hospital have been validated as meeting required safety requirements; recognises that thousands of patients are treated safely and expertly cared for by NHS staff in the hospital every year; welcomes the establishment of a Safety and Public Confidence Oversight Group, and calls on the Scottish Government to set out by what date it intends to carry out the risk assessment of the hospital's ventilation system, as recommended by the inquiry, what mitigations are currently in place to ensure that the water is safe to use, how it intends to protect at-risk patients in areas that have not been validated, and when this validation will be carried out and the documentation shared with whistleblowers and infection control.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Neil Gray to speak to and move amendment S6M-20731.1.

15:00

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): I begin by offering my heartfelt condolences to all the families who have been impacted by the issues that are being considered by the Scottish hospitals inquiry. Patients and families deserve answers, and I believe that, through Lord Brodie's inquiry, that is what they will get.

Like Mr Sarwar, I am also reminded of the fact that our then Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport, Jeane Freeman, took the important steps to get to where we are today. It was Jeane who first took forward the concerns of families and whistleblowers, first instigating the independent review and, thereafter, the Scottish hospitals inquiry in 2019. It was also Jeane, in her time as cabinet secretary, who took the initial steps to ensure that a future body would be set up to assure the safety and risk management of NHS sites. Indeed, the body NHS Scotland Assure was established in 2021 for that very purpose—a fact that is mentioned in the Government's amendment to the motion.

This is the first time that I have had the opportunity to place on record in the Parliament my sincere sadness that we lost Jeane Freeman at the weekend. Jeane was a force of nature in the best possible way. She was incredibly intelligent, loyal and generous with her time, support and kindness. She was a force for good, and encouraged us all to be better. I know that the Parliament will have the opportunity to properly remember Jeane, but I also know how much the subject of the debate propelled her to put into force the changes that have strengthened the safety of our hospitals. It is right that I take the opportunity to recognise her leadership, and my thoughts are very much with her beloved Susan, their families and friends, and all the many people who loved Jeane.

Jeane was driven in all that she did by a sense of justice and the need to fight for a fairer Scotland. She wanted to get to the truth for patients, whistleblowers and families as she recognised that they had been let down—that is what she said in September last year. Again, that is why I bring the

debate back to the people who are at the heart of the inquiry. It was for them that the inquiry was established to interrogate decisions that were taken and the decision-making processes, to identify responsibility wherever it lies, and to shine a light where answers were lacking, so that they could get the justice that they deserve. I cannot begin to imagine the pain and hurt that is felt by all those who have lost a loved one but who have so bravely and candidly participated in the Scottish hospitals inquiry. It is absolutely vital that Lord Brodie, as chair of the inquiry, be given the necessary space and time to come to his own conclusions for families without political interference. I again reiterate that important point to colleagues. I also reiterate that the Government will not comment on the live police inquiry, nor seek to speculate on Lord Brodie's conclusions, regardless of colleagues' appetite for me to do so.

Turning to the substance of Labour's motion, I echo its recognition of the safe and expert care that is carried out at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital. I place on record my heartfelt thanks to all staff, no matter their role, as they all contribute to the excellent service. I also recognise the fact that the new leadership of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde has committed to rebuilding trust and public confidence. The new safety and public confidence oversight group that I announced last week will be vital in that respect, and I am delighted that the group will be co-chaired by Sir Lewis Ritchie. I met Sir Lewis yesterday and I am assured that he will provide robust and independent scrutiny of the issues. That is why I cannot support the Tories' amendment to the motion, which seeks to ignore the fact that the group will have important independent and external oversight.

The group will, as highlighted in the Government's amendment to the motion, also look at the wider issues of the built environment and validation that are of interest to Labour's motion. It is right that I allow the group to undertake that work free from ministerial interference. Indeed, if I was seeking to direct the group's findings, I am sure that some of the very same members who are speaking about accountability and transparency would have choice words for me.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give the cabinet secretary the time back.

Brian Whittle: Given all that, at the end of the day, when such tragedies occur, who will ultimately be held responsible and accountable as a result of the findings of inquiries?

Neil Gray: The Government will be responsible for the implementation of the recommendations that fall under the responsibility of the Government that are made by the public inquiry. We will also ensure that NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde is held accountable to ensure the speedy implementation of the recommendations that are made to it.

I will not seek to pre-empt the issues that the new oversight group will review. I welcome its intention to include whistleblowers, patient representatives and the public in its work. The group will draw on the expertise of national agencies such as NHS Scotland Assure, Healthcare Improvement Scotland and industry experts to continue to demonstrate that the Queen Elizabeth university hospital provides a safe environment for patients and staff. However, given the significant level of political and public interest, I agree that it is vital that the Parliament also be kept updated on the group's work. That is what my amendment seeks to ensure.

I turn to the important issues of water safety, ventilation and infection control that are highlighted in Labour's motion. Ministers have already placed on the record our confidence in the safety of the Queen Elizabeth university hospital, but I will set out that case again.

First, I have absolute confidence in the leadership of the board and the chief executive of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and their ability to ensure the cultural change that is needed in Glasgow. That is vital in ensuring that whistleblowers are protected and supported to speak up. When I met Scotland's new national independent whistleblowing officer last week, I reiterated the Government's commitment to a safe whistleblowing culture.

Secondly, the inquiry heard from independent expert Andrew Poplett that the water system management is now "extremely well managed", with "significant improvement" having been made.

Sandesh Gulhane: *rose—*

Neil Gray: I am sorry, but I am already toiling for time.

More than 30,000 water samples were taken and analysed in 2025, and similarly, monthly air quality testing is undertaken in the necessary areas. Mr Poplett noted that the facilities team is exceeding standard guidance and is adopting a proactive and preventative approach that prioritises patient safety and resilience.

Furthermore, I confirm that the board has commissioned and received two independent reports on its water and ventilation systems to provide further assurances. Those reports will be considered by the safety and public confidence oversight group. That is in addition to proactive planned maintenance of the hospital systems,

which is carried out routinely, and to reactive reporting and escalation, which is carried out as and when required to ensure the hospital's clinical safety.

The findings of the independent reports on the water and ventilation systems have been positive: there was a fully compliant ventilation assessment in December 2025—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude, cabinet secretary.

Neil Gray: —and a fully compliant water safety system this January.

There is more detail that I will put on the record in my closing remarks on the debate.

As I said at the outset of my speech, we must ensure that the patients, families and staff who are at the heart of the issues that we are discussing get the truth that they deserve through Lord Brodie's inquiry. For those reasons, I ask members to support the Government's amendment.

I move, as an amendment to motion S6M-20731, to leave out from "is concerned" to end and insert:

"agrees that whistleblowers in Scotland's NHS must be protected and supported; notes that NHS Assure was the body created in 2021 to improve risk management and safety in Scotland's NHS estate; further notes that both Healthcare Improvement Scotland and independent experts have commented on the procedures now in place to ensure the safety of hospital for patients and staff; welcomes the creation of a Safety and Public Confidence Oversight Group, which will look at specific issues, including in relation to the built environment and validation; further welcomes that this group will be co-chaired by Sir Lewis Ritchie to provide additional scrutiny; agrees that Parliament must be kept updated of this group's work, and further agrees that the chair of the independent inquiry must be given the time and space to come to his conclusions without political interference."

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The limited time that we had available has now been exhausted. Therefore, members will now need to stick to their allocated speaking time.

15:07

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I apologise to members for needing to leave promptly when the debate is due to finish at 4.

I also associate myself with the remarks about Jeane Freeman that were made by Anas Sarwar and Neil Gray.

The Scottish Conservatives support much that is in the motion and seek to strengthen it with our amendment. The motion rightly recognises the exceptional NHS staff at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital, who deliver outstanding care in the most difficult of circumstances.

Those who held office during the scandalous years must be held to account. This is a debate about trust, and trust has been shattered by more than a decade of SNP mismanagement, evasion and political spin. Children died, families were lied to and gaslit, and whistleblowers were threatened and silenced. The hospital was rushed open in 2015 before it was ready, not because it was safe but because it suited the SNP's public relations agenda. It was politics over patients.

When the truth began to emerge, the response was not honesty; it was bureaucracy, legal threats and institutional spin. There was a disgraceful campaign of silence from a health board and a Government that were more interested in optics than accountability. What did Nicola Sturgeon's chief nursing officer, Fiona McQueen, reportedly suggest? She reportedly suggested that the families be offered £50,000,

"which is a trip to Disneyland".

Sophia Smith's brave mother said:

"I told her we didn't want your holidays and your money. We want"

justice. Mrs McQueen is still on the public payroll, earning more than £90,000 per year as chair of the Scottish Police Authority, an organisation that

"aims to increase public trust … in policing through accountable, proportionate and transparent oversight and scrutiny."

The irony.

I ask the question again: why are Scottish taxpayers still funding someone who allegedly showed such appalling judgment? Accountability must begin today. I have written to the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs and to the Criminal Justice Committee, because it is of paramount importance that Fiona McQueen appears in front of the committee to explain her heartless and shameless alleged bribe to grieving families.

However, the issue goes far beyond one individual. We cannot accept that NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde is running and co-chairing the oversight body. It is the same health board that presided over the failings and caused the scandal. Millie Main's mum said that she was

"let down and lied to"

by health officials. Victims have no confidence in its leadership. You could not make it up: it is like asking a fox to guard the hen house. The public deserve real oversight, not more of the same.

Let me say this clearly: whistleblowers have shown extraordinary courage, but they have lived in fear for their livelihoods. I have spoken to them, and they deserve our thanks and protection, not punishment. Whistleblowers tell me today that

cancer patients are being told not to drink the tap water or even brush their teeth with it. The cabinet secretary should go to the Queen Elizabeth university hospital and drink a litre of the tap water on camera. If it is safe enough for patients, it should be safe enough for ministers.

We condemn Shona Robison, the former health secretary, for breaking her pledge to the Parliament to carry out an independent safety audit before the hospital opened. That broken promise might have cost lives. The scandal has devastated families and damaged public trust in the NHS. Let this be the turning point—put patients over PR, put truth over spin and put accountability over political preservation.

I move amendment S6M-20731.2, to leave out from "welcomes" to "Group" and insert:

"expresses concern that the Safety and Public Confidence Oversight Group will be run by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, in light of the lack of confidence that victims have in the NHS board; calls on the Chief Executive of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde to therefore stand down as co-chair of the group; urges the Scottish Government to work with the Patient Safety Commissioner to immediately strengthen protections for NHS whistleblowers; condemns the Scottish Government for its failure to tackle a culture of secrecy and denial across the NHS; admonishes the former health secretary, Shona Robison, for breaking her pledge to carry out an independent safety audit prior to the opening of the hospital; requests that Fiona McQueen appear before the Scottish Parliament to account for her reported actions in dismissing the complaints of victims".

15:11

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): I follow others in acknowledging the sudden passing of Jeane Freeman and offer our condolences to Susan, the wider family and SNP colleagues, who I know keenly feel her loss.

I open by paying tribute to the patients, families and staff who have campaigned for years, often at great personal cost, to bring the issues at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital to light. We would not be having the debate without them. I whole-heartedly pledge my party's support to getting the truth for families, and we will do everything that we can to hold those who are responsible to account. To lose a loved one in the place where they are meant to be safe is unimaginable. To then be lied to about what happened to them is disgraceful. Patients and families have been betrayed and staff have been silenced—that must never happen again.

I welcome the debate because it is important that we continue to scrutinise the Government's response to the issues at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital, and it is an important function of the Parliament. We will support the Labour motion because, although we have been reassured that the hospital is safe, it is an on-going concern that the cabinet secretary has not been able to assure us of a full validation at the hospital.

We talk about restoring patient trust—a validation would be a necessary and vital step towards achieving that, because people deserve to know what is happening. However, I have some concerns about how we move forward, get answers for patients and crucially rebuild confidence in the services that are essential for so many. We should question the Government and apply pressure where it is needed without causing additional alarm. The last thing that we want to do is put people off from attending potentially life-saving treatment.

In the motion, Jackie Baillie acknowledges that

"thousands of patients are treated safely and expertly cared for by NHS staff in the hospital every year",

which is hugely important, but some parts of the motion could cause further anxiety and fear. I say that gently, not to undermine the important issues that the motion raises but to highlight that there are two important tasks at the heart of this: getting answers for families and rebuilding trust. The motion references "at-risk patients", which potentially undermines the work that has been done to reassure patients and staff.

In the previous debate that we held on the topic, my amendment, which all parties voted for, said that the Parliament

"acknowledges that recent revelations surrounding the Queen Elizabeth University Hospital will have been distressing for patients, their families and staff"

and

"understands that this could create uncertainty and fear regarding the safety of Scotland's hospitals and negatively impact staff morale".

We will always seek to hold the Government to account and get those answers, and like everyone in this chamber, I am on the side of patients, families and staff and want to see them get the truth because they deserve it. I will vote for the motion because I, like others, want as much scrutiny as possible, but we need to reflect on how we can provide that scrutiny without creating more anxiety than has already been created.

Ultimately, however, it is the Scottish Government's responsibility to reassure people. The Government and the health board must be fully transparent. That means, as well as co-operating fully with the inquiry, publishing any additional documents and communications that are requested, whenever the request is reasonable.

The Government has a tough hill to climb before it earns back the trust of patients, families and

staff. I welcome the establishment of the safety and public confidence oversight group, which will play an important role in rebuilding relationships. Previously, I asked the cabinet secretary whether there would be patient and staff representatives on the group, so I would be grateful if he could clarify in his closing speech whether that will be the case.

It is vital that we rebuild trust and confidence in Scotland's hospitals. That must be led by the cabinet secretary and the Scottish Government, but, as MSPs, we also have an important role to play.

15:15

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD): As others have done, I start by sharing the sadness of colleagues about the death of Jeane Freeman, and I send my condolences on behalf of the Liberal Democrats. Those of us in the chamber who lived through the Covid years will remember that they were dark and difficult, but no one ever doubted Jeane's commitment to making Scotland as safe as it could be during that time. We send our warmest thoughts to her family, her partner and her colleagues in the chamber.

The crux of this debate is the issue of trust. Do the public trust our institutions to properly investigate what went so badly wrong at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital? Do the public trust any of us here today to unearth what went wrong, or who knew what, without the usual political point scoring that normally comes with health debates? Do people out there trust that the hospitals that they attend to get better or that look after their loved ones are, ultimately, safe? Do the public trust that NHS boards, the Government and those at the very top will hold up their hands and take responsibility, so that none of this ever happens again?

Those questions are important, because those who lost loved ones were forced to campaign for answers, for the truth and for accountability. They never had the chance to grieve properly. Many of us in the chamber, including me, will have had loved ones in that hospital, and we trusted that hospital to look after them, care for them and help them to get better. For some families, their loved ones did not come out. Trust has been shattered by this scandal—"scandal" is the only word that I can find that is fitting to describe what has happened.

We often come here to criticise the Government about capital projects, but we are talking not about a delayed and overbudget ferry or prison but about a hospital. This is about lives that were lost because something somewhere went wrong. Those families deserve to know exactly what went wrong and, more important, who was responsible for it. Anything less should not and will not be tolerated by any of us.

Someone who was affected by this got in touch with me anonymously yesterday. She was treated at the hospital as a patient and has since developed numerous infections, so she still requires on-going treatment. The lady told me:

"I'm living with PTSD following the mistreatment of my care … I do not know what the future holds for me and whether the treatment by the specialists … will ultimately be successful",

but

"I certainly do not believe is that there has been any cultural change"

in that health board.

"They are not transparent and they are evasive".

I have not read out that quote to point fingers at individuals on the current NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde board, but it hammers home the point that the central issue of trust is at the heart of this ordeal. That constituent of mine does not trust the health board to do the right thing, and she is not alone.

We must start by addressing the most important issue: patient safety. The Scottish Government must promptly and publicly confirm the safety of every ward and unit in this hospital. I have no doubt that patients who are there now are being treated well and carefully by our amazing NHS staff, but ministers must validate that safety in public, explicitly, because the Government must restore trust in the hospital.

The reason why the safety and public confidence oversight group must not mark its own homework relates exactly to the issue of trust. Years of denial from the board have undermined the public's trust. The board did not take people's concerns seriously, and now, for some, it is too late.

With that in mind, we are happy to support Labour's motion, and we thank Labour for bringing it to the chamber. We will also support the Conservative amendment. However, we will not support the Government amendment. If we want to restore public trust, we must have accountability and honesty—and that must start here in this chamber, now.

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

15:19

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): Today, we are seeking clarity on the safety of the Queen Elizabeth university hospital. Public trust and confidence in our NHS should always be a top

priority—without it, we risk undermining the very foundations of our health service.

I thank all the hard-working and dedicated staff who deliver safe and effective care across Scotland each and every day. Staff are the backbone of our NHS, and I am grateful for all that they do in caring for our families, friends and loved ones. Let us be clear: the issues that we are discussing today are not an attack on those who deliver care. Rather, this debate highlights the failures in governance systems and structures, because what happened at the hospital is a scandal.

Again, I put on record my deepest condolences and sympathies to the patients, families and staff who were ignored and betrayed. Hospitals are supposed to help people to get better, not make them sicker, and no one should worry that hospitals and healthcare facilities are not safe.

The truth is that the Queen Elizabeth university hospital opened before it was ready, and it opened with contaminated water. The risk of waterborne infection was foreseeable, and issues were raised, but they were not acted on. Those who raised concerns were belittled, silenced and threatened, and whistleblowing procedures were not followed. The health board failed to admit serious errors in judgment and withheld the truth from patients and families.

NHS staff deserve to work in an environment in which their concerns are listened to and addressed, particularly when patient safety is a concern. However, on this Government's watch, that did not happen.

What happened at the hospital was a monumental failure—it was a failure in safety, a failure in leadership and a failure in accountability. Of course, we cannot rewrite the errors of the past, but we must do everything possible to ensure that patients are kept safe and that past mistakes are never repeated. We must ensure that those who are affected by the contaminated water are told the truth, and we must ensure that steps are taken to reassure patients that the hospital is safe.

The establishment of the safety and public confidence oversight group is welcome, and action must be taken to boost the public's confidence in the hospital. The oversight group cannot be another tick-box exercise—it must lead to tangible and meaningful change for patients, families and staff.

While we wait for the oversight group to begin its reporting, which could take months, the public need to be reassured now. We do not need an oversight group to tell us whether every ward and unit in the hospital has been fully validated; the Government could give us that information today. We do not need an oversight group to tell us what immediate steps are being taken to address issues with whistleblowing, which the Patient Safety Commissioner has identified as a system-wide issue. Finally, we do not need an oversight group to tell us how the Scottish Government will ensure full transparency over hospital safety concerns in the future.

I recognise the work that the group has been set up to do, but the Government has the power to reassure patients now. The public want to know whether each area of the hospital has been fully validated, including water and ventilation systems, whether that has been independently verified and, if so, whether that information will be published.

Until those questions are answered and patients and staff are satisfied, Parliament cannot be satisfied. It is our job to speak up for our constituents and scrutinise this failing Government. Anas Sarwar and Scottish Labour are doing just that.

15:24

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

I begin as I did when I spoke on the subject two weeks ago, which is to express my deepest sympathies to all of those who are grieving the loss of a loved one in the circumstances that we are discussing today.

In 2019, the Scottish Government decided to establish a public inquiry to get to the truth. It did so precisely because the families' pain was being compounded by having to tenaciously chase the truth themselves. An independent inquiry, with comprehensive statutory powers granted to it, is how we will get the level of open scrutiny and truth that families and patients deserve. That is what we all want to see.

As a nurse with 30 years' experience, I have spoken previously in the Parliament about how important trust is to patients' and families' experiences of healthcare, and about how patient experience and reassurance are related to recovery and patient outcomes.

The Government's amendment to today's motion agrees that whistleblowers in Scotland's NHS must be protected and supported; notes that NHS Assure was created in 2021 to improve risk management and safety in Scotland's NHS estate; and acknowledges notes that both Healthcare Improvement Scotland and independent experts have commented on the procedures now in place to ensure the safety of hospital for patients and staff. I also welcome the involvement of Sir Lewis

Ritchie in the safety and public confidence oversight group, which will look at specific issues, including in relation to the built environment and validation.

Let us pause for a second to remember that the independent public inquiry, which I am confident will provide the answers, reassurances and recommendations that we are all looking for, is still under way. While that is the case, it would be completely inappropriate for ministers to pre-empt its findings or final recommendations or otherwise direct its business.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Clare Haughey: I do not have time.

Not only would it be completely inappropriate for ministers to seek to do anything other than allow that process to continue—which, yet again, is being obfuscated by the Labour motion today—but it would be unlawful. The clue is in the name: public inquiries, such as the one that is being led by Lord Brodie, are obliged to conduct their work in an open and transparent manner.

That is why we know that Lord Brodie commissioned the reports and audits that have been referenced already on water and ventilation from Andrew Poplett, the inquiry's expert; that Andrew Poplett's view is that the Queen Elizabeth university hospital's current procedures for managing the water system are suitable and safe; that he noted that the facilities team is now exceeding standard guidance and adopting a proactive and preventative approach that prioritises patient safety and resilience; and that expert testimony to the inquiry has advised that governance arrangements for water and ventilation are now optimal.

Those independent judgments are important markers of the progress that has been made and of the seriousness with which patient safety is now embedded in day-to-day operations at the hospital. I will not pre-empt the inquiry's final conclusions and recommendations, but I am pleased that, during its course, we have been provided with important reassurances about the hospital's water and ventilation.

As I did in my speech two weeks ago, I will finish by bringing my focus back to the patients and families. I sincerely hope that, when the inquiry's final conclusions and recommendations are published, they will finally gain a sense of closure and feel that their questions have been answered.

15:28

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): It is with reluctance that we are, once again, having to raise the concerns about the safety of the Queen Elizabeth university hospital's ventilation and water systems in the Parliament. We do so because we feel compelled to, because patient safety in NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde is still very much in question, and because we are not satisfied that the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care is sufficiently across the issue.

When the topic was last raised in the Parliament, I talked about the culture that needed to change in Scotland. That is a much wider and more encompassing issue. I talked about how we must end the situation where loyalty and compliance are rewarded over competency and moral courage and where being in the club is more important than holding institutions of power to account.

In the short time that I have to speak this afternoon, I will talk about how we can do things differently and build a culture that identifies good practice, emulates it, manages problems with integrity and starts to change things for the better through a system of moral courage.

In the shipbuilding industry that I came from, where health and safety must be kept at high standards because lives are at stake, there is a clear expectation at all levels of the workforce that everyone in a team has the responsibility to stop the job if they perceive that something unsafe is happening.

In every major disaster that we have seen in recent years, from the Boeing 737 MAX to Chernobyl, the same pattern applies. People feel that they are unable to speak out or raise concerns and, as a result, lives are lost. That is what has played out in the Queen Elizabeth university hospital. It does not matter whether someone is an apprentice, an engineer or a senior executive: if something is unsafe, they are supposed to call it out and, often, stop working until the issue is resolved.

That is an easy thing to say but, in practice, it takes a great deal of trust, training and courage for that approach to operate as it should. For an apprentice to speak out, they must have confidence that their concerns will be listened to, that action will be taken and that the blame will be on those who caused the issue or failed to act, rather than on those who spotted it and tried to get it resolved.

We have seen that those who had the moral courage have been harangued, cajoled and pressured into silence. It is their courage that we should recognise today, more than anything else, because they have acted with public spirit at their heart. They have undoubtedly helped to save lives, but it is too much of a loss for us to bear that people died unnecessarily as a result of

negligence, and we must hold people to account for that. Lives are on the line.

Some members might be wondering how my point relates to the national health service, but it is clear that we need to improve our culture of management in the national health service. The lives of patients and staff are simply too important—any one of us or any member of our family could be affected—to allow an old-fashioned game of pass the blame to continue. We need staff to feel empowered to raise issues and to stop what is happening. We need them to know that their concerns will be acted on immediately and that accountability will lie with those who hold the relevant responsibilities for ensuring safety.

Although many will say that that is already in place, today's debate shows that we are still not there yet. Today, there are still live risks with the ventilation system in the hospital. The failure to act to validate those critical systems is simply unacceptable and cannot be tolerated.

It is time for the leadership of the Government to stop playing games and to work with the national health service to improve its health and safety record. It is time to stop working towards election deadlines and, instead, do the harder job of guiding our public health system to where it needs to be.

None of the changes that are needed will help the people who have lost loved ones due to the unsafe water and ventilation situation. However, if they are implemented now, we can begin to create a national health service in which such scandals do not happen again. I hope that members will support our motion.

15:32

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): It fell to me, on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives, to welcome Jeane Freeman to her ministerial responsibilities in this place in 2016—a happy duty at the time. I note that I reflected then that she brought considerable lifetime experience to Government, but I also noted a comment from her mother, who said that Jeane had a voice that could sell coal. She may not have had to sell coal in here, but she commanded the respect of the Parliament through the detailed and conscientious way in which she approached her responsibilities, and never more so than in the way in which she brought her attention to focus on the women who had suffered from mesh.

It might have been Humza Yousaf who took through a bill on the issue at the start of this session, but it was Jeane Freeman who accepted the case that there was an argument to allow women to be sent to the United States, to Dr Veronikis, to have mesh removed that they had been told by the health service in this country was no longer even present in their system. That is a debt of gratitude that I will not forget, and it is a debt of gratitude that the women and their families will carry for the rest of their lives. I hope that Susan knows that Jeane made a difference—because she made a difference. [*Applause*.]

I want to speak about the oversight group, which was a suggestion from the cabinet secretary in response to a defeat on a Labour Party motion in the previous week. That is not something that the Government volunteered to do; it is something that the Government decided to do in response. I sometimes worry about how that sort of thing comes about. I wonder whether the cabinet secretary went back to his office and said, "What the heck do I do now?" and some civil servant said, "Well, minister, you could set up an oversight group. That would be quite a nice way to deal with things. It shows you as a man of action, and it also allows you, in the future, whenever any inquiries are made about the subject, to say, 'Well, we now have an oversight group and we need to let it duly respond.'"

Why am I slightly cynical about that? I return to the mesh. As a result of the mesh scandal, we set up a patient safety review group. What was the outcome of that? Eventually, there was a commissioned report by Professor Alison Britton, which made 46 recommendations on how such groups should be structured and conducted in the future—because that oversight group on mesh led to the resignation of the very woman who had been invited to participate in it, because she had the experience of the issue to do so.

I ask the cabinet secretary whether, in fact, every one of Professor Alison Britton's recommendations on how such groups should operate has been embedded in the operational criteria that are being used to establish the working practices of that group. I should say that we have written to Professor Sir Lewis Ritchie to draw his attention to Alison Britton's recommendations—which were fully accepted by the Government at the time, and which we were told every future group would incorporate into its working practices—and to ask him to ensure that they absolutely are embedded.

This is one of the great scandals of our time and the biggest scandal of this Parliament. If there is going to be a patient oversight group, it has to be able to operate with the full confidence of everybody who is employed in it. We must know that it will not be some sort of chimera of obfuscation, but that it will actually be able to ensure that this does not happen again and that people know why it did happen.

15:36

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I, too, pay my respects and tribute to Jeane Freeman and offer my condolences to her partner.

I am concerned that the attempt by the Labour Party to interfere in the independent inquiry into the Queen Elizabeth university hospital is shifting base but with the same goal: to undermine confidence in the inquiry and the confidence of patients and staff in the safety of the hospital. Interference—undermining the findings before the publication of the report—is Labour's shame. I have here a copy of the letter from Anas Sarwar to Lord Brodie, a former inner house judge, which blatantly breaches the independence of the inquiry process and challenges the very competence of Lord Brodie as chair.

Mr Sarwar requests that the five-year-long inquiry be reopened, particularly to interrogate Government ministers—despite the fact that Jeane Freeman, who established the inquiry, had already given evidence and the fact that Government ministers had stated that they would give evidence if requested to. That they have not been called is entirely at the judgment of Lord Brodie, who may call whomsoever he wants.

I quote from Mr Sarwar's letter:

"I appreciate that reopening public evidence sessions would be an extraordinary step but I believe that it is the best route to securing the answers that families and staff need and ensuring that your report, and the public, are able to account for this vital component in the scandal."

I repeat: to ensure that

"your report, and the public, are able to account for this vital component".

The conclusion must be that Lord Brodie is not up to the job, that he has failed to call all relevant witnesses and that failure to do as Anas Sarwar asks will mean that the inquiry is flawed and cannot be relied on. That is an act of desperation and political sabotage.

In 2007, following eight years of a Labour and Liberal Democrat Administration, Scotland faced a major crisis in relation to hospital-acquired infections. An example is the Vale of Leven hospital in Jackie Baillie's constituency, where Clostridium difficile was a contributory factor in 34 deaths. Those failures had occurred during the Labour and Liberal Democrat Administration. The SNP, new to government, instigated an independent inquiry, which was published in 2014 and which established that the hospital environment had not been conducive to safety and cleanliness, with poor antibiotic prescribing practices and inadequate nursing care.

In 2007, a Health Protection Scotland survey found that 9.5 per cent of patients in acute hospitals in Scotland had a healthcare-associated infection. In the same year, under Nicola Sturgeon's stewardship as Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing, the outsourcing of cleaning and catering contracts to private companies in acute hospitals was banned—they were brought back in-house. As a result, the number of hospital-acquired infections was halved, from 9.5 per cent in 2005-06 to 4.9 per cent by 2011, and it remains low.

Why do I say that? The SNP's track record of responding—and, more than that, of letting independent inquiries do their work without fear or favour—goes back a long way. Regrettably, the same cannot be said of Labour.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the winding-up speeches.

15:39

Gillian Mackay: At the heart of this debate are patients and families, many of whom will be hurt, traumatised and angry. That is why it is so important that we get the tone of such debates right, that we air concerns without worsening their trauma and that we share stories without invading their privacy, because they have been through enough. To lose a loved one in a place where they were meant to be safe is unimaginable. To then be lied to about what happened to them is disgraceful, and we should make sure that it never happens again.

As I said in my opening speech, I welcome the establishment of the safety and public confidence oversight group. I am either less cynical or more hopeful than Jackson Carlaw. Although it cannot make up for the suffering that has been inflicted on the patients and families involved, I believe that it provides a crucial opportunity to restore trust and rebuild relationships.

Neil Gray: To save some time in my closing speech, I confirm to Gillian Mackay, in response to her question in her opening speech, that patients and staff will be represented on the oversight group.

Gillian Mackay: I thank the cabinet secretary for that.

Along with the public inquiry, the oversight group will, we hope, help to answer any questions that patients, families and staff have about what went wrong at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital, who is responsible, how they will be held to account and how we can move forward.

I hope that the Scottish Government will fully embrace the opportunity that the oversight group

gives us to make progress while we are waiting for the full outcomes of the inquiry. We must not squander that opportunity, because too many people have been let down and traumatised by the failings at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital. The oversight group must be open, transparent and—crucially—accountable. That is why it is imperative, as I mentioned earlier, that patient and staff representatives are on the group. I appreciate the cabinet secretary's confirmation that that will be the case. Pastoral support must be offered to those staff and patient representatives. What some of them will have been through is unimaginable, and it is vital that a trauma-informed approach is taken, so that their suffering is not compounded by reliving the events at the hospital.

Despite my reservations about the wording of the Labour motion, I will vote for it at decision time, as I said in my opening speech. The Scottish Government still has questions to answer about the Queen Elizabeth university hospital, and we would not be doing our jobs as MSPs if we did not put those questions to the cabinet secretary. We must keep putting questions, for as long as it takes for them to be answered, to whoever needs to answer them. We need to get to the bottom of what has happened at the hospital, which often means robustly challenging the Government and NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde. I think that we can do that in a way that avoids retraumatising or potentially scaring people out of treatment.

It is vital that we do not lose sight of the people who have been most affected—the patients, their loved ones and the grieving families. Their pain and suffering must be at the forefront of our minds at all times.

15:43

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I add my condolences to the family and friends of Jeane Freeman. I had the opportunity—the daunting opportunity—to sit opposite her during her time as health secretary. She was incredibly intelligent. She could be really fierce, but she was always fair and always open to discussion with members from across the chamber, especially during the dark times of the Covid pandemic. My thoughts are with Susan, Jeane's family and her colleagues.

Let me turn to my closing remarks on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives. Here we are again. It is the same old story of the Opposition keeping the spotlight shining on a tragedy in the health service and a Government following the usual pattern of resisting accountability and responsibility before, eventually—after pressure from constituents, MSPs and the media—falling behind the shield of a public inquiry. It is not that I am against the holding of a public inquiry. I would say that that is essential in this case. The issue is what happens afterwards, who is held accountable and responsible, and what change will be enacted following the recommendations.

Unfortunately, we have been here before. My colleague and friend Jackson Carlaw raised the spectacle of the mesh scandal. I remember hearing evidence, as a member of the Public Petitions Committee, from those who had suffered as a result of that scandal. My colleague Jackson Carlaw was front and centre in the process of supporting the petitioners and pursuing the Government for justice and change, to ensure that such a scandal would never happen again. There were years of ducking and diving and trying to avoid taking action. Anyone who witnessed the then Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport, Shona Robison, and the then chief executive officer, Catherine Calderwood, floundering as they tried to answer questions from the Public Petitions Committee while the sufferers—many of them confined to wheelchairs—sat behind them would have found it absolutely painful to watch.

On Eljamel, the first red flag was raised by concerned staff in 2009, but the inquiry began in 2025—again, only after the Government was relentlessly pursued by my friend and colleague Liz Smith, in support of affected constituents. Let us not forget that, last week, in the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, when I asked the Patient Safety Commissioner whether she thought such a case could never happen again, she said, chillingly, that she was "not confident" about that. Think about that. That catastrophe was raised in 2009, and the Scottish Government and NHS governance have not learned the lessons that need to be learned in order for us to avoid such a tragedy happening again.

I also raise the case of my constituents Fraser Morton and his partner, June, whose son Lucas would have been 10 years old this year had it not been for failings in a neonatal unit, where he died during childbirth. I was present during meetings with NHS Ayrshire and Arran and meetings with Shona Robison and Catherine Calderwood, when they tried to talk him down. I recall the eventual investigation by Health Improvement Scotland, which followed a television documentary on the situation and discovered that there was a shortfall of 24 neonatal staff, and that there was a high mortality rate at the time. Thank goodness Fraser Morton never took the compensation that he was offered to go away.

Consider this, Presiding Officer. Where would we be if we did not have a Liz Smith or a Jackson Carlaw and others from across the chamber putting their shoulders to the wheel to support constituents and victims? Where would we be if Fraser Morton had not been as relentless as he was and had given up and taken the

compensation, and if we had not had campaigners who resisted platitudes from ministers and managers alike and demanded the changes that are so needed?

One of the biggest barriers to accountability or changing the culture across the NHS is just how fragmented our healthcare system is. We have 14 regional boards, seven special health boards—nine if we include Public Health Scotland and the Mental Welfare Commission—30 integration joint boards, 31 health and social care partnerships and 32 local authorities, all involved to some degree in the delivery of healthcare.

Will the Scottish Government do what is necessary to end the culture of defensiveness in the face of mistakes, the culture of closing ranks and protecting the system even when the system is wrong, and the culture of ostracising those who speak out rather than hearing them? Without that, the NHS will never be the health service that we want it to be. Therefore, I ask again: who is responsible, and who is accountable?

15:47

Neil Gray: I thank members for their contributions to the debate. I hope that we have a collective interest in strengthening public confidence in the Queen Elizabeth hospital. Families seeking answers from the public inquiry deserve to hear its findings in the knowledge that it has been allowed to carry on independently and without fear of any political interference—that touches on a point that was raised by Christine Grahame. Like those who are seen by any other NHS service, patients in the hospital now and in the future want to be reassured that their care will be safe.

NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde is responsible for all operations at the Queen Elizabeth and is taking significant steps to maintain public confidence and assure the safety of the hospital. That responsibility requires oversight and scrutiny, and I am confident that Sir Lewis Ritchie will not shirk his responsibility to provide independent challenge where that is needed. To ease Carol Mochan's concerns, I say that I do not think that anyone could suggest that Sir Lewis Ritchie is a tick-box type person.

Further to my opening remarks on the current safety of the water and ventilation systems, I can confirm that the board has commissioned and received two independent reports on its water and ventilation systems to provide further assurances. Those reports will be considered by the safety and public confidence oversight group, in addition to proactive planned maintenance of the hospital systems, which is carried out routinely, and in addition to reactive reporting and escalation, which is carried out as and when required, to ensure the clinical safety of the hospital.

The findings of the independent reports on the water and ventilation systems have been positive, with a fully compliant ventilation assessment in December last year and a fully compliant water system assessment in January this year.

Ventilation governance has been subject to equally rigorous scrutiny. In March last year, Healthcare Improvement Scotland was asked to review progress in Glasgow, addressing requirements arising from its June 2022 inspection.

Healthcare Improvement Scotland reported that the original inspection covered more elements of the healthcare associated infection standards than had been covered in any other single inspection, underlining the depth of that assessment. HIS further confirmed that the subsequent action plan showed that all four requirements had been completed. That evidence assures me that the Queen Elizabeth university hospital is safe.

I did not have time to cover validation in my opening remarks, but I wish to address it now. I heard Gillian Mackay's speech, so I hope that she will also hear mine. When we speak of public confidence, which—I believe—Labour's motion seeks to undermine, I fully understand why members have raised concerns about whether a full and complete validation was carried out. However, I convey to members that the assurance of safety is based not on just one metric. Through the findings of the various independent experts that I have cited and the on-going work of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, all the evidence points to the safety of the Queen Elizabeth university hospital. I will provide specific detail.

Anas Sarwar: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention on that point?

Neil Gray: If I have time when I conclude my point, I will come back to Mr Sarwar.

The inquiry has heard evidence on the air systems and standards that were set when the hospital first opened. It is for the inquiry to come to its own conclusions or recommendations about the hospital's first opening. I will not prejudge those. However, the Government has been assured by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde that those systems have since had further works done or have a multidisciplinary derogation in place. All critical air systems are subject to a full annual validation process, which is carried out by authorised persons and by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde's authorising engineer. All systems are subject to regular maintenance checks, in line with guidance recommendations. NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde has implemented clear

governance structures, regular audits and a quality-improvement strategy that is aligned to national standards. Any issues that require escalation are escalated to management and board committees. That structured approach ensures prompt attention and remediation and, if necessary, notification to the Government. Escalation to the Government has not been considered necessary in respect of the general wards.

All of that matters because safety must be driven by evidence and expertise. That is a principle of fundamental importance, which I urge all members to recognise.

Have I time to take Anas Sarwar's intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you a little time back. Anas Sarwar, briefly, please.

Anas Sarwar: I thank the cabinet secretary for taking an intervention. With public confidence in mind, he refers to reports on water and ventilation. Will he publish those reports, and will he ensure that they are shared with Dr Inkster and Dr Peters, so that they are satisfied, as that will also give public reassurance, given that everything that they have said in the past 10 years has proven to be true, and they may—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary.

Neil Gray: All those issues will be considered by the safety and public confidence oversight group—on which, I believe, all patients and staff have a representative. I believe that approaches have been made to the doctors whom Mr Sarwar references to ensure the confirmation of their confidence in the processes that have been put in place since the opening of the hospital.

Members will be aware that I have written to party spokespeople and the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee to offer an opportunity to meet me and the co-chairs of the new safety and public confidence oversight group. I am very open to any further suggestions from members on providing additional assurances beyond those that I have set out today. As I said at the outset of my speech, we must ensure that, through Lord Brodie's inquiry, patients, families and staff at the heart of the issues that we are discussing get the truth that they deserve. For those reasons, I again ask all members to support the Government's amendment.

15:53

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): The events at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital resulted in the deaths of patients—adults and children. It is one of the worst scandals in the history of the Parliament and is on a par with the tragedy that occurred at the Vale of Leven hospital. The loss of life was entirely preventable.

I am so disappointed in Christine Grahame's shameless and factually inaccurate speech, which I will take up with her later.

It was to the credit of Jeane Freeman that she established the Scottish hospitals inquiry after hearing about the concerns. I offer my condolences to Susan and to Jeane's family and colleagues.

The inquiry has spent the past five years trying to undo the culture of secrecy and uncover exactly what led to the deaths of those patients. An inquiry's job is to make sense of the past so that we can learn lessons for the future.

Back in 2015, I asked the then health secretary, Shona Robison, whether she would learn the lessons of the Vale of Leven hospital inquiry and carry out an independent audit into the new hospital. She agreed, and then she changed her mind and claimed that there was no need to follow the MacLean report's recommendations because there was

"robust reporting and monitoring in place."

Had there been an independent audit, it just might have saved lives.

The hospital opened too soon, when it was not safe to do so. During the first three years of the hospital's operation, the Scottish Government was alerted to at least 14 serious infection outbreaks. Each of those reports would have landed on Shona Robison's desk. What was the result of that robust monitoring and reporting? Did the reports get read or acted on, or is it another example of complacency that resulted in patients dying?

Brian Whittle: Will the member take an intervention?

Jackie Baillie: I do not have time.

It is little wonder then that the assurances from the Scottish Government ring hollow. The lack of transparency and the toxic culture of secrecy unsurprisingly mean that very few trust the Scottish Government or the health board. Both have spent the past 10 years gaslighting whistleblowers, dismissing the concerns of families and covering up the truth from the people of Scotland.

The staff at the hospital are superb. Let me tell you how I know that.

Neil Gray: Will the member take an intervention?

Jackie Baillie: No, sorry.

Last week, I visited the Queen Elizabeth university hospital and I saw with my own eyes the challenges that remain. Yes, the staff at the hospital do a tremendous job—they are second to none and this is not their fault—but there is a problem with the building.

Patients are now supplied with bottled water. There are filters on the taps because the water is not safe. There are too many people in rooms in which the ventilation is inadequate, and air changes are half what they actually should be. The atrium, where people arrive, is filled from floor to ceiling with masses upon masses of steel scaffolding. There are yellow buckets to catch water that is coming in from the ceiling in some ward areas, and it appears that the hospital is being rebuilt from the inside out, and it is only just over 10 years old.

The key question that the Government needs to answer for patients' reassurance and for the staff is whether the hospital is safe today.

The cabinet secretary, Neil Gray, was unable to give that absolute reassurance when we last debated the Queen Elizabeth university hospital, and he cannot with confidence answer the question today.

Neil Gray: Will the member take an intervention?

Jackie Baillie: No. The cabinet secretary did not take one from me, so he should let me finish my point.

We need the evidence to reassure staff and patients that the water system is safe and that the ventilation system is safe. He should publish the reports that are in his possession, because it took cross-party support across the Parliament to shake the Government out of complacency. I am grateful to the Greens and all Opposition parties for coming together again today.

The counsel to the inquiry noted that validation had only been carried out in selected wards. The Poplett report, which the Government has relied on, covered ventilation and water, but it was restricted in scope. In fairness, Mr Poplett did what he was asked to do. It was a desktop exercise covering limited wards and not the whole hospital. It relied on paperwork that was provided by the health board. It failed to consider the logs of issues and associated clinical risk, because that information was not provided.

The whistleblowers, who are the infection control experts, were not involved. The report was on the management of the system, and not the original design of the system.

In fact, Mr Poplett said that the water was the minimum required by the Scottish health technical memorandum standards. He noted:

"given the … clinical activities and patient groups involved, I would have anticipated a greater degree of testing."

The counsel to the inquiry went on to say:

"the whole hospital ventilation system has not been validated. The general wards have not been validated. It's most concerning that it's still not been done."

The inquiry says that we should not wait for the conclusion of its report, because patient safety demands changes now.

In his contribution to the inquiry, Neil Gray told the inquiry that he would be surprised if the ventilation system of the hospital was not validated against any standard before opening, but it was not, was it?

Is Neil Gray surprised that Shona Robison did not seek that assurance? Is he surprised that the ventilation system has still not been validated? I have to say that I am surprised at this astonishing level of complacency. There are so many questions that the public deserve answers to.

Unfortunately, the Scottish Government cannot actually confirm whether the hospital is safe today, so I say to it: reassure patients by providing plans for protecting at-risk patients right now; validate the ventilation and the water throughout the hospital; and make sure that the validation reports are shared with whistleblowers and are published. Families and whistleblowers deserve nothing less.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the safety of the Queen Elizabeth university hospital. There will be a brief pause before we move to the next item of business.

Community Policing

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-20730, in the name of Pauline McNeill, on community policing. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

16:01

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Vital to any high-performing justice system is a well-trusted, visible police service. Scotland's police force is respected across the world, but there can be no doubt that, in the past 19 years, the Scottish National Party's lack of leadership and investment has reduced public confidence and eroded the police's ability to respond to all types of crime. Police stations are closing, officer numbers are dwindling and crime is not being responded to.

People want to see and feel the presence of the police, but that must mean their presence in all Scotland's communities. Our communities must know that the police will turn up when crime is reported and that it will be investigated to the highest standards. Violent crime in Scotland is rising—including sexual crimes such as rape and attempted rape—as are domestic abuse and weapons offences.

The increase in the carrying of weapons is understandably causing fear in communities. Will Linden, deputy head of the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit, stated:

"The biggest challenge we have is increasing carrying of weapons".

In the 12 months to April last year, weapons were found 231 times during searches on children—the highest total in eight years—and a 10-year-old boy in Edinburgh was the youngest person to be caught with a knife. Jimmy Paul, the unit's head, has said that he is worried about recent trends in which young people view violent content online and use social media to organise fights. Although fewer of our older children are getting involved in violence, more of our younger children—eight, 10 and 11-year-olds—are doing so. That trend is of concern, he said.

Scottish Labour believes that strengthening community policing is an essential part of the strategy for dealing with such young children. We would restore at least 360 police officers to the front line in local divisions, which would boost community policing teams. That would mean that every council ward in Scotland would have a named officer who would build relationships in the community and gather intelligence on crime in local areas. We believe that building relationships in our communities is vital to fighting such crime.

We would also reduce the amount of time that police officers have to spend stuck in accident and emergency, through our new mental health response service. Scotland's police officers currently have to deal with almost 700 mental health-related incidents each day. Between April and October last year, police officers responded to more than 122,000 incidents, which represented one in five of all incidents that officers attended. However, the vast majority of such calls do not involve criminality. Expecting police officers to fill the gap left by our struggling national health service is placing a huge strain on our already stretched police force.

As part of our plan to combine NHS 24 and the Scottish Ambulance Service into a strengthened emergency response health board, Scottish Labour would create a dedicated mental health response division. That would be a default blue-light service for mental health crisis calls, and so reduce the number of calls that would require Police Scotland to attend.

Only this week, David Kennedy, the head of the Scottish Police Federation, highlighted claims that the police are expected to operate like a "nanny force", by plugging gaps in social services, which is leaving communities without

"adequate protection from serious crime."

It is reported that 80 per cent of call-outs involve no criminality, with police time being increasingly taken up by public safety concerns, wellbeing checks and mental health crises. That simply has to end.

It is no surprise, therefore, that police morale is at an all-time low. Police officers must be allowed to do the job that they are trained for, as the public would expect. However, our police service has been hollowed out since its creation 13 years ago. Police Scotland has made savings of more than £1 billion, but it has not been allowed to reinvest any of those savings back into our police force. The police estate has been decimated, with a staggering 150 police stations closed in the past two years.

The public consensus is that that is compromising community safety. However, there are still some crimes to which the police do not turn up, as a result of what is called the proportionate response to crime initiative.

It is unacceptable that Police Scotland was the last force in the United Kingdom to roll out body-worn cameras. It is important for police officers to be able to fight crime in the best way, and with the best equipment, but, in Scotland, they have not been able to do that.

Given all that, it is unsurprising that so many officers are choosing to leave their careers early. I see that as the most vital issue in policing today. More than 1,700 police officers have quit the profession in the past two years, and officers are leaving at the rate of 16 every week. Too many officers are disillusioned and are leaving jobs or taking early retirement.

We need to start making police officers feel properly valued, and we need to reverse that trend. There are now more than 1,000 fewer police officers than when Police Scotland was formed back in 2013. It is no surprise that that is having an impact on officers who are currently serving.

The Scottish Police Federation has said that the Government's budget as drafted falls well below what is needed to stabilise officer numbers and meet rising demand, and we have still to see the full impact of that.

I believe that the most significant task ahead is to deal with the challenge of so many officers who are—as I said—leaving the job early. We must invest properly in the service to sustain police numbers. We must properly support police officers. We must reduce the practice of cancelling leave so that we have a strong, well-equipped police force that serves in communities, so that those communities see that their police officers and their police service are visible to them.

I move,

That the Parliament regrets that cuts to police officer numbers have disproportionately fallen on local divisions, reducing the number of officers on the frontline; is deeply concerned about reports of rising crime, particularly violent crime; recognises that the proportion of people reporting that they feel safe after dark is at the lowest point on record; considers that failures to modernise the court system and support mental health care have resulted in a poor use of police officer time, which should be focused on reducing crime; believes that there is a need to restore community policing, and calls for the creation of community and crime prevention officers in every council ward in Scotland.

16:07

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): I thank Police Scotland officers and staff for their dedication in keeping our communities safe. The Scottish Government recognises their vital role, which is why, building on last year's record investment of £1.64 billion for policing, we will be investing further record funding of more than £1.7 billion in 2026-27. That includes uplifts for both resource and capital funding and will allow Police Scotland to deliver on its priorities, including front-line service delivery.

Our investment in policing has enabled Police Scotland to take on more recruits in the last financial year than it has at any time since 2013. Police Scotland has confirmed that there is a healthy recruitment pipeline, In that it has welcomed around 1,840 new officers since the beginning of 2024.

In addition, as of 30 September 2025, there were around 30 full-time-equivalent officers per 10,000 members of the population, in comparison with 24 full-time equivalent officers per 10,000 in England and Wales. I am sure that everyone will welcome the fact that our police officers are receiving the best basic pay in the UK at the minimum and maximum points of each rank.

Public safety and crime statistics are a key measurement of the effectiveness of policing. The latest published statistics, from September, show that recorded crime had halved from its peak in 1991 and that, since the Scottish National Party came into office, it has reduced by 38 per cent.

Last year's Scottish crime and justice survey showed that the proportion of adults who felt safe walking alone after dark in their local area had increased from 66 per cent in 2008-09 to 75 per cent in 2023-24; the proportion who worried they that they would be physically assaulted in a public place had fallen from 31 per cent to 15 per cent; and the proportion who thought that people carrying knives was common in their area had fallen from 22 per cent to 13 per cent.

However, I completely understand that perceptions and experiences of safety can vary from area to area. Therefore, it is important that we talk about the facts in the round when we talk about crime and policing, in terms of both long-term trajectories and more recent changes. We need to use that information to understand the changing nature of crime.

The Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012, which created our national police service, also ensures that there is full operational independence, meaning that how and where officers are deployed are matters for the chief constable. The act also ensures that local authorities have a say in shaping priorities in their areas, which is better than was the case in the past. I recognise that community policing is a vital part of keeping our communities safe, which is why I welcome that it is front and centre in both Police Scotland's three-year business plan and its strategic policing plan.

Turning to the wider justice system, the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Act 2025 places victims and witnesses at the heart of a modern and fair justice system and includes significant new measures to meet the needs of the survivors of sexual offences. The act is part of a continually evolving justice landscape, with our police very much at the heart of it.

We all want to ensure that our officers have the time to police. There are significant endeavours to protect officers' time and better deploy them through a range of initiatives that reduce unnecessary demand on policing and ensure that people receive the most appropriate support. That includes the distress brief intervention programme and the strengthening of the enhanced mental health pathway, which is underpinned by investment of £18.5 million for NHS 24, with referrals up by 36 per cent. For my part, I will keep pushing for better pace and scalability of reform.

Alongside that, summary case management is streamlining criminal justice processes by reducing avoidable court attendances, enabling cases to be progressed more efficiently and minimising the time that officers spend waiting in court. Members will recall that the pilot programme demonstrated that 500 summary trials were not required to be fixed, which ensured that 18,000 witnesses, including 11,000 police officers, did not have to attend court. The roll-out of summary case management, the digital evidence-sharing capability programme and the use of body-worn video cameras are all vital reforms. Those initiatives, along with many others, will go a long way to ensure that mean officer hours are being released, which will allow greater focus on visible, front-line and community policing, crime prevention and protecting the public.

I move amendment S6M-20730.1, to leave out from "regrets" to end and insert:

"acknowledges that Scotland is a safe country with recorded crime having decreased by 38% since 2006-7 and that homicide is at its lowest level since comparable records began in 1976; recognises that in 2025-26, the Scottish Government increased police funding to a record £1.64 billion, investment which enabled Police Scotland to take on more recruits in the last financial year than at any time since 2013, and that the draft Budget has a further record investment in policing of £1.7 billion in 2026-27; condemns the UK Government's employer national insurance increase, which is costing Police Scotland over £25 million every year; commends the hard work, dedication and commitment of all the officers and staff of Police Scotland; is pleased that police officers in Scotland receive the best basic pay in the UK at the minimum and maximum of each rank, and that there are around 30 full-time equivalent (FTE) officers per 10,000 population, compared with around 24 FTE officers in England and Wales; notes that Police Scotland has an important role to play in addressing community concerns or tensions and there should be no tolerance for hate crime in a modern society; recognises that, whilst the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey shows a long-term increase in the proportion of people who report feeling safe in their local area, perceptions of safety can vary significantly between communities; further recognises that, in September 2025, Parliament agreed the landmark Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform Act, which will introduce reforms to place victims and witnesses at the heart of the justice and courts system, establish a Sexual Offences Court, improve the Victim Notification Scheme and parole system, and introduce a Victims Commissioner, and calls on the Scottish Government to continue its focus on reducing crime and reoffending and supporting victims."

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Liam Kerr to speak to and move amendment S6M-20730.2.

16:13

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): We cannot fix a problem if we do not first acknowledge that it exists. That is why the Pollyanna contribution that we have just heard from the cabinet secretary is so concerning, because the fact is that crime is rising and people out there know it. Recorded crime is up by 2 per cent; non-sexual violent crime is up by 3 per cent; and sexual crime is up by 7 per cent. Nearly one in every five adults in Scotland was a victim of at least one crime in 2023-24. Given that the cabinet secretary is so fond of comparisons, it is surprising that she omitted to mention that people are more likely to be a victim of violent crime in Scotland than they are in England and Wales.

The cabinet secretary's amendment would completely delete any reference to police numbers. I remind her that there are around 1,000 fewer officers today than there were in 2020. Despite nearly 20 years of manifesto promises, warm words and targets, there are basically the same number of officers as there were in 2007. Since police officer applications show steep falls, while resignations and retirements are rising, the situation shows no sign of reversal.

What is the impact of that? Police Scotland has over 900 fewer police officers who have a decade or more of experience than it did in 2019. Of the officers who are in post, one in seven—more than 2,300—are on light or modified duties due to illness or injury. It is no wonder that Audit Scotland reported last month that there is "no evidence" that the current complements of officers and staff represent the right numbers for future policing demand.

What about the cabinet secretary's proud boasts about funding? David Kennedy of the SPF recently said:

"If ministers want a police service that prevents crime, supports victims and responds when communities need it, they must fund policing at the level required".

What is that level? The chief constable told us that the sum in her budget request would strengthen the front line by funding 850 officers and 348 staff. What was this Government's response? It was £15 million less than the amount that was requested.

I credit the Labour motion for not only identifying the problems but for proposing solutions, because there is a need to restore community policing. In October, we set out in our justice policy the need for that to boost confidence in the police, keep people safe, reduce antisocial behaviour and

crack down on crime. However, I worry that the call in the Labour motion for

"the creation of community and crime prevention officers in every council ward in Scotland"

might risk stretching already limited police resources and force policing into a rigid structure that might not match the level of local need.

In my amendment, I have proposed a further solution. The SPF has warned that officers are spending between 40 and 60 per cent of their operational capacity dealing with health-related incidents. That means that a huge amount of police time is being diverted away from tackling crime because of wider public sector challenges that the Scottish Government is also refusing to address.

In my amendment and my justice paper, I addressed that issue by recommending the adoption of a right care, right person model, which is about focusing police time on crime and public safety. In brief, police will attend if there is risk, but health professionals will take the lead if there is a health issue. Here is a comparison for the cabinet secretary—such a model has saved nearly 19,000 hours every month for the Metropolitan Police and nearly 5,000 hours every month in Essex.

The Scottish Conservatives agree with the motion that, before identifying solutions, we must recognise the problems that have been caused by nearly two decades of a failing SNP Government. Once we have done that, the solutions become clear. We would back our police officers, stop wasting their time, ensure that they are visible in their communities and give them the powers that they need to do their jobs. That is what the amended motion would deliver.

I move amendment S6M-20730.2, to leave out from "for the creation" to end and insert:

"on the Scottish Government to reduce non-crime demand on Police Scotland and accelerate delivery of a 'Right Care, Right Person' style model."

16:17

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): When we talk about community policing, what we are really talking about is the values that we think should be at the heart of our communities, and we are talking about safety. Safety is not simply the absence of crime; it is the presence of justice, dignity and trust. That must be the foundation of how we approach policing in our communities.

Much is often made of violent crime, and it is right that we take harm seriously. However, we also need honesty and perspective. Long-term trends show that recorded violent crime in Scotland has generally fallen over recent decades. That trend matters, because it challenges the narrative of constant escalation that is so often used to justify fear-based policies. It reminds us that safety cannot be built on panic, sensationalism or punitive reflexes, but on evidence, prevention and care.

At the same time, perceptions of safety tell a more complicated story. Many people—particularly women, racialised communities, LGBTQIA+ people and disabled people—still feel unsafe in their daily lives. That fear is real. However, responding to it requires us to understand where risk truly lies and to tackle its root causes: poverty, inequality, trauma, exclusion and the erosion of the public services that once held communities together.

Nowhere is the gap between rhetoric and reality clearer than in how we respond to racism and the rise of the far right. In the north-east, far-right groups have sought to organise and intimidate. Last year, in its 20th year, Aberdeen's anti-racism march was attacked by members of a known racist and anti-immigrant group, who verbally and physically assaulted people who were attending a peaceful community event. The police did not prevent the confrontation, nor did they effectively stop it while it was happening. Instead, anti-racists stepped in to protect one another. That is not policing by consent; that is a failure of protection.

We have seen armed police deployed to arrest peaceful protesters who demonstrate against the genocide in Palestine—protesters who were later cleared of wrongdoing in court. Communities are left asking, "What are the police up to? What about proportionality and priorities? Why does peaceful protest appear to attract a heavy response, while racist intimidation appears to go unchallenged?"

What about consistency in the application of laws around stirring up hatred? At anti-immigrant demonstrations, individuals have openly called for the mass deportation of all black and brown people from Scotland, repeated antisemitic conspiracy theories or worse. There have been patterns of harassment: people have been followed, targeted and subjected to malicious allegations. Are we waiting for serious bodily harm to occur before intervention is deemed to be justified? Where is the bar for recognising intimidation and instigation?

Police Scotland must take seriously its responsibility to rebuild trust. Protecting free speech and the right to peaceful assembly must mean protecting those who stand against racism, not leaving them to defend themselves. Taking hate seriously means acting early, consistently and visibly. Community policing must mean standing with those who are targeted by hate, not

treating them as collateral in a public order calculation.

Policing does not exist in isolation, and I appreciate Labour's comments about officers being pulled into supporting people who are facing mental health crises or waiting for court processes to happen—that is not fair or right. If we are serious about community safety, we must think across portfolios—mental health provision, anti-poverty work, youth services and housing. Prevention is not a slogan; it requires investment. We must also be honest about where the risk is shifting. For many, cybercrime, online fraud and digital exploitation now pose greater threats than violence by strangers. If we misread risk, we misallocate resources.

Community policing must be rooted in equality, justice, accountability and compassion. If we want trust, we must earn it through consistency, protection of rights and a commitment to tackle harm wherever it arises.

16:21

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I thank Pauline McNeill for bringing the debate to the chamber today. There can be no doubt about the pressures on policing across Scotland and the impact of that on local communities. Against a backdrop of increasing complexity in the crime landscape, taking robust and urgent action to address those pressures is critical.

The decline in police numbers is one important aspect of the debate, and colleagues have rightly highlighted how workforce pressures are most keenly felt in neighbourhood policing capacity. I certainly see that in my Orkney constituency, where overall numbers are at a bare minimum and recruitment challenges are on-going. It is crucial that local forces are properly staffed in order to ensure that policing is effective and to maintain morale in the service and confidence among the wider public.

Worryingly, in Police Scotland's 2025 local policing survey, only 23 per cent of respondents thought that the police dealt with local issues. In the latest Scottish crime and justice survey, fewer than half of respondents thought that the police were effective at preventing crime. I recognise that having bobbies on the beat does not necessarily reflect modern demands on the police and policing, but when officers are not visible in local areas and certain crimes are not being investigated as a matter of course, community policing is difficult to sustain.

In return, public confidence starts to erode. Add to that the inability to call the local police station—if it is not already closed—to report an incident and it is not hard to see how tensions can arise between police and local communities. To be clear, that is not a criticism of officers and staff, who are stretched to the limits and asked to do more with less, or at least work with resources that fail to keep pace with growing demands. It is little wonder that we see—as Pauline McNeill identified—officers and staff leaving the force in sizeable numbers, which strips away capacity and invaluable experience.

One of the most notable pressures is the significant rise in non-criminal health and care work. As we have heard, the force faces almost 700 mental health-related incidents a day, and the Scottish Police Federation has highlighted that officers can spend entire shifts with an individual who is detained under place of safety orders.

The police essentially plug gaps in our health and care system by acting as a crisis care provider of last resort. That is not in the interests of vulnerable individuals, who need appropriate, often specialist support, not officers who are diverted from the prevention and detection of crime. That is not safe or sustainable, and it requires urgent redress from ministers.

In the meantime, inefficiencies in the court system, with delays and repeat adjournments taking officers away from front-line duties, simply compound the problems. Chief Constable Jo Farrell estimated that, in 2024, that involved as many as 500 officers a day, with only 15 per cent ultimately giving evidence. That is in no one's interest, and it demands to be addressed.

Community policing relies on visibility, stability and building trust. That requires officers to be present in communities to respond to crime and to engage in prevention by working closely with other local partners. Community policing has always been a great strength of policing in Scotland, but it now faces a pretty existential threat.

I thank Pauline McNeill for giving us the chance to shine a light on these issues, and I urge the Government to take the urgent steps that are needed to safeguard this critical aspect of policing in Scotland.

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

16:25

Davy Russell (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab): SNP members often like to hide behind carefully chosen statistics that hide the real situation on the ground and how people are feeling, but, on this issue, the numbers speak for themselves. As was mentioned earlier, there are now 1,000 fewer officers than there were when Police Scotland was established. Many officers are now on clerical duties, because many support

staff have been done away with. That ties in with the complaints that I get about never seeing a police officer.

There are 25 fewer officers in this quarter than there were in the previous quarter. Crime is up 2 per cent, violent crime is up 3 per cent and sexual crime is up 7 per cent. Those statistics reflect what people feel on the ground. It is not fear that people feel. They feel alone, because they know that, when they are in need of police assistance, help will be a little bit further away than it should be—if it comes at all.

Larkhall police station, in my constituency, is set to close its doors to public access, and the same is true for stations in Bellshill and Blantyre, in neighbouring constituencies. That ties in with the pattern of local services closing. A bank in my constituency closed recently, which will affect the vulnerable in society, and the police station is now set to follow suit. People are worried that their town, which is not insubstantial—15,000 people live in Larkhall, and it supports a further 15,000 people in the surrounding rural areas—is being forgotten. Given that the heart keeps getting ripped out of small towns, has the SNP Government forgotten about community spirit and the people SNP members were elected to serve? It is shameful that vital services are falling by the wayside while the Scottish Government does nothing about it.

If members speak to people in Larkhall, they will tell them that they now have to travel to Hamilton, take justice into their own hands or just not bother complaining and be a victim of crime. However, I am told that the desk at Hamilton police station is not manned in the evening, so I do not know where we go with that. I wonder which of those options the justice minister would like to suggest to my Larkhall constituents, because I do not know what to tell them.

Starving vital police services of essential funding is not like the mismanagement of health services. Families cannot go private, as they have to for hip replacements.

It is clear that the SNP does not have a plan to make our streets safer. The lack of community policing—in fact, any policing—will lead to more antisocial behaviour and people feeling less safe in their homes. Scottish Labour will restore much-needed investment in community policing, with a named officer responsible for every council ward, as has been mentioned.

If constituents want to feel safe where they live, they need to kick out the SNP Government in May. The SNP acts as though it does not care about the people it is there to protect. The SNP says that, if people vote for it and independence, it will be utopia, the garden of Eden and heaven all rolled up into one. Aye, right. The SNP Government can con some people some of the time, but the people of Scotland are finally beginning to see it for what it is doing in wrecking essential public services and breaking community spirits. Scottish Labour will fight that every step of the way.

16:29

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Presiding Officer,

"Community policing matters to us all. It brings significant benefits by strengthening trust, visibility and collaboration between police and the public."

Those are not my words; they are the words of Stuart Murray, the community policing chief inspector in East Dunbartonshire, whose team works closely with residents and business, doing exactly what the role of community police should be about.

For the past decade, I have witnessed local community police in my constituency address issues proactively, whether by tackling shoplifting through targeted patrols, working in partnership with retailers or reducing youth disorder by building positive relationships and offering early interventions. That said, I take Pauline McNeill's point about younger children carrying weapons, which is very concerning.

As Stuart Murray has said, regular engagement, including holding community surgeries in the form of pop-ups across the East Dunbartonshire area, helps residents to feel heard and supported while providing accessible opportunities to share concerns. That approach not only improves safety and gives reassurance but empowers communities to play an active role alongside their local problem-solving policing teams.

There has been no decline in community policing in Strathkelvin and Bearsden over the years—if anything, it has been stepped up incrementally. That brings me to the Labour motion. I do not believe that it is representative of what is happening on the ground. I am sure that things are not perfect, but I do not think that my constituency will be that unusual.

Police Scotland is operationally independent, but the SNP has delivered a higher number of police officers per capita than England and Wales. In addition, the 2026-27 Scottish budget is delivering record investment of more than £1.7 billion for police services.

Police Scotland's three-year plan includes a number of measures that are aimed at enhancing community policing to help to keep our communities safe. That includes preventing and reducing crime and offending, as well as striving to

transform societal attitudes and the circumstances that contribute to the perpetuation of harm.

There are plans to deliver high-quality and efficient public services through a range of initiatives, including, as we have heard, the rolling out of body-worn video technology and digital evidence-sharing capability—game-changing technologies that will increase public confidence in policing. Funding for the retail crime task force has also been maintained at £3 million, supporting efforts to prevent shop-based theft and pursue those responsible for it.

In addition, Scottish Government funding has allowed Police Scotland to take on more recruits in the most recent financial year than at any time since 2013. As we have heard, as of December last year, there were 16,416 officers. It is for the chief constable, under the scrutiny of the Scottish Police Authority, to deploy those officers, and they have been clear on the importance and priority of recruitment during evidence given to the Criminal Justice Committee.

The SNP Government cares deeply about crime and the safety of those living here. Indeed, levels of recorded crime have decreased by 38 per cent since 2006, and homicide is at its lowest level since comparable records began in 1976. In September last year, Parliament passed the landmark Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill, which will introduce reforms to place victims and witnesses at the heart of the justice and courts system.

Of course, it should never be forgotten that the Labour UK Government's increase to employer national insurance contributions costs Police Scotland more than £25 million every year, which has a considerable impact on any budget planning.

In conclusion, I congratulate our hard-working officers on carrying out their duties with empathy and efficiency every day to keep us all safe.

16:33

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): We know that people want to feel safe in their communities. They want to know that, when they call the police, they will come, and they want visible officers on their streets who know their neighbourhoods, know the issues and can act early to prevent harm.

When people tell us that they no longer feel comfortable walking after dark, and when surveys show that the sense of safety is at its lowest recorded level, we must listen. The issues that are raised in our motion today are the concerns that people are bringing to us: local shops are being repeatedly targeted; parks and community centres are being damaged by vandalism; and there is a sense that visible policing in their communities has thinned out. We know that officer numbers have fallen and that in many areas stations have been closed or had their hours restricted, eroding the visible local footprint that is a key part of community reassurance and confidence in policing.

The reality is that reductions have fallen hardest on local divisions, leaving fewer officers available for front-line roles. Although benefits from the centralisation of policing exist, we cannot ignore the impact on people's confidence and on the prevention of crime. Officers are expected to cover far more than core policing work. They respond to mental health crises, spend hours in A and E—because other services are simply not available—and backfill gaps that are caused by systematic delays elsewhere in our justice and health systems. In 2024, Chief Superintendent Derek McEwan, former divisional commander of Fife, said to local councillors that most of the work was now non-crime related. Every hour that is spent on such duties is an hour not spent on preventing crime, building relationships or reassuring communities.

I hear regularly from constituents about persistent antisocial behaviour, including in bus stations, on high streets and in parks. Local community safety partnerships are working hard with Police Scotland, but the scale of demand remains acute. Vandalism, deliberate fires and hostile behaviour are not minor nuisances but the daily lived reality for many families and businesses, and they come with clean-up and repair costs.

Shoplifting and retail theft are another source of concern. They have a particular impact on small and local retailers. It is no comfort to victims to be told that a crime is low level when it affects their livelihood and contributes to a wider sense of disorder. I am a member of the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers, and during USDAW's freedom from fear week, I spoke to retail workers in my local co-operative and heard about the daily challenges that they face.

In Mid Scotland and Fife, there is also the long-standing issue of off-road bikes and quad bikes, which I have raised many times with the Government. The vehicles are used in ways that threaten pedestrians, intimidate families in their local parks and disrupt daily life. Unfortunately, that is a persistent issue in Fife, and it has recently been raised with me again in Methil. Good local work is taking place, but police simply do not have the capacity to respond as quickly or as consistently as they would like, leaving people who report those activities frustrated at a perceived lack of response.

Community policing—where officers are embedded in their wards, know the people in those places and work with partners to intervene early—is one of the most effective tools that we have to reduce harm before it escalates. A new divisional commander, John Anderson, recently took up post in Fife. He has spoken of the shift to an operating model that moves away

"from reactive policing to prevention and problem solving".

Having dedicated community and crime prevention officers would make that shift. Community policing works when officers are visible, accessible and able to act early. It is about prevention and enforcement, knowing who the repeat offenders are and knowing the young people who might be diverted from trouble.

We must also look beyond policing to improve the justice system, so that officers are not tied up in court for extended periods, and ensure that our mental health services have the capacity to respond effectively, so that responsibility does not always fall on police officers.

Our police officers work extremely hard. They want to be out in communities, preventing crime and keeping people safe. We owe it to them and to the public to make sure that that is where their time is spent.

16:37

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I remind members of my declaration in the register of members' interests that my wife is a police sergeant in Moray.

I always come to debates on this topic keen to praise the efforts of our hard-working and dedicated officers locally and across Scotland while seeking to contribute their views to the debate. A number of points that I will raise have come directly from officers who are concerned.

However, if those officers are watching the debate or intend to catch up later, they should be aware of their Government's position. I want to make it very clear what the SNP is asking MSPs to vote for tonight—and I will give way to Angela Constance if she would like to explain her reasoning. The Government's amendment deletes wording from the motion, and I am not sure what is wrong with that wording because it is 100 per cent factually correct.

Why does the justice secretary and the SNP Government want to delete the sentence that says that the Parliament

"regrets that cuts to police officer numbers have disproportionately fallen on local divisions, reducing the number of officers on the frontline"?

Will the cabinet secretary explain her rationale for deleting that? We know that what it says about officer numbers is true, so does the SNP justice secretary not regret the falling number of police officers on the front line?

Angela Constance is not looking at me and does not want to engage in a debate, but I am using my four minutes to offer a debate, so I ask the justice secretary again—

Angela Constance: I will use my five minutes to sum up, as is my right.

Douglas Ross: I am offering my time to the cabinet secretary.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I think that it is clear that the cabinet secretary is not seeking to intervene, so I suggest that you continue, Mr Ross.

Douglas Ross: I do not think that that is clear, which is why I am going to give the cabinet secretary another opportunity. She has taken a clear position to delete those words, which suggests that the SNP Government, along with every SNP member who supports the amendment, does not regret cuts to police officer numbers or the impact that they are having on local policing and local divisions.

Because the cabinet secretary has moved the amendment in her name, I ask again: does this SNP justice secretary not regret the falling number of police officers in Scotland or the impact that that is having on local policing?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I think that it is clear now that the cabinet secretary is not seeking to intervene. The member has only four minutes, and we are at two minutes 36 seconds.

Douglas Ross: I am happy to use my time in this way, because the silence is telling. Angela Constance gave a speech in which she said that everything is fine and there is nothing to worry about, but there is something to worry about. If our justice secretary in Scotland has no regrets over the number of police officers falling or the impact that that is having on local policing, that is an issue. It is an issue if SNP MSPs vote for an amendment tonight that deletes that point, because the cuts are having an impact.

I asked local officers in Moray about the level of policing in the area and I was told that, just a few years ago, before the establishment of Police Scotland, we had eight officers per shift in Elgin, but we now have eight for the whole of Moray, and sometimes even fewer. For one town, we had eight officers. Now, for Elgin, Forres, Lossiemouth, Buckie, Keith and all the rural communities, we get eight in total, yet we have a justice secretary who does not regret that.

Pauline McNeill: Will the member give way?

Douglas Ross: I am sorry—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is concluding.

Douglas Ross: I know that. I do not have time.

It has been telling that, even in my four minutes, the justice secretary would rather stay silent about the cuts than admit that. If she does not regret them, she should.

16:41

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I am pleased to contribute to this debate on community policing, which speaks directly to how people across Scotland experience safety, reassurance and connection in their everyday lives. The Scottish Government recognises the importance of community policing, which, at its heart, allows security, trust and partnership to flourish in communities across the country.

With that in mind, the Government remains firmly committed to investing in policing and public safety, as we already heard from the cabinet secretary. The funding in this year's budget enables Scotland to maintain one of the highest ratios of police officers per capita in the UK. As of December 2025, more than 16,400 officers were serving communities, which gives Police Scotland the scale and flexibility that are needed to respond effectively to local and national demands. That strong foundation matters, because community confidence grows when people see officers who know their area, understand local concerns and engage regularly with residents. That is something that everybody who has spoken in the debate is agreed on.

When I think about North Lanarkshire, and particularly my constituency of Coatbridge and Chryston, I do not recognise a lot of the descriptions that other members have given. I am not saying that I disagree with what other members have said, because it might well be the case in their areas. However, I associate myself more with the remarks of Rona Mackay. I have good relationships with the local police officers in my constituency, and I see the work that they do. They are in and out of schools and youth services. They are often involved in football tournaments with local kids. They are around and visible. They have good relationships with local councillors and the like. That collaborative approach helps to identify emerging issues, supports preventive action and builds lasting trust.

Initially, I had concerns about police officers being in schools, but those concerns were quickly eased when I met officers in Coatbridge high school and St Andrew's high school in my constituency. The officers are not there in the typical police fashion; they are there to support young people who might be experiencing difficulties. That works really well—they have great relationships.

To give another example, Coatbridge community police officers have hosted community drop-ins and even worked alongside the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and other agencies in delivering the junior cop good citizen programme, which seeks to inform young people about respecting the community, fire safety, online safety, respect in relationships and road safety. Loads of good work is going on. In fact, when primary schools in my constituency have had issues with online bullying or whatever, they have got the local community cops to speak to the young kids to great effect. That has happened on at least a couple of occasions.

The Scottish Government has also invested in modern technology to support officers in their work. As Pauline McNeill mentioned, the roll-out of body-worn video cameras and digital evidence sharing systems is improving efficiency, enhancing officer safety and strengthening public confidence. By reducing administrative burdens and streamlining processes, those innovations will allow officers to spend more time in their communities, engaging directly with the people that they serve.

Support for community policing relies on recognising the wide range of situations that the police respond to every day. In the Criminal Justice Committee, we have looked at the issues around police officers responding to mental health crisis incidents. I agree with Pauline McNeill about that—the Criminal Justice Committee has done a lot of work on it and we need to look at areas where there is overlap with NHS services and how they can work jointly to take demand away from the police. I know that it is often a particularly difficult set of circumstances for officers to deal with.

Targeted initiatives demonstrate how focused investment can deliver tangible results. For example, the retail crime task force was supported by £3 million in funding and it has already made a measurable impact in tackling shoplifting and supporting retail workers. By combining visible policing with intelligence-led operations, the task force has strengthened safety and confidence across Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr MacGregor, you need to bring your remarks to a close.

Fulton MacGregor: Sorry, Deputy Presiding Officer—I ended up talking so much about the local—

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

Fulton MacGregor: I will close there. Thank you.

16:46

Maggie Chapman: I thank Pauline McNeill for securing this debate. Although we will not be supporting her motion at decision time, I share her frustration at the persistence of certain types of crime and the feeling, shared by too many, that our streets are not as safe as they once were.

As the debate draws to a close, I return to a simple but powerful truth: safety—that safety that we wish would return to our streets—cannot be separated from justice. A society that leaves people behind, that criminalises distress and that tolerates hatred will never be a truly safe one, no matter how many officers it deploys.

I do not agree that having officers in every ward is necessarily the panacea that it is presented to be. I do not believe that we can talk about community policing without talking about the wider systems that shape it. If our officers are spending hours in A and E with someone who is in a mental health crisis, or supervising individuals in delayed court processes because there is nowhere else for those people to go, that is not a policing success story but a sign of systemic failure. Too often, police officers are left to pick up the pieces because mental health services are overstretched, community support is underfunded and justice processes are slow. That is unfair on officers, on those in crisis and on the communities that lose preventative, relationship-based policing as a result.

If we want genuine community policing, we must free officers to do that work. That means properly resourced mental health provision, investment in youth work and community services and serious action on poverty and inequality. We all know that it is much better to prevent crimes happening in the first place than having to deal with the consequences of crimes that have happened. Safety is not delivered solely through enforcement—it is built through prevention, dignity and care. That is where we believe that our focus should be.

We also have to confront the issue of trust. Policing by consent depends on communities believing that the police will act fairly, proportionately and consistently. Where there is perceived overreach against peaceful protest or perceived inaction in the face of racist intimidation, trust is eroded. Where the application of laws around harassment or stirring up hatred appears to be inconsistent, communities take notice. Police Scotland must be willing to reflect honestly on that: accountability is not an attack on policing, it is essential to strengthening it. Protecting the right to peaceful assembly, safeguarding those targeted by hate and recognising patterns of harassment before they escalate are not optional extras but are central to public safety in a democratic society.

Finally, we need clarity about risk. Although debate often centres on street violence, many of the most significant and growing threats are digital: online fraud, coercive control, radicalisation and cybercrime. Community policing in the 21st century must adapt to that reality. Resources and training must be focused where harm is actually occurring, not simply reflecting the headlines that are the loudest or the most sensational.

My politics are rooted in social justice. I believe that safety and justice are inseparable. A society that tolerates racism, neglects mental health or leaves people in poverty will never be truly safe, no matter how many officers we throw at the problem. If we are serious about safer communities, we must invest in prevention, uphold everybody's rights, challenge hate and rebuild trust. That requires courage, consistency and compassion. That is the standard that we should set and the responsibility that we all share.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Sharon Dowey to close the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives.

16:50

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): Throughout the debate, we have heard from members across the chamber about the sheer importance of the role that policing plays in our society. We have rightly heard about officers' bravery, selflessness and commitment to keeping us, our friends, our family and our neighbours safe, but we have also heard how brutally undervalued they are. It is hard to think of a job in modern Scotland that is more dangerous and less rewarded and appreciated than that of a police officer.

Some reasons for that are not necessarily the fault of the Scottish Government alone. Police officers operate in a dangerous world, where people are less respectful and more prepared to take dangerous action against them. In addition, crime is evolving, and the range of threats that the police and the people they protect face is growing at an alarming rate. Liam McArthur spoke about the increasing complexity of crimes and the need for urgent action. Liam Kerr cited the statistics on the rise of serious crime. Recorded crime has gone up by 2 per cent, violent crime has gone up by 3 per cent and sexual crime has gone up by 7 per cent. Claire Baker spoke about the issue of retail crime.

However, many of the challenges that police officers face are a direct consequence of the Scottish Government's choices—its present choices and those that it has made over many years. It seems a very long time ago that the Scottish National Party, as a party of Government, committed to recruiting an extra 1,000 police officers on the street—a decision that it came to after being persuaded by the Scottish Conservatives. The latest statistics show that that work has been undone, as the number of extra officers on the front line has dwindled back down to an unacceptably low level, and things are projected to only get worse. Douglas Ross highlighted the fact that the SNP amendment seeks to delete the line in the motion that says that the Parliament

"regrets … cuts to police officer numbers".

The SNP is staying silent about the cuts.

Jo Farrell, the chief constable, told ministers exactly what she needed from the recent budget in order just to keep the show on the road. Instead, the Scottish Government delivered significantly less than that. It has been warned that that move will lead to even more job cuts at Police Scotland.

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP): The budget has not yet been passed. What amendments will the Conservatives seek to make to it to increase the justice budget? Where will that money come from?

Sharon Dowey: We could certainly cut the waste in the Scottish Government. The chief constable asked for a figure that would enable Police Scotland just to stand still, but the figure in the budget is £15 million short of that. It did not even get that.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): That was not an answer.

Liam Kerr: It was an answer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members! Please listen to the member who has the floor.

Sharon Dowey: It is not just the officers who have felt the brunt. The Police Scotland estate is also being subjected to a fundraising fire sale, as Davy Russell mentioned in his contribution. All over Scotland, local stations are closing, which is resulting in the disappearance of a police presence in towns and villages that have enjoyed having strong local officers for generations, and the buildings that are left over are in dire need of repair. It is a disgrace that police officers are expected to operate from such despicable environments, especially at the end, or in the middle, of unbearably gruelling shifts on the front line.

As the motion suggests, community policing is being deliberately and relentlessly eroded. That means that impressionable young people who might be on the fence when it comes to getting involved in offending have fewer positive role models nearby who might just talk them out of a life of crime. Officers who might have been able to build positive relationships in sometimes challenging communities are simply not there any more. Pauline McNeill spoke of the increase in young people carrying knives, which is a huge concern.

The SNP's inexplicable destruction of our police force has no winners. It leaves officers ill-equipped, underprepared and overburdened, which puts them at an unacceptable risk on the front line and leaves them more vulnerable to ill health, both physical and mental. Ultimately, it leaves communities exposed to criminals in a world in which crime is becoming less predictable and more devastating. After almost two decades of negligence, officers and the people they are charged with protecting deserve more.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs to close on behalf of the Government. You have up to five minutes, Ms Constance.

16:55

Angela Constance: I always listen very carefully to all members' contributions in any debate, and I rarely read out a pre-prepared speech when closing—instead, I am always trying to read my own handwriting. Also, I refuse to play games—I am too old to fool around—and I certainly do not let anyone, or, indeed, any man, put words in my mouth. I will exercise my right to use my five minutes in this debate as I see fit.

Douglas Ross: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Angela Constance: Absolutely not—no thank you.

I want to make the point that, when I listen very carefully, I also take a close interest in what people are not saying or doing. To the best of my knowledge, there were no justice asks in the negotiations or discussions that Opposition spokespeople had with the finance team. Instead, what I hear in the chamber is people opting out and then complaining. Every member in the chamber has to recognise that they all have power and influence that can make a difference.

As some members have mentioned, we have Labour's tax on jobs with the increase in the employer national insurance contribution, which has certainly represented a financial cost to policing. Further, there is the bill for the protection

of VIPs during the state visit last summer. I have not seen anyone standing up to Starmer on those issues.

Pauline McNeill: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Angela Constance: No, I will not.

The other thing that Opposition members will never say is by how much they will increase the policing resource or the head count. Instead, we will get figures plucked from thin air and discussions about how they would release officers back to the front line.

What always strikes me with sadness is that, when we have a justice debate, particularly a debate on policing, we tend to debate the past as opposed to the future.

Liam Kerr: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Angela Constance: Absolutely not.

I will be even-handed and balanced on the issue of police-recorded crimes. Serious assault and attempted murder have dropped by 60 per cent; housebreaking has dropped by 77 per cent; theft of motor vehicles is down by 69 per cent; vandalism is down by 73 per cent—those are all figures from 2006-07 to last year—and homicide is at its lowest level since records began, in 1976. Further, more people report feeling safe while walking in their own community.

In contrast to that—this is where I will be even-handed, as always—reports of violence against women and girls are up. Is that because of confidence in our justice system? In part it is, but could it also be because it remains a hidden issue?

Cybercrime is a growing concern, as is online safety. Shoplifting is also a growing concern, which is why we are prepared to invest £3 million every year in that area for the next three years.

Liam Kerr: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Angela Constance: Nope—no thank you.

Of course, as we have seen from evidence submitted by Police Scotland, increased specialism is required to tackle serious organised crime, which Police Scotland, I can assure members, does very well. Increased specialism is also required to investigate sexual crimes. National security and counter-terrorism activity also place a demand on policing in Scotland.

Claire Baker: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Angela Constance: No.

At the same time, we have to ensure that we have a balance between those areas and good community policing, which is about prevention. There is a connection between specialism and policing on the ground in our communities.

Therefore, let us start having a debate about the future of policing in Scotland, as opposed to the past.

Douglas Ross: On a point of order, Presiding Officer, which I genuinely think this is. The cabinet secretary was very clear that she does not use pre-scripted remarks and that her closing would be a summation of everything that was said in the debate. She went on to reference things that were not mentioned in the debate, such as the cost of VIP policing. If the *Official Report* shows that that was not mentioned in the debate, despite the fact that the cabinet secretary claimed that her remarks were unscripted, would that require a clarification to the *Official Report*?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I thank Mr Ross for his contribution. That is not a point of order. The chair is not responsible for the contributions of other members, including cabinet secretaries.

Douglas Ross: Further to that point of order, it was not about the rubbish that we heard from the cabinet secretary. If she said that subjects were previously mentioned whereas they were not, would that require a correction to the *Official Report* because she was making things up?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Ross, as I have already explained, the substance of the contributions of members, including the cabinet secretary, is not a matter for the chair. It was entirely a matter for the cabinet secretary to contribute in the way that she chose. That is not a point of order.

17:01

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I am pleased to close the debate on behalf of Scottish Labour. We brought it forward to talk about the reality of policing in Scotland in 2026, the issues in communities across Scotland and ideas for the future of policing in Scotland.

Pauline McNeill and other members have emphasised the importance of local policing. I join many members in thanking our dedicated and brave police officers for the work that they do. In particular, I praise Chief Inspector Iain Farmer and his team at K division in Renfrewshire and Inverclyde for their important work in tackling speeding and dangerous driving in the local area.

As I know from engagement with my constituents—as many members likewise will—they feel safer when police officers are visible and actively involved in their communities in responding to such concerns. They also have

greater confidence in Police Scotland to tackle crime when it is properly resourced.

I recognise the important work of our police officers across the country, yet our constituents and communities feel less safe. I say to the cabinet secretary that the number of people across Scotland who say that they feel safe after dark is at the lowest point on record. Less than half expressed confidence in the police in their local area—down from 60 per cent more than a decade ago. Overall, recorded crime rose last year, with violent crime up by 3 per cent, together with a worrying 7 per cent spike in sexual crime. Claire Baker talked on behalf of USDAW about the impact of retail crime.

The police are doing everything that they can in difficult circumstances. However, it is the first duty of a Government to protect its citizens. On that count, the SNP Government is failing, because the reason why our constituents and communities feel less safe is due to the Government's failures on policing.

The truth is that, despite the Scottish Government having come to power on a promise to increase police officer numbers, it has failed to protect those. There are now more than 1,000 fewer police officers than when Police Scotland was formed in 2013. I mentioned K division, its important work and the difficult circumstances that it has to face; it has 76 fewer police officers than it had then. Continued cuts to police officer numbers have involved the loss of another 25 officers in recent months, adding to the loss of almost 100 in the past year.

In addition, those cuts disproportionately affect local officer numbers. Ahead of the budget, as many members have said, the chief constable requested an additional £33.7 million to bolster front-line policing through the recruitment of an extra 850 officers. The Scottish Government failed to provide that investment, which means that we are likely to see further cuts in officer numbers at a time when crime is on the rise and confidence in local policing is failing. The recent best value report on policing in Scotland highlighted that workforce planning remains underdeveloped and that there is no evidence that the current officer numbers are sufficient to deliver an effective service.

As other members have highlighted, Scottish Labour will restore local policing to improve community safety. We will restore at least 360 officers to the front line in local divisions, ensuring that officers are once again visible and active participants in every community across Scotland. We will bring back crime prevention officers, who will work to proactively prevent crime rather than simply being reactive.

In the first weeks of a Scottish Labour Government, new strategic police priorities will be set out to rebuild public confidence in local policing. That is vital to ensuring that we have effective local policing across the country.

Members have raised other pressures that affect local policing capacity that the Scottish Government has failed to address. One of those pressures is the fact that officers increasingly find themselves dealing with mental health-related incidents. Scottish Labour will act where the Scottish Government has not, by creating a dedicated mental health emergency response division, which will result in a reduction the number of police call-outs.

Another pressure on local policing capacity is the amount of time that officers have to spend in courts. The chief constable previously indicated that up to 420 officers a day were in courts across Scotland. That takes officers off the streets and out of their communities. Scottish Labour will seek to address that with the roll-out of new technology in the court system and by reviewing the scheduling of cases.

Perhaps the biggest pressure on local policing capacity is the stress and other mental health issues that many officers face. The number of officer absences due to mental health and stress increased by more than 50 per cent between 2021 and 2024. More than 1,700 officers have quit during the past two years, leaving at a rate of more than 16 every week.

Scottish Labour will seek to improve pay, working conditions and mental health support in Police Scotland to retain existing officers and attract new recruits.

The Presiding Officer: I would be grateful if colleagues who are joining us could do so quietly.

Neil Bibby: Particularly because the cabinet secretary said earlier that she wanted to talk about the future of policing and we are presenting ideas that the Scottish Government is failing to deliver on.

Members have also highlighted the negative impact that the loss of police stations has had on community safety. Around 180 stations and buildings have been lost up and down the country since the creation of Police Scotland. In my region, we have seen the recent closures of Milngavie station, Bishopbriggs station and, even more scandalously, Ferguslie Park police station. Ferguslie Park has some of the greatest socioeconomic needs in the country.

More police stations are under threat, as Davy Russell mentioned, and he was right to raise that issue. Even those that are still operational are in a state of significant disrepair, including Paisley and

Greenock, which are in my West Scotland region. My colleague Katy Clark has raised that issue consistently. Scottish Labour is clear that we must properly fund the repair and maintenance of our stations to ensure that they are fit for purpose and able to serve local communities.

Today's debate has rightly focused on the importance of ensuring that policing is properly staffed, resourced and firmly rooted in local communities. However, it also illustrates the choice at the election in May—more decline and more crime with the Scottish National Party, or a new direction and support for our police with Scottish Labour.

I urge members to support the motion.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on community policing.

Finance (No 2) Bill

17:07

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-20718, which is on legislative consent for the Finance (No 2) Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Finance (No. 2) Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 2 December 2025, relating to clause 8 (Scottish and Welsh property rates set by Scottish Parliament and Senedd) and schedule 2, part 1 (Scotland), so far as these matters pursue a devolved purpose and alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.—[*Ivan Mckee*]

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

Business Motion

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-20749, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, which sets out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 17 February 2026

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Freedom of Information Reform (Scotland) Bill

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Children (Withdrawal from Religious Education and Amendment of UNCRC Compatibility Duty) (Scotland) Bill

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

7.45 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 18 February 2026

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, and Parliamentary Business; Justice and Home Affairs

followed by Scottish Green Party Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.10 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 19 February 2026

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions: Education and Skills

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Visitor Levy (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Scottish Income Tax Rate Resolution 2026-27

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Tuesday 24 February 2026

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Scottish Parliament (Recall and Removal of Members) Bill

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

6.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 25 February 2026

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Deputy First Minister Responsibilities, Economy and Gaelic; Finance and Local Government

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Budget (Scotland) (No. 5) Bill

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 26 February 2026

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

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

followed by Finance and Public Administration Committee Debate: Cost-effectiveness of Scottish Public Inquiries

followed by Criminal Justice Committee Debate: Substance Misuse in Prisons Inquiry

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2026

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.30 pm Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 16 February 2026, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[*Graeme Dey*]

17:08

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind): I wish to raise a matter of some considerable importance. I have given notice and a draft copy of my speech to the Presiding Officer, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs and the Minister for Parliamentary Business.

I should say that I have been a solicitor for 45 years. However, I am no longer in practice.

Last Thursday—5 February—in the case of Hirst v chief constable and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, Lord Lake, of the Court of Session, issued a seminal judgment in which he found Scots law to be in clear breach of the European convention on human rights and fundamental freedoms. In particular, he found that Scots law unjustifiably restricts the right to a free trial.

Lord Lake even took the step of issuing a formal declaration to that effect under section 4 of the Human Rights Act 1998. Specifically, he said that section 170 of the Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995 is inconsistent with the ECHR.

Such a declaration has been described judicially as a "last resort". Section 170 requires, inter alia, that, for a case of malicious prosecution—which was what the case was about—to succeed, the pursuer must first have suffered imprisonment. That is plainly ludicrous. Of course it is correct that the Crown must be immune when it simply makes a mistake. Not every case results in a guilty verdict. Mistakes can be made and prosecutions brought forward in good faith, but the law should surely not protect those cases in which it can be proven that the prosecution was brought out of malice. That blanket immunity, which section 170 provides, is what I believe led to Lord Lake making his finding.

The pursuer, Mark Hirst, a former STV journalist and prominent supporter of the late Alex Salmond,

was prosecuted for an alleged breach of the peace for making comments that the sheriff found simply to be an expression of an opinion. The Court of Session found that Mr Hirst had a relevant statable case for malicious prosecution to go to proof but, because of the terms of section 170, the court's hands were tied and the action could not proceed, and Lord Lake could not consider the proof even though he found that there was a statable case.

Because he was acquitted, the pursuer, Mr Hirst, cannot succeed in a subsequent case of malicious prosecution. It seems to me that section 170 is our own legal version of a catch-22.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Fergus Ewing: I will take an intervention in one minute when I finish this point.

However, section 170 was written not as a work of fiction by Joseph Heller but as a provision by the United Kingdom legislature in 1995. To proceed with his malicious prosecution action, Mr Hirst would have had to have said to Sheriff Paterson, "Please find me guilty and send me to jail, because otherwise I can't pursue a case for malicious prosecution." That is plainly absurd. Justice was served and done by his acquittal, but justice was also then denied because of his acquittal.

The right to a free trial is a cornerstone of democracy. It is what protects the citizen against the knock on the door in the middle of the night. It is what protects people from unlawful detention. It is what protects people from the jackboot of totalitarianism. Democracy is based on personal freedom, and where there is no fair trial, freedom does not exist.

I will take the intervention from Mr Kerr.

The Presiding Officer: I say at this point that this item is to seek changes to future business, and it is important that that is borne in mind.

Liam Kerr: Perhaps I may assist then, Presiding Officer. I remind members that I am a practising solicitor.

Clearly, if Scots law breaches the right to a fair trial under the ECHR, that needs to be remedied without delay, so what does Fergus Ewing suggest that members do about it?

Fergus Ewing: Indeed. I will cut to the chase, Presiding Officer. I appreciate—and I have communicated this to the Minister for Parliamentary Business—that there is not enough time for a bill. There would need to be massive consultation on the bill anyway, and I recognise that, but the issue must be addressed, nonetheless, as expeditiously as possible. We cannot allow a breach in the right to a fair trial—the most fundamental right of all—to subsist for any longer than is absolutely necessary.

Therefore, in conclusion, I request that the Scottish Government, perhaps in the next couple of weeks, make a ministerial statement. If, in that statement, it indicates to members that it believes that the defect must be cured and that it will be cured, we can have confidence that this is a Parliament and a Government that believes in personal freedom, democracy and the rule of law.

17:14

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Presiding Officer, I did not give you prior notice of my intent to speak. In relation to the business programme, I ask for parliamentary time to be scheduled for a Government statement on the continued delay in the release of material connected with the Salmond and Sturgeon inquiry.

Parliament has repeatedly sought clarity from ministers on when that information will be published, yet requests for both a statement and a firm timetable have been refused. Meanwhile, the Scottish Information Commissioner has taken enforcement action after deadlines were missed, and the matter now sits in the courts.

This is not some small procedural issue—it is about transparency and accountability to the Parliament and to the public. Let me be clear that no one is suggesting that the identities of alleged victims and complainers should be put at risk. Court orders protecting individuals must be respected and safeguards against so-called jigsaw identification are essential. However, ministers have said that work to resolve the issue is being carried out at pace. If that is the case, it is simply stating the obvious to say that the Government must know how far through the process it is—or does it mean at a snail's pace?

There are only a finite number of documents involved. If we are to take what the Government says at face value, work will already have been completed on many of them. It is therefore incumbent on ministers to tell Parliament when publication of the Salmond and Sturgeon files will happen.

There is absolutely no acceptable reason why a firm date cannot now be provided immediately. Continued delay risks giving the impression that process is being used as an excuse rather than its being a necessity, in particular as we approach an election. Taxpayers, whose money has been wasted on this cynical action, deserve full transparency. We are seeing continued concerns about Scottish National Party secrecy and cover-up, and the public are rightly asking how much

more public money will be spent before the matter is finally concluded.

The SNP is no stranger to frivolous litigious endeavours. We have already seen enormous legal bills accumulate: £363,000 spent on defending the botched Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill case; £250,000 spent on unsuccessfully testing independence powers at the Supreme Court; £766,000 spent on resisting cases brought by brave campaigners For Women Scotland; £630,773 spent on defending the misconduct investigation into Alex Salmond; and, so far, another £73,024—and counting—spent on attempting to keep the Salmond and Sturgeon files under wraps.

The public interest is clear. Ministers must now provide Parliament with the date for publication, confirm that protections will remain in place and explain how further delay and expense will be avoided. It is for those reasons that I call, again, for parliamentary time to be provided for ministers to make that statement, giving Parliament the clarity that it deserves and the transparency that the public need and deserve.

The Presiding Officer: I call the Minister for Parliamentary Business to respond on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau.

17:17

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey): I thank Fergus Ewing both for the advance notice of his intention to air the matter that he did and for the accompanying detail that he provided.

The Government notes the terms of the court judgment, but we also note—as I hope Mr Ewing recognises—that the period of time in which an appeal can be lodged runs until February 2026 and, accordingly, it would at this stage be premature to comment publicly on the matter. Self-evidently, if an appeal were to be lodged, it would be appropriate and proper to defer any decision on specific action pending the final decision on the case.

I acknowledge that it is entirely reasonable for Parliament to ask the Government what it intends to do to remedy an ECHR incompatibility if that is the final position of the court after any appeal proceedings have been concluded or if no appeal is lodged. Given that we are in the period during which an appeal can be considered, I note the need to afford the proper respect to the judiciary and to the litigants, and to be mindful of the later potential application of the Parliament's sub judice rules.

However, I note that, if the terms of the judgment broadly remain, careful consideration will be needed—as with any court judgment—regarding the judgment and what action may be necessary to address the incompatibility. With just six weeks left in the current session of Parliament, as Fergus Ewing acknowledged, that would, therefore, be a decision for the next Government and Parliament to take when the process is complete.

Fergus Ewing: I accept the argument that Mr Dey has produced—that we wait until February 2026—but I cannot see why, after February 2026, there should not be a ministerial statement. The minister appeared to rule that out, although perhaps I misinterpreted that.

Graeme Dey: I am making the point that, if we get into the situation that I have referred to, there will have to be careful consideration of the judgment and any action that is required to address the incompatibility. I very much acknowledge the seriousness of the matter that Mr Ewing has raised, although we disagree on the merits of a statement and when it would be delivered.

On the matter that Rachael Hamilton raised, both I and the First Minister have already indicated in the chamber the Government's intent. I offer further reassurance that the work is being carried out at pace. Therefore, I do not see the justification for a statement in the immediate term.

Rachael Hamilton: Will the minister take an intervention?

The Presiding Officer: The minister has concluded.

The question is, that motion S6M-20749 be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 17 February 2026

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Freedom of Information Reform (Scotland) Bill

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Children (Withdrawal from Religious Education and Amendment of UNCRC Compatibility Duty) (Scotland) Bill

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

7.45 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 18 February 2026

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, and Parliamentary Business; Justice and Home Affairs

followed by Scottish Green Party Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.10 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 19 February 2026

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions: Education and Skills

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Visitor Levy (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Scottish Income Tax Rate Resolution 2026-27

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Tuesday 24 February 2026

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Scottish Parliament (Recall and Removal of Members) Bill

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

6.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 25 February 2026

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Deputy First Minister Responsibilities, Economy and Gaelic; Finance and Local Government

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Budget (Scotland) (No. 5) Bill

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 26 February 2026

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

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

followed by Finance and Public Administration Committee Debate: Cost-effectiveness of Scottish Public Inquiries

followed by Criminal Justice Committee Debate: Substance Misuse in Prisons Inquiry

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2026

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.30 pm Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 16 February 2026, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:20

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of eight Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move the motions.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Civic Government (Scotland) Act 1982 (Licensing of Non-surgical Procedures) Order 2026 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Criminal Legal Aid and Assistance by Way of Representation (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2026 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the First-tier Tribunal for Scotland Local Taxation Chamber (Rules of Procedure and Composition) (Miscellaneous Amendment) Regulations 2026 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Food Supplements (Magnesium L-threonate monohydrate) (Scotland) Regulations 2026 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Legal Aid and Advice and Assistance (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2026 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2026 [draft] be considered by the Parliament.

That the Parliament agrees that the Finance and Public Administration Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the supplementary legislative consent memorandum on the Public Office (Accountability) Bill.

That the Parliament agrees that, under Rule 12.3.3B of Standing Orders, the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee can meet, if necessary, at the same time as a meeting of the Parliament between 2.00 pm and 2.50 pm on Wednesday 25 February 2026.—[*Graeme Dey*]

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

Decision Time

17:21

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are eight questions to be put as a result of today's business.

I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Neil Gray is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Sandesh Gulhane will fall, and if the amendment in the name of Angela Constance is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Liam Kerr will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-20731.1, in the name of Neil Gray, which seeks to amend motion S6M-20731, in the name of Jackie Baillie, on the safety of the Queen Elizabeth university hospital, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division. There will be a brief suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:22

Meeting suspended.

17:24

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We move to the vote on amendment S6M-20731.1, in the name of Neil Gray. Members should cast their votes now.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)

Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Ind)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Ind)
Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-20731.1, in the name of Neil Gray, is: For 59, Against 63, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-20731.2, in the name of Sandesh Gulhane, which seeks to amend motion S6M-20731, in the name of Jackie Baillie, on the safety of the Queen Elizabeth university hospital, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Ind)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Ind)
Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-20731.2, in the name of Sandesh Gulhane, is: For 56, Against 66, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-20731, in the name of Jackie Baillie, on the safety of the Queen Elizabeth university hospital, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Ind)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)

Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Ind)
Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-20731, in the name of Jackie Baillie, on the safety of the Queen Elizabeth university hospital, is: For 63, Against 58, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament is concerned that the Scottish Government is unable to state clearly that the ventilation and water systems at the Queen Elizabeth University Hospital have been validated as meeting required safety requirements; recognises that thousands of patients are treated safely and expertly cared for by NHS staff in the hospital every year; welcomes the establishment of a Safety and Public Confidence Oversight Group, and calls on the Scottish Government to set out by what date it intends to carry out the risk assessment of the hospital's ventilation system, as recommended by the inquiry, what mitigations are currently in place to ensure that the water is safe to use, how it intends to protect at-risk patients in areas that have not been validated, and when this validation will be carried out and the documentation shared with whistleblowers and infection control.

The Presiding Officer: I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Angela Constance is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Liam Kerr will fall.

The next question is, that amendment S6M-20730.1, in the name of Angela Constance, which

seeks to amend motion S6M-20730, in the name of Pauline McNeill, on community policing, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Ind)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Ind)
Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Abstentions

Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-20730.1, in the name of

Angela Constance, is: For 66, Against 55, Abstentions 1.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The amendment in the name of Liam Kerr falls.

The next question is, that motion S6M-20730, in the name of Pauline McNeill, on community policing, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Ind)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Abstentions

Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-20730, in the name of Pauline McNeill, as amended, is: For 66, Against 54, Abstentions 1.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament acknowledges that Scotland is a safe country with recorded crime having decreased by 38% since 2006-7 and that homicide is at its lowest level since comparable records began in 1976; recognises that in 2025-26, the Scottish Government increased police funding to a record £1.64 billion, investment which enabled Police Scotland to take on more recruits in the last financial year than at any time since 2013, and that the draft Budget has a further record investment in policing of £1.7 billion in 2026-27; condemns the UK Government's employer national insurance increase, which is costing Police Scotland over £25 million every year; commends the hard work, dedication and commitment of all the officers and staff of Police Scotland; is pleased that police officers in Scotland receive the best basic pay in the UK at the minimum and maximum of each rank, and that there are around 30 full-time equivalent (FTE) officers per 10,000 population, compared with around 24 FTE officers in England and Wales; notes that Police Scotland has an important role to play in addressing community concerns or tensions and there should be no tolerance for hate crime in a modern society; recognises that, whilst the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey shows a long-term increase in the proportion of people who report feeling safe in their local area, perceptions of safety can vary significantly between communities; further recognises that, in September 2025, Parliament agreed the landmark Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform Act, which will introduce reforms to place victims and witnesses at the heart of the justice and courts system, establish a Sexual Offences Court, improve the Victim Notification Scheme and parole system, and introduce a Victims Commissioner, and calls on the Scottish Government to continue its focus on reducing crime and reoffending and supporting victims.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-20718, in the name of Ivan McKee, on a motion on legislative consent for the Finance (No 2) Bill, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Finance (No. 2) Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 2 December 2025, relating to clause 8 (Scottish and Welsh property rates set by Scottish Parliament and Senedd) and schedule 2, part 1 (Scotland), so far as these matters pursue a devolved purpose and alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: I propose to ask a single question on eight Parliamentary Bureau motions.

As no member has objected, the question is that motions S6M-2750 to S6M-2754, on approval of Scottish statutory instruments; motion S6M-20755, on referral of an SSI; motion S6M-20756, on designation of a lead committee; and motion S6M-20757, on committee meeting times, in the name of Graeme Dey, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Civic Government (Scotland) Act 1982 (Licensing of Non-surgical Procedures) Order 2026 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Criminal Legal Aid and Assistance by Way of Representation (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2026 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the First-tier Tribunal for Scotland Local Taxation Chamber (Rules of Procedure and Composition) (Miscellaneous Amendment) Regulations 2026 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Food Supplements (Magnesium L-threonate monohydrate) (Scotland) Regulations 2026 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Legal Aid and Advice and Assistance (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2026 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2026 [draft] be considered by the Parliament.

That the Parliament agrees that the Finance and Public Administration Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the supplementary legislative consent memorandum on the Public Office (Accountability) Bill.

That the Parliament agrees that, under Rule 12.3.3B of Standing Orders, the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee can meet, if necessary, at the same time as a meeting of the Parliament between 2.00 pm and 2.50 pm on Wednesday 25 February 2026.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Nature Champions

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I encourage members who are leaving the chamber to do so as quickly and as quietly as possible as we move to the final item of business, which is a members' business debate on motion S6M-20338, in the name of John Mason, on the nature champions initiative. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes what it sees as the success of the Nature Champions initiative, established in 2013 and coordinated by Scottish Environment LINK, which encourages all MSPs to champion Scotland's species and habitats; recognises that more than 100 MSPs have become Nature Champions over the current parliamentary session, supported by 25 LINK member organisations, and that the initiative marked its 10th anniversary in 2023 with a public exhibition outside the Parliament, before being awarded the NGO Impact Award by the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management in 2024; considers that the Glasgow Shettleston constituency, like the rest of Scotland, benefits from action to protect biodiversity; regrets reports that one in nine species are at risk of national extinction in Scotland; acknowledges that many MSPs will retire or not stand again at the 2026 election, creating a need for new Members in the next parliamentary session to take up the role of a Nature Champion; welcomes that the initiative will be relaunched in the new session to provide that opportunity, ensuring continuity in raising awareness of Scotland's threatened species and habitats, and commends the cross-party and collaborative spirit that it considers has underpinned the initiative throughout its history.

17:35

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): I thank all those who have supported today's motion, those who have enabled this afternoon's debate and those who will take part in it. I welcome to the public gallery representatives of some of the organisations that support nature champions, including—and especially—Scottish Environment LINK, which co-ordinates everything, and the Scottish Raptor Study Group, which covers the eight MSPs who champion raptors.

The nature champions initiative has become incredibly popular among MSPs, and an amazing range of flora, fauna and habitats now have a member speaking for them. Some 105 MSPs are nature champions. I thank Scottish Environment LINK—Andrew Marks in particular—and its 25 supporting organisations, which include RSPB Scotland, the John Muir Trust, the Scottish Wildlife Trust and WWF Scotland.

There is a theory that urban politicians, such as myself, should stay out of matters that affect rural areas. However, a lot of us love all parts of Scotland, including cities, towns, rural areas and the maritime environment—that is the way it should be. Looking at the list of MSPs and their adopted species, I saw that Kaukab Stewart has the corncrake, which is not common in central Glasgow, and Anas Sarwar has upland birch woods, which I have not seen in the city either. It is a good thing that we all take an interest in all parts of the country.

Contrary to popular belief, I am not the species champion for the Soay sheep on St Kilda, although maybe I should have taken them on as an additional species—despite the fact that there are actually too many of them rather than too few. My species is the kestrel. Although it is not in the most endangered category, it has been in decline over a number of years. We used to see kestrels regularly hovering over motorway verges around Glasgow, but we see them less often now.

As Fiona Hyslop has blanket bogs and Jamie Halcro Johnston has Caledonian pinewoods, I guess that they do not move around very much and that you can visit them whenever you like. However, others among us—such as me with the kestrel, perhaps Martin Whitfield with the adder, or Rhoda Grant with the wildcat— can be quite elusive and you have to get to specific places at specific times to see them up close.

In two different years I have gone out to watch a team ring young kestrels, which can only be done at a certain time when the birds are not too small and not too large. Kestrel numbers in Scotland are down by some 67 per cent since 1995, the reasons for which are not entirely clear but probably include changes to farming practices. Numbers fluctuate from year to year, depending on the availability of the kestrel's main food source, which is voles. However, the reasons seem to be partly geographical, too, in that alternative food sources, such as baby starlings, might be available in some areas but not in others. The revival in the number of pine martens means more predators of kestrel eggs and chicks. However, I do not think that pine martens have a champion, so I am not blaming any of the members who are here today.

In retrospect, perhaps I should have chosen something that is easier to find, as Colin Beattie has done with rivers or Emma Harper has done with ponds and small lochs—they do not move around quite as much as kestrels do. There are some tricky situations where a species with a champion eats the species of another champion, such as Claire Baker's puffins, which eat Willie Rennie's sand eels. You might say that some species are a bit more exciting than others. Mark Ruskell has the white-tailed eagle—that is absolutely tremendous. However, Mercedes Villalba has road verges—I would need some convincing to get excited about them.

One of the purposes of today's debate is to re-emphasise the importance of the nature champions scheme, especially as we head towards the end of the current session of Parliament, given that quite a number of MSPs are either retiring or will not come back for other reasons.

I hope that those champions who return will continue to support a species or habitat—either their existing one, or perhaps a new one—and that both they and the Scottish Environment LINK member organisations will have a real push to get the 60 new MSPs signed up.

In one sense, the question is, why would an MSP not take on the role? If more than 100 of us have done so, why not the other 25 or so? I realise that the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands cannot take on a species because she might be seen to be biased in some way, but there are other members.

I was intrigued to see in the Scottish Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals manifesto that 87 per cent of people in Scotland now identify as animal lovers. That is good, but my question is this: why are the other 13 per cent not animal lovers? The good news for that 13 per cent, which could be around 16 MSPs, is that they can still be a nature champion and take on something which—like Graham Simpson's ash or Carol Mochan's kelp forests—is not an animal.

There are some species that would probably benefit from having a nature champion but do not have one. An example would be badgers, about which I had an email the other day. Apparently 65 per cent of land in Scotland is completely devoid of badger presence, so I think that they need a champion in Parliament, and hopefully that can be changed.

However, new MSPs will have to be quick if they want to support a popular species. We all know that Christine Grahame regularly grabs the seat behind the First Minister each Thursday so as to be on television, and she has also grabbed a very popular species in the golden eagle.

I thank Scottish Environment LINK and its member organisations for setting all this up; I thank colleagues for all their work and interest in the subject and for their support today; and I look forward to hearing contributions from members—even Christine Grahame's contribution on the golden eagle.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We may not hear about the verges unless Ms Villalba changes her mind and presses her button. As I have advised members who wish to participate in the debate, there is, as Mr Mason rightly anticipated, a lot of interest in participating. In order to allow every member a chance to contribute, speaking time allocations have been reduced to three minutes, so I would be grateful if members could stick to that.

17:42

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I thank John Mason for securing the debate. It is a pleasure to speak today on an initiative that has quietly transformed the way in which Parliament engages with Scotland's natural world. As someone who has proudly taken on the mantle of seagrass champion, I can attest to the power of the nature champions initiative in helping to grow our understanding of the natural heritage that we are all entrusted to protect.

When I was first approached to become seagrass champion, I did not fully appreciate the scale of its significance or the complexity of the ecosystem that it supports. Scotland is home to two true species: eelgrass and dwarf eelgrass, and together they form underwater meadows that are among the most remarkable and most threatened habitats in our marine environment.

For me, what began as a title soon became a genuine interest and fascination. Seagrass meadows are ecological powerhouses. They provide essential habitats for countless species, helping us to move towards our national target of halting biodiversity loss by 2030. They shelter rare species such as native oysters; stabilise the sea floor; improve water quality; and play a significant role in carbon capture, storing carbon at rates that exceed many well-known land habitats. Their contribution to a healthier coastal ecosystem is profound, and their loss would be felt far beyond the shoreline.

Yet, despite their importance, seagrass meadows have suffered a dramatic historical loss. Across the UK, up to 92 per cent have disappeared over the past century. That is why the work of the restoration Forth programme is vital. Restoration Forth, which was launched in 2022, is a community-driven effort to restore seagrass meadows and European flat oysters in the Firth of Forth. Delivered by a coalition including Project Seagrass, WWF Scotland, the Ecology Centre, NatureScot and others, it has already achieved remarkable progress. To date, more than 210,000 seagrass seeds have been planted across the Forth. Volunteers and project partners have also transplanted 880 seagrass cores, with additional trials showing expansion of up to 500 per cent in some of the monitored sites.

It is great to see that more than 3,000 people are taking part in events, workshops, seed processing sessions and restoration activities. Schools and community groups and local volunteers have

become custodians of their own coastline, building skills and forging connections that will last long beyond the project's timeline.

I have had the privilege of joining that work myself on several occasions. One memorable morning, I found myself on a freezing cold beach with a group of volunteers, learning the fine art of injecting seagrass seeds into sediment, using the dispenser injection seeding technique. I now pass the restoration site every morning on the train into Parliament, peering out of the window like a proud and slightly overinvested gardener checking whether his seedlings have sprouted.

Another highlight for me was joining a guided snorkelling session with restoration Forth, the Ecology Centre and WWF Scotland. Experiencing the hidden world of the Forth beneath the surface was nothing short of spectacular. It brought home, in a way that no briefing paper ever could, the richness of the life that depends on those meadows and the urgency of protecting them.

In conclusion, as we look ahead to the elections in May, I encourage all MSPs, both those returning after the election and those who are elected for the first time, to take up the role of nature champion. It is much more than just a title: it is a commitment to understanding, advocating for and celebrating species and habitats that make Scotland unique.

17:45

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I congratulate John Mason on securing the debate and delivering what I thought was an excellent speech, detailing just some of the species for which members are champions in the current session of Parliament. It reminded me of species champions from past sessions, because one of my predecessors representing the Highlands and Islands, Mary Scanlon, was the species champion for the freshwater pearl mussel; I know that she did a lot of work for that species and continues to take a great interest in it.

Like Mr Mason, I am not coming back to Parliament, but I will continue to take a strong interest in the species for which I am champion: the bottlenose dolphin. When I was appointed as champion, I found out that these dolphins are intelligent, inquisitive and playful, so I can only assume that 128 other MSPs were offered the bottlenose dolphin and refused, and it was left to the final MSP to take that one up.

I was delighted when I was asked to be species champion for the bottlenose dolphin, because it gave me an opportunity, which I readily accepted, to go to the Whale and Dolphin Conservation's Scottish Dolphin Centre at Spey Bay. The centre does incredible work, encouraging people to understand more about bottlenose dolphins and their life—which is a long life; many of the females live for up to 50 years or more—in the Moray Firth.

As the species champion, I went on a shore watch. I knew, when I was being photographed by the local press, that an image of me at that time, when I was leader of the Scottish Conservatives, looking out to sea with binoculars, was going to be used by some to say, "Tory leader looks for votes." I do not know for which species Russell Findlay is now the champion, but I advise him to be very careful of photo opportunities such as that. It was, understandably, reported in the way that I expected, but I was still keen to do it, because the shore watch project is great for getting people involved. You can go down there for 15 or 30 minutes, do a shore watch and then go back in and record the numbers.

Bottlenose dolphins also attract people to our area. The species generates about £4 million for the Moray economy and the wider economy along the Moray Firth, because people want to come and see dolphins and, if possible, go on one of the number of tours that go on in order to get up close—but not too close so as not to disturb their habitat.

A number of issues are concerning to those of us who are passionate about the species with regard to their habitat being disturbed. In three minutes, I do not have time to go over that. Nevertheless, being a species champion allows me to press those issues both in and outwith Parliament.

In my final seconds, I will say that I highly recommend the nature champions scheme to incoming MSPs, as it gives us a greater knowledge of a species with which we may otherwise not be familiar. It also gives us an opportunity to stand up in Parliament and take part in a debate that will, I think, be very consensual, because we all want to see the scheme continue to go from strength to strength. I will be looking at the next Parliament to see who gets not just the bottlenose dolphin, but many of the other species that have been mentioned tonight.

17:48

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I, too, thank John Mason for bringing this important debate to the chamber. Before the debate, I was inundated with colleagues telling me what species they champion. I am proud to be a nature champion, because it is an initiative that genuinely brings nature to life for us all. It makes us more aware of what is happening in our constituencies; which species are under pressure; which habitats need support; and where communities are stepping up to support local wildlife. I thank Scottish Environment LINK and its members for

consistently campaigning for nature and for educating us all on the issues that really matter.

Just two weeks ago, Parliament passed the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill, which marks a significant step forward in strengthening protections for Scotland's biodiversity. During that process, I was proud to bring many amendments to the table, some of which were even agreed to. I was especially happy to support the amendment to add swift bricks to new buildings; that is just one example of how small, targeted interventions can support species that are under pressure.

In fighting for nature, I have always stressed that nature is not a luxury. It is vital to our health and wellbeing, and it contributes to the quality of our food, the strength of our tourism sector and the resilience of our economy. If we are serious about tackling the climate and nature emergencies, we have to invest in our natural environment and in the communities that care for it, because a healthy natural world makes our communities more resilient.

As John Mason highlighted, in every community in urban and rural Scotland, people benefit directly from action to protect biodiversity, whether through urban green spaces, community gardens or local wildlife corridors in our urban areas.

As the nature champion for the large heath butterfly, I thank Butterfly Conservation Scotland, because I have now seen at first hand just how closely that species is linked to the health of Scotland's bogs. It is a true bog specialist, thriving on our upland blanket bogs and lowland raised bogs—habitats for which Scotland is internationally important.

The large heath butterfly is an indicator species. Its caterpillars rely on cottongrass, and the adults feed on cross-leaved heath, so when the butterfly is doing well, that tells us that those habitats are in good condition. Large heath butterflies could be under threat from climate change, and championing the species has shown me how vital peatland restoration is not just for one species, but for carbon storage, flood mitigation, biodiversity and community resilience.

More than 100 MSPs have taken part in the initiative, and I welcome the fact that it will be relaunched in the next session of Parliament because it will give new MSPs the chance to advocate for our threatened species and habitats. I hope that everybody will keep on campaigning together, because it could not be more important.

17:52

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I am delighted to speak in the debate and to add my whole-hearted support for the nature champions initiative.

The current session of Parliament began in a strange and distant time when we were all still socially distancing and still working out how to be together. The first nature champions meeting of the session was online, but many of us were there, and, even through a screen, it brought us together with a shared sense of purpose. With the way that we were introduced to the initiative, it felt like, "Well—an MSP? Of course you would be a champion!" It reminded me then, as it does now, that nature connects us all.

I was given the Eurasian beaver and the aspen, which is one of the beaver's favourite trees to dine on. I love the evolution of the initiative in recognising that species do not exist in isolation. The beaver needs the aspen and other trees, and bodies of water. In turn, beavers restore wetlands, slow the flow and help to alleviate flooding. Together, they form part of a living web—an ecosystem— that ultimately supports us.

Being the champion for the beaver and the aspen has enabled me to forge numerous connections. With the Scottish Wildlife Trust, I visited Knapdale, where the first beaver reintroduction trials began in 2009. I had actually been there in 2010, and it was a privilege to return and see how beavers had transformed the landscape. There was more water, more life and more diversity, which reminded me that the initiative is about seeing not just the species, but its impact.

On another occasion, I witnessed the team at the Argyll Beaver Centre, and their tremendous enthusiasm in engaging so many visitors in the wonder of beavers, helping people to understand why beavers matter and—going back to Douglas Ross's point—to contribute to the local economy.

Since then, beaver translocations in Scotland have opened up and beavers are flourishing, but we must ensure that those that are facing lethal control measures are moved to safety. I give the Beaver Trust my great thanks for its vital work in that regard, alongside support from the Scottish Wild Beaver Group and the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland.

I have loved hearing colleagues across the chamber delight in their species, from the freshwater pearl mussel to the red squirrel. With one in nine species at risk of national extinction, the nature champions initiative truly matters, so I extend my thanks to Scottish Environment LINK for conceiving of the idea and creating this wonderful forum for us to come together.

Perhaps the next step is a debate in the chamber in which we are not talking about our

species, but speaking from the perspective of our species and interacting with each other. There may be a humorous moment with one eating another, and things like that. Let us get that conversation going, because when we champion nature, we champion Scotland's future.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Beatrice Wishart—around three minutes, please.

17:55

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I thank John Mason for bringing this important debate to the chamber, and I thank Scottish Environment LINK for all its work and for its briefing, which highlights the stark level of on-going nature loss in Scotland, including the fact that one in nine species are at risk of national extinction.

There is much going on in the world of politics, but we should never forget that we face the twin challenges of the climate and biodiversity crises. What a great initiative it is to have 100 MSPs champion Scotland's threatened and iconic species and habitats. It has spawned similar programmes in the UK Parliament and the Welsh Senedd, and within Scottish communities and local authorities.

I am proud to be the MSP nature champion for orca. Liam McArthur—as you will know, Deputy Presiding Officer—champions the Scottish primrose, and I think that the difference in and between those two species reflects the diversity of the natural world in the northern isles.

Orca, which are often referred to as killer whales, are in fact members of the dolphin family. David Attenborough's "Wild Isles" series began with stunning scenes of a pod of orca off Shetland. None of that would have been possible without the keen eyes of local people, armed with a WhatsApp group, to alert the production crew of sightings. There was another sighting of orca of Shetland only yesterday, with wonderful images of them on social media for those of us who missed them.

I have been privileged to work with Whale and Dolphin Conservation and, like Douglas Ross, I have taken part in shore watches. Shore watching provides citizen science data, allowing expert workshops to identify global whale and dolphin habitats that are in need of protection.

In 2022, I was especially proud to have won the MSP nature champion of the year award, following my involvement in the campaign to stop at-sea explosions. Orca and other marine mammals can be severely injured in shock waves that are produced by detonations of unexploded ordnance on the seabed. Changes to the law to ensure that low-impact methods are used to neutralise those weapons better protect marine animals, but more work is required to change the law on noise limits, as noise can cause harm to whales and dolphins.

The rush to use sea spaces to provide transition to renewable energy can impact seabirds and ocean creatures as well as the fishing sector. The construction of the infrastructure also means an increase in noise pollution, for example from the pile-driving that is needed for offshore wind turbines.

To conclude, we need measures to ensure that we maintain our native species and habitats. Nature champions are a great way to raise awareness, and I wish the incoming 2026 cohort of MSP nature champions well in that endeavour.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Wishart. Had I known that you were going to mention the Scottish primrose, I probably would have given you another three minutes, but there you go.

17:58

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): thank John Mason for bringing this important debate to the chamber. The nature champions initiative encourages members of the Scottish Parliament to champion threatened and iconic species and habitats, raising awareness and promoting action to protect our environment. I am proud to be involved with the initiative as the champion for rivers, and my contribution will focus on why rivers matter and why they need our urgent attention.

The Parliament should be proud that more than 100 MSPs are currently nature champions, and debates like this are essential to highlight the importance of environmentalism. That context matters, because the scale of the challenge that is facing our natural environment is stark.

The motion for debate refers to a worrying report

"that one in nine species are at risk of national extinction".

More work must be done, and initiatives such as nature champions are a step in the right direction. That is why I am proud to be the champion for rivers: one of the most vital parts of our ecosystem, and one that we must recover if we are to reverse biodiversity loss.

At a local level, I see both the challenges and opportunities for improvement at first hand. I currently convene the Esk river improvement group in my constituency, where we bring together stakeholders to investigate how we can further improve and advance the quality of water for river users and wildlife. That work has only reinforced for me how central rivers are as biodiversity hotspots across Scotland, and their huge role in

supporting a range of insects, fish, birds and mammals. One often-overlooked part of the picture is freshwater invertebrates. Invertebrates are an essential part of the ecology of our freshwater system. They play a vital role in maintaining water quality, breaking down organic matter and balancing the food web.

Freshwater invertebrates depend on a healthy river to survive and are sensitive to pollution, shifts in temperature and habitat degradation. That makes them useful as an early warning system, indicating a river's health. Unfortunately, our rivers are under threat, and it is important that we understand the impact of those threats in order to tackle them.

On top of those long-standing pressures, climate change is now accelerating the damage that is being done. Extreme weather events alter rainfall patterns and rising temperatures are putting our freshwater ecosystem at risk. Those changes do not just affect wildlife but increase risks for communities. Flooding is a growing concern, with increased rainfall and river flow straining natural flood defences.

I hope that members of the Parliament will continue to support the programme and, with a large number of my colleagues standing down at the next election, I encourage future members to become nature champions and advocate for a stronger environment that will benefit us all.

18:00

Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): I commend John Mason for securing the debate and the work of Scottish Environment LINK, not just for selecting MSPs but for the support that it gives to MSPs with their particular species. A measure of LINK's success was the event last year, which I had the pleasure of sponsoring on its behalf, and where we had more than 100 MSPs.

I started off life as the champion for the freshwater pearl mussel, which is now getting its second mention of the evening, as I inherited it from Mary Scanlon. I am sure that Audrey Nicoll is looking after that species as well as the pair of us did. I am not sure whether promotion is the right word, but I am now the champion for the red squirrel, which, if nothing else, is certainly more photogenic and one of Scotland's most iconic species, given that we have 80 per cent of the UK's red squirrel population, which has declined by about 90 per cent in the past 150 years as grey squirrels have taken over, no more so than in Scotland.

However, in Aberdeenshire, we have a chance to eradicate the grey squirrel. Some individuals—no doubt they were well intentioned—took some grey squirrels from the central belt and released them in Aberdeen, where they then spread out along the Dee and the Don. In the past decade, we have had successful projects to trap grey squirrels and push them back into Aberdeen. We have a chance to remove grey squirrels and give red squirrels the best opportunity of surviving. Grey squirrels carry squirrel pox, which is a terrible disease, and they also compete with the red squirrels for food and habitat.

I will not go into my culinary skill of serving up grey squirrels, as it is already in the *Official Report*, but I urge people to do whatever they can to help organisations such as the Scottish Wildlife Trust and its saving Scotland's red squirrels project by trapping and reporting sightings. On 21 January, it was red squirrel appreciation day, which marked a milestone of nearly a quarter of a million recorded sightings. Everyone can play a part in helping that particular species. To continue that good work, these organisations need reliable funding cycles and a new Scotland strategy for red squirrel conservation, as the current one is just drawing to a close. We could also see improvements to the forestry grant system to better support grey squirrel control.

I end by wishing the nature champions initiative every success for the new parliamentary session. I hope that we can see improved support from the next Government for protecting our red squirrels.

18:04

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I thank the member for this debate. As an endangered species myself, I am grateful to be species champion for the once endangered golden eagle, and I even have the South of Scotland Golden Eagle Project in the Tweed Valley in my constituency.

From 2018 to 2024, 28 juvenile chicks were legally moved from the Highlands to the south of Scotland, establishing the current population of 48 to 50 birds. They are thriving because of the terrain, the supply of food and the protections.

I visited the secret location where the chicks develop into full-grown adults. They are released in stages on to platforms for food, returning initially to their camouflaged container homes until they choose to fly free for good.

Escorted by experts, the visitor approaches the containers silently across fields, carrying a tub of fresh kill. The containers are solid on the side the visitor approaches from, with grid walls on the other side, facing the hills, so the birds can scope their future territories.

Wearing a gauntlet for protection, the visitor raises a small leather flap in the side of the container through which they can present the fleshy morsels to the chicks. As I did so, this huge bird turned away from those hills and briefly stared at me and the food, in that order. To say that I was taken aback by the size of that chick is an understatement. It was enormous.

More scary was the predatory look that it briefly gave me. I was, indeed, coming face to face with the eye of its ancestor, the dinosaur—but what a privilege and what a thrill. I commend that project to anyone coming in once I have retired.

18:06

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I stand to speak on behalf of the Atlantic salmon, Salmo salar. I thank John Mason for bringing this debate to the chamber and Scottish Environment LINK for giving me the chance to represent that wonderful fish. It would have been wrong for me not to register my interest in the debate, in the sense that I have been involved in managing salmon fisheries for nearly 50 years and have been trying to catch them for about the same amount of time.

Interestingly, Christine Grahame got the species that I was hoping to get. I do not begrudge her that, and I am very grateful to be able to support the salmon. I want to talk about it because it is one of the reasons why many people flock to Scotland. They come here not only to try to catch salmon but to engage in all the activities that Scotland offers, such as partaking in our great food and drink, enjoying our whisky and visiting the other facilities around Scotland. A huge amount of anglers come to our rivers and generate more than £100 million-worth of income for Scotland every year.

When I move into retirement at the end of this session, I hope to spend a lot more of my life involved in trying to help salmon as well as catching them. There are huge threats to the salmon population, such as climate change, whether it involves floods or drought; predation, with seals coming up the river Dee, as we heard today; and aquaculture. I will concentrate on two of those issues this evening.

The first issue that I will address is water. I believe that the Scottish Parliament will have to consider that water is becoming a diminishing resource in Scotland. Allowing abstraction from one river catchment to another, with the effect that rivers dry out, is not a good idea. For example, we are abstracting water from the Spey and putting it into the Tay and the Fort William area to generate electricity. The result is that the rivers are drying up, the stones are heating up and water temperatures are rising in the river. It is not just salmon that are dying because of that but freshwater mussels, too. At the other end of that issue, we see increased flooding over short periods. I have seen parr and smolts washed out of the river, when they should be living in the river.

I have to mention aquaculture. We need to see a huge change in aquaculture. We need pens to be removed from migration routes for salmon. We need to drive down sea lice numbers—I know that the Government is working hard on that. We also need to see a reduction in disease. The aquaculture industry must rise to those challenges.

Like other members, I encourage future MSPs to become involved in the nature champions initiative. They should not be put off if they cannot get the species that they want. They should find one that they can represent, and they should stand up and fight for it, learn all about it and do the best that they can for it in the Parliament.

18:09

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): The nature champions initiative is now one of the most successful examples of collaborative politics in this Parliament. Since 2013, it has grown into an award-winning model of engagement that has now been emulated across the United Kingdom. It is a testament to its impact that, as others have said, more than 100 MSPs have stepped up as champions during this session alone.

I really enjoyed John Mason's opening speech, which brought quite a lot of good humour into the debate. However, as well as the light-hearted side of the issue, we must be clear about why such advocacy is necessary. Scotland's nature is in a state of quiet crisis. Scotland is currently ranked 212th out of 240 countries and regions for biodiversity intactness. The decline in species abundance is not a distant threat; it is a current reality, with one in nine of our species now at risk of national extinction.

Everybody has been talking about the various species that they are champions for. I am very pleased to be the species champion for the great crested newt. I am pleased not only because it is a fantastic species but because the largest colony of the great crested newt in Scotland is in Gartcosh, in my constituency. Indeed, the reason why the Gartcosh nature reserve was established was to protect that species. I have been on various visits there with the local Froglife team to see the great crested newt, but I have not actually seen any, because they are very shy animals. I have taken my wee boys down a few times for a look, too. They were very interested in finding the newts, but we have not found any. However, the newts

are there—we have seen the pictures today. In any case, Gartcosh nature reserve is a fantastic walk, so anybody who wants a wee day out with family or to go for a walk on their own should try to visit it.

On a serious note, protecting those green corridors in post-industrial landscapes is just as important as protecting any remote wilderness. That unique site at Gartcosh demonstrates how biodiversity can flourish alongside urban development when managed with care and expertise. The success at Gartcosh is a credit to the hard work of Froglife—sponsors of the great crested newt as part of the nature champions initiative—North Lanarkshire Council and the local people, who enjoy the presence of the colony, which continues to thrive.

The role of a nature champion is to turn abstract policy into a personal mission, ensuring that unseen parts of our environment have a dedicated voice in the heart of our democracy. I hope that I am doing my small part in that, as any time I drive past it with the kids—I have already mentioned my two boys, and my wee girl is now getting to a good age as well—I always say, "In there is the great crested newt!"

In the previous parliamentary session, I was the champion for the Natterer's bat. I enjoyed being that as well, and I learned a lot about that species. As others have done today, I encourage all returning and new MSPs to become involved in the project.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am conscious of the number of members who still want to participate, so, before I call the next speaker, I am minded to accept a motion without notice under rule 8.14.3 to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes. I invite Mr Mason to move such a motion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[*John Mason*]

Motion agreed to.

18:13

Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): I can give some more intelligence to the chamber on the golden eagle saga. When I was first elected to the chamber, I moved very quickly in order to become the species champion for the golden eagle, and I was lucky enough to be successful in that regard. In that role, I was also invited to the Moffat eagle festival and even got to be taken to the secret golden eagle release site that Christine Grahame described in her speech, where I was given a behind-the-scenes look at how golden eagle reintroductions work. However, once I was appointed Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity, it was felt that I should support all endangered and threatened species, and I had to, as it were, release the eagles. In April 2024, I once again had the opportunity to be a species champion, only to find that Christine Grahame had gotten in there and grabbed the golden eagles in my absence.

I am delighted to say that I am now the species champion for the endangered northern damselfly, which, in the UK, can be found only in the Highlands, where it is restricted to sedge-fringed lochans, which means small ponds with sedges, reeds and grasses around the edges. For the past two summers, my husband and I have volunteered on the site of special scientific interest for northern damselflies at Tombane farm in Perthshire, where invasive Sitka spruce trees are encroaching on the damselfly ponds. We enthusiastically, if amateurly, have a go at cutting down these trees and dragging them away from the ponds. As neither of us is qualified to use a chainsaw, we have to use small hand tools to do so, and we can clear away the smaller trees in that way. That allows us to give space and light back to the damselflies.

At the same time, since farmers began putting up fences to keep deer out, we are able to identify and protect the seedlings of native trees such as Scots pine, birch, oak and rowan, which can now regenerate, and we hope one day to have a thriving Caledonian pine forest at the top of the hill. Gordon and I have a competition each year to see who can locate the most tiny baby pine trees among the moss and grasses. He always wins, but I put on record that that is because he wanders off uphill to look for them while I am sawing up trees and dragging them away from the ponds—he is not here to contradict me. When we sit down to take a break, it is absolutely magical to see the colourful damselflies zooming about over the ponds and resting on the reeds and grasses.

Self-seeding Sitka pose a real danger to Scotland's rare wildlife and habitats by spreading from commercial tree plantations to sensitive habitats and there is a real question about who should pay to undo the damage that is being done. We have a lot to do to protect northern damselflies and to improve and restore their habitats. I thank the British Dragonfly Society and everyone else who works hard for that beautiful species.

18:15

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I thank John Mason for bringing this debate to the chamber.

I have been saddled with many titles over the years, some complimentary and some less so, and the knighthood and the trip to Holyrood or Buckingham palace are still somewhere in the

pipeline. However, one title that I am genuinely proud of, particularly given my strong links to Stranraer, is that I am the nature champion for the native oyster bed. I value the role enormously, not least because I am one of the few nature champions who can sustainably eat what my habitat produces because my constituency is home to one of the most important native oyster beds anywhere in Europe. Beneath the waters of Loch Ryan lies Scotland's last wild commercially harvested native oyster bed, a site of exceptional ecological and national significance.

Native oysters are remarkable ecosystem engineers. Each oyster can filter around 200 litres of water per day, improving water quality and supporting the health of the marine environment. They also act as an important blue carbon store, with studies showing that oyster habitats can hold up to 17.9 tonnes of carbon per hectare, per year.

Despite dramatic declines elsewhere across Europe, caused by overfishing, habitat loss and disease, the Loch Ryan oyster bed has thrived thanks to generations of sustainable stewardship. Its disease-free and genetically strong population makes Loch Ryan a vital source of stock for restoration projects across Scotland and a true jewel in my constituency.

That work is increasingly being supported by wider environmental initiatives, including the Solway Coast and Marine Project, which brings together scientists, local communities, the fishing industry and conservation partners to restore and protect the habitats that underpin coastal health. Oyster recovery is central to that work, but so too is restoring and protecting David Torrance's seagrass meadows, which sit alongside many of our oyster beds. Seagrass, as we have heard, is one of the most effective natural carbon sinks in the UK and provides crucial nursery habitats for fish and invertebrates. Healthier oyster beds improve water clarity, allowing more sunlight to reach the seabed which, in turn, enables seagrass to grow and thrive. Torrance and Carson might seem like an unlikely team, but oyster beds and seagrass act powerfully together as nature's tools for improving biodiversity, water quality and climate resilience.

One major example of what that kind of restoration can achieve is the historic return of native oysters to the Firth of Forth after more than a century. The project will see 30,000 oysters reintroduced, creating a new reef that will support marine life and improve water quality. As the Scottish Parliament's nature champion for oyster beds, I wish that initiative every success and hope that it will mirror the remarkable achievements of Loch Ryan, one of the country's largest and healthiest native oyster beds.

No celebration of those achievements would be complete without mentioning the Stranraer oyster festival, which will run from 11 to 13 September and draws around 30,000 visitors each year. It is a vibrant showcase of our marine ecology, heritage and, of course, outstanding food. I know that the cabinet secretary, having visited on at least one occasion, will agree that the wonderfully welcoming folk of Stranraer will ensure that visitors have the time of their lives there.

18:19

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Reform): I also thank John Mason for bringing this debate to the chamber. It is always the best debate of the year because so many people want to take part. I have really enjoyed listening to other members and am delighted that I will be followed by Mercedes Villalba, who is going to tell us all about what she has done for Scotland's road verges. I cannot wait.

In the previous session of the Parliament, I was a species champion for the holly tree. It was decided—probably rightly—that I did not do enough for the holly tree, so I was ditched from it. This session, I champion the ash tree. I was determined to do better for the ash tree than I did for the holly, so I have asked a number of questions about ash trees—six in the past year. I have asked about the cut in funding for the Future Trees Trust breeding programme for Scottish provenance ash; councils' ash dieback recovery plans; the link between increases in plant imports and the rise of tree diseases such as ash dieback; and the ash dieback risk group.

Ash is under threat, but there are some healthy ash trees out there. To be honest, my experience of ash trees has been a bit mixed. In August 2023, a group of species champions went on a trip to Scotland's rainforest, by Loch Lomond. We took a boat over to the rainforest, and we walked through it. Somebody pointed up a bank to a big ash tree—the biggest ash tree that I have ever seen. As a man who likes to get his boots muddy, I was determined to go up and hug that ash tree, which I did with Monica Lennon and Mark Ruskell. We joined hands and we hugged the ash tree. [*Laughter.*] We did—we hugged the ash tree.

The sad part of that story is that the ash tree has subsequently died of ash dieback.

However, there are better examples. The Argyle Street ash in Glasgow is currently the UK tree of the year. I went to see it last week, because it is in the running to be European tree of the year. I encourage everyone to vote for the Argyle Street ash.

Although I am up against the time, I need to mention my other species: the magnificent bilberry

bumblebee, which is hard to find but well worth the effort. I found more than one during an arduous trek up Ben Lawers with the Bumblebee Conservation Trust in July 2021.

The scheme is great, and I encourage new members and returning members to get involved.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Simpson. I discourage you from embracing the Argyle Street ash, for its own safety.

I now give the right of reply to Mercedes Villalba, who has around three minutes.

18:23

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer. By popular demand, I rise to advocate for the vital and exciting habitat of road verges—vital because they provide refuge for all manner of plants, animals, fungi and insect species, and exciting because, taken together, road verges cover almost 200km^2, which is an area the size of the city of Aberdeen. That offers a huge opportunity for species restoration.

Damaging changes to land management in the course of the 20th century have meant that roadside verges have become a last refuge for some of Scotland's most threatened plant and insect species—ones that are being driven to extinction at a faster rate than higher-profile mammal and bird species. I am therefore proud to advocate for that habitat. It matters because it will have a significant impact on pollinators and food chains. Lower crop yields, poorer quality, higher prices, fewer producers and greater food insecurity affect us all. However, properly managing road verges can help to address some of the imminent threats that our species and ecosystems face. Targeted actions that support species and habitats can have a positive chain reaction, restoring species, strengthening habitat health and improving our environment for the benefit of us all.

With that, I strongly encourage everybody to visit their local road verges.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is an offer that members surely cannot pass up.

I invite Mairi Gougeon to respond to the debate.

18:25

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I do not know quite how to follow that, but I hope that I can do the debate justice.

First, as other members have done, I thank John Mason for shining a light on this important initiative, and I thank Scottish Environment LINK for its work in developing the initiative and for all the support that it provides to MSPs.

I am delighted to take part in this debate on the nature champions initiative, first, to hear about all the great work that is being done by MSPs across the chamber and, secondly, because I genuinely love these debates.

I am also delighted to be covering the debate for Gillian Martin, who would have loved to be here—not least so that I can reflect on one of the most memorable contributions to our nature champions debates in previous years, which was, in fact, hers. She shed light on her early days as a goth and said how apt it was for her to be the champion for the yew tree. I could not quite remember when that contribution was made, but it turns out that it was in 2017 during my members' business debate.

At that time, I was the species champion for the hen harrier. As I said then, I really did not know what I was letting myself in for, but it turned out to be an incredible experience. As others have described in relation to the species that they champion, the experience really opened my eyes and brought my focus to that vital species. It took me right across Scotland—through the marshes and up the hills—and, fortunately, I got to experience that incredible bird up close.

Another stand-out contribution to the debate in 2017 was from Christine Grahame. As ever, she did not disappoint today. She was similarly dramatic in 2017, although the drama then was in relation to the house sparrow rather than the golden eagle.

Turning to other contributions, I note that John Mason said that some species for which MSPs are nature champions could potentially predate others, but Graham Simpson might have described the first example of a cross-party killing of one of the species. I hope that he has been able to provide some reparations for the damage that he and others in the chamber have clearly done to that species.

Our discussion is really timely, given that, as Sarah Boyack mentioned, just two weeks ago, the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill successfully passed stage 3. That was a real milestone in our commitment to restoring and regenerating the nature of Scotland. As everybody here will be aware, that groundbreaking legislation requires us, for the first time, to set statutory targets for nature. Such targets will form a central part of our strategic framework for biodiversity and, crucially, will ensure clear accountability and co-ordinated action across the Government.

As the nature champions initiative demonstrates, we need to take action to protect

our precious species and habitats. Just last year, we launched our first nature 30 sites, which is a key step in delivering our commitment to protect 30 per cent of our land and seas for nature by 2030. Four pioneering sites have now been recognised across Scotland—Loch Arkaig pine forest, the Findhorn hinterland, Loch Wood and Knapdale—and they will play a vital role in promoting ecological restoration and management at scale in Scotland.

We are also investing in our nature, and members have heard about the importance of financing critical initiatives for our species. The groundbreaking nature restoration fund has already invested more than £65 million in projects across Scotland. The fund is delivering a real impact and supports a wide range of innovative projects across Scotland.

Among the already successful initiatives is the Highland amphibians reptile project, which has boosted the survival rate of the Highland great crested newt from 2 per cent to 13 per cent. That breeding success enabled the translocation of the United Kingdom's rarest newts, which is thought to be a first in Europe. I hope that Fulton MacGregor, who is the nature champion for the great crested newt, will be delighted to hear that.

Across Scotland, we are restoring nature and iconic species, not as a Government acting alone, but by working hand in hand with communities, land managers and conservation partners. Our work to protect red squirrels, which Alexander Burnett mentioned, demonstrates the power of partnership. He highlighted the vital saving Scotland's red squirrels programme, which involves Government, volunteers and landowners working together to control grey squirrels, limit the spread of squirrel pox and safeguard one of our most iconic native mammals.

Lorna Slater and Christine Grahame highlighted golden eagles. The return of golden eagles to the south of Scotland is one of our most inspiring success stories. So much vital work has taken place on that, and it is great to see that success.

Of course, the debate is not just about our terrestrial species—we have had contributions from various members on our marine species. David Torrance mentioned seagrass, Douglas Ross talked about the bottlenose dolphin and Beatrice Wishart mentioned the orca. I welcome Finlay Carson's focus on native oysters, and the fact that he highlighted the Stranraer oyster festival. I have been able to see at first hand some of the work that has gone into supporting the species, as well as enjoying the product of that work later on at the oyster festival, which is a fantastic experience. I encourage members to visit it if they get the opportunity.

We also had an important contribution from Edward Mountain, who focused on the pressures that our iconic wild salmon face. As I set out in a response earlier today, a number of pieces of work are under way to try to address the pressures, of which we know there are a number, that are impacting on that iconic species.

Although we are making progress, there is clearly still much to be done. Now more than ever, it is important that we keep the nature agenda firmly in the spotlight. There is still work to do to raise its profile, to strengthen wider understanding and to ensure that nature remains at the heart of our national priorities. I welcome the discussion and the spotlight that the nature champions initiative puts on our biodiversity and iconic species in Scotland. Although I will not be a member in the next session of Parliament, I hope, like other members, that the initiative will continue in the next session with a new set of parliamentarians who are willing to support these precious species and habitats.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate. We can now all head to Alexander Burnett's for a grey squirrel surprise.

Meeting closed at 18:32.

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