

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

Scottish Parliament

Thursday 19 February 2026

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

General Question Time

Non-Domestic Rates Revaluation (Aberdeen)

1. Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of any impact of the upcoming non-domestic rates revaluation in Aberdeen. (S6O-05531)

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): Data showing changes in draft rateable values by council area can be found in an interim revaluation report on the Scottish Government website. Those statistics indicate a total increase in rateable value of 7 per cent for Aberdeen city, compared to 12 per cent across the whole of Scotland.

The budget delivers a reduction in the three tax rates for 2026-27 and provides support through sectoral and transitional relief schemes, including the extended support for the hospitality and self-catering sectors that was announced at stage 1 of the budget bill.

Liam Kerr: Today, Aberdeen is reeling following the announcement that, after decades of trading as community pubs, the Kittybrewster and the Brig 'O' Dee will join the ever-expanding list of pubs and hospitality premises that have closed. The city is witnessing a tsunami of bar and restaurant closures, with many citing the Scottish National Party's eye-watering business rates regime as a key cause. Will the minister give our pubs and hospitality businesses the breathing space that they need by backing the Scottish Conservative plans to exempt most of them from business rates entirely?

Ivan McKee: As I have already indicated, the total increase in rates in Aberdeen is only 7 per cent across the three years since the last revaluation. The Scottish Government is already putting in a total of £870 million in rates reliefs for businesses across the country, including £320 million in transitional support over the next three years, to support businesses facing precisely those challenges. In addition, if Mr Kerr was listening last week, he would have heard that we have put in the budget another relief of 25 per cent on top of the 15 per cent reduction that hospitality businesses benefit from—that is a total of 40 per cent relief for hospitality businesses, which is more than such businesses in the rest of the United Kingdom receive.

Population Health Framework

2. Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government how the population health framework will help to tackle the commercial determinants of health. (S6O-05532)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): The population health framework sets out a range of actions to tackle the drivers of ill health, including harms caused by alcohol, tobacco and vapes, overweight and obesity, and gambling. Legislation to restrict the promotion of less healthy food and drink comes into force later this year, and the Scottish Government is supporting the delivery of the four-nations Tobacco and Vapes Bill, which aims to create the first smoke-free generation.

In the coming weeks, an alcohol and drugs strategic plan will be published to take forward the learning in the delivery of the national mission. An alcohol harm prevention plan and a diet and healthy weight plan will be published later in 2026 and will set out key actions in those areas to improve population health.

Gillian Mackay: Giving evidence to the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, the chief medical officer stated:

"Our prevention agenda is one of the most important things that we can try to do nationally to ensure that we have a sustainable health and care system for the future."—[*Official Report, Health, Social Care and Sport Committee*, 10 February 2026; c 5.]

It is clear that we need to do more on prevention to keep people well and, over time, to reduce the burden on the national health service. When will we see comprehensive bans on marketing of alcohol, foods that are high in fat, salt and sugar, and vaping?

Neil Gray: I agree with the chief medical officer and with Gillian Mackay in her assessment of the need to ensure that we move to a more preventative upstream approach. That is exactly what we have set out in the population health framework and the service renewal framework to ensure that we have a sustainable and needs-based health and social care system.

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

The Government's work to continue and increase the minimum unit price of alcohol is an example of our approach to taking concrete action to reduce alcohol harms. Work is under way to consider the range of options for any future uprating of minimum unit pricing. We are also considering Public Health Scotland's recent evidence review of restricting alcohol marketing, although no decisions have been made. Our tobacco and vaping framework sets out the actions that we are taking to make Scotland tobacco-free by 2034 and to reduce vaping among non-smokers and young adults. The legislation that I referred to in my earlier answer to restrict the promotion of less healthy food and drink from October 2026 delivers one of the first actions under the population health framework.

Baby Box

3. Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the baby box, including current availability and the easiest way of applying for one. (S6O-05533)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): I am very proud of Scotland's universal baby box programme, which is the only one in the United Kingdom, and I am delighted that, since its inception in 2017, more than 367,000 baby boxes have been delivered, with 89 per cent of parents taking up the opportunity to receive a box.

Scotland's baby box is available to all parents of newborn babies, who are supported to apply by their midwife. All parents are informed about the baby box at the 12-week appointment. At around 25 weeks, they can register for a baby box by completing a freepost registration form with their midwife.

Bill Kidd: Every child in Scotland deserves the best start in life. Can the cabinet secretary say more about how the draft Scottish budget is investing to ensure that we continue to support children and families throughout the early years and beyond?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The member is quite right to point to the fact that the baby box is but one part of the Scottish Government's determination to ensure that every child has the best start in life. That includes the provision in the budget of £100 million over three years to support the delivery of a universal breakfast club offer for primary school-age children and the £50 million a year whole family support package, in addition to continuing to uprate the Scottish child payment and working to increase the payment to £40 for families with babies under one in 2027-28.

Deep Vein Thrombosis and Pulmonary Embolism (Primary Care)

4. Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to increase the identification of deep vein thrombosis and pulmonary embolism in primary care. (S6O-05534)

The Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy and Sport (Maree Todd): Primary care teams play a key role in recognising and assessing deep vein thrombosis and pulmonary embolism. Those teams have access to Healthcare Improvement Scotland tools that support evidence-based care for patients at risk, and the Scottish intercollegiate guidelines network—SIGN—provides guidance on preventing and managing venous thromboembolism, which primary care and other clinicians can use.

Members of the public can find information on NHS Inform, and the Scottish Government has endorsed Thrombosis UK's leaflets online. Those resources support awareness and timely assessment. Anyone with symptoms of deep vein thrombosis or pulmonary embolism should seek clinical advice promptly.

Fulton MacGregor: My office was recently contacted by the family of David Kellett, who died suddenly from an undiagnosed deep vein thrombosis and pulmonary embolism. I am told by his wife that, over nearly four months, David repeatedly sought medical help for worsening symptoms and was assessed by multiple healthcare professionals.

Despite those opportunities, DVT and PE were never considered, investigated or discussed, and, less than 48 hours after his final general practitioner appointment, David died at home. His family are now calling for a review of current practices, stronger clinical pathways and safety nets, and improved training and accountability to help to prevent similar avoidable deaths. David's family are still waiting for a report by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman on his treatment, which has been delayed since last year.

What work is being done to identify DVT and PE? What assurances can the Scottish Government give, as far as possible, that no family will go through such a tragic experience in the future?

Maree Todd: The Scottish Government extends its deepest sympathies to all families affected by DVT and PE, and we recognise the importance of strengthening early identification.

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

National health service boards are responsible for developing and maintaining local clinical pathways to support safe and effective assessment of patients with suspected deep vein thrombosis or pulmonary embolism. Clinical guidance is being kept under review, and SIGN 122 is currently on the programme for review. We remain committed to supporting best practice and improving awareness so that tragic experiences such as those that Fulton MacGregor has described are avoided in future.

Warm Homes Plan

5. Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of any impact on Scotland of the United Kingdom Government's warm homes plan. (S6O-05535)

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): [*Inaudible.*]

The Presiding Officer: Excuse me, cabinet secretary. Can you check that your card is inserted?

Màiri McAllan: Apologies for the delay, Presiding Officer.

The UK's warm homes plan acknowledges the importance of improving energy efficiency and supporting households, but it falls short on the meaningful action that is needed to accelerate clean heat and bring down energy bills. Despite promises, the UK Government failed to set out an enduring solution to reduce electricity prices, which continue to plague households in this energy-rich country. Energy bills remain around £190 higher than they were at the general election, when the now Labour UK Government pledged to reduce them by £300. I will continue discussions with the UK Government, urging it to use its reserved powers to go further, including through the adoption of a social tariff.

Marie McNair: I recently met MPC Energy, a business in Clydebank, to discuss the impact of Labour's short-sighted plans on its business. MPC has more than 10 years' experience and has helped hundreds of people on low incomes make their homes energy efficient, but, as a result of Labour's plans, it now faces uncertainty. Is the cabinet secretary willing to hear more about its work and consider what more can be done to ensure that my constituents and others across Scotland can continue to have access to warm and energy-efficient homes?

Màiri McAllan: I am aware of the concerns that have been expressed by businesses about the effect of the UK Government's delay in publishing its warm homes plan and the uncertainty that exists about future policy and support for heat and energy efficiency measures. I understand MPC Energy's concerns in that regard.

By contrast, this week, we marked a milestone of 50,000 households that have been supported to live in warmer, better homes through our warmer homes Scotland scheme. My officials and I will provide Ms McNair with the best information on how she and her constituents should approach the UK Government in respect of the continuity of support.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The Scottish Government's home energy scheme is far more expensive than the equivalent boiler upgrade scheme in the United Kingdom. Meanwhile, the number of installations in England is going up, while installation numbers in Scotland have stalled. When will the Government get a grip on the home energy system so that we can get people's bills down in the way that they need, and so that we can get warmer homes, too?

Màiri McAllan: I highlight to Willie Rennie the fact that the number of homes with a heat pump installed is higher than ever before in Scotland. According to the Scottish house condition survey in 2019, 23,000 homes had a heat pump installed, and that figure had increased to 45,000 by 2023. Equally, energy efficiency across all tenures has improved, with the share of domestic properties achieving an energy performance certificate rating of at least C increasing from 40 per cent to 52 per cent between 2019 and 2023.

Willie Rennie compared the home energy scheme with schemes in England. I am always open minded as to how Scotland's schemes can operate better and more efficiently, although the take-up that I have referred to speaks to their success. What I will not do is allow any of the protections that exist in our scheme to be eroded, because, as we have seen with schemes in the rest of the UK, customers can be left out of pocket with damaging installations having been made in their homes.

The Presiding Officer: I would be grateful if colleagues joining the meeting were to do so quietly.

Budget 2026-27 (South of Scotland Infrastructure)

6. Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how its draft budget 2026-27 will ensure meaningful infrastructure improvements in the south of Scotland. (S6O-05536)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): The draft budget includes investment to facilitate the installation of railway electrification infrastructure on sections of the Borders line

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

and to complete the new Dumfries high school. Across the south of Scotland, it will support the delivery of affordable homes, around 2.5 hectares of woodland creation, 268 hectares of peatland restoration and a new water treatment works in Boreland. Through the growth in city region deals, it will ensure that work continues on creating the 113-mile walking and cycling trail connecting Berwick-upon-Tweed and Moffat, and it will promote growth by developing new fit-for-purpose business units in Tweedbank.

Finlay Carson: I welcome this week's announcement of the £1.1 million ground investigation works contract for the Springholm and Crocketford bypass project, which is a clear escalation of preparatory work. However, communities want clarity on the financial direction of travel, not just technical studies. Will the cabinet secretary confirm in unequivocal terms whether full dualling of the bypass remains a funded and actively supported option for the Government? Will she set out precisely what formal engagement her Government has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding the budgeting, cost sharing and assessment of the dualling option, so that we can understand whether the necessary financial structures are in place?

Shona Robison: I would say first of all that there is specific reference to improvements to the A75 and A77, including the Springholm and Crocketford bypasses, in the new infrastructure delivery pipeline that was published on 13 January and that an outline business case that is in development will define that further.

I am pleased that Finlay Carson has welcomed the £1.1 million for the ground investigation works contract, and I can tell him that the design assessment work to consider options for realigning the trunk road, with bypasses at those villages, is well under way and proceeding at pace. We welcome the announcement that the UK Government has committed funding for the remainder of the current study, as that will enable us to complete the initial work on considering improvements to the key route at Springholm and Crocketford and to identify a preferred route option by early 2027.

For Women Scotland Case

7. Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it plans to continue providing funding to any organisations that challenge the judgment in the For Women Scotland v the Scottish Ministers case. (S6O-05537)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The equality, inclusion and human rights fund supports a range of civil society organisations that deliver work focused on tackling inequality and discrimination, furthering equality and advancing the realisation of human rights in Scotland. Those organisations must fulfil and meet their obligations under the grant requirements in place for that fund. Each organisation must deliver against its agreed obligations and those are monitored via biannual progress reports and quarterly finance reports on funded services.

Sharon Dowey: Various organisations have recently sought to reverse the implementation of single-sex spaces, ignoring last year's crystal-clear ruling by the Supreme Court and, in turn, the rule of law, but the Scottish Government still insists on funding them. Meanwhile, 10 months on, the Scottish National Party has still failed to ensure that its public bodies are fully following that judgment, leading to costly legal challenges at the taxpayer's expense. Will the Scottish Government finally issue an apology to women and girls in Scotland for its failure to fully implement that judgment, and will the SNP Government finally ensure that any body or organisation that it funds is committed to providing single-sex spaces?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I reiterate that the Scottish Government accepts the Supreme Court judgment and is implementing it.

I would point out that the schemes that Sharon Dowey refers to are helplines and befriending organisations and offer community engagement. I would also refer her to the recent hate crime statistics, which came out on 17 February and which point to hate crimes based on race, sexual orientation, disability, religion and being transgender and to the on-going challenges that we face due to misogyny. The Tories stoke up division, but I am proud that the Scottish Government continues to promote and protect equality and human rights throughout Scotland for everyone.

Care Pathways (Postural Tachycardia Syndrome)

8. Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide further details of the support provided to NHS boards to develop specialist care pathways for postural tachycardia syndrome. (S6O-05538)

The Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy and Sport (Maree Todd): We expect national health service boards to provide safe, person-centred care for people with postural tachycardia syndrome.

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

Although responsibility for specific clinical pathways lies with NHS boards, we have allocated more than £137 million to boards this year to help tackle the longest waits for appointments and procedures. That sum includes more than £500,000 for cardiology and £500,000 for neurology, which are the specialties most likely to support people with postural tachycardia syndrome.

I have every sympathy with postural tachycardia syndrome patients and the challenges that they face, and we want patients to receive all the support which they are entitled to.

Elena Whitham: Constituents in Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley, who have, or who suspect that they have, PoTS do not have a dedicated care pathway provided by NHS Ayrshire and Arran, which means that many are misdiagnosed and often end up using accident and emergency services to try to manage that much-misunderstood condition. I accept that such decisions are made at health board level, but what more can the Scottish Government do to support the creation of dedicated care pathways for PoTS alongside the training of healthcare professionals?

Maree Todd: I thank Elena Whitham for raising the concerns of her constituents in Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley. Although NHS boards are responsible for local service configuration, the Scottish Government is supporting improvements in the recognition, diagnosis and management of PoTS. Alongside the increased investment in reducing waiting times, we have provided £4.5 million in recurring funding to strengthen services for long Covid and ME or chronic fatigue syndrome, which are conditions that are often linked with PoTS.

We also work closely with NHS Education for Scotland to enhance clinical knowledge of autonomic dysfunction, fatigue and related conditions, providing training and resources to support earlier identification and better management of conditions such as PoTS. That is complemented by accessible NHS Inform guidance for both clinicians and patients.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Peter Murrell Charges (Information Sharing)

1. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): Before I start, I want to make it clear that I fully understand the law relating to live criminal proceedings. John Swinney should also understand the law, so I urge him not to hide behind it to avoid answering my questions, which have nothing to do with matters before the court.

On 19 January, John Swinney received a private briefing from the Lord Advocate that contained details of charges against Nicola Sturgeon's husband and former Scottish National Party chief executive, Peter Murrell. That information was kept from the media and the public. Thirty-one minutes after receiving that information, John Swinney passed it to his most senior SNP spin doctor. Why?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Let me make it clear that I understand the importance of protecting live criminal proceedings. That is exactly why the Lord Advocate sent me a minute to warn me about the risk of contempt of court in a significant criminal case. It is abundantly clear that I would be asked about that case in court. She did that in order to ensure that I did not prejudice the proceedings.

The very brief minute that was sent to me by the Lord Advocate, which is a type of communication that I receive from the Lord Advocate on a number of occasions, was issued to the people in the Government who have to speak on my behalf. If it is important that I am reminded by the Lord Advocate that I must be careful and respect the live criminal proceedings, it is equally vital that those people who are authorised to speak on my behalf have the same information.

Russell Findlay: The reason why John Swinney passed sensitive information from the Lord Advocate to his SNP spin doctor is obvious. It was because he knew that it gave him and his party a political advantage in an election year. Thanks to the Lord Advocate, John Swinney and the SNP knew the precise scale of the alleged crime, while the public knew nothing. Mr Swinney was also given key information about potential timescales, which was also concealed from the public.

Yesterday, the Lord Advocate claimed that she briefed John Swinney so that he did not say anything to jeopardise the case. John Swinney says that he accepts that, but her explanation is simply not credible. [Interruption.]

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Let us hear one another.

Russell Findlay: If it really was about preventing any risk to the case, who else did John Swinney share that information with?

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

The First Minister: The Government has answered a freedom of information request on time to address exactly the point that Mr Findlay has put to me. I want to repeat the reason why that information was shared with a limited number of people in the Government. It is because those individuals act on my behalf and they have to know the information that I am privy to so that they also do not jeopardise the live proceedings.

Mr Findlay has made a number of comments that are, frankly, contemptible—utterly contemptible. On the radio this morning, a prominent King’s counsel, Mr Thomas Kerr, was asked what to make of the issues that were raised in Parliament yesterday. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: Sorry—it was Mr Thomas Ross. My apologies.

Mr Thomas Ross KC said:

“I thought it was an absolute disgrace. I mean, the current Lord Advocate has practised at the Scottish bar for 40 years. She has a stellar career. She is trusted by every practising lawyer and every judge in the country, and for her to be accused of corruption without a shred of evidence to support it was one of the most shameful episodes I have seen in that building.”

It was a shameful episode, for which Russell Findlay was responsible. He should be ashamed of himself for what he has said.

Russell Findlay: Imagine boasting about getting an FOI answered on time—absolutely desperate.

The First Minister did not answer the question, but it sounds like he did not share the information with his entire Cabinet, but he shared it with his spin doctor.

The Lord Advocate should have known that handing politically advantageous information about an acutely sensitive criminal case involving Nicola Sturgeon’s husband to the SNP leader was a gross misjudgment. The Lord Advocate was appointed by Nicola Sturgeon and retained by both Humza Yousaf and John Swinney. As a member of the SNP Government, the Lord Advocate is supposed to be scrupulously politically neutral.

I will say it again: in the real world, this smacks of corruption. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

Russell Findlay: It once again highlights the inherent conflict of interest with Scotland’s top prosecutor also being a member of the Scottish Government. John Swinney stood on a manifesto promise to address that. Five years later, nothing has changed. I wonder why. Does John Swinney now agree that the Lord Advocate’s dual role must end?

The First Minister: Before I address that point, I want to say something very directly to Mr Findlay, the Parliament and the public in Scotland. Dorothy Bain is an outstanding prosecutor. She is an outstanding lawyer. She has 40 years of unimpeachable service to the public interest in Scotland. She alone is responsible for more cases of sexual violence of men against women being brought to justice than any other person. I put on record my absolute confidence in the Lord Advocate in undertaking her duties. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Thank you.

The First Minister: I am disgusted by the way that Russell Findlay spoke about the Lord Advocate yesterday. He should be ashamed of himself, and he should withdraw every word of contemptible rubbish that he put on the record yesterday and today. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. Let us continue.

The First Minister: The Government was elected on a policy commitment to explore, examine and consult on issues related to the dual functions of the Lord Advocate. Those issues are being considered; research work has been undertaken and it awaits decisions among ministers. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister. Thank you.

The First Minister: I point out that the regulation of the arrangements for the Lord Advocate holding the dual functions of being the chief legal adviser to the Government and the head of the prosecution service is in the Scotland Act 1998, which is reserved legislation. If Mr Findlay wants to do something about that, he should support Scotland in becoming an independent country.

Russell Findlay: The Oscar for best phony anger goes to John Swinney. What a desperate deflection—unbelievable. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear our proceedings.

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

Russell Findlay: After five years of inaction, it maybe will take this rotten episode to finally force the SNP to end the Lord Advocate's dual role.

This scandal is typical of an SNP Government that is obsessed with secrecy and spin, personified by the First Minister. If John Swinney really does not understand why this stinks, he is in need of a software update.

The Lord Advocate's private memo gave John Swinney political advantage. *[Interruption.]*

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

Russell Findlay: He was Nicola Sturgeon's right-hand man and he got a heads-up about the criminal case involving her husband. The Lord Advocate's actions were wrong and her excuses do not stack up. John Swinney says that he has confidence in the Lord Advocate, so will he therefore support our plan to get her back into Parliament to provide a full statement about this shameful, rotten episode?

The First Minister: Parliament decided on that point last night in a democratic vote by its elected members.

Yesterday, Mr Findlay put on the record all his points to the Lord Advocate. I think that 14 members were able to ask questions of the Lord Advocate, in an extended urgent question in Parliament. This morning on the radio, Thomas Ross KC said:

"I hope that now everything's calmed the Scottish Conservatives are big enough to apologise for making that slur"—
the slur against the Lord Advocate—

"because being trusted is the most important thing for every lawyer in the country, and for somebody who is trusted"—
the Lord Advocate—

"to be accused in some way of dishonesty, I thought, was shameful."

I agree with Mr Ross. I was disgusted by the behaviour of Russell Findlay and a number of other contributors in Parliament yesterday. The most appalling level of behaviour was deployed by members of Parliament. We have a code of conduct and some standards to uphold in this Parliament—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. You will stop shouting. Continue, First Minister. Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: The shouting and bawling from the Conservatives demonstrates my point that they do not deserve to be here, and they will not be here, because they are on their way out at the forthcoming election.

Peter Murrell Case (Public Information)

2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): This week, we learned that the Lord Advocate disclosed to John Swinney information about the prosecution of Peter Murrell that was not in the public domain. Over the years, we have seen the Scottish National Party apply pressure to institutions to get the outcome that it wants, regardless of consequences. We saw it at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital, where pressure was applied to open the hospital early and people died.

This will be in the *Official Report* for future reference. Did the First Minister, anyone acting on his behalf or any SNP adviser ask the Lord Advocate, or any of her advisers, at any point, to be updated on the prosecution of Peter Murrell?

The First Minister (John Swinney): No.

Anas Sarwar: I thank the First Minister for putting that on the record for future reference. It was the answer that I was expecting, but let us see, in the cold light of day, where that goes. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Sarwar.

Anas Sarwar: I remind the Deputy First Minister and the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government that there have been incidents before in which members have misled this Parliament, so they should be very careful about what they say.

Yesterday, the Lord Advocate appeared to give inaccurate and contradictory information to Parliament. She said that she had not given John Swinney a political advantage because,

"From the point at which an indictment is served, there is no limitation on its terms being made public."—*[Official Report, 18 February 2026; c 77.]*

However, after the Lord Advocate had notified John Swinney, the Crown Office warned the media, saying,
"We have no comment. The indictment is not a public document until it is presented in open court."

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

Those two statements cannot both be true.

If *The Sun* had not published the story, the only people who would have known the details of the case before the election would have been the Crown Office, Peter Murrell and, bizarrely, because the Lord Advocate notified them, John Swinney and his SNP advisers. How is that acceptable and not the very definition of political advantage?

The First Minister: The point that the Lord Advocate made yesterday is that the minute the indictment is served on the accused, it becomes a public document. It can be made public as a consequence of that. That is why the statement is valid.

The reason why that is important, and why I have contradicted Mr Sarwar's statement, is the contents of the Lord Advocate's letter to Mr Sarwar yesterday.

It is a damning letter. It says—these are the words of the Lord Advocate—in response to correspondence from Mr Sarwar:

“the publication of your letter has put a number of factual errors into the public domain, and it is incumbent on me to correct them quickly and publicly in order to protect the rule of law.”

That tells us all that we need to know. Anas Sarwar is putting factual errors into the public domain, undermining the rule of law. Anas Sarwar is unfit to lead the Labour Party. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Stephen Kerr, I ask you to please be quiet.

Anas Sarwar: That is amazing coming out of the mouth of John Swinney.

These two sentences cannot both be true:

“From the point at which an indictment is served, there is no limitation on its terms being made public.”—*[Official Report, 18 February 2026; c 77.]*

and

“The indictment is not a public document until it is presented in open court.”

Those are two contradictory statements that John Swinney cannot run away from.

There are many questions. If the Lord Advocate was recused from the matter, why was she corresponding with John Swinney about it at all? If it was for John Swinney only, why was the information shared with SNP advisers, and who did they tell? Why did the Crown Office refuse to share it with the media when the Lord Advocate told Parliament that it was public information? Does John Swinney really expect us to believe that he needs a specific warning from the Lord Advocate to give his favourite excuse? It is just not credible.

Will John Swinney confirm that, after he leaked the information to SNP political advisers, none of it was passed on in any form—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Sarwar.

Anas Sarwar: Was it passed on in any form to any other SNP politician or party official?

Is it not the truth that this is just the latest episode of an SNP Government, with a rotten culture at its heart, in which John Swinney and the SNP will always put their party before Scotland?

The First Minister: What this is evidence of is Mr Sarwar's desperation. It is becoming clear, as every week goes by, that Mr Sarwar is getting more and more desperate about everything that he does.

In order for me to answer directly the point that Mr Sarwar has put to me, I say that the individuals to whom the information that was shared with me by the Lord Advocate was passed is a matter of public record. Those were the only people to whom it was passed; that was to enable those speaking on my behalf to follow the Lord Advocate's guidance.

I have given a direct answer to Anas Sarwar, and I hope that he has the decency to accept the direct answer that I have given him. I do not think that he has because, week by week, Mr Sarwar comes here and attacks somebody's character. He comes here and attacks my character regularly. Yesterday, he did not even have the guts to come here and say to the Lord Advocate's face the things that he put in a letter that prompted her to say that he was undermining the rule of law by his actions. That is somebody who is unfit to lead a political party.

Why is Mr Sarwar desperate? He is desperate because he knows that, for all his efforts, his political ambitions are going absolutely nowhere. For years, he has told the people of this country to back Starmer, but he now wants us to believe that he wants Starmer out so that, somehow, the country can progress.

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

While Anas Sarwar goes around smearing individuals and undermining their character, I am going to carry on supporting members of the public by reducing waiting times, opening general practice walk-in clinics, keeping unemployment low and making sure that child poverty falls in Scotland. That is an SNP Government delivering, and Anas Sarwar is finished.

Graduate Teachers

3. Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): It has now been six weeks since I asked the First Minister about Margaret MacGill. She has been ready to leave hospital for a year, but the lack of available carers means that she is still stuck there. Her husband, Cathal, says that the First Minister is welcome to visit them any time, because it seems that she is not going anywhere.

I turn to the issue of education. Today, the Scottish Liberal Democrats will publish figures showing that a record 400 recent graduates left teaching last year. Why, under the Scottish National Party, are people who are ready and raring to teach, and who have grafted for their qualifications, being forced out of Scottish education altogether?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I have discussed the case of Margaret MacGill with Mr Cole-Hamilton before. I would be delighted to visit Mr and Mrs MacGill, should the opportunity arise. The issue relates to the availability of particular carer support in the community. As I have rehearsed with Mr Cole-Hamilton on a number of occasions, there are challenges with staff availability to undertake that support. I reaffirm my commitment and my willingness to try to do all that we can to address the issue.

On the question of teaching, I want to ensure that we have strong opportunities for members of the teaching profession. That is the focus of the work that the Scottish Government undertakes to ensure that we have the appropriate employment and opportunities available and that they are spread throughout the country, so that they meet the needs and aspirations of individuals.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I have to say that it seems that the First Minister has done absolutely nothing to get Margaret MacGill out of hospital in the six weeks since I first raised her case.

Under the SNP, three quarters of newly qualified teachers cannot get the full-time contracts that they need to pay their bills or get a mortgage. It is absolutely brutal. One graduate has been stuck on supply lists for nine years, racking up tens of thousands of pounds-worth of debt. He even tried to take his own life. Many more are being forced to work abroad, when they want to teach here; there is a brain drain. Why cannot the First Minister admit that his Government has made an absolute pig's ear of it, and that tens of thousands of teachers are paying the price?

The First Minister: I do not agree with that characterisation. I say to Mr Cole-Hamilton that there has been an increase in post-probation employment in the past year, which is welcome. In Scotland, we have a higher number of teachers per 100,000 pupils than in any other part of the United Kingdom—by a significant margin. There are 7,584 teachers per 100,000 pupils in Scotland, compared with 5,551 in England and 5,301 in Wales. That leads to a much lower pupil teacher ratio in Scotland of 13.2 pupils per teacher, compared with 18 in England and 18.9 in Wales.

The Government is supporting a much larger teaching profession in Scotland, because we think that that is important. We will continue to do that as part of the budget proposals that we have put forward, which Mr Cole-Hamilton and his colleagues have supported. I am very grateful to them for their support in that respect.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (Referral Criteria)

4. Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what measures the Scottish Government is taking to standardise the criteria for urgent referrals to child and adolescent mental health services for an assessment, in light of reports that it is currently a postcode lottery. (S6F-04690)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The national child and adolescent mental health services specification sets a consistent national standard, requiring boards to ensure that children and young people receive timely support that is appropriate to their needs. Children and young people are added to waiting lists and are seen according to clinical need. Decisions on urgent referrals must follow clinical judgment so as to ensure fair and proportionate responses across Scotland. The CAMHS performance target has been met for the past year, with 91.5 per cent of young people starting treatment within 18 weeks. We continue to support boards to further improve access and to ensure that services remain safe, person centred and consistent.

Christine Grahame: I agree that decisions should follow clinical judgment. However, my question was prompted by a constituency case involving a child who, at home, exhibits extreme behaviour that is deteriorating. She masks the behaviour at school and in public, so the school will not and cannot make an

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

urgent referral. At home, her increasingly violent behaviour to her family and her self-harm impact seriously on her twin sister, who is mimicking that behaviour. I am most concerned about her mother's health as she has a heart condition and, to be frank, is at breaking point.

The girl has waited since June 2023 for a CAMHS assessment, but after three years she is now further down the waiting list. That cannot be right, and hers might not be the only such case. Does the First Minister agree with me that in this case urgency should be created by her behaviour, which consists of self-harm and harm to others, and not the locus, although it appears to have been determined by the locus here? As I have anonymised and abbreviated the circumstances in her case, may I send more details to the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care so that he can look into it?

The First Minister: I very much sympathise with the details that Christine Grahame has put on the record. I reassure her that clinical judgment should be applied in all cases. It is difficult for me to make judgments in the absence of detailed knowledge about that particular case, but the performance level for child and adolescent mental health services has been met for the past year, with 91.5 per cent of young people starting treatment within 18 weeks. If Christine Grahame would be so good as to write to the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, we will explore the particular case and will see whether more can be done to consider the questions of clinical judgment that have been applied. However, it is difficult for me to respond on that case at this moment.

Attacks on Teachers

5. Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to reports that hundreds of teachers have sought medical treatment following attacks by pupils in the last five years. (S6F-04684)

The First Minister (John Swinney): There is no place for violence in Scotland's schools. Any incident that results in staff requiring medical treatment is deeply concerning. Most young people behave well, but we recognise the challenges that staff face. As part of our joint national action plan with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities we have published guidance on consequences and on risk assessments for violent behaviour. That guidance, which was developed with teaching unions and headteachers, prioritises safety and confirms that exclusion remains available as a last resort.

Our approach to tackling violent behaviour, including in schools, focuses on early intervention and prevention, and it has been backed by more than £6 million of investment since 2023.

Roz McCall: No one should have to go to work afraid that, on any given day, it will result in an assault on them that needs medical attention. However, that is what is happening in Scottish schools. In the past five years, more than 5,200 incidents of pupil violence were recorded in which teaching staff required medical treatment, with at least 225 of them having to attend hospital or their general practice.

We know that Scotland has the worst rate of violent injuries to school staff anywhere in the United Kingdom. Right now, teaching staff and other pupils fear that they will be next to be attacked. Will the First Minister explain what it will take to finally prioritise their safety, restore discipline and take responsibility for that failure to act?

The First Minister: I agree with Roz McCall's fundamental point that nobody should go to work in fear that they will be exposed to violence. I agree entirely with that point.

The Government is taking steps, through the measures that I set out in my original answer, to ensure that support is in place in schools on the basis of early intervention and prevention, to de-escalate in particular instances and to ensure that young people receive the support that they require in schools to address any behavioural issues.

A range of remedies are available in the behavioural guidance that has been agreed with local authorities, which run our schools. The Government will continue to work with local authorities to ensure that that guidance is applied in full to protect teaching staff.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): No worker should face physical abuse or violence in the workplace. There has been a deterioration of behaviour and standards in recent years, and the present situation is the outcome of it.

I have spoken to teachers in my region, who tell me that the scaffolding of support that used to sit around children and teachers to support young people with behavioural problems or other challenges has been hollowed out by the Government—through its neglect of education, its lack of leadership and its cuts to local authority budgets. Does the First Minister accept that this behaviour problem not only has happened on his watch but has happened because of his party's failure to support our schools?

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

The First Minister: No, I do not accept that point. The Government has strongly supported investment in education, and it has done that consistently. I have just recounted to Mr Cole-Hamilton the fact that we have a significantly lower pupil teacher ratio in Scotland than exists in other parts of the United Kingdom. We have consistently higher numbers of teachers per head of population than in other parts of the UK. I set out in my answer to Roz McCall the steps that the Government has taken to work with local authorities to put in place guidance to support our schools system.

I agree with Mr O'Kane on the point where I agreed with Roz McCall: nobody should be exposed to violence at their place of employment. That is why the Government has put in place the guidance and the resources to ensure that that can be realised.

Just Transition Plan

6. Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): To ask the First Minister whether he will provide an update on the development of a just transition plan for the north-east of Scotland, including how communities and workers have been engaged. (S6F-04691)

The First Minister (John Swinney): We are committed to achieving a just transition in the north-east, with workers and communities at the heart of it. We have already invested £120 million through the just transition fund and the energy transition fund, bringing in even more investment, creating jobs and supporting new ideas. We are also driving forward projects such as the oil and gas transition training fund and the investment zone for the north-east of Scotland. Our support is aimed at addressing directly the needs of local people and businesses. Recent site closures show the need for more proactive planning, so we are refreshing the joint transition planning framework to support more targeted action and guide a new Just Transition Commission in the next session of Parliament.

Maggie Chapman: I thank the First Minister for that answer, but my constituents want to know when they will see a plan that responds to the decline of the North Sea basin. The £500 million just transition fund is not a strategy, and neither is hope.

We need a plan that provides jobs and training for oil and gas workers, creates conditions for the development of offshore clean energy, and supports job creation, economic stability and the sustainability of an effective domestic supply chain.

Specifically, when will the Scottish Government publish its overarching strategy—drawing together existing policy levers, including licensing, procurement and regional planning—which will enable the north-east to be the powerhouse of our new green economy and give workers and communities the future that they need and deserve?

The First Minister: I pretty much agree with Maggie Chapman about the requirements for the transition in the north-east of Scotland. All that material has been set out by the Government in the various steps that we have taken. The transition has to be managed in an orderly fashion. In a telephone call with the Prime Minister earlier this week, I made a point about the importance of our managing the careful balance of the reduction in North Sea oil and gas activity with the upsurge in renewables. I have said to Parliament before that the oil and gas sector is contracting too fast because of the issues in relation to the energy profits levy. In my call with him on Monday, I encouraged the Prime Minister to change course on that. The upsurge in renewables has not happened as quickly as we would like. A balanced, orderly approach is what will safeguard livelihoods in the north-east of Scotland, and that is what the Scottish Government is committed to.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): We all want to see a just transition, but Labour's decision to continue the Tories' energy profits levy is being described by the oil and gas industry as taxing the sector "to death". We know that the levy is causing hundreds of job losses, and experts are warning that it will cost thousands more, block billions of pounds-worth of potential investment and undermine the energy security that a just transition relies on. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

Kevin Stewart: Does the First Minister agree that the United Kingdom Government's reckless approach is sabotaging the chances of a fair and just transition? Can he expand on what his Government is doing to support Scotland's energy workers?

The First Minister: I am certainly making the case to the Prime Minister that the energy profits levy should be ended—and ended now—because it is damaging the transition that we are taking forward. I have made that point to the Prime Minister a number of times and I repeated it in a call with him earlier this week.

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

In relation to other steps, as I set out in my original answer to Maggie Chapman, we are taking forward a number of steps to invest in facilities and opportunities to develop new energy sources in the north-east of Scotland. The Government is absolutely committed to that work.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): My constituents are at the cliff edge of the so-called transition. According to a recent Jobs Foundation report, the truth is that the Scottish Government has no just transition plan and no energy strategy, and we have a jobs emergency in the north-east.

Will the First Minister support oil and gas workers, and finally back projects such as Rosebank, Jackdaw and Cambo, so that we can have a managed transition?

The First Minister: I have already said a lot in response to some of those points, but, on the issue of new developments, I have set out very clearly the Government's position, which is that any new developments must pass a climate compatibility test. The Government is taking a range of steps to progress its just transition strategy, which is supporting individuals on the ground with investments in a range of projects, whether on the facilities of the Energy Transition Zone or the training support that is in place for oil and gas workers. The Government will continue to deliver that support in the period to come.

The Presiding Officer: We move to constituency and general supplementaries. Concise responses and questions will enable more members to be taken.

Donald Russell (Closure)

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): The news that Donald Russell is to close its operations in Inverurie is devastating for its workers and their families across Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen city. It is yet another example of a business that is struggling to cope with sky-high energy costs, which have soared on the Labour United Kingdom Government's watch.

Does the First Minister share my concerns that businesses in energy-rich Scotland are paying the highest price in broken Brexit Britain? Will he commit to engaging with the workforce and trade unions at the earliest opportunity?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am deeply concerned to hear about the difficulties that Donald Russell faces. It is a business of exceptional quality and significance in Aberdeenshire. The Government is supportive of the continued operation of the business, and Richard Lochhead, the Minister for Business and Employment, is urgently seeking a meeting with the company to understand how the Scottish Government can support it. We will work on trying to create a positive outcome.

I am acutely aware of the challenging conditions in which businesses are operating because of the increase in employment costs including employer national insurance contributions, and the increased energy costs with which businesses are wrestling.

Those are some of the practical and hard realities that have been created by the actions of the United Kingdom Government. That is why we must maximise the steps that we can take—and have taken—in Scotland, to temper any impact of business rate changes on businesses, and to ensure that businesses are supported through these difficult times. That is, of course, integral to the Government's budget.

Skye House

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): The First Minister will be aware of the report on the unannounced inspection of Skye house in August 2025. I share the Government's concerns about the report's findings regarding culture, staff resourcing and the use of restraints and other cruel practices. However, the report does not address the journeys of young people and how they entered Skye house in the first place. I am concerned that, when parents and carers raise concerns about culture in our national health service and social work departments, they are being met with a defensive response and an attempt to shut down such concerns without any accountability or willingness to improve services.

Will the First Minister now instruct a review of child and adolescent mental health services, NHS boards and social work services to discover how many concerns have been raised in respect of culture, to prevent young people from being failed and, ultimately, put in institutions that risk causing more harm than good?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I have considerable sympathy with the point that Meghan Gallacher puts to me. The Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing has already been in contact with the chief executive of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde to request an urgent meeting to express the Government's expectation that all 16 formal requirements and nine areas for improvement at Skye house be addressed and implemented swiftly and demonstrably.

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

The issues that emerged in the Skye house report make for very concerning reading. I want to signal today, in response to Meghan Gallacher's point, the importance that I attach to those issues being confronted not just by the organisations that are responsible but by other organisations that deliver comparable services. That is the fundamental response that Meghan Gallacher requires—that all providers of such services must be able to be satisfied that they are not presiding over situations like the ones highlighted in relation to Skye house.

I hope that that gives some reassurance to Meghan Gallacher about this case. There has been another case, in which I instructed the health secretary to call in the leadership of NHS Forth Valley to make clear the Government's expectations on improvement. That is the culture that I want to preside over.

I am grateful to Meghan Gallacher for raising the issue, because it provides me with an opportunity to signal the importance that I attach to such issues being taken seriously by NHS leadership in Scotland, which Ms Gallacher has a right to expect from those authorities.

Glasgow and Clyde Rape Crisis (Funding)

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): This week, Glasgow and Clyde Rape Crisis closed its waiting list for two specialist services. That decision has come as a consequence of real-term cuts in the Government's proposed budget funding for rape and sexual support services. I do not need to remind the First Minister that sexual crimes have never been higher—the data shows that there has been an 11 per cent increase in attempted rapes. It is therefore difficult to reconcile the Government's commitment to tackling the epidemic of violence against women and girls with

“a budget that reduces the real-terms value of the very services designed to respond to it.”

Those were the exact words of the director of the Glasgow service.

How does the First Minister justify a real-terms cut of £3.9 million to the delivering equally safe fund, when, as he keeps telling me in response to every question that I ask, it is the Government's core programme for addressing violence against women and girls? Why does the Government believe that it is acceptable to withdraw that vital support from women and girls who have experienced rape and sexual violence at a time when the demand for those services continues to rise?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Ministers are actively engaged in dialogue with the Glasgow and Clyde Rape Crisis. The context is that there has been a 12.5 per cent uplift in the delivering equally safe fund in 2025-26, taking total investment in the fund to £21.6 million. A couple of weeks ago, Sharon Dowe raised issues with me concerning the distribution of that funding in relation to a project in her locality. Ministers are exploring those distribution issues in order to address them. I hope that that assures Pauline McNeill that the Government is investing substantially in the equally safe programme and that it recognises the demand for that support in the country. There might be issues with the programme's deployment around the country, but that is the subject of active discussion with ministers.

Rail Fares (Freeze)

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): While Keir Starmer's distracted Labour Party looks the other way on the cost of living crisis, our Scottish Government is freezing rail fares. Will the First Minister explain how such decisions are putting money back into the pockets of my hard-working Paisley constituents?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government is taking every action to tackle the cost of living challenges that members of the public face in Scotland. Last week, the Cabinet Secretary for Transport and I were pleased to announce the freezing of rail fares in Scotland for the next financial year. It comes on top of the decision last September to eliminate peak rail fares, which resulted in an average cost reduction of about 17 per cent on all ScotRail ticket types, and a 48 per cent reduction in commuting costs for commuters between Edinburgh and Glasgow. That is demonstrable evidence of the Scottish Government acting to tackle the cost of living pressures that members of the public face. I commit to Mr Adam and to the Parliament that the Government will do as much as it can to support households in these difficult days.

Raigmore Hospital (Specialist Care)

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Some 12 months ago, I warned the Scottish Parliament that Highland NHS Board was intentionally—according to our vascular surgeon—running down care provision in the Highlands. Last week, the First Minister told the *Inverness Courier* that it is acceptable for Highlanders to have to travel for up to four hours to Perth and Aberdeen in order to access treatment, simply because there is not a critical mass of cases in the Highlands. Given the success of the national treatment centre in Inverness, which I applaud, will the Government focus on delivering specialist care at Raigmore hospital, so that Highlanders can get treatment close to their homes and families?

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

The First Minister (John Swinney): I have not seen the press commentary that Mr Mountain speaks of, but I spoke to a representative of the *Inverness Courier* at the weekend when I visited the Sutherland area with my colleague Maree Todd. I will look at the remarks to see how they have been set out.

The fundamental point that I was making—which I think that Mr Mountain will understand—is that a certain level of active delivery of cases is required in an area to sustain the safety of clinical services within it. We want to maximise the delivery of services in as many localities as we can, but they have to be clinically safe. We will work to do that in all localities.

Mr Mountain referred to the strength of the national treatment centre, which is an outstanding asset that delivers care not just to patients in the Highlands but to those in the Perthshire areas that I represent and in other parts of the country. We are taking decisions to ensure effective deployment of clinical services, but that has to be done safely. That underpins the Government's decisions.

Fuel Poverty and Energy Policies

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): This week, Scotland reaches a milestone as more than 50,000 households receive support to live in a warmer home, with homes now being cheaper to heat. Meanwhile, the Scottish National Party Government published plans that could mean that communities across Scotland see more money being invested in their areas as a result of onshore renewable energy developments. What action is the First Minister taking to tackle fuel poverty? Does he agree that only through the fresh start of independence can we use Scotland's energy to create a wealthier and fairer Scotland?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government continues to use the powers that we have to raise incomes and improve energy efficiency, including by increasing funding for the warmer homes Scotland scheme, investing more than £197 million in our winter heating benefits and providing a further £1 million this year to expand energy bill debt advice services. We are doing everything that we can with our budget, and I am glad that the budget is progressing through the Parliament to enable us to do that.

However, there is a contradiction in Scotland—it is an energy-rich country that has high levels of fuel poverty. I agree with my colleague that it is important that Scotland's energy wealth works for the people of Scotland, and we can achieve that only with the fresh start of independence.

Robotic-assisted Surgery

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): In England, £26 billion of investment will make 90 per cent of keyhole surgery robotic assisted by 2035, which will result in access being expanded to nine out of 10 patients and waiting lists being cut. In Scotland, there is no national strategy or timetable, and there has not even been a completed review of the current robotic capacity across our national health service, despite the First Minister promising last year to expand access.

Robotic procedures released more than 11,000 bed days back into our NHS in 2025 alone. Waiting lists are soaring, women are waiting years for gynaecological procedures and, 20 minutes across the border, patients in Carlisle will soon have better access than patients in Scotland. When will the First Minister stop the delay and deliver a clear and funded national plan to expand robotic surgery in Scotland?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Let me correct some of what Sue Webber said. Operation numbers in Scotland are up, out-patient, in-patient and day-case waits are down and the Government is taking forward an investment strategy that is designed to ensure that our national health service is fit for the future. That is what the planning work that is going on throughout Scotland is all about. That is why we are delivering an increased number of operations.

I look forward to continuing that work, in the months and years to come, to ensure that the national health service delivers for the people of Scotland under a strong Scottish National Party Government.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time. There will be a short suspension to allow those leaving the chamber and the public gallery to do so.

12:48

Meeting suspended.

12:49

On resuming—

Public Services (Funding)

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

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-20268, in the name of Alexander Burnett, on a fair share of funding for public services. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak button.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes calls for fairer funding to be allocated among Scotland's 32 local authorities and 14 NHS boards; further notes reports that Aberdeenshire Council is the fourth lowest funded local authority in Scotland, receiving less government funding per capita than the Scottish average; believes that NHS Grampian is the second lowest funded NHS board per head of population, is reportedly facing a deficit of nearly £50 million, has just 1.4 beds per 1,000 people, and has one of the fastest growing elderly populations in Scotland; considers that rural and island communities cover large geographical areas, which come with unique challenges and require significant resources, particularly with regard to infrastructure maintenance, service delivery and issues that arise from extreme weather; recognises concerns that local services are under immense pressure, and notes the view that it is important to ensure that communities are properly resourced to enable them to continue to have access to local services that meet their needs, including reliable public transport, local schools and health and social care services.

12:50

Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): I thank those who have supported the motion, which echoes a joint statement put out by 22 community councils in Aberdeenshire. For 19 years, Scotland has struggled under the Scottish National Party. Our councils are underfunded, education standards are slipping, rural nurseries and primary schools are closing, our roads are full of potholes, our bridges are crumbling and our national health service is at breaking point. However, Scotland is the highest-taxed part of the United Kingdom.

We need a Government that will focus on Scotland's priorities. For years, there have been repeated calls for the SNP to provide more funding to support local services. Our councils are stretched thin, while the Scottish Government receives the largest settlement of £50 billion from Westminster. The SNP budget for 2026-27 falls £1 billion short of what the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities called for and fails to deliver COSLA's demand for £750 million to fill the cracks in social care. The Institute for Fiscal Studies highlighted that the SNP's budget for health and social care, which covers hospitals and general practitioners, will fall in real terms. Local services do not get the funding that they need and, as a result, the most vulnerable suffer.

Aberdeenshire Council is the fourth lowest funded local authority. It has the sixth highest population, yet it receives £50 million less than the Scottish average. That forces cuts across all non-statutory services. There are now no adult attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism assessments, and hundreds of people are on waiting lists, left in the dark without support. Despite Aberdeenshire's fragility in the face of flooding, erosion and extreme cold, there were cuts to winter resilience at a time when communities should be getting more support. In an attempt to save money, 1,200 grit bins were cut, leaving some communities without any. However, that is robbing Peter to pay Paul, because the council also shares half a health and social care partnership deficit. That means that, when somebody slips and breaks their hips, the potential cost is much greater.

This is not a challenge to be tackled as a test for the public sector; it is an unwinnable scenario, in which the elderly, road users and council tenants have been set up to fail. Morality is not understood by this Government. The SNP might have seen the countryside on its way to a photo call, but it is incapable of making policy that gives places such as the north-east their fair share.

Population sparsity, geographic area, failing infrastructure and travel times all have a huge impact on services. Aberdeenshire has more than 3,000 miles of roads to maintain—more than double that in Glasgow. It has 1,800 bridges—more per capita than anywhere else in Scotland. Aboyne bridge has been shut for more than two years, forcing people to take a 20-mile detour. It will cost £15 million to repair it or £30 million to replace it. However, that is just one of 200 Aberdeenshire bridges that require repairs and, over the next 20 years, 317 bridges might be forced to close. Can the minister even begin to comprehend what that will look like?

Rural schools are also at risk. Last year, I campaigned with parents to save four nurseries, but they are still under threat. When services are cut, rural areas are hit hardest as resources are redirected to larger settlements. That only encourages rural depopulation. It is no wonder that the SNP Government stands accused of modern-day Highland clearances.

It is no surprise that, two years in a row, the Local Government Information Unit has found that there is no confidence in local government finances. It has called for the Government to review how local authorities are financed and the funding formula for distribution. Without that, our councils have no option but to increase council tax to make up for the Government's failure to provide a fair share to the north-east.

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

On health, NHS Grampian is, per capita, the second lowest funded national health service board, yet its elderly population is among the fastest growing. NHS Grampian is £45 million over budget, and, last year, the overspend was £65 million—the highest in Scotland—with auditors warning that staffing levels might have to be slashed.

While the SNP sits back and asks NHS Grampian to make further cuts, costs are still increasing. In Grampian, we have just 1.4 beds per 1,000 people, and there are now no minor injury units on Deeside. Community hospitals have been closed, despite the promises that the SNP made at the election in 2021. Waiting lists are at record highs, ambulance stacking at Aberdeen royal infirmary has caused chaos and care homes that need to run at capacity to survive have empty beds because it is cheaper for the SNP Government to ignore bed blocking than it is to fund people to be cared for in their community. That is having tragic consequences for people's lives.

While our NHS staff are working hard under incredible pressures, we also face recruitment challenges. That is affecting GP surgeries such as the one in Kintore, which has reduced hours, because it does not have sufficient doctors to operate full time. Other GP surgeries, such as the practice in Alford, are being taken over by mega-practices, where oversight is non-existent and GP to patient ratios have plummeted. A proper Scottish Government would have improvement initiatives such as offering golden hello payments to encourage people to move from the central belt and would invest in local training opportunities so that people could work in their communities.

If members think that the situation is bad now, they should just wait. Audit Scotland forecasts that Scottish Government funding will fall in real terms in 2028. Things are going to get worse. Will the minister take any responsibility? He will undoubtedly talk about balancing the budget, as though it is an achievement rather than a legal obligation. He will talk about Conservatives not backing the SNP's budget or identifying savings, despite the fact that we pointed out that independence spending had rocketed by £36 million and that there was a 25 per cent spike in foreign aid. He will talk about how Aberdeenshire Council is responsible for its budget, as Swinney did last week when he refused to help the Aboyne bridge group. He will pass the buck on to COSLA and its funding formula, knowing that it does not reflect rurality.

When will the Government take responsibility and govern, rather than hiding behind organisations that it controls? Politics is about spending choices, and the SNP Government is choosing to defund and destroy our rural communities.

12:57

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I am grateful to have the opportunity to debate the motion, and I thank Alexander Burnett for bringing it to the chamber. However, there is something quite ironic about the subject of the debate, and I will not shy away from calling that out.

We cannot let the Conservatives off the hook for their record or for what is happening locally. Over the past decade and a half, they had ample opportunity to do something about the situation, and they chose not to. In fact, they chose to do the opposite. Conservative politicians have a track record of voting for public spending cuts. That is on the public record. That is the ideology of Conservatism. The Conservatives cannot spend years squeezing the state and demanding tax cuts for millionaires and then call for a bigger share of a pot that, through their design, is smaller.

Let us say the quiet part out loud: public services did not get stretched by accident. They have been systematically squeezed for years by UK austerity. People at home do not need MSPs to explain what pressure looks like. They feel it in their everyday lives, and I see it reflected in my casework.

I agree that rurality, distance, harsh weather and an ageing population mean that it costs more to deliver services in Aberdeenshire, and Brexit has caused a serious labour shortage. That is why the Scottish Government has ensured that local government funding in Scotland is at record levels. Councils will receive almost £15.7 billion in the upcoming budget, and that matters. I am not saying that that will solve everything, but it cuts clean through the idea that the Scottish Government is simply not putting money into local services.

There are two issues that we need to bear in mind: first, how the pot is shared out through COSLA's distribution process; and, secondly, what happens after that. Councils choose priorities locally, and that local accountability matters. Councillors are democratically elected to make those decisions. What the motion tries to glide past is the fact that Aberdeenshire's budget choices are made by the Tory council administration—it is those councillors who decide what is protected and what is cut. However, time and again, we see the same trick: local cuts are made, and then the Conservatives point to Holyrood and say, "It's not our fault."

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

There were alternatives. In Aberdeenshire, for example, the SNP council group put forward a different budget proposal and priorities to reduce the damage, but those options were rejected. People deserve to know that, because it means that some of what we are seeing was a choice and was not fate.

I will make a constructive call: when Aberdeenshire councillors set their budget later this month, I ask members on the Conservative benches to speak to their colleagues, asking them to work with the SNP council group and across parties to protect the most vulnerable. They must stop the blame game and do the hard work that it takes to get consensus for the benefit of the community. When cuts hit disability day services, that is not an abstract saving line, because families are left carrying the weight on their own. If we truly care about the ageing population, we cannot ignore the people who need support now or the carers who are already at breaking point. If Conservative members genuinely want a way forward, there it is.

We were promised the broad shoulders of the UK, but people in my communities do not feel at all upheld by UK broad shoulders. Instead, they feel weighed down by decisions that have been made elsewhere. Scotland can do better than this. With full powers in our hands—the hands of an independent Scotland—we can keep more resources here and invest in our public services in a way that people deserve.

The motion for debate is spin, dressed up as concern. My constituents deserve honesty and real solutions, and that is what I am offering today.

13:01

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): The motion poses a simple question about whether the way in which the SNP Government chooses to distribute its record funding among our local authorities, NHS boards and infrastructure investment projects is a fair distribution. Those are all devolved services, as Karen Adam would know if she bothered to learn how devolution and funding work.

Presiding Officer, the north-east has such a consistent and sustained imbalance of distribution that the dogs on Union Street would tell you that we do not get a fair distribution. For example, for more than a decade, NHS Grampian has received less than the level of funding that is required by the Government's own allocation model. Since 2010, the disparity between needed and actual funding is around £250 million. That funding shortfall has resulted in reports just this week that NHS Grampian is projecting a deficit of £76 million, having made £62 million-worth of savings this year and needing a further £40 million of savings next year. That translates to the fewest beds per head in Scotland. It means delayed projects, stacked ambulances and enormous waiting lists for people in the north-east.

The funding shortfall embeds pressure across the system, because NHS Grampian funds a significant share of Aberdeen city and Aberdeenshire health and social care partnerships. Due to NHS Grampian starting from a low financial position, with its below-target allocation, the HSCPs, too, are under strain. Care provision tightens, recruitment becomes challenging and local urgent care services operate with limited flexibility. Those are entirely predictable consequences of sustained unfair underallocation by this Government.

Our north-east local councils face the same unfairness. Aberdeenshire Council is the fourth lowest-funded local authority per head in Scotland, receiving less than the national average. Aberdeen City Council also ranks among the lower-funded councils. Both have been consistently almost the worst-funded—if not the worst-funded—councils in Scotland for years. Starting from a lower funding baseline immediately limits what local services can be delivered effectively. Karen Adam desperately tries to say that it is nothing to do with the Scottish Parliament, but that is not standing up for her constituents; that is abandoning them, yet again.

As the motion highlights, the unfairness extends to infrastructure investment in the north-east, or lack thereof. To the south of Aberdeen, the growing communities of Cove and Newtonhill, which sit directly on the east coast main line, need new stations. People have been demanding them for years, and several thousands have signed my campaign petition to deliver them. However, the Government refuses to deliver, just as it will not address our poor local and regional bus services or deliver the vital upgrades that are so desperately needed on the A90 and the Laurencekirk, Toll of Birness and Cortes junctions.

When communities lack proper transport infrastructure, the result is congestion, pressure on local roads and reduced economic activity. Earlier today, when I asked the minister whether, in response to the tsunami of pub and hospitality closures in Aberdeen and the north-east, he would support Scottish Conservative plans to exempt most from business rates, he blithely ignored the issue, failed to provide any solutions and completely ignored the question about whether he would support that.

North East Scotland is a region that contributes significantly to Scotland's economy, its energy, its food production and its advanced manufacturing and research. We in the north-east have an expectation—actually, a right to expect—that our essential services and infrastructure are funded in line with assessed requirements.

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

The fact is that fairness to the whole of Scotland should be baked into decisions that the Scottish Government makes. The sustained gap in the north-east demonstrates that it is not—that is not what is being delivered. We need a commitment to fairness for communities across the north-east and a Government that finally delivers a fair share for the north-east.

13:05

Davy Russell (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab): I thank Alexander Burnett for bringing the debate to the chamber. It is on a wee subject that is dear to my heart, as I have over 40 years of experience in the public sector at a senior level, and I know that, over a long period, we have had both good times in the public sector and some very hard times. That aside, since 2010, all of us as chief officers, whether in health, social care or education, or just in general bread-and-butter services such as refuse collection or fixing potholes, have been managing decline.

We used to categorise services as being: statutory services, where you must do it or face a fine or imprisonment; essential services that affect people's lives; services that are nice to have; and, finally, the category that we still do too much of, which is the "What are we doing this for?" category—and the answer is usually, "Because we have always done it" or "I don't really know what the answer is."

During this period of managed decline, we who manage and provide public services have still managed to work wonders, doing the impossible while being starved of funds. However, that is mainly down to the hard-working, committed workers and staff, many of whom are on low wages but have a true sense of pride in their work and a profound respect for the people they are providing the service for.

Over the same period, the Scottish Government has habitually wasted significant pots of money. We have had the ferries fiasco; Gupta's invisible Fort William smelter; and thousands of civil servants spending time redacting responses to freedom of information requests, to name but a few examples. The cost of those alone comes to about £1 billion. What about the blunders and cover-ups that we have not even heard about yet?

We are running more than 130 unelected quangos that are eating into public money. Some are supposed to distribute public money, but, in some cases, they are hoarding public funds while—in my experience—we had to beg to get access to those funds. If we did not do what the unelected organisations wanted, we did not get the funds. They used it as a method of control, and that is the Scottish Government's fault. I will name and shame a couple of them: Sustrans, Zero Waste Scotland and Strathclyde Partnership for Transport. SPT has almost £200 million in reserves. We could pay for 1,000 doctors, 1,000 nurses, 1,000 street cleaners and 1,000 road workers all at the one time from that £200 million pot.

Why are we, the Scottish people, putting up with that nonsense? It is a disgrace. Many chief executive officers and directors in those organisations pay themselves inflated salaries and bonuses for delivering poor, out-of-touch services. While I acknowledge that increasing funding for something does not necessarily mean that it will get better, rebranding organisations or adding commissioners, or some other fudge mechanism, does not improve things either.

A public service should be exactly what it says on the tin—it should be fit for purpose and have the ability to do what it is designed for, as an efficient, sustainable, fully funded public service. We need a full shake-up from top to bottom, rather than the jigsaw that we have at present. We need to improve the staple methodology for funding public services in a way that the Scottish people deserve. Transition should not be pie in the sky.

To achieve that, we should be setting a challenging, achievable and clear road map to success. We need to untangle the current cash-absorbing, shambolic mess. We in this Parliament should spend less time talking about seagulls, greyhounds, independence and kicking Americans out of Prestwick airport. We should concentrate on the bread-and-butter services that affect every single person—even people in the chamber. Creating more of the same without fixing the basics, including the funding methodology, is wrong. We need to roll up our sleeves and get on with the job in hand.

13:10

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I thank Alex Burnett for bringing this crucial debate to the chamber. I must admit that I am still a little bit dizzy from Karen Adam's speech. My word—that was some amount of political spin from a former councillor. How on earth she thinks that she can say that in the chamber is beyond me.

I agree with some of the points that Davy Russell made about concentrating on key things. Seagulls are a very important subject, though, especially in my community in Moray, and we have to talk about them.

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

I could not believe it when, on Thursday 4 May 2017, I was elected to Moray Council. I stood in the seat of Buckie, a strong SNP area, and I thought that I was never going to win, but I was elected, and I was happy. I was serving as a football coach in the community, I worked in the church and I was on the community council. However, for the two weeks after I was elected to the council, I was plagued by the chief executive and the deputy chief executives telling me just how dire it was in the council. They said that there was no money, that we could not do anything positive and that all we could do was make cuts.

I spent the next five years learning why, and the reason is discussed in the COSLA document that I am holding up. I know that we are not meant to use props in the chamber, but I want to quote from the document, which is called "What does the 2026-27 Budget mean for Councils?" It is worth pointing out that the president of COSLA is an SNP councillor, that almost half of the councils in Scotland are run by the SNP and that the document has been agreed by all council leaders in Scotland. It says:

"COSLA Leaders have agreed this is a very poor settlement which fails to address the dire financial situation of Local Government in Scotland."

It is dire; it has been dire every year. On another page, the document points out just how dire it is. While the SNP Government has put more and more money into benefits, it has slashed local government.

Karen Adam: Will the member take an intervention?

Tim Eagle: I am not allowing Karen Adam an intervention. She would not take an intervention from any of us.

The 2026-27 budget is another dire one that will force all council administrations, whichever party leads them, to make cuts and put up council tax. Alex Burnett made the key point that council tax is going up because, for a long time, the SNP prevented councils from doing anything to council tax but did not make up the shortfall in funding, and because it has also not funded revenue over the years. We have seen massive increases in costs in education. Additional support needs and social, emotional and behavioural needs are through the roof, as are needs in other areas such as social care, but none of that has been funded. In addition, we are taking away services that have previously been provided. Why are swimming pools under threat? We need them. School crossing patrols are also under threat, and that is all because we are funding what this Government wants and not what we should be doing on the ground. To me, that is simply not good enough.

COSLA states:

"The budget reality is that this is a cash reduction in core capital funding".

That is not going to help with the bridges that I and Alex Burnett want to protect across rural Scotland.

A lot of councillors are trying their best and doing great work across the country, but it is very difficult. I say to the people of Scotland, "Don't blame your councils—blame this SNP Government". Ministers are the ones who have destroyed council funding because they are not up to the challenge of taking on the difficult things.

I will finish with a comment on NHS Grampian. A couple of days ago, it put out a press release that I found really frustrating. It says that it is an "incredible achievement" that NHS Grampian has managed to make budget cuts. I do not think that that is an incredible achievement. NHS Grampian is cutting its budget at a time when I have constituents coming to me with breast cancer or eye problems who cannot get into hospital. We should not be seeing cuts in those budgets. We should be seeing services being delivered, with more beds at Dr Gray's and the hospital in Aberdeen. We need that so that our constituents, whom we care for and want to serve, can actually get the services that the NHS delivers. This Government has to step up to the plate and put more money into local services, particularly in rural Scotland.

13:14

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I am grateful to Alexander Burnett for the opportunity to speak in this debate for the communities of the north-east, and particularly the people of Aberdeenshire, who know all too well what it means to be asked to do more with less. However, he and I have quite different solutions to the problems that his motion identifies: I support higher taxation on individuals and businesses with significant wealth. I am proud that Scotland has a fairer tax system than anywhere else in the UK, which is thanks to the Scottish Greens. At its heart, however, the debate is about how public spending is prioritised.

Karen Adam was right to highlight that it is Mr Burnett's Conservative colleagues who are making the decisions in the shire. However, it is also true that Aberdeenshire Council is the fourth lowest funded local authority in Scotland, and that it receives less per head than the national average. It is also true that NHS Grampian is the second lowest funded health board per capita, with a deficit of nearly £50 million and only

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

1.4 beds per 1,000 people, despite serving one of the fastest-growing elderly populations in the country. I agree that that creates significant challenges that other health boards do not face.

I appreciate that the local authority funding allocation is devised by a formula that is agreed by COSLA, but perhaps it is time to open up discussion about that formula and the allocation. However, we cannot do that on our own in the Scottish Parliament—that is not in our gift. The numbers that we see in the motion are not abstract—they are not simply lines in a spreadsheet. They represent delayed care, overstretched staff and anxious families and communities who are worried about the future of the services that they rely on.

In Aberdeenshire, geography matters. Rural and island communities cover vast distances; roads must be maintained across huge areas; public transport must connect disparate and scattered towns and villages; and services must withstand extreme weather events that are becoming more frequent and more severe. Delivering equity in such circumstances requires more resource, not less, and I think that we agree on that. However, this is not simply a question of fairness between local authorities or health boards; it is about social justice. I was proud to stand alongside communities across Aberdeenshire in their fight to save sheltered housing, disability services and community care facilities that enable people—particularly older and disabled people—to live independently and with dignity. I pay tribute to those from Cuminestown, Portsoy and all the other northern Aberdeenshire towns and villages for their campaigns last summer. I am sorry that we did not halt all the closures and cuts.

When sheltered housing accommodation and wardens are cut, daycare services for disabled people are reduced and local facilities close—decisions that were made by Conservative councillors—the cost does not disappear. It is displaced on to families, unpaid carers and, ultimately, our NHS. If we are serious about relieving pressures on the NHS, we must invest upstream and fund preventative services properly. We must recognise that good social care, accessible local transport, warm and secure housing and strong community facilities are not optional extras but the foundations of a healthy society.

Aberdeenshire's rapidly ageing population should be a call to action, not an afterthought. Fair funding must take into account changing demographics, rurality and deprivation, all of which can be hidden in affluent-looking areas. The real cost of delivering services across large dispersed communities must be acknowledged.

This debate is about whether we are willing to match our rhetoric on equality with meaningful financial commitment. It is about whether we accept a system that leaves one of Scotland's largest local authority areas persistently underfunded and one of its key NHS boards struggling to meet demand.

Communities in the north-east are resilient and resourceful, but they should not be expected to compensate indefinitely for structural underfunding. A fair share of funding is not a special favour; it is a matter of equity and dignity. It is essential if we are to build a Scotland in which every community—rural, coastal, urban or island—can access the public services that it needs and deserves.

13:18

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): I thank my colleague Alexander Burnett for bringing this debate to the chamber.

Many of the issues that have been highlighted in Aberdeenshire are also present in other parts of rural Scotland, not least in my region of South Scotland. Communities across Ayrshire are well aware of the impact of the Scottish Government's fiscal approach on them. Health services have been decimated, local authorities are buckling under enormous demand and everyday things that we used to be able to count on seem to be on borrowed time.

We do not need to look much further than at the plight of NHS Ayrshire and Arran for the evidence of that. The dire state of affairs there got so bad last week that the Scottish Government had to raise its emergency intervention to the second-highest level. That should not have come as a surprise to ministers. After last year's emergency loan of more than £50 million, Scotland's public services watchdog said that there was "no evidence" of financial sustainability in that health board. Patients can see how bad things have got. The severe situation there is not the fault of hard-working staff and medics; it is a symptom of years of underfunding from central Government, which, having failed to properly resource the organisation, is now having to shell out for expensive sticking-plaster solutions.

Life in the region's councils is not much better. We know that many people from across Scotland choose to come to South Ayrshire to retire. Of course their presence is welcome, and their contribution to local life is considerable. However, for too long, the Scottish Government has ignored the impact on demographics. South Ayrshire has one of the country's highest proportions of people over the age of 65; already, they account for more than a quarter of the population, and that will increase to a third within a few years. That will

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

bring the region into competition with areas that have the oldest demographics in the world, yet there is no funding mechanism to reflect that, and it will have an extraordinary impact on demand for health and social care.

The sums do not add up, which is why councils are left with no option but to raise council tax or close facilities. Such counterproductive moves make people only poorer—financially, educationally and culturally. Councillors take the hit for that locally, but the decisions that are made by the Scottish Government in Edinburgh are to blame.

Health boards and local authorities are being asked to sweep up where the SNP Government has failed, whether in relation to delayed discharge, intolerable environments for teachers or the impact of policing cutbacks. All those things are felt locally but could have been prevented nationally. That is why I fully support Alexander Burnett's motion to finally give councils and health boards the money that they need to do the job properly.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Ivan McKee to respond to the debate. Minister, you have around seven minutes.

13:21

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): I will come on to members' contributions shortly, but I will first cover off some general points.

The Government recognises the essential role that local authorities and health boards play in delivering high-quality health and care services across Scotland, including in rural and island communities. That is why the draft 2026-27 budget provides a record investment of £22.5 billion in health and social care services.

Since 2007, the Government has delivered a balanced budget and has taken steps to support the long-term sustainability of Scotland's public services, despite significant inflationary pressures and increasing demand on services. Both the NHS Scotland resource allocation committee—NRAC—formula and the local government grant-aided expenditure distribution methodology provide objective, evidence-based methods for assessing the relative needs of services across the country.

We recognise that strong and on-going partnership work is essential, and the Government remains absolutely committed to constructive engagement with local authorities, NHS boards, integration authorities, COSLA and local communities to ensure that reforms are co-designed and that funding decisions support sustainable long-term improvement and improve outcomes for the people and the communities that they serve.

As I said, the draft budget that was recently introduced in the Parliament provides £22.5 billion of investment in health and social care services. It exceeds the health consequential from the UK Government and provides a real-terms uplift, to ensure more sustainable and resilient services. In 2026-27, NHS boards' baseline funding will increase, bringing a total investment of more than £17.6 billion—an average real-terms uplift of 1.8 per cent. We will also be fully funding pay deals in 2026-27. We recognise, of course, that it remains the statutory responsibility of NHS boards to achieve a balanced budget.

As I mentioned, the NRAC formula is an objective measure of the need for healthcare services across Scotland. However, in addition, since 2012-13, the Scottish Government has provided more than £4 billion of additional funding to ensure that each territorial board remains within 0.6 per cent of NRAC parity.

The NRAC formula is refreshed annually to reflect changes in population and service needs, including in remote and rural communities. That supports vital work to reduce health inequality and ensures that we continue to allocate funding according to the relative need for healthcare in each board area. In particular, in 2026-27, NHS Grampian will receive nearly £1.5 billion in baseline funding, which equates to an increased investment of £130.7 million compared with 2025-26 and includes a 2 per cent baseline uplift of £28 million. NHS Grampian will also receive an additional £11.4 million to ensure that it remains within 0.6 per cent of NRAC parity.

Liam Kerr: Among all the statistics that the minister is trotting out, let us get specific. How would he suggest that NHS Grampian makes a further £40 million of cuts next year?

Ivan McKee: I was just coming on to that point. The board was escalated to stage 4 of the NHS Scotland support and intervention framework in May 2025 in order to provide it with the support that it needs. The Scottish Government has set targets to improve the board's position over the next three years, and the board remains on course to achieve those targets.

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

With regard to local authorities, the Government has provided another real-terms increase in funding for the next financial year. We will continue to work with COSLA to ensure that our communities continue to receive the high-quality services that they expect and deserve. The grant-aided expenditure funding formula is agreed by COSLA leaders, and Aberdeenshire Council receives additional funding due to Aberdeenshire's rural nature. If Alexander Burnett disagrees with any of the evidence that is used to make that calculation or if he believes that other evidence would merit inclusion in distribution considerations, I am sure that his points could be raised directly with COSLA, which makes decisions on the funding methodology.

Tim Eagle: I want to focus on that point, because it is crucial. I came down to the Parliament in 2018 to discuss it with the then Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Constitution, Derek Mackay. The problem with the COSLA funding formula is that it requires the entire COSLA body—all the council administrations—to come together and agree. The councils that do well out of the funding formula will never agree to reset it; therefore, the Government will need to step in. Recognising that rurality is not taken into account, will the Government promise to do that in the future, to make sure that the funding formula is fair?

Ivan McKee: I have identified that Aberdeenshire Council receives additional funding due to its rural nature. It is interesting to get it on the record that the Conservative Party is calling on the Scottish Government to overrule COSLA on matters that relate to local issues.

Tim Eagle: That is not what I said.

Ivan McKee: That is exactly what he said. I think that COSLA would have something to say about that.

Under the two existing formulas, the additional cost of providing services in rural and remote areas is a key component in determining funding allocations. In the 2026-27 provisional settlement, Aberdeenshire Council will receive more than £20 million in additional allocation based on rurality indicators, making it the authority with the sixth-highest such allocation per person.

I will turn to some of the members' speeches. There was no change in the typical approach from Alexander Burnett, Tim Eagle and other Conservative members. On the one hand, they call for £1 billion in tax cuts—Alexander Burnett opened his speech with a comment about Scottish tax rates. At the same time, they argue for increased resources to be provided to public services. It fell to Maggie Chapman to give the Tories a lesson in basic arithmetic and economics, and I am glad that she did. That shows the state that the Conservative Party is in. Given that it has no chance of being in a position to make decisions in Government, it has the luxury of being able to call for contradictory things in debates.

Karen Adam clearly laid out the reality of the situation at the national and local levels. In that regard, we were entertained by a bit of a dispute between Opposition parties on the position of seagulls—that was a piece of brief entertainment in the debate that broke up the monotony of the hypocrisy from the Tory party. *[Interruption.]* I already answered Liam Kerr's question—perhaps he was not listening, or perhaps he was too excited about the speech that he made.

With regard to non-domestic rates, in Aberdeen city, the total increase in rateable value is 7 per cent compared with a total increase of 12 per cent across Scotland. The Scottish Government is putting £870 million into reliefs this year to support business with those increases. Rather than being in the situation that was indicated by Liam Kerr earlier, we are giving the hospitality sector more support in percentage terms than it is getting south of the border.

As I outlined, the Government remains committed to ensuring that funding is distributed fairly and that it supports sustainable and high-quality services across Scotland, including in remote and rural communities. We will continue to work collaboratively with local authorities and NHS boards, and we will drive the reforms that are needed to improve outcomes for all our communities.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate. I suspend the meeting until 2.30 pm.

13:29

Meeting suspended.

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

14:30

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Education and Skills

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon. The next item of business is portfolio question time, and the portfolio this afternoon is education and skills.

Disruption in Classrooms (Social Media Use)

1. **Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what analysis it has undertaken of any link between social media use and violent disruption in classrooms in Scotland. (S6O-05539)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): We recognise concerns about the impact of social media use on children's behaviour and wellbeing. The behaviour in Scottish schools research highlighted that behaviour is influenced by a range of complex factors, including the impacts of the pandemic, poverty, family circumstances and wider societal influences. That is why our focus is on preventing the development and escalation of unhelpful behaviour, particularly through encouraging positive relationships in schools.

I also welcome the fact that a number of local authorities and schools either have banned mobile phones or are exploring doing so.

Stephen Kerr: Children now spend, on average, around three hours a day online, and 70 per cent of them are being exposed to real-world violence during that time. Teachers across Scotland are telling us that concentration is falling, behaviour is deteriorating and disruption is rising. Given the Government's acknowledgement that violent disruption in classrooms is increasing, does the cabinet secretary accept that unregulated mobile phone use during the school day is contributing to the problem? If she does—I think that she might—will she move beyond guidance and commit to a clear nationwide ban on mobile phones in Scottish schools?

Jenny Gilruth: Mr Kerr and I have discussed these issues at length. I should pay tribute to his colleague Pam Gosal, who led a round table on the matter last week, which I attended, and where we discussed the issue in more detail.

I accept the member's substantive point in relation to the harmful impacts of mobile phones in our schools and the disruptive impact that they can have on behaviour. The BISS research brought some of those issues to the fore.

There are broader issues in this space in relation to the regulation of the internet and social media in particular, which is what the member's first question was about. On Monday, I will be in London, meeting United Kingdom Government ministers at the interministerial group on child sexual abuse, which I expect to talk about those issues in more detail.

More broadly, the member is aware of the Government's position on mobile phone bans in schools. At the current time, we do not have a nationwide ban; the guidance says that that power rests with headteachers. For the Government to introduce a national ban, we would have to legislate, and I will not be able to do that in advance of the election or give confirmation at the current time. I hear the issues that the member has put on the record today, and I am sympathetic to the general points that he has made.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): As children and young people encounter new and evolving challenges, can the cabinet secretary outline how the Scottish Government is supporting work such as the digital discourse initiative to equip them with crucial skills to counter negative online content and behaviour?

Jenny Gilruth: The programme for government committed us to supporting the digital discourse initiative, which was a joint project by Time for Inclusive Education and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue. The initiative supports schools to counter the impacts of disinformation and online hate. During my visit to Cathkin high school last year for the launch of the project, I heard positive feedback from staff and pupils. I am delighted that the initiative continues to receive such positive feedback. It is one of several useful online resources that complement the recently updated statutory guidance that the Government has published on relationships, and sexual health and parenthood, which provide learners with the knowledge to develop safe and healthy relationships.

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

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): We know that there is a clear link between social media use and behaviour. I hear what the cabinet secretary says about her position on mobile phones, although I would ask her to furnish Parliament with further information about why she thinks that there has to be a legislative intervention for her to ban mobile phones in Scotland's schools.

Given that the cabinet secretary has responsibility for child safety and wellbeing, as she referenced in her answer to Stephen Kerr, what is the Scottish Government's position on the proposals currently under consultation to ban under-16s from social media use, as other countries around the world have done?

Jenny Gilruth: What I said about the banning of mobile phones is not something that I think; as a minister, I have commissioned advice on it from my officials. Legislative power does not rest with the Scottish ministers at the current time, which is not to say that it may not do so in the future.

I expect to discuss the issues that Mr O'Kane raises with regard to online behaviour and social media with UK Government ministers on Monday at the interministerial group on child sexual abuse. I am very sympathetic to the proposals that the UK Government has put forward in that regard. However, I recognise that an element of powers here rests in a reserved space, so I will continue to engage with my colleagues in the UK Government. I am happy to give an update on that, following my meeting on Monday.

Qualifications Scotland (Learner Interest Committee)

2. Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government, regarding the Education (Scotland) Act 2025, how the new body, Qualifications Scotland, will ensure that the learner interest committee is representative of all of Scotland, including rural and island areas and neurodivergent learners. (S6O-05540)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): I am pleased that Qualifications Scotland opened the application process for its new learner interests committee on 2 February this year. It will ensure that a range of perspectives are represented on the committee, including from learners across Scotland's regions and people with additional support needs or a disability. It is also important to be clear that the Education (Scotland) Act 2025 places a statutory responsibility on Qualifications Scotland to encourage equal opportunities when appointing members of the committee. That sits alongside specifically requiring them to consider the appointment of individuals who are care experienced, who come from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and who have additional support needs in education.

Emma Roddick: We know that many neurodivergent learners struggle with neurotypical processes and structures in school settings, and that can be further compounded by rurality. Equally, I know from young rural voices that they face multiple barriers such as being young carers, being disabled themselves or suffering from mental health issues. Many of those characteristics can cause the others, so how will we take an intersectional approach that recognises the multiple barriers that some learners face?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank the member for her question and the issues that she raises. Qualifications Scotland is at arm's length from ministers, but I should say that it already undertakes a range of activity that is designed to support the needs of disabled and neurodivergent learners. That includes reviewing and updating the content for its designing inclusive assessment academy course for staff and appointees who develop qualifications and assessments.

Qualifications Scotland also engages directly with organisations that represent neurodivergent learners via its equality and inclusion group. The organisation and the Government are very aware of the needs of disabled and neurodivergent learners and any barriers to accessing current qualifications that they may face, and, to Emma Roddick's point, they are keen to address those needs through improvements to accessibility and inclusion as part of qualifications reform more broadly.

Qualifications Scotland should of course ensure that learners across all Scotland, including those in rural and island communities, have the same assessment experiences, supported by deploying visiting assessors for all assessment centres in Scotland.

Apprenticeships (Care-experienced Young People)

3. Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting apprenticeships for care-experienced young people, particularly in rural and island areas. (S6O-05541)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Ben Macpherson): The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that care-experienced young people can access a variety of apprenticeships, including in rural and island areas. Skills Development Scotland, on behalf of the Scottish Government, provides enhanced contribution rates for care-experienced modern apprentices up to the age of 29. Those enhanced contribution rates ensure that training providers can offer the additional support that is needed to help

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

individuals to sustain and complete their apprenticeship. Skills Development Scotland also provides a rural uplift and an enhanced payment for training providers in rural and island areas to incentivise delivery in those locations.

Ariane Burgess: At present, apprenticeships in critically important sectors are off limits for rural and island-based young people who are care experienced, and who could find it destabilising to leave their forever homes. For example, there are no roof-slating apprenticeships north of Arbroath, which in effect prevents many young people in the Highlands and Islands from pursuing that key line of work.

Given the Scottish Government's on-going commitment to the Promise, what steps will it take to rectify the lack of opportunity for care-experienced young people in my region and across rural and island Scotland?

Ben Macpherson: I thank Ariane Burgess for highlighting those important points about her region, the young people in it and those who are retraining.

The modern apprenticeship demand assessment comprises three phases. The first is establishing a robust evidence base and sourcing and collating strategic and contextual data. The second phase draws on the baseline to support consultation with industry to verify demand. In the final phase, the evidence baseline and consultation insight are analysed and a final assessment is produced to inform the modern apprenticeship contracting strategy. That is all undertaken by Skills Development Scotland.

The member makes important points about making sure that there are opportunities in the area, that the demand is fulfilled and that we build the skills base that is required, not just in the here and now but for the times ahead. If the member would like to follow up on the issue after this question session, we can help her to connect with Skills Development Scotland and, potentially, the Scottish Funding Council.

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The initial enrolment in apprenticeships as a post-school destination is a positive step, but the real challenge lies with sustained retention. Nine months after leaving school, the proportion of care-experienced young people in positive destinations drops by 15 percentage points, falling from 86.4 per cent to 71 per cent. In my region, Fife College reports that only 46.5 per cent of care-experienced students successfully complete their course compared to 63 per cent of the general student population. Can the minister outline what mandatory retention measures the Scottish Government is embedding in its new apprenticeship contracts to ensure that care-experienced apprentices are supported to the finish line and not just at the starting blocks?

Ben Macpherson: The member is right to highlight those issues. We have increased access in both college and university enrolment for those from a care-experienced background. However, I appreciate the point about retention and the wider responsibility that we, collectively as a Parliament and a country, have to care-experienced people through the Promise. If the member has the forbearance, I will take that away and engage with Skills Development Scotland, working with my colleague who leads on the Promise. I will provide reassurance and look into any further action that can be taken to make a positive impact for the people who she rightly highlights need our help, and as much assistance as we can give them, to ensure that we fulfil the Promise.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): The lack of provision in traditional building skills training in local colleges for young people in rural and island areas of Scotland creates an obstacle for those who are interested in a career in the sector. I have met industry representatives who have highlighted a delivery model in Canada and Ireland, where a mobile training facility was developed to allow for local training provision in key trades. Will the Scottish Government consider the development of such a mobile training facility to allow all young people in Scotland to have the same opportunities for careers in the traditional building sector?

Ben Macpherson: I met relevant stakeholders recently to discuss traditional building skills. The member is right to highlight the need to retain the skills that we have now and pass them on to the next generation, as well as the need to meet the demand for those skills across the country. I will take away the member's suggestion and will be happy to pick it up with Skills Development Scotland.

Access to Childcare (Western Isles)

4. Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its engagement with Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, the Care Inspectorate and the Scottish Childminding Association regarding the improvement of access to childcare across the Western Isles, both for children under three and three to five-year-olds. (S6O-05542)

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes): The Scottish Government continues to work closely with Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, the Care Inspectorate and the Scottish Childminding Association to support improved access to childcare across the Western Isles. We recognise the distinct challenges and the vital role of childminders in rural and island communities and have funded the

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

SCMA to deliver a national three-year programme of childminder recruitment and retention. More broadly, we are supporting childcare access through national programmes, including investment in early adopter communities, and we have made commitments in the national islands plan to develop practical, place-based solutions for children and families.

Alasdair Allan: I thank the minister for her on-going engagement on the issue. As she is aware, there has been a huge reduction in the number of childminders who are operating across my constituency in recent years, with no childminders at all left in Barra, Uist or Harris. In order to support parents back into work, can the minister say anything further about the Scottish Government's work to increase access to childcare in rural and island settings, for example, through exploring the option of permitting childminders to operate in a non-domestic setting?

Natalie Don-Innes: That specific example has been raised with me before by other members across the chamber and I feel that it should be explored further. However, amending legislation to allow the delivery of childminding services in non-domestic premises would be a lengthy process and we would need to carefully consider any consequences of doing so. Safeguarding would be key. In the shorter term, I understand the importance of those issues, which is why I requested that Highlands and Islands Enterprise provide a report on rural and island childcare access. Building on that report, work is under way to arrange a rural and island childcare round table, which will bring together partners across policy, regulation and the childcare sector to focus on identifying realistic and effective action that we could take to improve childcare access to support families in those communities.

Racism in Schools

5. Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to tackle racism in secondary schools. (S6O-05543)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): There is no place for racism in our schools and we are committed to addressing it across all education settings. The anti-racism in education programme strengthens professional learning to build racial literacy, and interim guidance on responding to racism was published last June.

A new whole-school approach will be issued shortly, offering guidance on responding to and supporting pupils, staff and families who have experienced racism. This work is supported by anti-racism curriculum principles and calls to action developed with children and young people, alongside resources to embed anti-racism in classroom practice.

Emma Harper: I have heard reports of pupils moving schools due to persistent racist bullying. That can be especially difficult for families in rural areas, where alternatives are limited. In addition, the rise in anti-immigration rhetoric from some political parties might be emboldening parental attitudes that, in turn, influence young people and shape behaviour within school communities. Can the cabinet secretary outline how the Scottish Government is supporting both urban and rural secondary schools to embed effective anti-racism practice and to ensure that staff are equipped to respond swiftly and protect pupils who might be at risk?

Jenny Gilruth: I am very shocked to hear that pupils have been encouraged to move schools, in some instances, because they have been on the receiving end of persistent racist bullying. That should not be happening in our schools, and I reiterate that there is no place for that type of hatred in them.

Where that type of behaviour does occur, it needs to be robustly addressed. That is why the forthcoming whole-school approach guidance, which I mentioned in my previous response, will offer a further response to our councils and schools on the handling of racist incidents. That guidance has been developed with the racism and racist incidents sub-groups, the work of which is being taken forward as part of the national action plan on relationships and behaviour.

Education Scotland's building racial literacy programme is open to teachers across the country and, as I understand it, it has been a worthwhile initiative that has helped support teachers in our schools. The programme provides access to online learning, which allows teachers from all local authorities to take part. More than 1,000 teachers have completed the programme so far, and 24 anti-racist mentors now support schools across the country, including in rural areas such as Highland and Orkney.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There are a couple of supplementary questions, which will need to be brief.

Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Ind): What specific funding allocations will be made to support participative curriculum resourcing with regard to anti-racist materials? How will schools be supported in accessing high-quality materials to ensure that racist incidents are handled effectively so as to prevent far-right narratives from filling the gaps?

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

Jenny Gilruth: Mr Choudhury raises a very important point, and a number of different funding streams are related to the issues raised in his question. The building racial literacy programme, which I mentioned in my previous response, has £78,000 of funding, and there is funding of just over £80,000 for the cohort of the leadership and mentoring programme. From the AREP curriculum budget that I mentioned earlier—that is, the anti-racism education programme—there has been an extension of the partnership with Scotdec, in collaboration with educators.

The focus for 2025-26 is on creating an anti-racism and maths resource, for which the Scottish Government has provided £150,000. Funding to the value of £67,000 has also been agreed to support the second year of Education Scotland's anti-racist mentors programme.

There are two other funding streams, but I am conscious of the time. If the member will allow me, I will write to him with a bit more detail on those topics. I appreciate that there is a range of different issues here, and I would like to give him a substantive response.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): From the data that the cabinet secretary has available to her, can she say what proportion of incidents result in meaningful disciplinary action? How would the cabinet secretary define a consequence that acts as a real deterrent to that behaviour?

Jenny Gilruth: Mr Kerr will be aware that the Government published updated guidance on consequences prior to the summer recess last year. As for data on meaningful disciplinary action itself, those are not data sets that the Government would itself gather.

I should say that there are broader issues in relation to our education data at the current time. I am sure that this will be a matter that the incoming Government, following dissolution and the election, will want to consider in due course, as there are certain issues to look at in relation to data sharing and data being more readily available to ministers who sit at national level.

Grooming Gangs (Public Inquiry)

6. Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what the education secretary's position is on concerns that, in light of the national review timeline, victims of grooming gangs may have to wait up to 18 months before ministers decide whether to establish a full public inquiry. (S6O-05544)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): It will not take 18 months. The first phase of assessment is already under way, with local authorities having 12 weeks to respond. The inspectorates have committed to reporting to ministers by the summer of this year once they have assessed the findings.

The findings will be scrutinised by the national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group, which is chaired by Professor Alexis Jay. Professor Jay has provided advice throughout the development of the national review and will advise ministers on the progress being made.

I will be providing a fuller, more substantial update to Parliament in my statement on these issues next week.

Sue Webber: I am sure that the survivors, along with me, will be delighted to know that they will not have to wait 18 months for the review.

According to their testimonies, victims say that they were brought over the border from England to Edinburgh to be exploited and raped. Will you confirm that the national review will explicitly cover historical cross-border grooming networks, including cases in Edinburgh involving offenders operating from England?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Jenny Gilruth: I thank the member for her question. She is absolutely correct to put on record the importance of listening to survivors' voices. That is why, yesterday evening, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs and I joined a meeting of the cross-party group on adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. I was very grateful to the group's members for sharing time with Ms Constance and me to talk about their experiences to ensure that the national review listens to their voices and that we get this right for them. That is imperative.

Ms Webber raises a substantive point in relation to historical cross-border cases, and some of the issues that she has alluded to relate to historical cases, too. She will be aware of the work of the child abuse inquiry, which is looking at some of the historical cases in the round. If Ms Webber will allow me, I would like to write to her in more detail about the role of the inspectorate.

Finally, it might give the member some comfort to know that I will be meeting Alexis Jay later this evening. Following that meeting, I would like to write to Ms Webber in more detail on those points.

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

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 7 was not lodged.

Budget 2026-27 (College Sector)

8. Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of any potential impact of its draft budget 2026-27 on the college sector. (S6O-05546)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Ben Macpherson): The draft budget increases core capital and resource funding for Scotland's colleges by £70 million—a 10 per cent uplift on last year. That provides a strong platform for the sector to support learners, deliver the skills that our economy needs and ensure that our colleges are equipped for the challenges and opportunities of the next quarter of the 21st century.

I meet college stakeholders regularly. This morning, the First Minister chaired a constructive meeting with Colleges Scotland, and the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government and I attended, too. Colleges Scotland welcomed the draft budget and recognised the significance of the additional funding for the sector. I hope that members across the chamber will share our commitment to Scotland's colleges and support the draft budget.

Jamie Hepburn: Audit Scotland has reported that New College Lanarkshire's modelling demonstrated that supported learning requires the most staff per academic credit achieved. How can the uplift that the minister speaks of sustain supported learning at New College Lanarkshire and across the further education sector, and support the social good that it can deliver?

Ben Macpherson: I had an excellent visit to New College Lanarkshire's Motherwell campus in recent months, and I was struck by what a remarkable institution it is, by the good that it is doing in the community and by the skills that it is providing to the public and private sectors.

The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that all our students, including those with a disability, with a long-term medical condition or with additional support needs, are able to access further and higher education and are fully supported throughout their studies. I am confident that the uplift in funding that the draft budget will deliver will enhance colleges' ability to make strategic decisions that strengthen student support and further embed inclusivity at the heart of their provision. The tripartite group of Colleges Scotland, the Scottish Government and the Scottish Funding Council is also driving forward a fundamental review of the current credit-based college funding model to improve flexibility and responsiveness, which will help in that regard.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): In 2018, a comprehensive job evaluation exercise for college staff was initiated, and it has still not concluded. I know that the SFC is going through a lessons-learned process at the moment, but it is estimated that backdating this to 1 September 2018, which the Government has committed to, will cost £100 million. Is that £100 million ring fenced in this year's budget? Does the minister agree with the suggestion that the exercise will cost £100 million? Given the length of time that it has taken to get to this stage, what has the Government done to look at the implications of that for people's tax in the years that have passed since this review, which has still not been completed, was initiated?

Ben Macpherson: I thank Mr Ross for raising the important point about how our college staff are paid and the funding that is provided by the Government to facilitate that through our valued stakeholders.

Of course, a period of work on industrial relations was undertaken prior to my appointment. Thankfully, we have reached a position of settlement with good outcomes for all parties, including, in recent months, support staff in colleges. The staff who work in our colleges are the most important stakeholders, as they deliver for the learners whom we are all sent here to serve and represent.

I am happy to take away Mr Ross's specific question on resourcing, both historically and going forward. I would like to give the member a substantial, detailed response, and do so in writing, if he is understanding of that.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I am sure that the minister will recognise the role that the Liberal Democrats played in securing the uplift in college funding and in persuading the finance secretary to give that 10 per cent—or £70 million—increase. However, staff, trade unions and college leaders want to know whether this will just be a one-hit wonder or whether it will result in an increase year on year. We need to have certainty for the college sector so that it can plan for the future. Is the minister confident that the finance secretary understands that, and will increases be forthcoming in future years?

Ben Macpherson: I thank the member for both his fair criticism, on occasion, and the constructive approach that he and his party have taken to the budget process. Through that positive and constructive engagement, along with working together on the collective need of, and our responsibility for, learners and

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

the economy, this settlement—if the budget is agreed to fully, as we expect to happen—will have a real, positive impact on communities across Scotland and, crucially, will help our colleges. That is what we discussed in the meeting this morning that I referred to earlier. All of us now have the opportunity to look ahead to what our college sector can provide to ensure that we tackle poverty and realise our economic potential.

The member is right to emphasise that there is a process beyond this financial year, and we are working with the college sector and the SFC on how we start to think about how we, on a shared basis, can invest in people and the economy in the round.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio question time. There will be a brief pause before we move on to the next item of business to allow members on the front benches to change over.

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