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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 25 March 2026

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

General Question Time

Forth Valley College (Alloa Campus)

1. **Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the reported decision by Forth Valley College to retain its Alloa campus for 2026-27, what engagement it will have with the college and the Scottish Funding Council to ensure the long-term future of further education provision in Clackmannanshire. (S6O-05685)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Ben Macpherson): The member is right to emphasise that, because of the additional resource that the Scottish Government has provided to our college sector, the board of Forth Valley College has confirmed that the Alloa campus will remain open for the academic year 2026-27.

In January, using the Scottish Government's convening power, and working with the college principal and the wider college, we were able to bring together senior representatives from the public and private sectors to consider and explore how the college could strengthen its engagement with industry and ensure that the potential of the Alloa campus was fully realised. That was a very constructive discussion, which highlighted the strong commitment that exists across the region to creating a skills system that is responsive and resilient. The group expects to meet again in the summer to review progress and consider next steps. That represents a positive way forward for the potential of the Alloa campus.

Keith Brown: I very much welcome the Scottish Government's support in this matter, and especially its budget support, notwithstanding the fact that neither the Conservative Party nor the Labour Party made any budget proposals for increased college funding.

What consideration did the Forth Valley College board give to alternative options across the wider Forth Valley College estate, including the Falkirk and Stirling campuses, before reaching its position? It seems that the board has focused only on the Alloa campus. Given the importance of further education to local skills, employability and economic growth, especially in our most deprived communities, what specific assurances can the minister provide that Clackmannanshire will continue to benefit from a high-quality, sustainable and diverse further education offering in the longer term?

Ben Macpherson: My engagement and the Scottish Government's wider engagement with the college have been enhanced by the work of Keith Brown, as the constituency MSP, in informing the Scottish Government and working collaboratively and proactively with it to promote the interests of the college and the people it serves and he serves.

Through the process of wider engagement with partners in industry and the public sector, which I mentioned in my first answer, it is clear that the need for skills in Clackmannanshire, Stirlingshire and Falkirk will increase in the period ahead as a result of the inward investment, the opportunities in the economy and the growth that we are seeing in the area, so Forth Valley College should have a positive future across the three campuses. It is important that all partners—with the Scottish Government at the heart of the process—work together constructively in the year ahead to develop the case for continued investment in the college so that it can realise its potential for the region and the people in the area.

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Does the minister accept that funding for Forth Valley College needs to increase year on year? Otherwise, we will be in the same position next year and the following year, with the Alloa campus facing the threat of closure. Does the Scottish Government accept that, if we are to grow the Scottish economy in the way that we need to, colleges across Scotland must be put on a more sustainable footing?

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): A brief response would be appreciated, minister.

Ben Macpherson: Investment in our college sector has increased significantly in this financial year, and the Government is now taking part in a process that was formally announced on 12 March, along with the college sector and the Scottish Funding Council, to consider what our college sector should look like in the future. It is clear from the voice of industry and the needs of communities that we must have a thriving college sector if we are to meet the needs of the future and to realise our potential. The more we are united in that task as a Parliament and as a country, the more we will achieve together.

Grangemouth (Redundancy Support)

2. **Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting workers at Grangemouth who have been made redundant. (S6O-05686)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): We are committed to securing a just

transition for Grangemouth. We have provided more than £12 million in funding to support the creation of up to 279 jobs.

We are also committed to supporting workers who have been made redundant as a result of commercial decisions at Grangemouth. We have established a programme of skills support that is assisting redundant workers to retrain, upskill and transition to new employment. Up to £2 million has been made available for that by the Scottish and United Kingdom Governments. Engagement has been high, with more than 300 individuals being supported to date.

Bill Kidd: The Westminster Labour Government has shown whose side it is on by stepping in to save steel at Scunthorpe but abandoning the workforce at Grangemouth.

The unions, especially Unite the Union, have been constructive throughout and have put the needs of their members before anything else. What role has our Government played to create a future for the workers who have been abandoned and discarded by the United Kingdom Labour Government?

Kate Forbes: The Scottish Government has engaged extensively with those workers. Mr Kidd's question allows me to put on record my enormous appreciation of the constructive and positive role that unions at Grangemouth have played. They have brought ideas and solutions to the table and given help to their members and other workers in order to secure a chance of a better future.

I thank Unite the Union in particular. It has worked with us to establish the Grangemouth jobs prioritisation scheme, which ensures that redundant workers are prioritised for new opportunities arising at Grangemouth as a result of the Grangemouth just transition fund. I put on record my enormous thanks to all the unions that I have had the pleasure of working with over the past few years.

Bus Routes (Local Authority Powers)

3. **Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of whether local authorities are fully utilising the powers available to them under the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019, such as bus service improvement partnerships, franchising and the ability to run their own services, to safeguard essential routes such as the 46 and 48 in Midlothian. (S6O-05687)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): The Scottish Government and I very much appreciate the vital role that local bus services play in supporting the communities of Midlothian. We have given local transport authorities powers to improve services within their areas, and I encourage them all to explore the powers that are available to them to make necessary improvements as they see fit.

It is for each authority to determine what actions are best to address their own transport challenges. Additionally, local authorities have a duty under the Transport Act 1985 to identify where there is social need for particular bus services and can subsidise services at their own discretion.

Colin Beattie: My constituents are gravely concerned about the adjustments to the routes that I mentioned, which will make it harder for residents to reach hospitals, workplaces and essential appointments. With that in mind, what guidance does the minister provide to ensure that local authorities are deploying the powers at their disposal in the public interest?

Jim Fairlie: We have published a range of guidance to support local authorities in using the powers under the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 and most recently published guidance on franchising on 17 March this year. As I said, I want all local authorities and transport authorities to consider the full range of tools that are available to them under the 2019 act to ensure that everyone has accessible public transport regardless of where they are in Scotland. However, I recognise that it is for each local transport authority to determine which powers, if any, are suitable to improve the services in their specific area.

Affordable Childcare (Clydebank and Milngavie)

4. **Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting families in Clydebank and Milngavie to access affordable childcare. (S6O-05688)

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes): Families in Clydebank and Milngavie, like those throughout Scotland, benefit from our investment of £1 billion annually in the provision of 1,140 hours of high-quality early learning and childcare. The evaluation of that policy that was published last week shows that it is helping parents, particularly women, into work, training or study, enabling them to make choices that support families and helping families to meet the cost of living challenge. If families paid for that offer, it would cost more than £6,000 annually.

We are also expanding school-age childcare, delivering breakfast clubs for all children in primary school and extending the extra time programme to help more families impacted by poverty.

Marie McNair: I am proud of the policies that the Scottish National Party Government has introduced, which make childcare more

accessible. We know that wraparound childcare is essential to ensuring that parents can find and retain employment, and that the impact of that policy is keeping children out of poverty. Will the minister set out the Government's continued commitment to childcare providers across Scotland in recognition that they are key stakeholders in the delivery of our childcare strategy?

Natalie Don-Innes: I absolutely recognise the fundamental importance of childcare providers as the cornerstone of the childcare system in Scotland. I am glad that Marie McNair asked that question, as it allows me to put that on record one last time.

I have welcomed the opportunity to visit a wide range of settings during my time in office, seeing our support and funding in action and witnessing the passion, dedication and skill of our childcare professionals, who seek every day to get it right for every child. As the next Government considers its priorities for childcare, I urge it to continue to put childcare providers' voices at the heart of those discussions.

Scottish Information Commissioner (Government Handling of Information)

5. **Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to comments by the Scottish Information Commissioner who stated, in relation to the Government's handling of information concerning the Salmond files, "I can no longer trust the government to handle this information unsupervised and will explore more intrusive options to ensure compliance." (S6O-05689)

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey): As the First Minister set out in the chamber on 19 March, the Scottish Government has, since the start of 2024, answered more than 13,000 freedom of information requests, of which 95 per cent have been responded to on time. The Scottish Information Commissioner has raised compliance concerns about two of those cases. One relates to a delay in compliance due to the need to adhere to court orders and the scale and complexity of the material involved. The other is about the interpretation of the scope of a request. As the permanent secretary has set out in response to the commissioner, all FOI request cases are handled with the highest standards of impartiality and integrity.

Douglas Ross: The Scottish Information Commissioner has lost trust in the Government. He has called its excuses "preposterous and unacceptable". Any other Government would be utterly ashamed, but this lot are brazen and think that they can get away with it. Does the minister understand that the Government's behaviour on that case and so many others has led the public out there to tell me that they think that Scottish National Party ministers and the SNP Government are a bunch of chancers and liars?

The Presiding Officer: We will be courteous and respectful to one another in the chamber.

Graeme Dey: Indeed, Presiding Officer. Oh, the irony of Douglas Ross standing up in this chamber and calling on anyone to respect authority. If anyone wants evidence of how estranged Mr Ross is from self-awareness, we have just had it. [*Interruption*.]

The Presiding Officer: Thank you.

Graeme Dey: I absolutely do not accept the thrust of Mr Ross's point. [*Interruption*.]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the minister.

Graeme Dey: The Government has an excellent track record in responding to FOI requests. One of the two requests in question concerned releasing a huge amount of data and involved protecting the identity of individuals, and I remind Mr Ross that the other involved the Government, very unusually, releasing legal advice that it had received. That in itself is evidence of the Government's willingness to comply with FOI requests. [*Interruption*.]

The Presiding Officer: I would be grateful if we could hear each other. This delay means that it is unlikely that I will be able to call all members who wish to ask a question.

Fusion Strategy

6. **Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government, regarding any impact on its energy policy and strategy, and in light of reports that Torness nuclear power station is due to close by 2030, what its response is to the United Kingdom Government's new fusion strategy, which aims to deliver thousands of jobs and long-term energy security. (S6O-05690)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): The Scottish Government recognises the increasing interest in fusion energy. However, fusion remains experimental, with no commercial deployment and uncertainties around cost, safety and timescales.

The United Kingdom Government's prototype fusion plant is not expected to be operational until 2040, but the climate emergency demands proven, deployable solutions now. That is why we are focused on Scotland's world-leading potential in renewable energy, which is already delivering thousands of jobs, significant investment and greater energy security—now—and remains the clearest route to net zero.

Martin Whitfield: What estimate has the Scottish Government made of the direct financial losses to East Lothian resulting from the closure of Torness nuclear power station, including the projected reduction in high-skilled employment, the impact on local supply chain businesses and the anticipated fall in business rates and revenues to support local public services—or has it not yet done so?

Gillian Martin: We obviously work with Torness, and we welcome the work of its workers and management and their participation in our energy security. Torness is making plans for its closure, as Martin Whitfield is well aware.

Nuclear fusion is far away from deployment. The security of electricity supply and issues such as grid stability, inertia and frequency control will not be helped by something that happens in the future—in 2040. Nuclear fusion also cannot be lifted and put into Torness power station or other fission sites. I think that Martin Whitfield is aware of that, too.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): What does the cabinet secretary understand to be the estimated average build cost of a small modular reactor?

Gillian Martin: Obviously, I do not have that information in front of me, because we do not plan to build small nuclear reactors, which are unproven technology that has not been deployed. The Scottish Government has a policy against new nuclear fusion.

Forth Valley College (Funding)

7. **Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its commitment is to a sustainable funding package for Forth Valley College to ensure its long-term future. (S6O-05691)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Ben Macpherson): The member is generous in spirit, therefore he will want to be thankful for and warmly welcome the fact that the Scottish National Party's 2026-27 budget includes a 10 per cent uplift for our colleges, reinforcing the Government's on-going commitment to the college sector, to people across the country and to the economy.

As part of the annual allocation process, the Scottish Funding Council will publish indicative university and college allocations for the financial year 2026-27 during the coming days, and the Scottish Government's increased support for our colleges will be reflected in those announcements.

Alexander Stewart: It is vital that the public is aware of the full picture, because, unless the Scottish Government can give concrete reassurances about the long-term future of the Alloa campus to its students and employees, it will be right back to square 1. Can the minister give any assurance about the long-term financial package that is required?

Ben Macpherson: Whether it is at the Alloa campus, Forth Valley College or other colleges across the country, as I said, this Government's stepping up of support for our college sector is making all the difference for learners and institutions.

I spoke earlier about the difference that has been made for the Alloa campus and I said that it will stay open for this year. We are in a very positive and constructive dialogue with the sector as a whole and with Forth Valley College about the future of the Alloa campus. There is huge potential and there are economic opportunities. There is a need for more skills in the area, and that will have an impact on the community, so that the Alloa campus can have a bright future. The Government will keep working proactively to support the whole of our college sector, Forth Valley College and the people of Alloa.

Sexual Crimes and Domestic Abuse

8. **Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Ind):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the Scottish Police Authority's recent quarterly policing performance report showing that sexual crimes have continued to increase, with recorded rape at the highest level since comparable records began, and with domestic abuse also continuing to rise, what its response is to concerns that its equally safe strategy is failing women and girls, including what urgent, measurable action it will take to reverse these trends. (S6O-05692)

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): All forms of violence against women are abhorrent, and those who perpetrate violence and abuse—the majority of whom are men—must change their actions and behaviours.

Although we recognise that some of that increase might be due to the actions to increase confidence in the justice system, so that more victims report sexual crime, clearly there is more that we need to do. That is why we are absolutely steadfast in our commitment to preventing such violence and addressing the underlying actions and attitudes that perpetuate it. Improving access to support through our equally safe strategy will be underpinned by almost £46 million in funding during the next two years, subject to the annual budget process, which reflects our deep commitment to tackling the issue.

Ash Regan: Twelve years on from the equally safe strategy, women and girls in Scotland are less safe than ever. Male violence is escalating in

homes, on our streets and online. Despite £100 million of equally safe funding having been delivered since 2021, our vital front-line services are overwhelmed by demand from victims of sexual assault, rape, domestic abuse and prostitution. While other nations tackle the root causes of misogyny, including by criminalising the purchase of sex, our Government's woeful inaction and ideological obsession have allowed data on sex to be corrupted, sex-based protections to be eroded and women to be treated as commodities. Will the Government stop blaming teenage boys for misogyny and finally connect the dots upstream by strengthening sex-based protections and confronting systemic misogyny through urgent legislative and societal action to reverse this crisis?

Kaukab Stewart: I absolutely accept that violence against women and girls—the majority of which is committed by men—is absolutely abhorrent and must be stopped, but I reject some of the characterisations that were made in that question. We are working extremely hard to do that.

Yesterday, I visited Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre to hear about the wonderful work that, as part of delivering our equally safe strategy, is directly impacting women and girls who face those abuses and is making improvements in their lives. I have also met Jess Phillips MP, so that we can take a collaborative approach to tackling technology-facilitated abuse of women.

This Government is absolutely taking action to address those abhorrent abuses of women and girls.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes general question time.

First Minister's Question Time

12:01

Scottish Government (Record)

1. **Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con):** Some say that the Scottish National Party Government is incompetent. Some say that it is dishonest. Some say that it is sleazy. I say that it is all three.

John Swinney has been at the heart of this incompetent, dishonest and sleazy SNP Government for almost two decades. He defended his health secretary for pocketing £11,000 of taxpayers' money for iPad roaming charges. He defended his next health secretary for taking taxpayer-funded limos to the football. He defended his justice secretary for misrepresenting a grooming gangs expert. He defended his transport secretaries over the corrupt CalMac ferry scandal. He defended himself for deleting his Covid-era messages to Nicola Sturgeon. When will John Swinney start defending the interests of Scotland, not the interests of his sleazy SNP pals?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I defend the interests of the people of Scotland every day of my being. Having listened to Russell Findlay's poorest hits over the course of the past minute or so, I am left wondering why the Conservatives are going to get decimated at the forthcoming election.

Russell Findlay: I have plenty more to come on the SNP's greatest hits. John Swinney spends so much time on the moral high ground that it is a miracle that the man does not suffer from altitude sickness. The truth is that this jaded career politician—[*Interruption*.]

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

Russell Findlay: This jaded career politician has become accustomed and immune to SNP dishonesty, incompetence and sleaze. His party has trashed the reputation of this Parliament, and it is the people of Scotland who suffer.

John Swinney has made Scotland the highest-taxed part of the United Kingdom. He has made Scotland spend more on benefits than anywhere else in the UK. That means that John Swinney is responsible for a looming £5 billion black hole in the public finances. He needs to start being honest with the people of Scotland and tell them now how much more tax he will take from them to tackle the SNP's £5 billion bin fire.

The First Minister: I reassure Russell Findlay, in case he is worried about my energy in the next few weeks, that I am just raring to go for the forthcoming election and to win it well for Scotland.

As for aw the pile of abuse that he has just spouted out, which he spouts out every week, let me remind him what I reminded him of last week: the majority of taxpayers in Scotland pay less tax under an SNP Government than they would if they lived in England—[*Interruption*.]

The Presiding Officer: Thank you.

The First Minister: The international credit ratings agencies complimented—[*Interruption*.]

Oh, they do not like this—[*Interruption*.]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: The international credit ratings agencies complimented the "prudent" financial management of Scotland. The only person in the Parliament who has any explaining to do about their stance on fiscal recklessness is Russell Findlay, for telling me to follow Liz Truss. What a disaster that was.

Russell Findlay: That credit rating is founded entirely on the fact that Scotland is a proud part of the United Kingdom.

I turn now to SNP incompetence. I ask you to bear with me, Presiding Officer. It would take all day to properly address this useless Government's dismal record—in fact, it would take several days—but here are a few examples: classroom violence—up; teacher numbers—down; police stations—closed; police officer numbers—down; violent crime—up; domestic violence—up; new houses—unbuilt; major roads—unbuilt; hospital waiting times—up; general practitioners and dentists—unavailable; breakfast and bikes for kids—undelivered; new prisons—unbuilt; prisoners—set free; ferries—broken; pubs—closing; rural Scotland—ignored; oil workers—betrayed; women's rights—trashed; drugs deaths—up. And there is so much more.

I ask John Swinney: which of those is he most ashamed of?

The First Minister: I am left with the same question that I had a moment ago. If all that was the case, why are the Conservatives heading for a disaster at the forthcoming parliamentary election? It is because they are simply peddling a doom loop of despair, and that is killing the Conservative party.

Let me tell Russell Findlay a few things that happened under this SNP Government. When we came to office, 62 per cent of schools were rated as being in a good or satisfactory condition; that is now 93 per cent. When this Government came to office, three and four-year-olds got 412 hours of funded early learning and childcare; they now get 1,140 hours. When we came to office, the average number of affordable homes built was 5,448; the average under this Government is now 7,734.

I tell Russell Findlay something else: waiting times in this country are coming down. They are coming down because of the leadership that I have given this Government, and they are going to continue to come down. That is an SNP Government delivering on health for the people of Scotland.

Russell Findlay: Dearie me—all that spin from John Swinney. As we have just heard, John Swinney will always defend SNP sleaze. He will always put up taxes to spend more money on benefits. He will never take responsibility for his long list of failures.

But for John Swinney, none of that really matters, because since he was a teenager, he has cared about only one thing, and that is independence—[*Interruption*.]

The Presiding Officer: Thank you—thank you.

Russell Findlay: The SNP members come to life when I talk about independence, but they sat in silence when I read out the list of SNP sleaze and failure. Silence—[*Interruption*.]

The Presiding Officer: Let us all hear one another. Those in the public gallery would like to be able to follow proceedings, so let us hear one another.

Russell Findlay: John Swinney will again go into an election with independence as his number 1 priority. He says arrogantly that he will win a majority. He says that that will give him a green light for another referendum. People are sick and tired of that damaging and divisive obsession. They want politicians and the Parliament to address their problems—the cost of living, the national health service, the economy and jobs. Why does John Swinney believe that chasing independence is more important than those critical issues?

The First Minister: The Government is focused on people's priorities and on delivering improvements in the lives of the people of Scotland. That is what has driven my public service for the past 29 years as a member of Parliament. It has driven every moment of my privilege to serve the people of Scotland as a minister and now as First Minister. Since 2007, under the SNP, wealth per head in Scotland has grown by 10.1 per cent, compared with 7.8 per cent in the UK. Waiting times are falling in this country. On the cost of living, we have abolished peak rail fares and we have frozen rail fares for next year. That is an SNP Government delivering within our powers on the priorities that concern people—the NHS and the cost of living.

People in Scotland are finding times hard because of the damaging decisions that have been made in the United Kingdom. Whether it is the austerity that was ushered in by the Conservatives or the Brexit that was forced upon us against our will by the Conservatives, all those things have damaged the quality of life of people in Scotland. I say to the people of Scotland that we have an opportunity on 7 May to have a fresh start with independence and I intend to deliver it.

Scottish Government (Record)

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** The Parliament is supposed to be about the lived experiences of Scots. Five years ago, Scots elected a Scottish Government on a clear promise to make this a Covid recovery Parliament. Let us not forget that John Swinney was the Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery. But we did not get recovery, did we? Instead, the SNP Government lost its way and took Scotland backwards. On almost every measure, things are now worse than they were five years ago. Waiting times are worse, homelessness numbers are worse, crime is up, police officer numbers are down and educational attainment is poorer. In 2021, John Swinney was the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills and promised that we would have 3,500 extra teachers. Instead, we have 810 fewer teachers compared with 2021. John Swinney and the SNP have failed. After 20 years, more of the same will not cut it, will it?

The First Minister (John Swinney): In the course of the Government's term of office, we have taken steps to improve the lives of people in Scotland, whether that is in delivering a stronger economy, which has been delivered against the tides of austerity and the inflation surge in 2022, or in the health service, where waiting times have come down for eight months in a row as a consequence of the Government's actions. In education, levels of attainment in our schools are rising and the poverty-related attainment gap is narrowing. The SNP Government is delivering on the priorities of the people of Scotland. We are determined to serve the people of Scotland, and we are determined to improve the lives of the people of Scotland.

Anas Sarwar: I just read out the facts in the record of failure. Let us not forget that John Swinney was the education secretary who marked down working-class kids during the pandemic. When he did that, he told teachers that he did not trust their judgment and young people that he did not believe in their ability.

However, it is not just in the classrooms that he is failing our young people. The number of homeless children in 2021 was 7,500. Today, the figure stands at more than 10,000—there are 10,000 children without a home to call their own on the SNP's watch. There are starker and more serious failures, too. The number of Scots who are sleeping rough on our streets has increased by 66 per cent since 2021, and almost 5,000 of our fellow Scots have lost their lives since 2021 to a drug deaths crisis that the SNP said was a national emergency. Will John Swinney be honest and accept that that is not a record of success but a record of failure that he should be apologising for?

The First Minister: The Government has to wrestle with a whole number of different challenges. Since 2021, we have had to wrestle with the significant levels of inflation that have arisen as a consequence of the invasion of Ukraine and all that flowed from that. Despite that, the Scottish Government is building more houses per head of population than are being built in any other part of the United Kingdom, so as to provide action on homelessness. The Government has taken action to invest more than £120 million in the past two years on ensuring that void accommodation is put back into use, so that thousands of families can get back into accommodation as a consequence of our actions. That is a Government acting to address the issues that are faced by people in Scotland and ensuring that we deliver better opportunities and better prospects for the people of our country.

Anas Sarwar: What Scots will hear from that is that John Swinney thinks that 10,000 homeless children is a measure of the Government's success, rather than a measure of its failure.

I started my public service as a national health service dentist, and fixing our NHS is personal to me. The SNP promised an NHS recovery but failed. At the election in 2021, 549,000 Scots were on an NHS waiting list. The figure is now 786,000. In 2021, around 1,200 Scots were waiting more than two years for treatment. Today, that figure is—shamefully—almost 6,400.

The SNP has had 20 years in power. If it knew how to fix the problems in our NHS, our schools and more, it would have done it by now. That is why Scotland needs change and a new Government that will fix the SNP's mess, get the basics right and build a better future for our country, Scotland.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): They don't want you.

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

Anas Sarwar: Five years ago, the SNP promised recovery and failed. Is it not the case that the next five years must be about Scotland recovering from John Swinney and the failing SNP?

The First Minister: One of the things that Anas Sarwar failed to mention in his commentary about the national health service is that, since 2021, we have had the Covid pandemic, which created significant disruption to our national health service. What is the Government doing about that? The Government is ensuring that waits of over a year have decreased for eight consecutive months across new out-patient and in-patient day cases. New out-patient waits of more than a year have more than halved. In 80 per cent of disciplines in the national health service, there are no waiting times whatever beyond 52 weeks. That is the Government taking action to improve the circumstances in the national health service.

Anas Sarwar talked about a potential change of Government. People in Scotland need to be really wary about all of this. Anas Sarwar stood here a couple of years ago and argued for a change of Government in the United Kingdom. We got a change of Government, but what else did we get? We got the increase in employer national insurance contributions, which is damaging the economy, and we got the actions that have been taken to remove winter fuel payments; we have had failure after failure from the UK Government. Now, Anas Sarwar turns round and says that everybody was foolish to vote for that man Keir Starmer, whom he had argued that we should all vote for. That tells us that Mr Sarwar is a man of poor judgment that the people of Scotland should not listen to and will not listen to on 7 May.

Free Bus Travel

3. **Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green):** Free bus travel for young people is the Scottish Greens' proudest achievement of the past five years. It is a simple idea, but one that has transformed the lives of young people across the country and saved families a fortune. It has opened up opportunities for young people to take up college courses or job opportunities in neighbouring towns without having to worry about whether they can afford to get there. It means that families can take the bus for a day out without it costing them a fortune. On top of that, climate-friendly public transport is the first choice for an entire generation, because of a scheme secured by Green MSPs.

Between young people, older people and disabled people, almost half of all Scots can now use the bus for free. The Scottish Greens want to go further. We believe that Scotland can be like Malta and Luxembourg and offer free bus travel to everyone. Does the First Minister agree and, if not, what is his alternative to help people to save money on their transport costs?

The First Minister (John Swinney): All those steps are very welcome, but the Government has also put in place a £2 bus fare cap, which is being taken forward in the Highlands and Islands to determine how it can operate. We have abolished peak rail fares and we have frozen rail fares so that more people can use public transport.

Those are some of the measures that the Scottish Government is taking to make sure that people are able to access public transport and have a much greater choice when doing so.

Ross Greer: I am glad that the First Minister has mentioned the £2 bus fare cap across the Highlands and Islands and the scrapping of peak rail fares. Those were also policies that were proposed by Green MSPs in budget negotiations. We are proud to have provided those ideas, which have saved families a fortune and are helping to tackle the climate crisis.

On top of that, we established Scotland's first nature restoration fund, we brought in the emergency rent freeze and we wiped out school meal debts for thousands of struggling families. Green MSPs have delivered changes that have saved families a fortune and protected our planet. We know that the solutions to the climate crisis and the cost of living crisis are one and the same.

We were proud to work with the First Minister and the Scottish National Party to deliver those changes, because Greens believe in co-operating to take Scotland forward. However, those ideas were all put on the table by Green MSPs in the first place. We brought forward bold, progressive ideas and we worked to deliver them. What is the First Minister's favourite of the changes that the Greens have delivered in this Parliament?

The First Minister: I am very pleased that the Government that I lead is able to afford a balanced budget that puts the money in place to deliver on our policy priorities. As a consequence, I am very proud that, because of the steps taken by this Government, child poverty in Scotland is falling. It is 9 per cent below the levels in the rest of the United Kingdom, and that is because of the leadership of an SNP Government.

Conversion Practices (Ban)

4. **Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP):** To ask the First Minister whether he will provide an update on the Scottish Government's commitment to banning conversion practices. (S6F-04778)

The First Minister (John Swinney): Conversion practices cause lasting harm and have no place in Scotland. The Scottish National Party Government is clear that we will end this abhorrent practice and ensure that everyone can live free from abuse.

We have publicly consulted on proposals for Scottish legislation and are supporting victims and survivors with a dedicated helpline that offers

counselling support. We continue to engage with the United Kingdom Government to explore UK-wide legislation. However, I am clear that, if the UK Government is unable to introduce a fully inclusive ban, we will publish our own bill in year 1 of the next parliamentary session, should the people of Scotland re-elect my Government.

Joe FitzPatrick: Conversion practices are abhorrent. Scotland has made great strides towards equality under the SNP, but those practices remain a stain on our country. Conversion practices should be banned as quickly as possible.

I am grateful that my final contribution in our national Parliament, after representing the people of Dundee for 19 years, is on this matter, which is very important to me and to the entire LGBTQ+ community. I am confident that the First Minister shares my views, but I would be grateful for his absolute commitment that, if he is returned to government, banning conversion practices will form part of his first programme for government.

The First Minister: I am happy to give that confirmation and make that commitment to Joe FitzPatrick and to make it clear that the Government is absolutely committed to equality, to advancing the rights of the LGBTQI+ community and to ending harmful and abusive conversion practices in Scotland.

Given that this is Joe FitzPatrick's last contribution in the Parliament after his 19 years of service, it is appropriate that it is on this topic, in respect of which he has given impressive leadership in advancing the rights of individuals in our society and has been a champion of equality. I pay a warm tribute to my friend and colleague Joe FitzPatrick as he stands down from the Parliament today.

Children (Assaults in Hospitals)

5. **Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con):** To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to research by Women's Rights Network Scotland reportedly showing that some children have been assaulted in Scottish hospitals. (S6F-04782)

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am horrified by any suggestion that children have been assaulted while in hospital. I expect health boards to work closely with Police Scotland to keep patients, particularly children, safe. The national guidance for child protection in Scotland makes it clear that all concerns that a child has been abused or is at risk of abuse must be reported to the police or social work. I have asked the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care to write to all health boards to express our clear concerns and to ask what has been done to support the safeguarding of children and young people while in their care.

Pam Gosal: Hospitals should be a safe space for everyone, but new findings from Women's Rights Network Scotland reveal the grim reality that patients, including children, have been sexually assaulted in Scottish hospitals. That is utterly unacceptable. We know that those findings are just the tip of the iceberg, with most cases not being reported and victims being left to suffer in silence under the Scottish National Party. Will the First Minister confirm whether his Government will finally mandate consistent and transparent recording of sexual offences in national health service facilities and publish annual figures so that there can be accountability?

The First Minister: Any form of abuse of that nature is completely abhorrent. I expect health boards to work closely with Police Scotland and to uphold their legal duties as employers to keep staff, patients and visitors safe. Health boards have a legal duty and reporting systems in place to record data on sexual assault, violence and aggression. The Government's expectation is that such reporting should be undertaken by health boards.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): A 13-year-old girl was sexually assaulted at Crosshouse hospital, and a 13-year-old girl and a 15-year-old girl were assaulted at Stobhill hospital. Given that the level of sexual assaults in hospitals was raised in the Parliament and in the media last year, what work has the Scottish Government done to investigate the full scale of the issue? Does the First Minister agree that openness about the risks is essential to ensuring that there is robust safeguarding?

The First Minister: Yes, I agree with that point. In August, the Government published a sexual harassment guide to supplement the bullying and harassment and the gender-based violence policies that we have in place. The guide aims to support those who are active and operating in the leadership of our hospitals to ensure that such issues are properly and fully addressed and that any issues are accordingly reported to the police, as is the obligation to do.

We have also launched a national NHS network to bring together health boards and partner organisations to explore and share approaches to preventing sexual harassment across NHS Scotland. That will include information on data and reporting, training and education, sharing of best practice and providing support to staff and employers. A range of action has been undertaken to follow up on the issues that Katy Clark referred to, which were raised in the Parliament last year.

HMP and YOI Polmont (Staff Shortages)

6. **Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to the HM Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland report indicating that staff shortages mean young prisoners at HMP and YOI Polmont lack enough opportunities for work, education or recreation and spend "far too long locked in their cells". (S6F-04789)

The First Minister (John Swinney): I welcome the report and have noted the continued improvements that the Scottish Prison Service has made since the inspection was carried out last August, as set out in the post-inspection update. I also fully understand that, although much progress has been made, there remains much more to do, and the Scottish Government and the Scottish Prison Service are fully committed to continued improvement. The Scottish Prison Service has increased its staffing levels and is providing enhanced support to young people. It is also taking action to increase the time that is spent out of cells through providing new purpose-built outdoor space for young people and reviewed opportunities for activities.

Pauline McNeill: It is extremely sad that yet another inspection at Polmont young offenders institution has told us that there are deep-rooted problems in keeping young offenders safe. The tragic suicide of 19-year-old Daniel Kerr two weeks ago illustrates again that the state is failing to keep those young people safe—and that comes after the findings of the inquiry into the deaths of William Brown and Katie Allan.

This week, Professor Sarah Armstrong pointed out in an interview that the issue is not just about resources. However, despite the professionalism and dedication of our prison staff, the system still operates in a way that is completely contrary to the obvious needs of a young person who struggles when they are detained and does not have adequate time out of their cell. In fact, His Majesty's chief inspector of prisons for Scotland, Sara Snell, said:

"Young men in Polmont continue to spend far too long locked in their cells".

Why has there not already been a complete shake-up of how we detain young offenders? Surely, in the last days of this current Scottish Government, it is time to admit failure on the issue.

Perhaps the First Minister and I could agree that Scotland must implement a new daily structure in the Polmont young offenders institution—one in which, at the very least, adequate and productive time out of a prison cell is at the heart of the system.

The First Minister: First, I record my sadness at the death of Daniel Kerr, which Pauline McNeill referred to. It is a tragedy, and I extend my deepest sympathies to the family and friends of Daniel Kerr. The Government clearly regrets that that has happened.

There has been a very strong focus on the issue in Government, led by the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs through the ministerial accountability board, in the light of the fatal accident inquiry that took place in relation to Polmont. A whole series of interventions and actions have taken place, some of which I recounted in my earlier answer.

I assure Pauline McNeill that those steps have been taken. They have been the subject of analysis and assessment by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons. The inspection on which the report is based was carried out in August of last year, and a great deal more has happened as a consequence.

Much of the focus is on ensuring that Polmont is better able to support young people and assist in providing opportunities for the necessary exercise and engagement. Those steps are in place, and that is what the ministerial accountability board has examined. I assure Pauline McNeill that that will remain the focus of the Government.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I was pleased to see that the Scottish Prison Service has piloted non-pain-inducing control and restraint techniques that reduce the risk of injury to staff and prisoners. Can the First Minister assure me that the pilot approach will be rolled out across the prison estate, with staff being given the appropriate training?

The First Minister: Yes, it will be rolled out to the remainder of the estate.

The Scottish Prison Service's new approach to control and restraint is successfully running in three establishments. I am pleased to say that the Prison Officers Association Scotland has welcomed it, and we will take forward the approach that has been set out in the question.

Immigrants and Minority Groups (Protests and Rhetoric)

7. **Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD):** To ask the First Minister, in light of the reported rise in protests and rhetoric aimed at immigrants and minority groups, what action any future Scottish administration can take to restore kindness, decency and tolerance to politics. (S6F-04786)

The First Minister (John Swinney): I strongly condemn rhetoric that seeks to vilify or dehumanise minority groups. Scotland has a proud history of welcoming people of all

nationalities and faiths, including those seeking refuge and asylum from war and persecution. We all share responsibility to uphold that legacy, and there is no place for division that harms communities.

My Government has strengthened protections for communities facing division and harm, showing the impact that collective action can deliver. As elected representatives, we must lead by example, ensuring that political discourse is grounded in respect and constructive dialogue. That is how most people conduct themselves and what they expect from those in public office. We all have a duty to uphold human rights and challenge discrimination in all its forms.

Jamie Greene: I associate myself with those words. In asking what is potentially my final question, I wish all members across the chamber the very best in the future.

The reality is that, in recent times, we have seen a rise in antisemitic abuse and far-right protests. There are people who aspire to become members of the Scottish Parliament who are spouting Islamophobic bile on social media and cracking jokes at the expense of gay people.

When I joined this place a decade ago, there was genuine desire to find common ground on some difficult societal issues on Gypsy Travellers, migrants, refugees and transgender people—people who are our friends, our neighbours and our fellow Scots.

Ten years on, I am utterly saddened to hear politicians use language that reduces people to adjectives such as “dangerous”, “unwanted” and “unwelcome”. I challenge not just the First Minister but the leaders of all the political parties that hope to return members to this place to commit their parties in the next parliamentary session to using their privilege of platform wisely, to debating with decency and to remembering that the language that is used in here affects people out there. I hope that we can do politics better, and that we can all agree that hatred will never, ever have a place in this Parliament.

The First Minister: I associate myself entirely with Jamie Greene’s comments. Jamie Greene has made a distinguished contribution to this Parliament over the 10 years that he has been here, and I wish him well for all that lies ahead for him. He has made an important contribution in shaping many of the reforms that have enhanced the rights of individuals in our society—he should be proud of what he has contributed to this Parliament.

I associate myself entirely with the substance of Mr Greene’s question and the appeal that he makes, and I commit myself to exercising leadership in that way. That is the way that I exercise leadership—with respect to other people in our society and respecting the rights of every single person in our society. I am horrified by some of the behaviour and by the racial intolerance and hatred towards other people that are now expressed publicly in our society. In my constituency, there are people who stand outside a hotel that accommodates asylum seekers and who have banners with language that is hate filled—it is appalling.

On Mr Greene’s point about the aspirations of politicians to come into the Parliament, let me speak something out loud, because I know that everyone is talking about it today. The homophobic joke—well, alleged joke—by Malcolm Offord, the leader of Reform in Scotland, is a warning to this country of what is coming our way. There is no place for homophobia, racism and intolerance. That is what Reform represents, and we all have to stand up against that bile in our society.

The Presiding Officer: We move to constituency and general supplementaries.

Diving Facilities (Ayr)

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): Ayr diving club has been in existence since 1964 and uses one of only four diving facilities in the whole of Scotland. It is the only one on the west coast, with the other three being on the east coast. There is a risk of closure of the diving facility, as it needs a substantial amount of money to repair mechanical and structural issues in order to address safety concerns and ensure environmental sustainability. That is money that the council simply does not have. If the diving facility in Ayr can no longer operate, the nearest facility is 85 miles away, in Edinburgh.

What can the Scottish Government do to support the diving facility and ensure that divers on the west coast have equitable access to diving facilities compared with those in the east?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I recognise the importance to people in the south-west of Scotland of the facility at the Citadel leisure centre. As Sharon Dowey makes clear, it is a matter for South Ayrshire Council. Obviously, through the investments that we are making in the budget, the Government is providing support for greater access to swimming lessons in our facilities around the country.

The issue that the member raises is a particularly specialist area. I will ask officials to explore what opportunities there are for co-operation but, fundamentally, it remains a matter for South Ayrshire Council.

Spinal Muscular Atrophy Screening

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): For the past five years, I have been working with clinicians and impacted families who have campaigned to get Scotland's national health service to add spinal muscular atrophy to a range of conditions that newborn babies are screened for as part of the heel prick testing programme. Indeed, I have raised the issue directly with the First Minister in this place. This week, Scotland became the first part of the United Kingdom to introduce that test right across the country, which will be life changing for those who are born with that rare condition.

Will the First Minister join me in congratulating the clinicians and the families, including my constituents the Pearsons and their toddler, Grayce, on their successful campaign? Will the First Minister consider further enhancing newborn baby screening programmes in the next session of Parliament?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am delighted to welcome those developments, which have come about as a result of a tenacious campaign by the Pearson family on behalf of their daughter Grayce, supported by Bob Doris, who has been an enthusiastic champion of that objective. The screening programme is an essential part of ensuring the health and wellbeing of children. The Government will explore and examine opportunities to enhance the screening programme, and we will take that work forward should we have the privilege of being returned to office after the election in May.

Ferry Services (South Uist and Barra)

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): It feels a little like groundhog day. South Uist and Barra face yet another chaotic holiday period. South Uist faces an 85 per cent cut in its ferry service during the Easter period. The First Minister knows that this community has suffered from cuts for years, and that has caused businesses to struggle. The community was instrumental in getting the Scottish Government to provide compensation, but what it really wants is to run its businesses successfully and, to do so, it needs a reliable ferry service.

Will the First Minister intervene and ensure that those islands do not suffer another dismal holiday period?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Every effort is made to ensure that the CalMac Ferries network can meet the needs of all island communities, and there will be local dialogue about the delivery of individual services. New vessels are joining the fleet—the MV Isle of Islay is about to enter service, which will assist in improving capacity. Refits are on-going for vessels that are going through their contracted annual maintenance, but there will be active dialogue to ensure that ferry communities have the services and support that they require.

Renters and First-time Buyers (Support)

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): New data shows that banks have withdrawn mortgage offers across the board, leaving first-time buyers in the lurch as rates spiral out of control. While the Westminster Labour Government sits on its hands as mortgage rates spiral in broken Brexit Britain, the Scottish National Party will support renters and first-time buyers with up to £10,000 to help them to get on the property ladder. People want to get on in life, and the SNP will help them every step of the way.

Will the First Minister outline what steps the Scottish Government is taking to support renters and those who hope to buy their first home?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government has taken a number of steps to support renters through the Housing (Scotland) Act 2025, but we are also setting out proposals to provide up to £10,000 towards a deposit to give people the help that they need in order to buy their first home. I have heard from many young people who feel unable to get the necessary resources together for a deposit, but they can rely on a re-elected SNP Government to deliver exactly that for them.

Rural Support Plan

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests—I am a small farmer.

This is one of those moments not of anger, but of disappointment. It is disappointing that the Scottish Government waited until the last days of the parliamentary session to release the rural support plan, thereby avoiding the scrutiny that it deserves. Seventy per cent of the document is about things that we already know, and there is next to no detail on future support schemes. The few figures that are in this document show year-on-year real-terms cuts that amount to nearly a quarter of a billion pounds in lost funding.

Will the First Minister explain not to me but to my constituents and everybody in the agricultural community why, if the Scottish National Party Government is so proud of this uninspiring plan, it released it too late to be scrutinised by the Parliament?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I will tell Mr Eagle what is uninspiring: the implications of Brexit, which his Government forced upon the people of this country. Agricultural support has

been undermined by the Conservative Government's actions in negotiating the Brexit that it put in place.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): That is absolutely shameful.

Tim Eagle: Answer the question.

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: It is all very well for Mr Eagle to take issue with me on this question, but the real guilty parties on Brexit and its implications for agriculture are the Conservative Party and its activities, and the Conservatives will be found out for all of that on 7 May.

Trongate 103 Cultural Centre (Notices to Quit)

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Will the First Minister intervene urgently to stop City Property, Glasgow City Council's arm's-length landlord, from issuing a notice to quit tomorrow to seven independent charitable arts organisations at the publicly funded Trongate 103 cultural centre, which would force them out and leave them facing an additional £700,000 a year in costs—four times their previous rent and ten times their service charges—while ignoring the independent sustainability study that was commissioned by the council, especially amid the wider crisis engulfing Glasgow's cultural ecosystem, including the indefinite closures of the Centre for Contemporary Arts, the Lighthouse, the Arches and the People's Palace? City Property is out of control. Will the First Minister intervene and get a grip of the issue?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I have every sympathy with the issue that Mr Sweeney has raised, but such matters are properly for Glasgow City Council and its arm's-length organisations to determine. The Parliament often wrestles with the issue of where decisions should be made, and such decisions are properly for Glasgow City Council to make.

I point out that, in recent days, the Scottish Government has put in place financial support to ensure the completion of the Citizens Theatre refurbishment for the people of Glasgow. The Scottish Government is delivering £3.5 million of extra funding right into the heart of Glasgow, in addition to the other investments that we are making in the city to strengthen its cultural identity. The Government will continue to do that when it has the power and responsibility to do so.

Lochgelly Medical Centre

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): A new medical centre for Lochgelly is a shovel-ready project, but its delivery has been combined, at the 11th hour and to everyone's surprise, with an entirely separate capital project that, although welcome, is not yet out of the starting blocks. Can a phased approach be considered so that Lochgelly can go first and a long-standing Government commitment to the people of Lochgelly can be met?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I will certainly give consideration to whether a phased approach would be practical. I understand that different proposals are at different stages, so we can certainly consider the issue that Annabelle Ewing has raised and has championed on behalf of her constituents.

As Annabelle Ewing prepares to step down from the Parliament at the forthcoming election, I pay tribute to her public service and to her commitment to her constituents in Cowdenbeath, which she has exercised on many issues, but especially on this issue, for many years.

Summer of Sport (Impact on Health and Wellbeing)

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): The First Minister will know about my passionate belief that sport is a force for good in our communities. Declining physical literacy levels among our children are directly linked to increasingly poor health outcomes in Scotland, and I say that as a performance coach of some 25 years. We have a fantastic summer of sport on the way, which, I am sure, we are all relishing, but how will the Scottish Government ensure that the summer of sport will have a positive legacy and impact on the health and wellbeing of all the people in Scotland across all our communities?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The purpose of the investment that the Government has made in the summer of sport is to ensure that exactly what Mr Whittle has set out can be realised as a consequence. The summer of sport is designed to engage communities the length and breadth of the country, to give individuals an appetite for sport and to achieve the benefits of physical exercise, which Mr Whittle has championed.

On Tuesday, the Cabinet considered other important issues in relation to the degree to which young people are using phone technology and whether exercise and engagement in sporting activity could be alternative choices. Many issues have to be addressed in that respect, but the investment in the summer of sport will certainly help to achieve the objectives that Mr Whittle has raised with me.

Ming Yang (Investment)

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind): Last October, the Chinese renewables company Ming Yang announced an investment of £1,500 million in my constituency, which would initially

create 1,500 direct jobs and lead to 4,000 jobs in phase 3. Rumours now suggest that Mr Miliband of the United Kingdom Government is about to reject the investment on the grounds of national security, but members of the industry in Scotland say that a technical solution to those concerns can and should be found through an open tendering competition by the UK Government. Will the First Minister—as Alex Salmond most certainly would have done—move heaven and earth to secure the largest-ever such investment in Scotland, and will he persuade the UK Government that to do anything other than approve the investment would be an act of abject betrayal?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I recognise the seriousness and the significance of the issue that Mr Ewing raises, which is being decided on by the UK Government. The fact that the UK Government has not come to a decision for some considerable time is causing no end of frustration. Like Mr Ewing, I am hearing all sorts of rumours about the decision. As things stand, I have no clarity on what decision the UK Government has come to, but I assure Mr Ewing that very, very vigorous representations have been made to the UK Government on the decision, which is central to our renewables future.

I have previously raised in Parliament the fact that the lack of a decision by the UK Government is slowing down the upsurge in renewables activity at the same time as the UK Government is penalising the North Sea oil and gas sector through the energy profits levy. What we have here is a perfect storm for the people of Scotland, whereby decisions that are for the UK Government to take are having a damaging effect on Scotland, whether in relation to oil and gas or renewables.

The answer is to take Scotland's future and Scotland's energy into Scotland's hands, and we will be able to do that only with the fresh start of independence.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time. The next item of business will be a members' business debate on a motion in the name of Pam Gosal.

We will have a short suspension to allow those who are leaving the chamber and the gallery to do so.

12:51

Meeting suspended.

12:52

On resuming—

Mobile Phone Use in Schools (Ban)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-20881, in the name of Pam Gosal, on a Scotland-wide ban on the use of mobile phones in schools. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes what it sees as the dangers that mobile phones and social media pose to children and young people, especially in relation to their physical and mental health; expresses concern regarding the potential safeguarding issues associated with the use of mobile phones, such as exposure to harmful content that is not age-appropriate; further expresses concern regarding reported studies that state that two in three 11- to 17-year-olds find it difficult to put down their phones, with teenagers spending, on average, five hours and 30 minutes each day on their smartphones, including four to five hours on social media, as well as research that reportedly found that one in five 16- to 18-year-olds say that social media has made them feel that "life is not worth living"; notes the calls for a Scotland-wide ban on the use of mobile phones on school premises; understands that schools across Scotland, including in the West Scotland region, and the rest of the UK that have implemented such bans have seen promising results, and that countries across Europe and around the world have taken extensive steps to limit the use of mobile phones in schools, and commends what it sees as the great work done by organisations such as Smartphone Free Childhood, Kids for Now, One Collective Power and Delay Smartphones, which are raising awareness of the potential dangers that come with mobile phone use.

12:53

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I am pleased to deliver one of the final members' business debates of this parliamentary session on a very important subject. Before I start, I would like to say a few words about my time in the Parliament over the past five years. I hope to return in May. However, just in case the stars do not align and the gods above have other plans for me, I would like to say a few words and to thank everybody who has engaged with me.

It has definitely been an interesting five years in the Parliament, during which time I have worked with colleagues from across the political parties. Sometimes that leads to agreement, and sometimes it does not. I have highlighted many important issues, including domestic abuse, the safety and protection of women and girls, education and many more. For someone who did not come from a political background or even have any friends or family in politics, it has been the absolute honour of my life to serve the country in

which I was born and brought up. Here's to not writing me off just yet. I hope to be back after 7 May.

I will now turn to the subject of the debate. I thank all the organisations and individuals who have contacted me regarding the serious issue of mobile phones in schools. My motion stems from my being contacted by concerned parents from my area in East Dunbartonshire, as well as from the round-table meeting that I hosted in Parliament last month, at which parents, teachers and experts spoke in depth about the issue. Special thanks go out to Sam Rice from Smartphone Free Childhood and Kids for Now, to Nova Eden from One Collective Power, which provided presentations to the round-table meeting, and to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, who attended as well.

Children's brains are still developing, which is why we have age limits on alcohol consumption, driving and consent. They are now being raised in a world that is more demanding than the one that we grew up in, and a lot of that involves the excessive use of technology and social media. Let us be clear: this is not just an education problem; it also affects health and justice, as we heard at the round-table meeting.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I am grateful to the member for hosting the round-table event that she has described, which I attended. She is quite right to frame the issue in a public health context. I believe that, in a few years' time, we will look back on this period with an understanding that mobile phone use in schools has as damaging an effect on public health as nicotine had in the previous century.

Does the member agree that we need legislation to back headteachers and that we cannot just leave things to them but must reinforce their position through legislation that takes mobile phones out of classrooms entirely?

Pam Gosal: I absolutely agree, and the member will hear later in my speech that the Scottish Conservatives will introduce legislation to address that point in the next session of Parliament.

Smartphones and excessive social media use pose many dangers to children's physical and mental health, and they create safeguarding issues. I will now refer to some eye-opening statistics. The average teenager today spends five and a half hours a day on their smartphone. If they continue at that pace, that will amount to 25 years of their lifetime. Teens are twice as likely to have anxiety and three times as likely to have depression as other groups, with one in five 16 to 18-year-olds saying that social media makes them feel that life is not worth living. Two out of three 11 to 17-year-olds find it difficult to put their phones down. Pre-teens lose the equivalent of a night's sleep per week due to their use of social media. At the same time, 73 per cent of teens take their phones to bed with them.

Those statistics are shocking. At the same time, we must not forget that excessive smartphone and social media use exposes children to inappropriate content such as violence, pornography and the generation of deepfakes involving, for example, girls' faces being put on naked bodies. Predators are not hanging around our playgrounds any more, because it is now much easier to find vulnerable children online.

We all know that, in schools, children are often distracted by their phones, which undermines their ability to focus in the classroom. Mobile devices disrupt learning and are sometimes used to record pupils, teachers and staff without their consent. We have heard in the chamber numerous examples of girls being filmed in unisex school toilets by boys. There has also been a sharp rise in road accidents and children being mugged after school as they have been walking around staring at their smartphones, completely unaware of their surroundings.

The Conservatives were the first party in Britain to support a ban on social media use for under-16s and have long backed a full ban on mobile phones in schools in Scotland. In the next session of Parliament, we will introduce a mobile phone ban bill, to ensure that pupils can focus on learning and to end the postcode lottery of differing school policies.

Current guidance that has been produced by the Scottish Government allows individual headteachers to limit the use of mobile phones as they see fit. That risks creating a postcode lottery whereby phones are banned in some schools but not in others. Luckily, some schools have implemented such bans, and the Scottish Conservatives support their efforts, as case studies have shown that such bans work. Portobello and Queensferry high schools, in Edinburgh, are taking part in a two-year trial that involves pupils locking their phones in pouches during the school day, with consultation responses showing that 97 per cent of staff and 94 per cent of parents favour limiting phone access.

North London now has more than 400 smartphone-free schools, while Northern Ireland has introduced guidance to ban or heavily restrict phone use throughout the day. Other countries, too, have or are considering a ban on the use of mobile phones in schools. Those include France, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Croatia, Georgia, Malta and many others. Let us not make Scotland the last place to implement such a ban. We must be proactive in keeping our children safe while

improving the quality of the education that they receive.

There will be many reasons for parents saying that their children still need mobile phones—which can easily be addressed—such as the need to contact their children during the school day or the fear that their children might feel excluded from their peers. However, on balance, mobile phones do more harm than good, and it is worth sharing good practice from schools that have moved forward with a ban.

The evidence is clear: excessive smartphone and social media use harms children's wellbeing, safety and ability to learn. As MSPs, we all have a duty to protect young people. A ban on mobile phones in schools in Scotland is the right way forward.

I look forward to hearing the cabinet secretary's remarks in her closing speech. I hope that she can put her back and some teeth into the issue, to give us a bit more than just the passing of guidance to schools—to make sure that we have legislation. That is what the Scottish Conservatives will bring back in the next session of Parliament, to make sure that we ban smartphones in all Scottish schools.

13:01

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I thank Pam Gosal for securing this debate on a Scotland-wide ban on the use of mobile phones in schools, and I congratulate her on her powerful and comprehensive speech. As this will be my last speech before I step down, I hope that the Presiding Officer will afford me a few moments at the end of my speech to include some personal reflections on my time in the Parliament.

Undoubtedly, mobile phones bring huge benefits to the lives of children and young people: staying connected with friends and family, learning, socialising and just chilling out. Often, a family's decision to introduce a phone involves a fine balance between the benefits and the concerns—and, perhaps, timing and costs. However, Ms Gosal's motion reflects the concerns of many—parents, teachers, legislators, police officers and children—that overexposure to the use of mobile phones carries risks. I commend the work of many organisations to safeguard children in that space.

The harms and risks that flow from children's mobile phone use can damage and, in some devastating cases, end lives. Those include unlimited screen time, exposure to inappropriate content and contact, bullying, peer pressure and group-based sexual abuse. In response, school bans, as part of a wider policy approach, have become more popular, with an ever-increasing number of countries introducing them. Others, such as Scotland, encourage schools to restrict and manage access.

However, at the moment, it is unclear whether bans are effective. Some consider that mobile phone use by children is so ubiquitous that bans in isolation are not enough to tackle the negative impacts. It seems that there is still some way to go to find a clear, evidence-based approach that safeguards children. I very much acknowledge the proposal by colleagues, including Pam Gosal, that it could involve legislative provision.

Another area of risk, which is often overlooked, is the exposure to extremist ideology that promotes violence, hatred and intolerance. The final years of my policing career were spent working in that space, supporting public sector organisations to understand their role in safeguarding children from exposure to extremist ideology.

As I prepare to leave the Parliament, I reflect that never in a million years did I foresee my role shifting from enforcing the law to making the law. What an utter privilege and an amazing experience it has been to be a member of our amazing Scottish Parliament. I thank a number of people for making it happen: my loving husband, Alex; my wonderful son, Sam; my parents, Bill and Jean; and my sister, Susan. I also thank Maureen Watt, who has been a mentor and friend throughout. I thank my brilliant constituency team, who went above and beyond to assist constituents who sought our help. I thank my wonderful committee clerks and the other Parliament colleagues who supported me through my five-year convenership of the Criminal Justice Committee. I thank my MSP colleagues and Parliament staff. Finally, to my constituents, I say thank you for the honour of representing you.

Having entered politics later in life, I have often found it hard to understand why we think fractious discourse and debate serve the people of Scotland. Next session, I want to observe a Parliament that rejects that approach and instead engages in strong and collegiate scrutiny of the Government as an effective legislature that prioritises improving lives, particularly the lives of our children, above soundbites and partisan deadlock. I also hope that, in the face of a turbulent new geopolitical era, we finally deliver independence for Scotland.

13:06

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I thank my friend and colleague Pam Gosal for securing the debate and for the work that she has carried out on domestic abuse during the five years that she has

served in this session of Parliament, which she should be proud of. I certainly would not like to be a voter in East Dunbartonshire if her team knocked on my door and I told them that I was not voting for Pam. I look forward to her being returned to Parliament.

I also pay tribute to Audrey Nicoll for an excellent speech and for her distinguished time as convener of the Criminal Justice Committee. I know how much members from across the Parliament have enjoyed being part of that committee, and her stewardship of it has been central to that.

As Audrey Nicoll touched on, we all need to understand the toxic environment that our young people are growing up in, because of the devices that they have in their hands.

Yesterday, I attended the launch of Change Mental Health's manifesto, "Put Kids First", which is on standing up for Scotland's next generation. Interestingly, the two key asks of that manifesto are for a ban on mobile phones during the school day and a ban on social media for under-16s.

We are all, on a cross-party basis, acutely aware of the negative impact that phones have on our young people. I attended a round table last month to hear the views of parents and carers about the impact that phones are having on their young people. We know of cases in which young people have taken their own lives because of bullying and harassment on their mobile phones, but we also know about the negative impact that phones are having on a wider part of our young people's development.

Statistics now show that young people spend as much time on their devices as they do sleeping. An average 10-year-old will spend more time on their device than on any aspect of their personal development. We need to understand our young people and the time that they are growing up in. I support a ban on mobile phones in schools and believe that we need to implement it urgently.

I welcome the work that Scottish Conservative councillors in the City of Edinburgh Council have done to drive the two pilots that have taken place in Portobello and in South Queensferry, which the cabinet secretary has visited. They are delivering great results for the whole school community and, most importantly, young people say that they welcome the fact that they have finally woken up to the wasted time and the negativity that social media brings to their lives. We are also seeing that pilot rolled out across primary schools.

However, a ban is not an easy solution. I know that the cabinet secretary will talk about the Education Act 1980 in her closing speech, and we need to understand that if we, as a Parliament, want to send that message about mobile phones, we will have to take the next step. It is therefore important that during the next session of Parliament, we create a bill that clearly defines the understanding that we want a national ban on mobile phones in our classrooms. There should be no more excuses on that.

We also need to send out a wider message to parents and carers. Based on a number of meetings that I have had, I know that it is not easy to ask young people to put down their phones or to implement a ban, but it is quite clear that Scotland can be world leading on that, as Australia has become.

If we understand the negative impact that phone use is having on our young people, we as a Parliament, and councils, need to take action. I hope that there will be cross-party action early in the next session of Parliament. I think that our manifestos will demand that. If we do not do that, the negative impact—as Alex Cole-Hamilton touched on—of this growing public health emergency is absolutely clear.

I hope that this debate has started the action that is needed to deliver a ban and that members in the next session of Parliament will do just that.

13:10

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I am pleased to contribute to the debate, and in doing so, I thank Pam Gosal for bringing the issue to the chamber, and I wish her well. Pam was one of the first MSPs I met when I was elected to this place; we were in the same little group on the first day. Her leadership of the cross-party group on India, of which I have been a deputy convener, has been very important in this Parliament, particularly to the wider Indian diaspora across our region and elsewhere.

Since coming into the education brief, I have been fairly consistent in saying that tackling the wider issues surrounding today's debate, such as violence and disruption in our schools, must come first and foremost, because that will provide the foundation for everything else that goes on in the classroom and in the wider school environment.

Given that it is the last day of the parliamentary session and that we are about to enter an election period, colleagues will expect some politics from me. It is clear that the Government has failed to grip these issues during this session. Indeed, this weekend, a response to a freedom of information request from local authorities across Scotland showed that the number of reported incidents of pupil-on-teacher violence has more than doubled over this parliamentary session.

In my region, that means that in places such as Renfrewshire, things are spiralling somewhat out

of control, with recorded incidents in primary schools increasing more than fivefold since 2022-23. Obviously, there are multifaceted reasons for that, and we need to understand those, but that is not an excuse for ignoring the very clear problems that surround the use of digital technology and what young people are being exposed to in online spaces. That is why my party was one of the first to call for a nationwide ban on mobile phones in the classroom. It is clearly part of a toolbox and a package of solutions to deal with those issues and give young people better opportunities and a better start to their school life.

Other actions need to sit alongside a ban, however; it would not, in isolation, be a silver bullet. That is why we have advocated for a national charter on behaviour and standards and national leadership on discipline in schools, to empower headteachers to set out consequences, look at the issue of community partners such as campus cops and restore the relationships that now do not exist in many local authorities. We have also advocated for improving workforce planning, so that support staff meet the needs of pupils, and for ensuring that schools have funding certainty, so that they can offer teachers and education staff permanent or long-term contracts, in order to address the scandal of qualified teachers being unable to work.

It is clear to me that a range of solutions are required in the next session of Parliament to make an impact on the problems that exist in relation to violence and behaviour. It is clear that any ban on phones will have to involve young people. They will have to help to co-design it and they will have to be at the heart of how we implement it—we should not forget that in the debate.

There are already myriad discussions about how we might do that. I know that the cabinet secretary will say that she feels that she does not have the power. Some advocate for a new piece of legislation, but I would advocate for looking at the legislation that we already have. There needs to be a wider discussion about powers that have not been used, such as those in the Education (Scotland) Act 2016, and the duties that we place on chief education officers in local authorities to implement and enforce certain things.

Given the day, I pay tribute to Audrey Nicoll, who has made her final speech of the parliamentary session. Her work with me and others across committees on drug deaths and drug harms was very important. I hope that we will all continue to focus on that in the next session of Parliament. She can be assured that her contribution in that space is very valued.

I also pay tribute to you, Deputy Presiding Officer. This is perhaps the last time that you will chair a debate in the chamber that I am involved in, and I wish you all the very best for what comes next.

I reflected, when speaking to you yesterday, on the fact that your dear mother was the first person to sit in that chair. It has always stuck with me that it must be so important to you that, over our five years in Parliament, you have been able to do the same thing. I am sure that many of us who watched the first day of proceedings in 1999 never thought that we would sit in the chamber and help to form the next part of the story of the Scottish Parliament.

I appreciate that I am now saying nice things to indulge you, Deputy Presiding Officer, so that I get a wee bit more time, but I am about to conclude. I leave the chamber with two important points. The politics over the next wee while will be fierce and intense, so I will quote two Johns—neither of them are who members might think, before we go there. They are two of my political heroes. One is John Hume, who said that when people are

"divided … the only solution is agreement."

We need to find those solutions in the next session of Parliament, in particular in education.

The second is John Smith, who said:

"The opportunity to serve … is all we ask".

That is all that we—those of us who are standing again—are asking, and I wish everyone well.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr O'Kane, for your kind words.

13:15

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): In following that fine contribution, I, too, pay tribute to Audrey Nicoll. I have always genuinely enjoyed listening to her contributions, especially given their precision. The lack of aggression in her contributions was commendable, and she has added considerably to the chamber over the past five years.

I also pay tribute to Pam Gosal for leading this debate. We do not know whether any of us will be back in Parliament, but I welcome her contribution.

Finally, I pay tribute to you, Deputy Presiding Officer. Your contribution has been notable, in particular in making the case, right up to the end of the session, for the Lochgelly health centre—it must get built, or I know that you will be on our backs.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Hear, hear.

Willie Rennie: We have looked at the issue of mobile phones, and I have been clear about the damaging effects that I think that they have in the

classroom. However, we need to broaden the debate slightly. We see the roll-out of digital devices in the school environment, and there are big questions about whether children, and which age group, should be using those devices, and how they should do so.

On Monday, I met with a group called Unplug.Scot, because in Fife there has been an accelerated roll-out of digital devices from primary 5 onward. The group is deeply concerned about a number of practical things; I will go through some of those first and then go on to the wider issues around the use of digital devices and mobile phones.

Unplug.Scot is concerned, first and foremost, about parental consent, because parents are being encouraged—and almost coerced—into signing a form to say that their child can bring their digital device home. Parents have no choice about whether those devices will be used in the classroom, but they have an option to sign to bring them home. If they refuse to sign, they are warned that their child might lose out, with no justification as to how they are going to lose out or what other steps will be taken to make sure that they do not lose out.

The group is concerned that there is no equality impact assessment on the roll-out of these devices, and it is not convinced about the robustness of the filters that are used on them or whether virtual private networks can be used to circumvent those devices, too.

Those are some of the group's practical concerns, but it has a wider concern about the evidence that has been drawn on to justify the roll-out of these devices.

I have pursued the matter with Fife Council on a number of occasions and it is quite firm that it believes that there are some significant advantages. However, that has to be countered with the experience of countries such as Sweden, which has decided to roll back the use of these devices and return to physical books, because there have been concerns about the impact on learning and performance in the Swedish education system. Equally, we have heard education leaders across the United Kingdom express such concerns.

To return to the situation in Fife, the education director is clear that, having looked at what has happened in Edinburgh and Glasgow, and in the Borders, they see a significant improvement in performance in areas such as maths if the use is limited to an hour. I think that there are, again, questions about exactly how much these devices are used. They can also provide instant feedback and make sure that parents are able to see instantly how their child is performing at school with the portfolio system that is in place.

All of that should be thoroughly investigated before we take any legislative steps to control the use of mobile phones.

Pam Gosal: The member says that we should take our time, but the problems are happening right now and we need to act now. As I said in my speech, there is already so much good practice going on, so why do we have to look at everything? I think we should be moving on.

On the subject of good practice, the member spoke about Sweden and I have looked at that example. They spent a lot of money on technology, but they practically binned that to go back to good old-fashioned learning and the children are actually enjoying that. I know that my colleague Brian Whittle is going to cover the subject of activity. Does the member believe that we should be looking at the good practice that is happening?

Willie Rennie: I do think we should do that, but this debate has been quite narrowly about mobile phones when I think that we need to look at all the digital tools that we have available to us. I am not against the use of some digital tools as long as we can be absolutely clear about the evidence. The Education, Children and Young People Committee has not looked at that subject in the past five years, but I think that we should have looked at it and the next Parliament should do that with some urgency. I am in favour of acting at speed, while also ensuring that we take a comprehensive look at all those things.

I favour a ban on the use of mobile phones in the classroom and think that the Government here should lead on that, rather than leaving it up to headteachers. However, we need a comprehensive plan for moving forward.

13:21

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): This extremely important subject is more pressing than many of the things that we debate in Parliament, and I thank Pam Gosal for bringing it to the chamber.

We know that schools, and the teachers and pupils in them, face a range of challenges, which we also know are not exclusive to Scotland. Across the UK and beyond, authorities are really struggling to deal with the growing influence and impact of social media and the toxicity that accompanies mobile phones. We cannot control everything, but we can control what is allowed in classrooms. Every teacher I have spoken to agrees that phones must be banned from the classroom. Most parents agree, and many children

are actually on board so long as the policy is fair and absolute, with no exceptions.

As a parent, I instinctively know that the concerns relating to smart phones are completely legitimate. Anyone with eyes and ears can see the harm and distractions that those devices cause for young people, and there is also hard evidence. The organisation One Collective Power, which campaigns for the welfare and wellbeing of schoolchildren across the country, has presented some extremely powerful statistics, including that the average teenager spends five and a half hours on their device each day, that phones and social media increase the likelihood of depression, especially in girls, and that kids at smartphone-free schools have higher levels of attainment. The position should be obvious to us all: phones in schools fuel distraction and conflict, pose nightmare scenarios for teachers and inflict harm in almost every area of the school, from classrooms and corridors to the playground.

That is not the children's fault, nor is it exclusive to them. We adults also struggle to put our phones down when we know we should. We have all kept watching videos and clips and kept scrolling for far longer than is healthy. Even during long debates in this chamber, we can see members checking their devices rather than engaging with the content at hand—we are all at it. There is a role for grown-ups in setting an example rather than pretending that the issue affects only children.

The solution is in front of us. There should be an outright ban, across the whole country, on phones in schools, with no exceptions, exemptions or compromise. The Scottish Government has said that headteachers have the power to impose a ban in any case, but we must go further and give them our full support. MSPs, MPs, local councillors and people of influence must all get behind a ban, because that will make it easier for teachers to enforce and will send a clear signal to pupils and parents that the rules are clear and unambiguous.

We would soon see the benefits. Teachers have already told me that when children do not have their phones, their engagement improves. They learn better and take part in more activities. Remarkably, they even start speaking to one another. They improve their communication skills. They make new friendships and cement existing ones. They go back to having a life that is not lived on the tiny screen in front of them.

From the minute a pupil walks into a school, there should be no mobile phones in sight. That is what the teachers want and what the children need. That is why I am delighted to give this motion my full and unequivocal support.

Since I have finished within my four minutes of time, I would like to say good luck to Audrey Nicoll, who I have had the pleasure of working with on the Criminal Justice Committee for the past session. To you, Deputy Presiding Officer, and to everyone else who is leaving, I wish good luck in the future.

13:25

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I thank my colleague Pam Gosal not only for bringing this important debate to the chamber, but for telling me what I need to speak about for the next four minutes.

We are all very aware of the significant impact on health that the use of social media and smartphones can have, especially on our youngsters' brain development. One thing that I want to talk about, which has not been spoken about yet, is how we engage with youths to make them part of the decision making. Youth organisations consistently say that decision makers must include young people in conversations about safe social media use and support them to participate meaningfully in the digital world and with new emerging technologies.

I was speaking with a girl guide leader—let us call her Kaley from my office—who told me that leaders and girls in her unit create rules together, including rules on mobile phones. In her unit, the girls unanimously voted to ban phones during the unit meetings, and she told me that that has been replicated across the other units that she knows.

We are very good at banning things and taking things away from youths without involving them in those decisions. I also think that what we are talking about doing in this debate is not too far removed from what the youth of today want themselves. It is interesting that the girls attitudes survey carried out by Girlguiding UK in 2025 found that girls are restricting their online activity in order to protect themselves, with more than a third of respondents reporting that they avoid using certain apps and platforms in order to protect themselves. More than two fifths of the young people surveyed think that more needs to be done to ensure that they are safe online. Girls are disproportionately affected, with over a third of 11 to 21-year-old girls saying that

"they often feel depressed after spending time on social media."

To put the issue in context, we have to understand that those who were born in the early 2000s will never have known a life without social media. Those who were born from the 2010s onwards will never have known a life without smartphones. Speaking as somebody who got his first mobile phone—a brick of a thing—at the age of 32, I find that quite astonishing.

It is important that pupils have the opportunity to put their phones down in school, but also important is what happens outside school. We must remember that children have access to smartphones and social media when the school day is over. What are we doing to educate them on their safe usage, to model positive behaviour and to discourage misogyny online?

I talked about what I learned from a girl guides leader, which was about activities that they have decided they will put their phones down for. It would not be a speech by me, Deputy Presiding Officer, if I did not slide sport into it. I have never known of, nor ever seen, somebody dribbling a basketball down a basketball court while scrolling through social media. I have never seen anybody play piano while scrolling through social media. It is not just about what we want to limit in terms of mobile phone usage, but about what we are offering as an alternative to encourage young people into other activities.

It is also not necessarily just our children we need to persuade; we also need to persuade parents that it is a good idea. It used to be that, when parents wanted to contact their children at school, they phoned the office. If children wanted to contact their parents, they, too, did so through the office. We need to consider all of that in the round.

It is not like me to agree with Willie Rennie on much, but on this issue I do. If we are going to restrict or ban mobile phones in schools, which I fully support, we must ensure that other things are available to our children that take their attention away from their phones.

13:30

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Who, on the Conservative benches, says that we cannot occasionally agree with Willie Rennie? I agree with him about the use of old technology—books. It would be a great idea to have books in our classrooms and homes again. I hope that it catches on, and I hope that this new-old technology thing takes off in a big way. I love books.

I agree with Brian Whittle about banning things. I am incredibly reluctant to talk about banning anything, because I am afraid that Parliament's reputation is that if it is not taxing things, it is banning them. Frankly, I do not think that that enhances the reputation of our Parliament. However, there are some situations in which we need to take cognisance of the realities in relation to the power of new technology—and it is a power. Brian Whittle is right when he says that we need to teach each other and the rising younger generations about the power of new technology—how to harness it and use it to our benefit. That, as ever, was a useful contribution from Brian Whittle. Inevitably, he introduced the world of sport, too.

However, this is no longer a debate about preference or guidance; it is about whether we are prepared to act in the face of clear and growing evidence that mobile phones are damaging the learning environment in our schools. In Scotland, we have chosen to rely on local discretion. That may sound sensible, and I understand the attraction of that course of action, but, in practice, it has meant inconsistency, uncertainty and not nearly enough backing for teachers on the ground.

Meanwhile, the situation in classrooms has moved on. Scottish Government research identifies mobile phones as a significant and growing source of disruption. Teachers are dealing with constant interruptions, fractured attention and time lost to managing behaviour that should not be an issue in the first place. That matters, because every moment lost to distraction is a moment taken away from learning. Standards do not slip overnight; they erode gradually, lesson by lesson, when focus is no longer protected.

Let us be clear about what we are asking schools to compete with. Phones are not neutral tools; they are devices designed to capture our attention. I do not need to tell MSPs about the captivating powers of a mobile phone, which we see at every moment in the chamber. Douglas Lumsden just put his phone down, which is a very good thing. They are designed to interrupt and keep young people—in fact, any people—engaged elsewhere. It is simply not reasonable to expect teachers to win that battle on their own.

Other countries have recognised that and have acted decisively. Across Europe and beyond, national restrictions are now commonplace. Where phones have been removed from the school day, the results are consistent: improved focus, calmer classrooms and better behaviour. We can see the same in Scotland in places where schools and councils have taken firm action.

Ministers know that there is a problem—I have heard the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills speak on the subject. They say so, but, for some strange reason, they have chosen not to act in a national direction. The question is straightforward: do we continue with the fragmented approach that leaves teachers to carry the burden, or do we provide the clarity, authority and back-up that a national position would bring? A Scotland-wide ban, with clear and sensible exemptions—because they will need to exist—would do exactly that. It would set a consistent standard and back our teachers. It would restore the classroom as a place where attention is given to learning, not to a screen for some other

purpose. This is about leadership, standards and whether we are serious about giving every child the environment that they need to succeed. The case is made and the evidence is there. The time to act is now.

If this is to be my last contribution in the Scottish Parliament, I am delighted that it was on a subject that will matter so much to the future of our country.

13:35

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): I thank Pam Gosal for bringing this debate to Parliament and for sponsoring the recent round-table discussion on the topic, which I was pleased to attend, along with colleagues from across the Parliament.

There is now a growing consensus on the issue. We all share concerns about the impact of mobile phones and screen time on our children and young people. We know that it is causing them harm, anxiety and some real mental health challenges. Some are groomed and abused sexually online and also physically. We need to be mindful of this growing threat.

Colleagues are aware of the Government's current position on these matters. Back in 2024, the Government published updated national guidance in which I was clear that any headteacher would have my full backing as Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills should they see fit to implement a ban, but that decision was ultimately left to headteachers' discretion. However, there is a growing consensus that more action needs to be taken in this space.

I will mention some of the points that have been made in the debate, in which there have been a number of similarities.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I believe that the cabinet secretary has found common ground with the consensus that is emerging in this debate. However, does she recognise that an act of this Parliament is sometimes required to create the kind of cultural shift that we are talking about, as it was for the ban on smoking in public places? Does she agree that we need to back our headteachers by underpinning the guidance with legislation that will give them the confidence to have those discussions with families and, culturally, will mean that we all understand that it is no longer acceptable to have mobile phones in classrooms?

Jenny Gilruth: I very much recognise Mr Cole-Hamilton's point, which is reflective of a growing ask from Parliament for more national direction. We saw that only yesterday with stage 3 of Mr Johnson's Restraint and Seclusion in Schools (Scotland) Bill. On that topic, the Government had published updated non-statutory national guidance, but there was an ask from Parliament and stakeholders for us to be much clearer on providing direction, and we legislated for that yesterday.

Pam Gosal was absolutely right to point to the fact that children's brains are still developing. That was a common theme throughout the debate. Members spoke about the public health implications, which Mr Cole-Hamilton also touched on. We discussed that matter at the Cabinet table only yesterday, as the First Minister mentioned at First Minister's question time.

As adults, we need to be mindful, too, of our use of technology and how it is affecting us all. Sharon Dowey touched on that. In previous debates relating to mobile phones, I have mentioned how we interact in this place and how we listen to each other, or not. This morning, I was at a fabulous visit in Wester Hailes with Sistema Scotland and the little noise programme, and the chief executive pointed out to me the importance of creating such screen-free spaces for mums and dads to come along with their babies, where wee ones can play and listen to one other, without having phones there.

Pam Gosal mentioned the number of schools that are now moving to implement bans, supported by the Government's approach to setting out our views on mobile phone technology in schools. It is fair to say that, as I alluded to, the policy landscape has shifted since 2024, when I updated the national guidance to make our expectations on mobile phones clear. Now, not only on mobile phones but on restraint, as I mentioned, and in relation to Liz Smith's Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill, there are growing asks from Parliament. The next Government will have to consider legislative change in our schools, which is one of the reasons why I have committed to the wider John Wilson review of our approach to school education.

Miles Briggs alluded to the Education (Scotland) Act 1980, which is a piece of legislation that I have cited on many occasions.

Pam Gosal: I have been speaking to the councils in my West Scotland region, and one of the things that they asked for when I brought up the subject was clear direction—guidance, legislation or whatever you want to call it—from Government. That is what they need. Headteachers have a fear of going ahead with something that they do not have your backing for. It is good to hear you say that you see cross-party consensus on the matter, but if you come back into Government, will you commit to making sure that we look at banning mobile phones in schools, and

will you provide that direction to schools through legislation?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind the member to always speak through the chair.

Jenny Gilruth: I remind Pam Gosal that the foreword from me at the front of the national guidance document makes it very clear that any headteacher will have my backing as cabinet secretary should they see fit to implement a ban but that, ultimately, the decision as to whether to do so is at their disposal. That is because we trust headteachers, who know our schools, to take such decisions.

There is a wider, political, point to be made on this issue. I do not want to prejudge what might come from any political manifestos in this space, but I hope that Pam Gosal can hear that I am seriously considering wider action in this space.

I want to pay tribute to Audrey Nicoll, to her final contribution in the Scottish Parliament and to her service as the constituency member for Aberdeen South and North Kincardine. Audrey Nicoll has played a key role in convening the Criminal Justice Committee throughout this parliamentary session, and her contributions in the chamber, as Willie Rennie alluded to, have always been thoughtful, intelligent and well reasoned. People listen when Audrey Nicoll speaks, and she will be much missed on the Scottish National Party benches and in the Scottish Parliament when she leaves us.

Miles Briggs spoke about the impact of mobile phone devices on childhood development and children changing but the pace of technology not necessarily keeping pace with what is happening in our schools. It is important to put on the record that the Government has today published the first online safety action plan, which is part of our response to those emerging issues. The action plan is the outcome of a task force that was led by Natalie Don-Innes and Siobhian Brown. I thank both ministers for their vital work in bringing together partners and stakeholders to ensure that the Government has delivered action on the matter before the Parliament rises.

Paul O'Kane was quite right to say that a ban in isolation is not the answer. If colleagues speak to headteachers about how they have gone about implementing bans, they will find that doing so takes time. The headteacher at Portobello high school, for example, took nine months to implement a ban. Doing so involved engagement with parents and pupils. Getting buy-in and support for the approach took time—it could not happen overnight.

I might be the only MSP in the chamber who has ever confiscated a mobile phone from a 15-year-old boy. Such situations can be fractious. It is important that we remember that headteachers and teachers are dealing with young people and that behaviour is sometimes a challenge in our schools, as we heard from Mr Kerr. It is important that we support teachers in responding to those matters accordingly. In itself, a national ban will not provide the resolution that Pam Gosal wants. We need to think about wider behavioural change, too.

Willie Rennie made some interesting points about digital technology and potentially limiting the time for certain subjects. I agree with his comments about the narrowness of the debate thus far. The question that is worth asking is whether a national ban, were we to introduce legislative change in the next parliamentary session, would be enough for our schools. If the next Government is to legislate on school education, we need to be much more ambitious than simply considering a mobile phone ban.

Sharon Dowey rightly spoke about adult use of technology, as I alluded to. We also need to be mindful of our own behaviour in the chamber.

Brian Whittle spoke more broadly about the need for us to engage with young people. It was helpful for us to hear yesterday from the outgoing chair of the Scottish Youth Parliament, Ellie Craig, who delivered time for reflection. Paul O'Kane talked about girls restricting their actions on certain apps to protect themselves. That made me reflect on the fact that—I do not know whether he has noticed this—a number of female members of the Cabinet have now taken themselves off the platform known as X. We have taken action to protect ourselves in our roles. It is a gendered issue, as anyone who has seen the recent "Manosphere" documentary on Netflix will attest to. We need to be mindful of that in our schools when we talk about mobile phone technology, because girls experience it in different ways, and the majority of our teaching profession is also female.

Mr Kerr spoke more broadly about local discretion, which, in practice, he argued, leads to variation. I agree, but that is a feature of our education system—currently. It need not be under a future Parliament.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary, I appreciate that you are trying to respond to everybody, but I am conscious of the next debate and of the fact that all the members are here and ready for that to go ahead. Perhaps you could bring your remarks to a close.

Jenny Gilruth: I apologise. However, I want to pay tribute to you, too, for your service to the people of Cowdenbeath. [*Laughter.*] I shared Mr Rennie's smile as you advocated for Lochgelly health centre. You were always very supportive towards me when I was first elected 10 years ago,

and you will be much missed on the SNP benches, too.

Presiding Officer, I want to very briefly comment on an individual parliamentarian who is sitting to my left and who is about to respond to the final members' business debate of this session—Mairi Gougeon. Mairi and I were both elected a decade ago, in 2016. She has been an outstanding Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands; she has been an outstanding constituency MSP for the people of Angus North and Mearns; and she has been an outstanding friend. I will miss her dearly when she leaves us.

It will be for our next Parliament and Government to consider whether they wish to institute a national ban on mobile phones in schools. I hope that I return to play my part in that debate and decision.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate. There will be a short pause before we move on to the next item of business.

Remote, Rural and Island Communities (Sustainability)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-20849, in the name of Jamie Halcro Johnston, on the sustainability of remote, rural and island communities. The debate will be concluded without any question being put, and I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak buttons as soon as possible.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises a special duty to ensure the long-term sustainability of Scotland's remote, rural and island communities; notes the view that addressing the needs of these communities requires policy that recognises and accommodates the particular circumstances of the Highlands and Islands region and other parts of remote, rural and island Scotland; acknowledges the challenges of delivering public services such as education, transport, local health and social care, policing and justice to areas with lower population density; believes that a range of local public services have been centralised or downgraded and no longer have a visible presence in many remote and rural communities; considers that the rural economy and rural businesses have faced unprecedented challenges in recent years with the farming and fishing sectors under real pressure and uncertainty, increased regulation impacting the visitor economy, and high streets and town centres struggling; believes that access to housing and affordable accommodation has become increasingly difficult in these communities, particularly for young people; recognises what it sees as the vital importance of connectivity to the prosperity of these communities, including preserving and expanding travel links by road, rail, sea and air and the need to plan for the future investment needs of essential infrastructure, and notes the view that building strong communities in all parts of Scotland will require a greater focus and consideration from across Scotland's public bodies.

13:46

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests as a partner in a farming business.

I thank all those who have signed today's motion, allowing me to bring the debate to the chamber. With an election on the horizon, there will inevitably be a more partisan tone in the air after today's proceedings, but I just want to recognise how often members representing remote, rural and island communities have been able to work together to get things done.

I especially appreciate the work of all those who joined me on the cross-party group on islands that I established this session. There is scope for the CPG to do more and reach out even further, but I hope that MSPs and the many other organisations and individuals involved have seen the value of

having a forum for island issues at the heart of the Parliament.

In yesterday's stage 3 debate on the Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill, I talked about the loss of experience and expertise from this Parliament, and this debate will feature the last contributions that a number of members from the rural communities will make.

My party colleague Oliver Mundell is stepping down after 10 years representing the Dumfriesshire constituency. Oli is a scion of the great Mundell political dynasty; I first worked with his father, David, when I was a relative newbie to politics and this Parliament was further up the road. Like David, Oli has dutifully served those he represents and has always stood up for their interests, regardless of how popular it made him with our Conservative whips. I know that colleagues from across the chamber will miss his consideration of and commitment to the issues that he was most passionate about.

Beatrice Wishart, too, will be giving her last speech, and I particularly thank her for all her efforts on the CPG on islands, for making it the success that it has been and for the strong voice that she has been for Shetland. Our island communities face many challenges, and it is vital that their voices are heard in the chamber and in the corridors of power. Beatrice Wishart has very much played her part in that respect, and I wish her all the very best for the future.

John Mason, too, will be bowing out after today's debate. I would be hard pressed to describe him as a strong voice for our island communities, given his previous confusion about what actually constitutes an island. [*Laughter*.] However, I have served with John on committees, most recently the Finance and Public Administration Committee, and I know how diligent he has been in conducting the vital scrutiny required of MSPs.

Last but not least, the cabinet secretary will be giving her last speech, too. I know that, because she reminded me of the fact last week. We have not always agreed—and the rest of my speech will probably highlight some of those areas of disagreement—but Mairi Gougeon has always been one of the more approachable members of a Government that is not always known for truly welcoming differing opinions. I and my colleagues would recognise that, if it were needed, the cabinet secretary would sit down with those with concerns and hear them out, and that was appreciated. We certainly wish her all the very best in whatever she chooses to do after this place.

With all of the niceties out of the way, I turn to my motion. Although it directly mentions the Highlands and Islands, I know that most of the issues that we will talk about touch constituencies and regions around Scotland that are facing the challenges of remoteness and rurality. Some listeners might see them as little more than a list of grievances, the complaints of people who have chosen to live furth of the central belt. Some might see them simply as a variation of problems felt elsewhere, and therefore no better or no worse in the end.

However, that is not the feeling on the ground in rural Scotland. Last year, the Scottish Government's research into the effect of increases in the cost of living concluded that

"Rural and remote places in Scotland are more exposed to high inflation",

noting the high costs of fuel, food and transport.

That is not, in itself, unusual: such businesses often operate on reduced margins; salaries are lower; and costs are often higher. What is different now is a palpable feeling that many communities are on the edge of a precipice. Instead of creating sustainable communities, it feels more as though the core resilience of many of our villages and towns has slowly been crushed.

That has practical consequences—whether it is the young family facing another year of being unable to afford a permanent home for their children; the small business owner who seems to be sacrificing more than she gains, but who keeps going; the working person who is trying to make ends meet; or the older person on a fixed income who is afraid to turn on the heating. Specifically rural issues are pushing more people into those sorts of categories. The result can be anything from depopulation to despair.

When the motion was written, I referred to the many unprecedented challenges that remote, rural and island communities have faced. We can now add a crippling energy crisis on top of those. That crisis hits not only households, but businesses and public services. It comes at a time when household finances are already stretched, when many businesses have already had their confidence battered and when we were already worried about additional costs through rate revaluations and tax changes from April. For the public sector, it comes against a backdrop of overstretched and underresourced services.

The traditional rural economy is struggling by almost every measure. Farm incomes have fallen, harvests have been decimated by the climate, and increases in regulation have driven up costs and complexity. Many rural communities are also dependent on visitors—whether they are in the Highlands and Islands, the south of Scotland or places such as Stirlingshire and Perthshire. There, too, costs for operators in the visitor economy are escalating, while the Government sees this as a good time to impose more regulation and more tax.

In addition to economic woes, small rural communities are increasingly seeing services moved further away. The local police office has disappeared, the local general practitioner surgery has been combined with one elsewhere and the local hospital has had services downgraded or lost entirely. Perhaps even the local school is at risk. The goal of efficiency savings—often without any consideration of second-order effects—is motivated not by the efficient management of resources but by driving costs down. There is a visible retreat of public services from communities. That has a cost in towns and villages being hollowed out. It also impacts the quality of service that people are receiving: it is more difficult than ever for many people to see their GP; it is a struggle to find a national health service dentist in most of the country; and crimes are going unreported, because there is no expectation of their being investigated.

The problems of remoteness are made all the greater by failures in connectivity. Our roads are in the worst state in my memory. Major infrastructure projects, such as the dualling of the A9 and the A96 and tackling the repeated closure of the Rest and Be Thankful, have been delayed or overlooked. The costs are not solely economic—sometimes they are measured in lives lost. Meanwhile, the ferries crisis continues, with the Scottish National Party Government coming face to face with the consequences of two decades of neglect, while islands and ferry-dependent communities pay the price.

If the next Scottish Government is to serve the people of remote, rural and island Scotland, there desperately need to be a reassessment of the relative cost of delivering public services in remote and rural areas. It is clear that those services are not currently being delivered effectively. In many cases, such as the delivery of social care at home, there is no strategy at all. We also need there to be real effort to grow the economies of Scotland's regions, and an economic strategy from the Scottish Government that analyses regional impact and recognises how island and remote communities operate.

We will not always agree on the way forward. However, there are many areas in which we can work together and where the need for change is both urgent and evident. As we go into this election, I hope that the needs of remote, rural and island Scotland will be at the top of the agenda.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before we move to the open debate, I advise members that the debate is heavily oversubscribed. I am conscious that afternoon business starts at 3 o'clock and that there will need to be time for the chamber to be prepared for that. Therefore, I will have to keep members to their speaking time allocations and I will cut them off if they go beyond their four minutes.

13:54

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. Since this will be my last speech of session 6, I thank you and the Presiding Officer team for your patience and for the fair and courteous manner in which you have presided over proceedings of this Parliament.

As the convener of the Finance and Public Administration Committee, I also record my thanks to the committee's members and clerking team. The committee has won multiple awards and has built a formidable reputation, and none of that would have been possible without the hard work and dedication of its clerks and the collegiate working by colleagues.

I note that her speech today will be the cabinet secretary's last response to a debate. I find it sad that Mairi Gougeon is leaving Parliament at such a young age, after a mere decade in this place—eight years in Government and five years in Cabinet. I wish her all the best for her future endeavours after she catches the midnight express.

I congratulate Jamie Halcro Johnston on securing the debate. Scotland's islands are truly remarkable places. Our island communities are consistently identified as being among our happiest communities and the best in which to grow old or raise children.

As MSP for a constituency that includes Arran and Cumbrae, I know at first hand the outsized contribution that both places make to our economy, culture and natural heritage. I wanted to speak today about the many positive developments that are taking place in Arran and Cumbrae, such as Millport's £48 million flood protection scheme, which has improved flood protection for more than 650 homes and businesses; the £9.17 million investment that has gone into Arran's bus services; the reopening and refurbishment of Millport town hall, which received a £1.934 million regeneration grant from the Scottish Government; and the 18 affordable homes that were delivered as part of the Rowarden affordable housing project.

Instead, I will focus on the issue that influences every aspect of island life—the ferries. Both communities that I represent are beyond exasperation with the current situation—and with CalMac Ferries, for that matter. In Cumbrae, the community has been fighting a rearguard action against CalMac's attempts to impose scheduled maintenance windows and increased turnaround times. The new summer timetable shows a

significant reduction in sailings, which impacts both islanders and visitors on busy, sunny summer days. There is deep concern about the lack of transparency around the evidence that is used to justify those changes, such as the undisclosed turnaround time report and the limited explanation for withdrawing simultaneous loading and unloading, despite decades of safe operation. As one Millport resident put it,

"It seems to me that CalMac has forgotten that they are meant to provide a service, not service a business plan."

On Arran, the situation for islanders has become intolerable. According to the Isle of Arran ferry committee, the last day that Arran had a timetabled service without risk being advised was 14 February; since then, there have been constant cancellations. Arranachs have endured a level of disruption that few other communities in Scotland have faced, given the issues with the MV Glen Sannox and the seemingly constant breakdowns of the MV Caledonian Isles, even after £11 million-worth of repairs.

The consequences are profound. Constituents described 40 visitors sleeping overnight in Brodick hall, cancer patients forced into exhausting and costly detours via Claonaig, families stranded for days on the mainland, empty shop shelves as freight struggles to get through, and elderly residents missing vital hospital treatments because they simply cannot rely on the ferry. The deterioration of confidence in the route is real, and the emotional, financial and social toll on Arran is immense. Islanders are asking not for miracles, but simply for a reliable, functioning lifeline service.

I visited Ardrossan harbour on Monday to hear about the essential redevelopment project that will begin next year as well as some of the immediate actions that Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd is taking to improve resilience. The Scottish Government's acquisition of Ardrossan harbour should be a landmark moment. Now that it is in public ownership, there is a clear path towards the harbour's much-needed redevelopment. Coupled with the new tonnage that is being added to CalMac's fleet, it should represent a turning point in west coast ferry services.

However, although it is welcome, that significant investment alone is not enough. Islanders have been clear that the tripartite structure of CalMac, CMAL and Transport Scotland needs reform in order to streamline decision making and improve accountability. That will now be for the next Parliament to deliver. Islanders will rightly expect urgency, accountability and a ferry system that is worthy of the communities that it exists to serve.

13:58

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Before I start with some final thoughts, I want to make it clear, up front, that my comments are not personally aimed at the cabinet secretary, who I respect and with whom I enjoy working, as everybody across the chamber does. I have never felt the need to compare her to a chlorinated chicken, unlike her predecessor. Instead, Mairi Gougeon deserves recognition, not least for her decision to pull the plug on the Galloway national park, which is a rare example of Scottish Government ministers listening to the views of rural Scotland. I know how seriously she takes the health and wellbeing of all Scotland's rural workers, which is to her credit.

In leaving, I am saddened not at the thought of going, but at the knowledge that the Parliament that I leave behind is not a true friend to rural Scotland. I share the frustrations of my constituents that Holyrood is dominated by urban, central-belt thinking and is obsessed with telling people who live in rural Scotland how to live.

When the Scottish Government is not busy banning things, it is busy imposing them. Our precious uplands are being carpeted with trees and turbines, often displacing people and changing the character of our communities for ever. Along with supporting the many community events and projects that make my Dumfriesshire constituency so special, the proudest moments I have had while in elected office have been those when I have stood alongside communities in David versus Goliath battles to see off the worst attempts to industrialise our countryside. The playing field is far from level. It often feels as if money talks, with hillsides being sold to the highest bidder without any thought about the social consequences or about how future generations will put food on the table.

Meanwhile, here in our national Parliament, tokenism too often prevails over substance. That might mean flying the European Union flag outside the building, long after we have left the EU; serving what is still labelled as "oat milk" despite court clarification that that is unlawful; or banning greyhound racing long after the last track in Scotland has already been shut. By doing those things, we do a disservice to and go out of our way to diminish the great democratic prize that others fought for. Indeed, much of the debate in this chamber seems a far cry from the genuine excitement that I witnessed as a child when I first watched Donald Dewar address the Parliament in 1999. Most institutions grow in stature as they age, but Holyrood seems to be stuck in reverse.

That fuels the growing disconnect between the Scottish Parliament and many of the people whom it is supposed to represent—decent hard-working people, who get their hands dirty and pay their taxes, just like anyone else. My sincere hope is that future sessions of the Parliament will be

different and that other members will be more successful than those of us here, including me, in shifting the dial.

Instead of attacking rural Scotland, we should celebrate and back it. We must be willing to recognise that delivering rural services costs more in a country such as ours. Rural Scotland, not least Dumfriesshire, holds real potential. The answers to many of our most pressing challenges can be found in our rural and remote communities, but they must be given the freedom to flourish. Our communities need politicians who will listen to those on the ground, who really do know best. Endless legislation and policy are not substitutes for substance or real-world experience. Politicians, however green they claim to be, must understand their limitations and remember those who elected them.

14:02

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): As a South Scotland MSP, I am no stranger to the harsh realities faced by those accessing services in rural areas. I speak to constituents from across the region, and the issues that we discuss match those found in the Government's own research, with people mentioning transport, travel costs and access to GPs and other services, along with depopulation and a lack of economic opportunity.

The pressing issues that we are discussing today are unique and diverse and any action taken to address them must be flexible and responsive. It is usually my colleague Rhoda Grant who speaks in rural debates, and I know that she has really appreciated the support from Mairi Gougeon and Jim Fairlie and their work in committee. I pass on the very best wishes of the Labour group.

We all agree that living in a remote or rural community should not limit access to basic and specialist care, nor should it limit opportunities. We know that the housing crisis is acute, that depopulation and demographic change are very real in rural communities and that transport and connectivity issues are raised with every member in the chamber. Access to services can be limited, economic instability often affects rural communities in a heightened way and the cost of living is much greater for those living in them.

As everyone has said, the next Parliament must work together to rebuild trust with rural communities and businesses, and it must redouble efforts to co-design a rural strategy with communities and to put the future of rural and island areas on a more secure footing. The next Government must work with those communities to ensure that legislation is implemented and monitored to enable delivery.

Given that much of my time in my five years in the Parliament has been focused on health, it would be remiss of me not to raise the subject again in the context of rural and remote communities. This parliamentary session ends as it began, with a Government that has really let down the patients and staff in our rural and island health services. Indeed, we have heard repeatedly of a healthcare system that underdelivers and underperforms for our rural communities.

Our universal healthcare system has become a bit of a postcode lottery, with rural health inequalities continuing to be exacerbated by decisions that do not always work for those communities. General practitioners are difficult to get in rural areas; waiting times are increasing; and the level of delayed discharge is high.

Rural areas bear the brunt of the failure to match up services, and distances can make things difficult. In the next parliamentary session, there really needs to be cross-portfolio working, with links made between transport, economy and the cost of living. In my region, there are difficult stories to tell about maternity and alcohol services, but I want to raise in particular the issues of training and support for staff to stay in rural areas, because those are cross-portfolio matters. We must work with trade unions, professional bodies, training providers and NHS boards to get flexible training opportunities, delivery and recruitment in place. One particular area that I have mentioned is apprenticeships, and I hope that we can do more work on that in the next parliamentary session.

I hope that the Parliament can pass on as a legacy the requirement for cross-portfolio working when it comes to rural issues, and I hope that we see that happen in the next session of the Parliament.

14:06

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Before I start, I want to thank Oliver Mundell. He has been a great colleague, and I thought that he gave a really good speech on rural Scotland and what it means.

I also thank Mairi Gougeon for the work that I have been able to do with her over the past year. It is frustratingly difficult to enrage her, which is always annoying for those on committees, but we have had a good working relationship. We might not agree on things, but I am sad to see her go.

Finally, I have a quick message about John Mason. For those of us of Christian faith in the Parliament, he has led by example, and his prayer breakfast will not be forgotten. The pastries have always been welcome on a Thursday morning.

Rural Scotland is, to me, incredibly important. I have spent my entire working life there. I have been on thousands of farms across the north-east and the Highlands and Islands; I have been on many estates; and I have worked with different communities. It is, for me, a passion that I wanted to bring into this chamber when I came here just over two years ago.

At that time, I went to my party's chief whip and said, "I want to do something on rural Scotland," and, in the past two years, I have been lucky enough to secure three members' business debates on the issue. The first was on health and social care, because I recognised very early on in my days on the council that that was an incredibly important area. Indeed, I think to this day that it is not right that basic services are not delivered in rural communities throughout Scotland. It is fair enough that people might have to travel for complex surgery, but we should be delivering basic services as local to home as possible.

My second debate was on the rural depopulation crisis. It is one thing to have a plan to deal with rural depopulation—it is another to deliver it. As Oliver Mundell has said, rurality might cost more, but what would Scotland be if we did not deliver for rural Scotland?

My final debate was on rural bridges and the importance of connecting communities. There are now four bridges in Moray that are falling down, and it is not right that we are disconnecting communities in that way. If I return, as I hope, in the next parliamentary session, I will continue the pressure to bring back the capital funding that is required for rural bridges.

I thank the communities across the Highlands and Islands that are doing so much to keep rural Scotland going, making businesses work, helping each other and working to attract the professionals whom we need across rural Scotland. However, I also want to highlight the challenges and the increasing number of rural penalties that I feel that I see.

I tried to put an exemption for travel on health grounds into the visitor levy, and I think that it represents a rural penalty that my amendment did not get through. The fact that patients have to travel for routine care is a rural penalty. The fact that ferries do not work is a rural penalty. That bridges do not get fixed; that the A9 and A96 have not been dualled; that councils do not receive the funding that they need; that rural buses and services are stopping; and that parcel delivery is more expensive—those things, and many more, are rural penalties that we have failed to deal with and which we will need to deal with.

Finally—this, too, is incredibly important—I want to send a message to the young people of rural Scotland. I know that many of them will want to travel, explore the world and see the lights of the big cities as they get older, but I want them to know that there will always be a home for them in rural Scotland. Therefore, we must ensure that housing, jobs, employment, transport and opportunities are the very best that they can be, if they are to feel safe enough to return to Scotland at some point in their lives.

It is one thing to have a rural depopulation plan, as I have said; it is another thing to live and breathe it. I just want to recognise, as we should all recognise—and as I hope that Parliament will recognise in the new session—that rurality might well cost more, but Scotland would be a very different place without it.

14:10

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I thank Jamie Halcro Johnston for bringing this debate on rural issues to the chamber. Before I contribute to it, however, I would like to pay tribute to several members who will not be back in May. It has been a pleasure to work with Mairi Gougeon on various key pieces of legislation during this session. I thank her for being so constructive and personable during our discussions, and I wish her all the best for the future. I also thank Oliver Mundell and John Mason for their years of public service in the Parliament and to the people they represent. I also thank Beatrice Wishart—I name-checked her yesterday, too—for her championing of Shetland and, in particular, our shared interest in fixed links.

Today's motion raises several key points that I agree with. The lack of availability of affordable accommodation is a real concern, and I share the view that we need to boost connectivity across the region. As the motion notes, those factors are key to strong communities and the Scottish Government must handle them with nuance. I disagree, however, with its diagnosis of the challenges that rural and island communities face. For example, increased regulation of the visitor economy will help to fix housing shortages and support local authorities to deliver the various services that the motion states are downgraded. The reason for services being on their knees can be traced back to 14 years of Tory austerity at Westminster and historic underinvestment in rural Scotland long before the Scottish Parliament existed.

Throughout this session, the Scottish Greens have delivered for people across the Highlands and Islands. On transport, we have scrapped peak fares for rail passengers, as well as those for islanders on NorthLink ferries. We have introduced a £2 bus cap across the Highlands and Islands and secured consultation on cruise ship levies that will

help to reduce pressure on port towns and island communities.

On housing, we have ramped up availability and affordability by winning multiyear funding for community housing projects, getting more money into the rural and island housing fund and implementing tougher council tax rules for second homes. Tenants are better off thanks to Green wins from the Housing (Scotland) Act 2025, including long-term rent controls and stronger protections against no-fault evictions. We were also there for renters in the aftermath of the Covid pandemic, when we were instrumental in bringing in a rent freeze and a ban on arbitrary evictions, both of which were key promises in our 2021 manifesto.

I have also been supporting the agricultural sector, securing funding for a sustainable farm and food skills pipeline that will support the transition to regenerative growing practices and give more young people opportunities in that crucial sector. I urge the Government to follow through on that work. On top of that, I have supported market gardeners, working to set up a support scheme that would ensure that crofters and other small-scale producers are funded based on what they deliver rather than the size of their holdings.

I am incredibly proud of what the Scottish Greens have delivered so far, but I am also aware that more still needs to be done. I am deeply concerned about the impact that Donald Trump's reckless attack on Iran will have on the cost of living. Energy costs look set to soar, which will hit people across the Highlands and Islands who already face a price premium. The cost of fuel is also likely to rise, which will affect everyone from fishers to community pharmacies that deliver vital prescriptions. The Scottish Greens will continue to be there for folks in the on-going crisis.

Looking further ahead, we want to instigate proper investment in the future. Highlands and Islands communities must see the delivery of a rural housing revolution, more affordable homes, more social housing and more long-term empty properties coming back into the community. We want to ensure that every community has access to essential banking, childcare and public transport, including free bus travel, which is already enjoyed by half of Scotland's population. We also want to tackle escalating land prices to democratise land.

Scotland's rural communities are the backbone of our nation, and the Scottish Greens will do all that we can to give them the best possible future.

14:14

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I thank Jamie Halcro Johnston for bringing this important debate to the chamber on this, the last day of the sixth session of the Scottish Parliament. This will be my final speech in the Parliament and, appropriately, the debate is on the sustainability of Scotland's remote, rural and island communities.

It has been an honour and a privilege to serve in the Parliament. I thank colleagues across the chamber for their kind words and for their friendship, and I wish Oliver Mundell, John Mason and the cabinet secretary well as they step down.

During my time here, I have repeatedly spoken about the issues that affect the island and rural areas of Scotland. I have often said that islanders do not look for special treatment. What people seek is the means to live and work in their communities and to survive and thrive in them, which entails putting investment into infrastructure and public services. Despite Government promises, digital connectivity is still not 100 per cent available across island and rural areas, yet it is vital for sustainability in today's world. The further away from the central belt a place is, the more it costs to deliver services there, and almost everything that people who live on islands need has to be brought in by ferry. A lack of housing for young local families and the high cost of travel are the two reasons that I most often hear for people leaving Shetland to live elsewhere. I have heard numerous accounts of people coming to Shetland to take up jobs in the NHS or the council, only to leave a few months later because they cannot find permanent accommodation.

This will also be the last time that I get to reinforce Shetland's call for a network of subsea tunnels to link islands, which would be another development in the evolution of its transport connectivity. I am pleased to have been able to work with Alistair Carmichael MP and the tunnel action groups to make progress on that much-needed infrastructure development.

Of course, I did not plan to come to the Parliament: I thank former MSP Tavish Scott for stepping down halfway through session 5 and throwing us into a whirlwind of a by-election in 2019. I thank very much the people of Shetland, who put me here, and I thank my colleagues Willie, Alex, Jamie and Liam for their support. I hope that there will be more women on the Scottish Liberal Democrat benches after the election.

None of us could do the work that we do without the teams who stand behind us, and I am very grateful for my team of Will, Helen, Kevin, Joy and Theo, and past staff Lily, Erin and Louise, who have worked hard and supported me over the past seven years. I also thank all the staff in the Scottish Parliament building who do so much to enable us to carry out the work that we do.

I live in a wonderful community. Like any other place, it has its problems, including drugs, alcohol and domestic abuse, but it is also a generous community, as was demonstrated just last weekend. A plea was put out for funding to enable a well-known local man to access brain tumour treatment that is not available in Scotland. Within three days, the fund had raised more than £100,000 to help with on-going treatment in Germany. For a population of 23,000 people, that is quite remarkable. When tragedy struck my own family 18 months ago, when my dear son-in-law died suddenly, my daughter Louise and their children—Kieran, Leighton and Eve, my grandchildren—and the wider family felt the arms of the community wrap around us with love and support, and for that we will forever be grateful. I also appreciated the support from my colleagues across the chamber, including the Presiding Officer and the First Minister, during that difficult time. I leave now to return to my family and friends, who have supported me throughout my time here, and I look forward to a bright Shetland summer.

If I have a pearl of wisdom for the next intake of MSPs, it is that they should do what we all came here to do and make life better for our fellow citizens, and that they should do so by working together across the chamber, constructively and with kindness.

14:18

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow Beatrice Wishart, who, as we all know, has been a real champion for her communities in the time that she has spent here. I also pay tribute to my friend and colleague Oliver Mundell, who has shown us what a constituency MSP should be, and to John Mason, with whom I have had the pleasure of working in the community. I say to John that working with him has always been interesting—I will leave it there.

I also pay tribute to Mairi Gougeon, who is, frustratingly, always happy and upbeat no matter what the situation. Although we disagree on some things, I know that she and I share a passion for locally produced food. We have worked hard together on that, and I appreciate her support.

I thank Jamie Halcro Johnston for bringing this debate to the Parliament. As always, I want to introduce a slightly different approach to the subject and so I will talk about how we should develop health policy. We must start from the position that services should be available to our communities no matter where they are, whether they are urban, rural or on islands.

We should all have access to GPs and to dentistry, pharmacy, accident and emergency, and maternity services. Access to those things should be statutory across our country, no matter what. The same should be said for education and community activity. However, how we deliver that uniformity of service will vary across urban, rural and island settings. There is an acceptance, especially in our rural and island communities, that people will require to travel to access some services—for example, trauma or specialist health services.

I have tried to bring to the chamber my belief that healthcare will be revolutionised by the adoption of technology. No one will benefit more from that than our rural communities across Scotland—it is they who will benefit disproportionately. We are way behind the rest of the world in adopting that kind of technology, which will deliver services in a more effective way across our country.

Connectivity, which has been mentioned, is a lifeline for all our communities. I live in East Kilbride. I know how poor the roads are there, how infrequent the buses are, how infrequent the rail services are and how difficult it is for people to get out of their cars. For rural and island communities, connectivity is a lifeline. As Jamie Halcro Johnston said, roads, rail networks and ferries—we keep coming back to ferries—are key to keeping those communities where they are and stopping migration away from them.

The chamber will welcome the fact that this—eventually—is my last speech in this parliamentary session.

If we are to deliver for all our communities, including our islands and rural communities, we will require to do something that this Parliament has been very poor at: cross-portfolio working. That is what we need to do if we are to deliver people's basic needs across all our communities.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call the next speaker, in order to protect the time available for each member who wants to participate, I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 8.14.3 of standing orders, to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes. I invite Mr Halcro Johnston to move such a motion.

Motion moved,

That, under rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[*Jamie Halcro Johnston*]

Motion agreed to.

14:22

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I thank Jamie Halcro Johnston for allowing us to debate, on the final day of the parliamentary session, the many issues that he and I have fought most hard on over the course of it.

I have been really lucky with my regional colleagues—Rhoda Grant, Edward Mountain, Ariane Burgess and Tim Eagle in particular. Whether through bumping into each other on surgery tours or working together on committees, they have had a frequent and usually positive influence on my working life. Although Jamie Halcro Johnston and I have interacted less often, we have never clashed outwith this chamber. That is the kind of collegiate working across parties that we should be promoting.

In my first speech in the Parliament, I spoke about the mental health crisis in our region. When I made that speech, only 137 days had passed since my mother died of Covid and 44 months had passed since I was homeless. That was now 1,758 days ago, and I have learned so much since then, from the finer points of goose management to the difficulties in delivering island housing developments. However, my outlook on the core issues that we face has not changed, nor has my passion for addressing them.

The day I made my first speech, I told the Parliament that I would spend the next five years doing everything in my power to improve the lives of others who make the Highlands and Islands their home, that I would work with colleagues across the chamber to make sure that we are getting it right, and that I would use my lived experience to contribute to discussions because I deeply understand the issues faced by my constituents. That is what I did. It was so meaningful to me to serve as the minister with responsibility for addressing depopulation. I am so proud of the addressing depopulation action plan that I published then, and the scale of the work that went into it from the communities that I worked with, many of which were rural or island based.

I worked with the transport secretary to ensure that young islanders benefit from our free bus travel scheme, which has now been extended to interisland ferries. From this week, my constituents are benefiting from a £2 fare cap for single bus journeys; I am delighted that the trains that I travel on every week are due for an upgrade next year; and now that we have a set timescale for the Nairn bypass, I look forward to seeing spades in the ground for that very soon.

I will never forget amending what is now the Housing (Scotland) Act 2025 to allow us to collect data that will allow future Parliaments to make better decisions, better policy and better law.

When I look back at all that and look forward to the work that remains, I am proud of what has been achieved, but I have a deep feeling of unfinished business. I, the SNP and the Parliament have more to do to ensure the sustainability of rural and island areas and the whole of the Highlands and Islands region, so that locals can access high-quality public services.

On the day I made my first speech in June 2021, I also spoke about how, no matter which direction I am travelling in, I look out for the Kessock bridge lights in the distance and know that I am nearly home. Much as I will miss the contributions of many colleagues who do not plan to return, including the cabinet secretary, Elena Whitham, and Joe FitzPatrick, whose contribution at First Minister's questions I welled up listening to earlier, and much as I value the work that we all do here, I will head home on Friday morning, and I cannot wait to look ahead and see that bridge.

I will spend the next six weeks working hard to come back here and represent that incredible Highlands and Islands constituency, and I hope that anyone who does so takes the issues just as seriously. I know that society and the Parliament are best when protected characteristics and geography do not limit our ambition. There is a lot of work to do to ensure that people in the Highlands and Islands and young people like me who are homeless and struggling or disabled and fighting are supported to be contributors and to be happy, healthy and productive individuals—maybe even leaders or MSPs.

14:26

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I pay tribute to my colleagues who will not return next session, particularly Oliver Mundell, who has spoken out so well for Dumfriesshire, John Mason and my dear friend Beatrice Wishart, whom I will miss dearly. We need to reflect on the hard work that she did with the cross-party group on brain tumours—what she has achieved in such a short time is remarkable. [*Applause*.] I also thank my friend and colleague Jamie Halcro Johnston for once again showing his passion for rural Scotland by bringing this debate to the chamber.

Rural Scotland has been asked to do more with less, and that is simply not sustainable. For almost a decade, I have stood in the chamber making the case for rural Scotland, campaigning for a moratorium on inappropriate wind farm developments, defending the local services that our cottage hospitals once provided, leading the call to dual the A75 and working through the cost of living crisis to secure support for rural households and businesses.

Our remote, rural and island communities are central to Scotland's economy, culture and identity, yet too often they are treated as an afterthought. Nowhere is that shown more starkly than in Galloway and West Dumfries, in a region that is shaped by long distances, dispersed populations and fragile infrastructure. However,

distance must not mean disadvantage. It should not mean that a hospital appointment becomes an all-day journey, that expectant mothers face an 80-mile trip to the nearest maternity unit or that access to justice, education and essential services depends on how far someone can drive. However, that is exactly the reality for too many. Centralisation continues to hollow out rural life when a bank closes, when step-down beds vanish or when services are removed to distant hubs. It is not only an inconvenience but costs jobs, weakens high streets and leaves communities feeling forgotten.

Connectivity—physical and digital—remains one of the defining challenges. I have led the campaign to dual the A75 because it is not only a regional road but a national economic artery that links Scotland and England to Northern Ireland and carries nearly £9 billion-worth of freight every year. For too long, it has been neglected, with safety concerns, unreliable journey times and chronic underinvestment that hold the south-west back. The A77 faces similar issues. Warm words will not fix those routes—only investment will.

Public transport cuts are another blow. When rural services disappear, communities are effectively cut off—young people from education and opportunities, older residents from independence and workers from employment.

In 2026, it is indefensible that the flagship reaching 100 per cent—R100—programme has failed so many areas of rural Scotland, which still lack reliable digital connectivity. Without it, businesses cannot expand, people cannot work flexibly and communities cannot compete.

Our rural economy is strong but under huge pressures. I have stood with our farmers as they face rising costs, uncertainty and diminishing support. Those are not just businesses; they are the backbone of our communities, but this week's rural support plan lets them down yet again by offering year-on-year reductions and asking them to deliver more.

I have also raised the concerns of fishing communities, which are navigating rising costs, complex regulation and deep uncertainty while trying to sustain an industry that is central to our heritage. Bizarrely, some of those efforts on the scallop industry were actively and regrettably scuppered by Emma Harper, who had the chance to vote to make the industry more sustainable.

I put on record my thanks to Mairi Gougeon for her support in developing a new boat-based cockle fishery in my constituency. I mean that from the cockles of my heart. [*Laughter.*] The initiative could bring tens of millions of pounds into the local economy. Indeed, I thank her for all the work that she has done and for being a friend for 10 years. I remember Mairi from her first few days as a new parliamentarian. I wish her all the best in the future.

Tourism is also a major issue in our region, and high streets in towns such as Stranraer, Dalbeattie and Newton Stewart are battling for survival.

I realise that I am running out of time, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have run out of time. Could you wind up, please.

Finlay Carson: Rural Scotland does not need more recognition of the problem; it needs action. We need policies that reflect rural realities, investment that matches rural needs and a Government that understands that fairness means ensuring that no part of Scotland is left behind. Resilience must not be mistaken for the ability to endure endless pressure. If we are serious about building a fairer, stronger Scotland, we must be serious about delivering for rural Scotland.

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

14:31

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): I thank Jamie Halcro Johnston for securing the debate and other members for their kind words.

Many people in Scotland's urban areas and central belt still care deeply for our remote, rural and island communities. I have visited a number of islands with the Parliament's committees during the past 15 years, including Islay, Arran, Mull, Harris, Lewis, and Orkney, as well as going to Shetland for a council by-election. That has been one of the enjoyable aspects of being an MSP. Normally, I visit islands as a tourist and have visited some 38. I note that I consider the Uists and Benbecula to be one island as I can drive my car between them without using a ferry. I hold to the position from one of my more controversial moments in the Parliament that Skye has not in fact been an island since the bridge was built. [*Laughter.*] I was proved correct during Covid, when it was treated as part of the mainland.

I can understand the desire to have causeways, bridges or tunnels linking islands to each other or to the mainland. That makes access to a range of services much easier, from shopping to medical services, weddings and funerals. However, I caution that, from a tourist's perspective, such fixed links can make an island less attractive or magical for a visitor and could have a negative economic impact.

Talking of driving my car, my priority for road improvements in Scotland would have to be the A82 between Tarbet and Ardlui right at the top. The Road Haulage Association was in the

Parliament last week. The fact that two heavy goods vehicles cannot even pass each other on stretches of that road is appalling. In my opinion, that should be a higher priority than dualling the A9.

I do not often agree with Scottish Land & Estates, but I agree with some of the key points in its briefing for the debate. Tackling depopulation in rural areas has to be a top priority; and as it says,

"if rural Scotland does not thrive, Scotland does not thrive".

Last summer, I visited Mingulay for the first time and I have previously visited St Kilda. I find it incredibly sad that islands that once supported a hardy population eventually had to be evacuated and now have no permanent human inhabitants. We do not want that to happen to any more of our islands or remote areas. I noted press coverage just yesterday of the vacancy level for both primary and secondary teachers in the Highland Council area, yet I get complaints from young teachers that they cannot get a job in Glasgow. Somehow, we need to take that on as a national challenge and support teachers and other workers from urban areas to consider moving to more rural and remote parts of Scotland.

Another aspect is political representation. Rightly, the three main island groups are guaranteed an MSP each, yet the whole west coast from Cape Wrath to the Mull of Kintyre forms only three constituencies and is represented by three MSPs. If the Western Isles can have an MSP for 22,000 registered voters, why should Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch have to have 63,000 voters? We need to address that by not being so fixated with the population of constituencies. Land mass should be a factor, too.

This is my last speech in Parliament, so I thank all those who make this Parliament work, including fellow MSPs—and especially those who are leaving. We are much smaller than Westminster, and that is a big advantage in my opinion. We all know each other, to some extent, and we have a building that is modern and fit for purpose, unlike the one on the Thames. We are not hampered by a second unelected chamber. One person can make a real difference in a chamber of 129, whereas, as I can say having been at Westminster, with its 650 MPs, one person does not count for much there, and Scotland counts for very little.

I have tried, over my 15 years here, to say things that no one else would say and to ask questions that no one else would ask. That has clearly got me into trouble at times, but it has certainly been a huge privilege to serve here.

I conclude by thanking you, Deputy Presiding Officer, and your two colleagues. In particular, I thank you, and especially Alison Johnstone, for taking a firm line when some members sought to bully you and undermine Parliament as a whole. Many of us are very grateful that you did so.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Mason. As a resident of Burray, I can assure you that the linked south isles in Orkney are definitely islands.

With that, I call Mairi Gougeon to respond to the debate.

14:35

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): I am grateful to Jamie Halcro Johnston for securing the debate. Given the breadth of the areas that are covered in the motion, any one of my colleagues could have been here to respond. However, I am delighted to have the opportunity to do so, because this SNP Government cares deeply about our rural and island communities. When they thrive, all of Scotland thrives.

There are a lot of items to cover.

I thank everyone across the chamber for their kind words to me. I am so glad that members expressed all of that on a day when my mum is up in the public gallery to hear it—as opposed to in half an hour's time, when they will be throwing pelters at me again at question time. I wish to recognise my mum, Marianne, without whom I would not have entered politics. She is the most inspirational woman I know, and she sacrificed so much for me. She fostered a passion for debate and a drive for fairness and justice, and she really stoked a fire to campaign for Scottish independence. I thank her for that.

During this final speech, I am flanked by my closest friends and colleagues, without whom I could not have survived these sessions of Parliament: Jenny Gilruth, Jim Fairlie and, sitting behind me, Nicola Sturgeon.

There is so much that I want to cover and talk about today, but it is important to recognise the final contributions of some more colleagues. Oliver Mundell and I entered Parliament at the same time, in 2016. I still remember our first meeting; potentially, he does not. In that session, we were given opportunities to get to meet each other and break down political barriers. We served together on the Justice Committee initially, and, from that initial engagement to now, I have always enjoyed engaging with him. It has always been in good humour—normally outside the chamber rather than inside it, as members will probably have been able to judge today. Inside the chamber, we tend to profoundly disagree on a number of items.

We have just heard the final contribution from John Mason. Despite the fact that he represents a more urban constituency, I have always appreciated John's interest in matters relating to my portfolio, which I know also matter greatly to him—none more so than the sheep of St Kilda. It was a sheer delight for me, as species champion for the kestrel, to respond to the debate that John Mason brought to Parliament just recently. It is safe to say that the species champion debate is the only debate that unites us right across the chamber. In all seriousness, John Mason has had many years as a councillor, MP and MSP, and it is important to mark that contribution. I wish him all the very best going forward.

It has been an immense pleasure to get to know and work with Beatrice Wishart during our time in Parliament. I have always appreciated her openness to engage with me. Through all the numerous pieces of legislation that we have worked on together, she has always been driven by doing what is best for the people of Shetland. From fisheries to fixed links and a whole host of issues in between, we have not always agreed, but I have always appreciated Beatrice's ability to have difficult discussions in a constructive way. I wish her all the very best as she steps down from Parliament.

I also want to express good wishes to those who are not stepping back but hope to return in the next session of Parliament. It has been a privilege to work with you, Deputy Presiding Officer, and with Finlay Carson, Tim Eagle, Jamie Halcro Johnston and a number of other members across the chamber, not least Ariane Burgess, with whom we worked closely on a number of key pieces of legislation, always striving to do what is right.

Being Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands has been the privilege of my life. I have worked alongside many others to deliver real and lasting change for our rural and island communities and businesses. Of course, some of those challenges remain, but our rural and island communities and industries are rich with opportunity and this Government has been determined to unlock it.

Housing is a key issue that has been raised in the motion and throughout the debate. Just this morning, we heard more information about the announcement by the housing secretary, Màiri McAllan, of the £10 million that is being made available from 1 April through the Scottish emergency heating oil scheme, which will provide vital support to householders who are worried about the recent surges in the cost of heating oil and liquid petroleum gas. It is a key example of where we have gone over and above what is provided by the United Kingdom Government to deliver for our communities.

That is alongside the wider investment that we are making in housing. Our croft house grant scheme has invested more than £26.5 million to support more than 1,100 croft homes. We are going further still, with an announcement this year of a new rural and island housing grant scheme, with investment of up to £20 million. That is alongside £37 million for a rural and islands housing fund and £25 million in rural affordable housing for key workers.

Transport has quite rightly been mentioned in the debate. We have reduced the cost of travel and have improved connectivity. We have expanded concessionary travel, abolished peak rail fares and introduced a £2 bus fare cap pilot in the Highlands and Islands. The road equivalent tariff has reduced ferry fares significantly, and we cannot forget the significant investment in new ferries, which will improve lifeline links for our rural communities.

I will reflect on two key areas mentioned in the motion that are the lifeblood of our rural, coastal and island communities and that form the heart of my portfolio—agriculture and fisheries. We value our food producers in Scotland, which is why we invest more than £660 million every year in our farmers and crofters. That is the most generous support package anywhere in the UK. We are continuing to back our marine economy with more than £70 million through the marine fund Scotland since 2021 and the £16 million that was announced just last week.

However, that all pales in comparison with the funding that we should receive. The UK Governments, past and present, have short-changed our farmers, crofters and fishermen. They have frozen funding, removed ring fencing, removed multi-annual funding and Barnettised funding across those critical areas. That serves only to short-change our critical food producers.

I am proud of the work that we have done to support new entrants to our agriculture industry, including the 17 new opportunities that we provided on Forestry and Land Scotland land, the transformative projects that we are investing in through the islands programme, and the investment in our community-led local development. Just recently, we had the Tyne and Esk local action group in the Parliament talking about the return on investment that it sees from such development and about the important work that it does in our rural communities.

One of the parts of the job of which I have been most proud has been working with youth local action groups and the Young Islanders Network, which I launched in Orkney a number of years ago. Working with our incredible youth leaders has been inspirational and it ensures that our young

people have a voice and take part in our decision making.

As the member who has the honour of making the final contribution in the final debate of this session of the Scottish Parliament, I want to say that it has been an absolute honour and the privilege of my life to serve the people of what I can now definitively say, without challenge, is the most scenic, culturally significant and generally the best constituency in Scotland—Angus North and Mearns:

> "almost you'd cry for that, the beauty of it and the sweetness of the Scottish land and skies."

Lewis Grassic Gibbon, the great author from the Mearns, summarised better than I ever could how I feel about my home region. From the coast to the glens, it really is the best of Scotland. I thank the people of Angus North and Mearns for putting their faith in me to represent them in the past two sessions of Parliament.

It has also been an honour beyond imagining to serve the people of Scotland as a member of the Scottish Government in what is the best portfolio in the Government. One of the great privileges of this role is who you get to meet and work with along the way, and the amazing people who keep you going in your job, too. It is fair to say that I have met some of the best of them, and I will mention some of the people who have made a real impression on me.

First, I had the experience of riding a combine with Andrew Moir, discussing the techniques that he is using on his farm, as well as agriculture policy. Last summer, along with Kenny Gibson, in his constituency, we visited David Carruth and his woolly pigs. Nothing quite warms your heart like driving along the road and having a troop of little piglets running towards you. Bryce Cunningham, of Mossgiel, is an organic dairy farmer in Elena Whitham's constituency, and he is working tirelessly to improve our food system. Martin Kennedy, whose farm I have been fortunate enough to visit a number of times, is not just a former president of NFU Scotland; he is still working and continuing to drive innovation in the industry that he has worked tirelessly to represent.

There are also our amazing fishermen. Just last week, when I launched the marine fund Scotland, I met Sam Mason and Barry Brunton, fishermen who care about the environment, are innovating to avoid bycatch and are so passionate about what they do. That also brings me to Ian Wightman, whom I have met in Largs a couple of times. One thing that I love about our farmers and fishermen is that they are not backward in coming forward to say what they really think.

I must also mention some of the incredible women I have had the opportunity to work with and meet. Caroline Millar is a true force of nature who has driven the incredible growth of agritourism in Scotland. A chance meeting on a bus at the Royal Highland Show led to a farm visit with Cora Cooper to see at first hand how a commercial livestock business can work hand in hand with peatland and nature restoration. Nikki Yoxall and the incredible Denise Walton are at the forefront of nature-friendly farming.

From the incredible women in agriculture to the incredible women right here, in the Parliament, I have been fortunate to work with so many inspiring women. In my time as a junior minister, I worked with the formidable Jeane Freeman and Roseanna Cunningham. I also worked with my colleague and best friend, Jenny Gilruth, as well as Nicola Sturgeon, who took a chance on me by appointing me to the Cabinet.

I again put on the record my sincere thanks to all those who have supported me in my Government role: the civil servants, the officials, the special advisers—including Ian Muirhead and Kate Higgins—and my incredible private office staff and my unfailing constituency office staff, who have pretty much been with me from the start and without whom I could not do this job. I also thank the Parliament staff, who are so kind and who make working in this building such a joy.

Last but certainly not least, I thank my amazing family, whom I cannot wait to spend more time with, and my amazing husband, Baptiste. It takes the patience of a saint to be married to anyone in this job, but he has looked after me and I would be at a loss without him.

On a final, final note, on this beautiful spring day, I will end on a point of optimism. In spite of the challenges that we face and the times that we are in, I am full of hope and optimism for the future of our country. We have shown that we are delivering for communities across Scotland with the powers that we have. We have focused on the issues that matter: protecting funding for and investment in our farmers and crofters, investing in our rural and island areas, and taking action on land reform. However, we could do so much more with the powers of independence. Therefore, although I am stepping back from elected politics, I will continue to work tirelessly for Scotland's independence and to deliver the fairer and more equal society that I know it will bring.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate. I will briefly suspend the meeting, and I look forward to regathering with you, cabinet secretary, and a few other colleagues at 3 o'clock.

14:46

Meeting suspended.

15:00

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Hello again. This afternoon's first item of business is portfolio questions, and the first portfolio is rural affairs, land reform and islands.

Public Transport (Island Communities)

1. **Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government, regarding its cross-Government co-ordination on island connectivity, what discussions the rural affairs secretary has had with ministerial colleagues on how to ensure that public transport meets the needs of island communities. (S6O-05693)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): The Government has published its on-going and proposed investments in ferries and other public transport island connectivity in the islands connectivity plan of May 2025 and the recent national islands plan.

Since 2021, the Government has delivered the MV Glen Sannox and the MV Isle of Islay, purchased the MV Loch Frisa, chartered additional tonnage, commissioned 13 new vessels, invested in ports—including the purchase of Ardrossan harbour—and extended free travel to all young islanders. We have also retained the road equivalent tariff, which has saved passengers around £25 million annually. For example, an islander travelling monthly by car from Arran saves more than £360 annually compared with previous multijourney tickets.

Katy Clark: A constituent of mine who lives on Arran has contacted me about the lack of joined-up, integrated provision of public transport on the island. She advises that no bus service runs to Brodick from Blackwaterfoot in time for the first ferry sailing and no bus service runs to meet islanders off the last ferry in the evening. Despite engagement with Stagecoach, CalMac Ferries and Strathclyde Partnership for Transport, the situation has not improved. Will the minister commit to integrated timetables and ticketing, and will he look at the specific situation on Arran?

Jim Fairlie: Katy Clark has raised a very good point on integrated services, which I have raised before. It does not work if a ferry arrives in port and the passengers watch a bus drive away. Our bus services are in the private sector, so we have to manage that and deal with it. However, her point is absolutely spot on, and we should look at the issue.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Against community wishes, CalMac has reduced services to Cumbrae this summer, and it is combining an overzealous approach to health and safety with new scheduled maintenance windows. It is a textbook example of how not to bring a community with you.

Islanders have also expressed concerns about CalMac's reticence to carry out an impact assessment under the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018, even though the changes are significant. Does the minister agree that stronger guidance is needed to compel public bodies to carry out such assessments, given the Scottish Government's commitment to genuine community involvement?

Jim Fairlie: My understanding is that CalMac has continued to work closely with the community on Cumbrae to fully consider the changes and the issues that relate to loading and offloading. Kenneth Gibson has been a vigorous campaigner for his constituents, but my understanding is that CalMac's decision is based on safety. At the moment, that is how I think that the situation will continue.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 2 was not lodged.

Heating Oil Costs (Agriculture Sector and Rural Industries)

3. **Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding whether any of the support announced in response to the increased cost of heating oil will help the agriculture sector and other rural industries in Scotland that are dependent on that fuel. (S6O-05695)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): The £10 million Scottish emergency oil heating scheme, which commences on 1 April, includes £4.6 million from the UK Government and is for households and individuals. Scottish ministers are writing to the UK Government about the significant impacts of increased costs on farmers, including the lack of regulation on kerosene and red diesel, as well as the implications for our domestic food supply and overall food security. Many of the levers to help address the issues are reserved, and the Scottish Government remains in close contact with the UK Government to monitor the situation as it unfolds in order to understand what can be done to alleviate pressures as they arise.

Christine Grahame: I hope that the UK Government responds positively. It needs to be

reminded of how important our farming community is in providing high-quality food and drink for domestic consumption and for export. Food and drink is Scotland's top international sector and is valued at £8 billion annually.

Does the minister agree that the London-centric UK Government overlooks the contribution of our rural communities and our farming communities? As a last word in my many years in the Parliament, I will say that that is particularly the case in my constituency of Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale.

Jim Fairlie: I thought that Christine Grahame's last contribution was going to be yesterday, but here she is, back again and making sure that she continues to represent her constituents.

Christine Grahame is absolutely right to make the point that she has made. She is correct that London does not understand Scottish agriculture and what the food and drink sector in Scotland is delivering. We are supporting and protecting the farming sector with the powers that we have. That is in stark contrast with policies in other parts of these islands.

We continue to provide our farmers and crofters with the most generous package of support, worth more than £660 million per annum. That support is vital in underpinning food production and helping businesses to deal with a wide range of issues, from supply chain shocks to volatile commodity markets. The published rural support plan now provides the industry with certainty for the years ahead, so it should have the confidence to invest for the long term.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: A number of members would like to ask supplementary questions. I will try to get them all in, but the questions will need to be brief.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I congratulate my friend and colleague Christine Grahame on her time here, and I wish her well in the future.

I agree with the minister and Christine Grahame that heating bills are doubling and that rural areas are particularly affected. Farmers are bearing the brunt of the war in the middle east, which will also have an impact on food production. Should people who could be eligible for potential funding order their fuel now, or should they hold off? What will be the eligibility criteria? Will the Scottish National Party Government shape the fund to recognise rural challenges?

Jim Fairlie: I absolutely recognise the points that Rachael Hamilton has made. We do not have the details for the scheme at the moment; we will need to get more details. The uncertainty does not help anyone, so it is incumbent on everyone to try to reverse from the positions that we have got ourselves into, or been put into, to ensure that we provide stability not only to farmers but to everybody who relies on food, which is all of us.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Given the challenges that Christine Grahame outlined and the Scottish Government's commitment to a just transition, how can the Government support investment in biofuels and anaerobic digestion to reduce reliance on heating oil and provide greener, more secure energy for rural industries such as those in Dumfries and Galloway and the Borders?

Jim Fairlie: We want to encourage new innovative techniques, but, as Emma Harper knows, the energy system is reserved. We need to look at how we can make ourselves far more resilient through using our own fuel in Scotland, and there are a number of ways in which we can do that.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Farmers in my constituency are deeply concerned about the rise in fuel costs and the potential rise in the cost of fertiliser, which could come soon. I am keen to make representations to the UK Government on a cross-party basis, but we need to gather the evidence first. Can the minister assure us that he is gathering all the evidence necessary to make a powerful case to the Westminster Government?

Jim Fairlie: I very much welcome Willie Rennie's intervention, because that is exactly what we need to do. The representations cannot be made on anything other than a cross-party basis. We need to work together on food resilience, which is the most vital thing that we can have in this country. I am more than happy to continue to work with anyone in the chamber who wants to help us to get to that situation.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Members will be aware that it is snowing in some parts of Scotland, so heating is incredibly important. Has the Government assessed the scale of hardship among off-grid households, including many in my Galloway and West Dumfries constituency, who do not qualify for means-tested benefits? Will the Government consider a broader scheme that reflects the circumstances of those households? When is it likely that the money will be in people's accounts?

Jim Fairlie: The scheme will be open from 1 April, but, as I said to Rachael Hamilton, some details are still to be worked out. Finlay Carson's point is absolutely valid. We need to get the situation under control so that the people of Scotland have access to what we have—we have a massive fuel supply, but we still have to pay the highest prices.

Food and Drink Processing Scheme Scotland

4. **Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how the £9 million being invested in the food and drink processing scheme Scotland will help businesses to increase productivity, improve efficiency, and invest in new equipment and technology. (S6O-05696)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): As part of our £9 million capital support package for the food and drink processing sector, a new food and drink processing scheme will provide grants on a competitive basis to boost production, improve supply chain efficiency and deliver economic benefits for food and drink businesses. It will offer match-funded awards of up to £400,000 to unlock growth opportunities and strengthen the sector's long-term sustainability.

That investment bolsters the support of more than £9 million that the Government has provided to the sector this year, which includes funding to deliver the national food and drink strategy, as well as other initiatives that seek to maximise growth, enhance competitiveness across domestic and export markets, and drive further resilience and innovation.

Michelle Thomson: I am pleased to hear about the Government's plans, especially its provision of additional capital investment to help businesses to expand and attract further investment, which will ultimately ensure that the sector remains a powerhouse for Scotland's economy, but I want to add my voice on an issue that has already been raised. What scenario planning has the Government undertaken in the light of the continued disruption in the middle east, which, frankly, could disrupt the Government's good work, given the possible impact on exports, energy and fuel costs, which Christine Grahame mentioned, and fertiliser and agricultural input markets? If it has not undertaken such scenario planning, are discussions under way with the United Kingdom Government?

Mairi Gougeon: As other members have done, Michelle Thomson has raised a number of important points. We established a food security unit precisely to address the key challenges that members have identified. That unit was initially set up on the back of the work of the food sector resilience group that was established when the outbreak of war in Ukraine led to significant shortages. We in Scotland are fortunate to have close engagement with our wider food and drink sector, which means that we can engage quickly in an effort to address some of the challenges and find ways through them. We set up the food security unit in order to monitor the situation.

With regard to broader engagement, I met NFU Scotland just last week, on the back of its letter to the Prime Minister about the significant concerns and issues that it wanted to be addressed. As the agriculture minister has just highlighted in response to Willie Rennie, and as I said in my meeting with the NFUS, we want to work with the industry to address those challenges. We are seeking engagement with the UK Government on the matter, so that we can address some of the problems and get ahead of any further issues.

Direct Support Payments

5. **Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how much it has paid to the agricultural sector in direct support payments over the course of the current parliamentary session. (S6O-05697)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): The Scottish Government invested £2.416 billion in the agricultural sector in direct support payments in the five years from 2021 to 2025. Those payments were delivered via the basic payment, greening, young farmers payment, Scottish suckler beef support and Scottish upland sheep support schemes. That funding represents the most generous direct payment package in the United Kingdom.

Bob Doris: I welcome the fact that the Scottish Government's package of support is the most generous package of direct support in the UK, but can the minister reassure me that the Scottish Government remains committed to providing direct payments to farmers in the future, given that the provision of such payments appears to be ending elsewhere in the UK? How does the support that is offered to farmers in Scotland compare with the support that is offered to farmers elsewhere in the UK?

Jim Fairlie: Bob Doris raises a very good point. I emphasise again that the Scottish Government cares deeply about our farmers and crofters and our natural environment. Through our rural support plan, we are delivering a balanced approach, including through continued direct payments. That is in stark contrast to the policies that have been adopted in other parts of the UK. We are committed to providing certainty for the long term. That is why we are delivering the most generous direct support package in these islands, through which we are providing more than £660 million annually. From our support for our iconic livestock sector to our continued investment in less favoured area support, it is clear that things are better here in Scotland.

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The rural support plan that was published just

yesterday is a huge let-down. It is not just me who is saying that—many stakeholders are, too. Importantly, the figures in the plan amount to a real-terms cut of about £250 million, which is a huge decrease in funding to our rural sector. Despite the wide calls for more funding that have been made by stakeholders and the fact that the sector is being asked to deliver so much, why has the Scottish National Party Government chosen to let down our rural sector with its funding announcement?

Jim Fairlie: I am sorry, but if anyone has let down the rural sector, it is members of the Conservative Party and the Labour Party. The Scottish Government continues to provide direct payments. The rural support plan has been welcomed by NFU Scotland, because it provides certainty and shows that we are continuing to work with our farming community.

It was the Tories who froze the agricultural support budget, and it is the Labour Party that has Barnettised it. Any farmer who is listening to this exchange will fully understand that we are working with the sector and are continuing to make direct payments, and that Scotland is the only part of the UK where that is happening.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Any farmer listening to this would be struggling to hear what was being said. Can we have less chirping from the Conservative front bench, please?

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): To correct the minister, I say that the agricultural funding was rolled up into the block grant rather than being Barnettised. The exact same amount of money is being received because of that.

Stakeholders are concerned about the lack of detail in tiers 2 and 3 of the rural support plan. They are concerned that there is no specific guidance on what farmers and crofters need to plan for. Given that the top 20 per cent of claimants receive 62 per cent of direct payments, will the Government move beyond rhetoric and commit to a redistributive mechanism such as front-loading or capping payments, so that public money can serve the public good?

Jim Fairlie: The first point to make is that we currently cap. On the point about front-loading and so on, we will look at a number of options. We have given certainty about what the payments will look like between now and 2030.

The funding has been Barnettised—it may well be rolled up into the block grant, but it has definitely been Barnettised. The funds from the United Kingdom Government have been frozen. I repeat that we are the only part of the UK that continues to provide direct support, and we have the most generous package of farming support anywhere in the UK.

Food Security and Resilience

6. **Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the United Kingdom Government assessment, "Global biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and national security", published in January 2026, what assessment it has made of Scotland's food security and resilience. (S6O-05698)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): As the Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy said on 19 March, we have considered that UK Government report, which highlights that our national security is under threat from global ecosystem degradation and collapse. The Scottish Government is working to protect our communities and economy by investing in ecosystem protection and restoration and ensuring that Scotland's food systems are secure and resilient. Work is under way on the inaugural food security statement, as required by the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024, which will include those environmental considerations.

Patrick Harvie: I am pleased that that was a slightly more positive answer than I have had from another minister, who has simply dismissed the issue by saying that national security is a reserved matter. I am glad that it seems to be on the cabinet secretary's agenda, because the warnings in the assessment are stark, saying that every critical ecosystem is on a pathway to collapse and that the implications are severe.

As this is one of the cabinet secretary's last opportunities to speak in the chamber, I thank her very warmly for her service to Scotland. I think that she will be a loss both to Parliament and to Government. However, I urge her to send a clear message to her successor in Government that the implications of the assessment for devolved responsibilities, including for our food security, need a much clearer and sharper focus if we are going to avoid the potentially catastrophic implications that the report warns us of.

Mairi Gougeon: I am in absolute agreement with Patrick Harvie on that point, and of course I will be leaving that message, worded in the strongest terms. However, for me, what needs to be done is more about building on the work that we have already done. As I highlighted in a previous response, we have established a food security unit to look ahead to any emerging threats and to deal with some of the big threats that we face at the moment, not least the threats that are posed by ecosystem degradation, which the report highlights.

We are undertaking important work in many areas and have already established some of the necessary foundational building blocks through the climate change plan and the nature restoration legislation. It is important that, in the next session of Parliament, those elements are delivered and built on, because we have to take action across all those areas if we want to ensure that we have food security and that we are resilient in the face of such challenges in the future.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): That was an interesting question from Mr Harvie, as the Scottish Greens have spent the majority of this session of Parliament demonising our farmers and food producers.

Rather than relying on imported food, which increases our carbon emissions, how is the Scottish Government supporting local procurement avenues, including by encouraging informal co-operatives to bid for contracts?

Mairi Gougeon: Brian Whittle has raised that issue with me on a number of occasions, and I think that we and members across the Parliament are keen to deliver on it. The Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022 and the very first good food nation plan are key to delivering on that. They recognise that procurement is a powerful tool to lever in more support for our local producers. A number of pieces of work are already under way on various mechanisms that make it easier for local suppliers and smaller producers to access public sector contracts.

More broadly, we have always been keen to make the point that nature and climate are not working against food production. We need to deal with the climate and nature challenges that we face if we are looking to secure food production for the future and, ultimately, make our farmers and crofters and their businesses more resilient.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 7 was not lodged.

Community Right to Buy Review

8. **Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the community right to buy review. (S6O-05700)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): The Scottish Government accepts the review and its recommendations for improvements to community rights to buy, and I am grateful to all who took the time to respond to the consultation that we undertook on it. The Government is exploring its options on legislation to take forward the recommendations. That will, of course, be a decision for the next Administration. However, where legislation is not required, we will act quickly, and work is already under way with stakeholders to make what progress we can in the meantime.

Fulton MacGregor: The existing processes have achieved a lot, in revitalising parts of Scotland through community right to buy mechanisms, but those processes ask a lot of the groups that put forward proposals. What are the cabinet secretary's views on how that process can be made easier and on how genuine mistakes that are made by the council, private owners or others can be made to carry no final consequences for the process?

Presiding Officer, as this is her last portfolio question, I put on record my best wishes to my good friend Mairi Gougeon, who started with me in 2016. I wish her all the best for the future, and I know that she will be sorely missed by our national Parliament—although perhaps that is not as sore as my legs were when we went for a run during our first session. I took a long time to recover from that.

Mairi Gougeon: I thank Fulton MacGregor for those kind comments. Some of my favourite memories are from those early days when we came to the Parliament together and served on the Justice Committee. He did not do as badly on that run as he thought, but I am glad to hear that he suffered afterwards. [*Laughter.*]

On Fulton MacGregor's substantive point and the concerns that he has raised about community right to buy, he is absolutely right. The points that he has made came through loud and clear in the consultation and have been made to me by community groups that have been through the right to buy process—that it has been difficult and cumbersome. Community right to buy, and the various other rights that have been in operation, have achieved a lot, but we are committed to improving on that by making the process less of a burden on groups that seek to use it. Recommendations include combining and simplifying the rights, reducing the burden on voting and eligibility requirements, and extending the registration period for groups. All those measures will help the process.

Ultimately, the process has to be robust. However, making it easier is a goal of the review, and I encourage members to look more broadly at the detail that is contained in that.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): How will the recommendations in the community right to buy review strengthen existing mechanisms or create new support mechanisms so that more communities can take ownership of their land? Is it likely that an amending bill will be needed, next session?

Mairi Gougeon: I thank Mercedes Villalba for her interest in the topic. As has been highlighted in the review report, delivering on some of its recommendations would need primary legislation. Ultimately, that will be for the next Government to decide on and take forward. However, where we can take action and make progress, we want to do that quickly, which is why I have highlighted the work that we are undertaking with stakeholders. We want to make sure that the process is accessible. Ultimately, it has to be fair to the landowner and the communities that are trying to access it, so we have to strike that balance while making those improvements where we can.

I take this opportunity to wish Mercedes Villalba all the very best. I have enjoyed our work together. I say that to Rhoda Grant, too, as I missed her out in the debate earlier. Thank you for your engagement on the critical pieces of legislation on which we have worked, and I wish you all the very best for the future.

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

Health and Social Care

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next portfolio is health and social care. I advise members that there is quite a bit of interest in asking supplementary questions, so, if I am to get them all in, they will need to be brief, as will the responses.

Dumfries and Galloway Royal Infirmary (Beds)

1. **Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to reduce reported bed pressures at Dumfries and Galloway royal infirmary. (S6O-05701)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): To support improvements in hospital capacity, last year, we published the operational improvement plan, which made available up to £220 million to reduce waiting times, improve hospital flow and minimise delayed discharges. That investment is supporting the expansion of hospital-at-home capacity to at least 2,000 beds by December this year. Yesterday's figures show that almost 7,200 people were supported by that service between November and January.

We have invested in frailty services across Scotland, including in Dumfries and Galloway, where teams are now operating at both the royal infirmary and Galloway community hospital. Through that approach, we are supporting boards to shift the balance of care from acute to community, ensuring that more care is provided closer to home.

NHS Dumfries and Galloway is focusing on actions to reduce occupancy and improve flow by delivering additional home care capacity and ensuring early discharge planning.

Oliver Mundell: The reality on the ground remains grim. In my final parliamentary contribution, I highlight the case of a constituent in her 80s who recently spent the first night of her hospital stay confused, alone and scared in a corridor. On the second night, her family was relieved to hear that she was moving to a room, only to find out that it was a temporary bed in a day unit. The woman was left with a broken doorbell in place of a buzzer and was unable to rest due to excessive noise.

I understand that our hospitals are under pressure, but does the cabinet secretary agree that we should still be able to do better for our most vulnerable patients?

Neil Gray: I will turn to Oliver Mundell's substantive point in a second, but, with your indulgence, Deputy Presiding Officer, I take this opportunity to pay tribute to Oliver Mundell. I have had many dealings with him during the past five years in my ministerial roles, and I have always found him to be a constructive champion for his constituents and a tenacious parliamentarian. I have always enjoyed working with him, and I wish him and his family all the very best for the future.

In addition, I thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer, and your colleagues who are standing down, for your service in the chair over the past five years. It is very much appreciated by the Scottish Government's health team.

I deeply regret the case that Oliver Mundell has put on the record. From what he has said, that is a completely unacceptable situation. I have seen corridor care happening, and it is undignified, unacceptable and no way for us to proceed, which is why we are making the investments that we are making through NHS Dumfries and Galloway.

The board has been allocated almost £4.5 million of combined core unscheduled care and operational improvement funding to increase the number of hospital-at-home services and to improve patient flow-through by implementing discharge without delay and addressing adults-with-incapacity delays.

If Oliver Mundell wants to send me more details, I will be happy to look at what can be done through NHS Dumfries and Galloway in the time that I have left to do so.

Silica Air Pollution

2. **Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of any potential public health impact of silica air pollution. (S6O-05702)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): The Scottish Government has not undertaken any recent assessments of the potential public health impact of silica air pollution.

Due to the nature of their work, construction workers are most likely to be at risk of silica air pollution. Regulation of workplace health and safety is reserved to the United Kingdom Government, which has responsibility for relevant legislation and statutory regulations.

The Scottish Environment Protection Agency is responsible for pollution prevention for silica sand quarries across Scotland, and it takes necessary action should quarries not comply with control regulations.

Mark Ruskell: In the 14 years that I have been an MSP, I have encountered many examples of environmental injustice. Perhaps the worst case that I have come across is at Burrowine moor quarry, near Kincardine, where the community has been suffering from silica dust pollution for many years, alongside noise and light pollution.

The community's view is that SEPA's and the council's regulatory responsibilities are not working. Our planning process seems blind to the health issues, and the review of mineral permissions around quarries is stuck in the 1970s.

What further work can be done between the health and planning parts of the Scottish Government to ensure that those concerns are addressed and that the planning process puts health more centrally into its considerations during the next parliamentary session?

Jenni Minto: I thank Mark Ruskell for his supplementary question, and I recognise the point that he makes about planning and health. As part of my role as the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health, I am very aware of the different determinants that impact on people's health. I am happy to take the point that Mr Ruskell raises about the Burrowine moor quarry at Culross in Fife and see what else we can do to look at that situation.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: A brief question from Carol Mochan.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): The prevalence of respiratory issues such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease in my South Scotland region causes concern. We know about the inequalities in the most deprived communities and that those communities are disproportionately affected. Mark Ruskell's question leads me to ask whether we should look to carry out analysis of the inequalities impact of silica air pollution on our communities.

Jenni Minto: Ms Mochan raises a fair point—one that I know she presses whenever she asks a question about inequalities in relation to public health. I should highlight the fact that planning is a local government responsibility, but I recognise that, when we are looking at the social determinants of health, many areas fit into that inequality lens.

I am content to take the issue away and look at it.

NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde (Discussions)

3. **Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government when it last met NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, and what issues were discussed. (S6O-05703)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): Ministers and Scottish Government officials regularly meet representatives of all health boards, including NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, to discuss matters of importance to local people. I last met NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde colleagues this morning when I visited the Scottish newborn screening lab at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital campus to hear about the fact that Scotland is the first nation in the United Kingdom to deliver a new spinal muscular atrophy test for babies.

I am sure that Mr Bibby will join me in welcoming that news, which is thanks to the hard work of SMA campaigners, families and, indeed, the Scottish National Party's Bob Doris.

Neil Bibby: This year, 8,700 Scots have waited more than eight hours to be seen at accident and emergency in the NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde area alone, and 3,141 have waited more than half a day.

I recently spoke to a constituent in Paisley who has had to pay £7,000 of his own money to get a cataract removed privately because he could not wait any longer on the national health service, and he will not be alone.

Will the minister take this opportunity in the final portfolio question time of the parliamentary session to apologise to the thousands of my constituents who have been waiting unacceptably long for treatment and are having to spend their savings to go private to get treatment?

Neil Gray: Of course I apologise to anybody who has had to wait too long for treatment, but our NHS is undoubtedly turning a corner. We have had eight months in a row of falling waiting times, and

in NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, there has been a 93.3 per cent reduction in long waits of more than 52 weeks in ophthalmology alone.

Of course I apologise to that constituent who has felt the need to seek private care, but we are delivering shorter waiting times in ophthalmology and many other disciplines in NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, thanks to the hard-working staff of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and the investment and direction given by Government.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members have a number of supplementary questions; they will need to be brief, as will the responses.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests.

Scotland's biggest health board, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, has a key role to play in bringing down long waits locally and nationally. Will the cabinet secretary therefore outline the progress that NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde has made across key specialties and the progress that has been made overall as a board to ensure that nobody waits longer than a year for treatment?

Neil Gray: Clare Haughey is absolutely correct. Waiting lists in Scotland continue to fall, with waits of more than 52 weeks reducing for eight months in a row. New out-patient waits of more than 52 weeks have more than halved since July last year.

In NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, there have been reductions in new out-patient waits of more than 52 weeks by 94.3 per cent for ear, nose and throat, 93.3 per cent for ophthalmology, 90 per cent for general surgery and 90 per cent for gynaecology since July 2025. In addition, there have been reductions in its in-patient and day-case waits of more than 52 weeks for paediatric surgery by 67 per cent, general surgery by 66 per cent, plastic surgery by 57 per cent and neurosurgery by 56 per cent. That is undeniable progress, thanks to the hard work of staff and the direction and funding given by this Scottish National Party Government.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): It has been a privilege to be here in the Scottish Parliament for the past five years. I came into politics to stand up for patients and our hard-working national health service staff, who do extraordinary work in the face of immense pressure, and I am proud to declare that I am a practising NHS general practitioner.

There have been multiple scandals at NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde health board, from the Queen Elizabeth university hospital to atrocious abuse at Skye House, and we have witnessed consistent, systematic failures that have let down the most vulnerable patients.

Why have managers been protected and not held to account? Is it to shield the SNP after 19 years of mismanagement and failure?

Neil Gray: I do not think that we can—and nor should we—seek to draw a correlation between NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde officials and the SNP. I do not know the politics of the leadership of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, and we should be careful to draw a distinction in that regard.

However, on both the issues that Dr Gulhane has raised, the Government has taken action to get answers for families. In the case of the public inquiry into the Queen Elizabeth university hospital, which is due to report, I wish Lord Brodie the space and time to be able to come forward with his independent conclusions. On Skye House, the Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing gave a statement to Parliament just days ago setting out the Government's actions and how we are seeking to respond, working with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, to ensure that improvements are made.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): My 10-year-old constituent, Cara, was referred to child and adolescent mental health services in Glasgow in May 2023, but in March this year, her parents were informed that she is still number 381 on a waiting list of 1,500. That is surely unacceptable. Cara suffers from acute anxiety, but—despite even her GP requesting a timeline for diagnosis—her family have still been waiting years in limbo.

What actions will the cabinet secretary take with the health board to help my constituents, such as Cara, who are trapped on CAMHS waiting lists for too long?

Neil Gray: First, my sympathies go to Mr Sweeney's constituent. I think that the matter that he is seeking to address is a diagnostic wait, rather than a CAMHS wait; those are two distinct matters. The CAMHS waiting times target has been met by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, although I accept that we have more work to do around the neurodevelopmental diagnostic waits, which is why we are supporting NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and partners to invest in capacity to ensure that that can be delivered.

Adult Social Care Displaced Worker Scheme

4. **Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the impact of its recently implemented adult social care displaced worker scheme on social care services. (S6O-05704)

The Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing (Tom Arthur): The scheme, which closed in January 2026, is backed by £500,000 of Scottish Government funding and helps employers to fill critical roles in adult social care via displaced

international workers who are already in the United Kingdom and find themselves without sponsored employment through no fault of their own. Based on early estimates from current operational data, we anticipate that up to 200 vacancies may be filled as a result.

We continue to process eligible claims for the scheme and, once that process is complete, we will begin our evaluation of the scheme, including options to further support and strengthen the adult social care sector via displaced workers.

Jackie Dunbar: As we have seen for months now, the UK Labour Government is determined to lurch further to the right on immigration than even the Tories were when they were in power. That is having a hugely damaging impact on constituents such as mine, who rely on skilled workers in social care to deliver care packages and the valuable services that are provided by our care home staff.

What assessment has the minister made of the harmful impact that Labour policies are having on the social care sector in particular? Will he join me in calling for the repeal of those damaging policies by the reckless UK Labour Government?

Tom Arthur: Jackie Dunbar raises extremely important points. We all recognise that, both in Scotland and across the wider UK, there are significant systemic challenges in social care, in particular owing to demographic pressures and the cost of living crisis with which we have been contending for the past five years. That makes it very difficult to understand the rationale behind the UK Government's approach to immigration with regard to social care and its decision on employer national insurance contributions, which we estimate is costing the sector around £84 million. That is not in the interests of social care in Scotland, and it is certainly not in the interests of social care elsewhere in the UK. I therefore urge the UK Government to think again on these matters; to recognise the invaluable contribution that overseas workers make, not just in social care but across our economy; and to act accordingly.

North Ayrshire Health and Social Care Partnership

5. **Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what support it is providing to North Ayrshire health and social care partnership. (S6O-05705)

The Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing (Tom Arthur): In 2026-27, North Ayrshire Council will receive £403.9 million to fund local services, which equates to an extra £20.1 million or an additional 5.2 per cent compared to 2025-26. NHS Ayrshire and Arran will receive nearly £1.1 billion in baseline funding, which equates to an increased investment of £88.2 million from 2025-26. That includes a 2 per cent baseline uplift of £21 million for the board. The Scottish Government continues to engage closely with North Ayrshire HSCP and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to understand system pressures, and it is providing a range of support on matters relating to health and social care.

Kenneth Gibson: Demographic change and rising demand are placing ever greater strain on health and social care partnerships and the Scottish Government. From next Wednesday, North Ayrshire Council will provide only critical social care. Labour abstained in the budget to avoid making choices, sneakily blaming Scottish ministers thereafter if any portfolio fell under pressure. Social care is certainly in that category. Can the minister confirm how much of the additional funding that is available to the Scottish Government from April will be allocated to health and social care partnerships, specifically North Ayrshire?

Tom Arthur: I assure the member that all councils will receive their fair share of the currently undistributed sum of £107.5 million. We recognise that social care is under pressure. That is why we increased the allocation in the budget for social care and for local government. As I touched on earlier, notwithstanding the existing challenges that we face through the cost of living crisis, those issues are being compounded by the United Kingdom Government's decisions on immigration and on employer national insurance contributions.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): The significant cuts to social care provision that are coming into effect next month in North Ayrshire will mean that social care is restricted to critical risk as a result of a £9 million deficit. There is a similar situation in East Ayrshire, which has a £10 million deficit. Does the minister agree that those cuts are unacceptable and will cause real harm? Does he agree that, although there is clearly a wider discussion to be had about the funding that is needed for social care and how we provide it, steps need to be taken now to ensure that those cuts do not go ahead?

Tom Arthur: I recognise the concerns that the member raises. Similar concerns have been raised with me by many members about decisions that have been taken in their localities. I note, however, that statutory responsibility for those decisions sits with integration joint boards. The Parliament had a long and detailed debate about the proposition of a national care service, which would have seen a change in accountability. Ultimately, the Parliament, including the Labour Party, argued that decision making should be local, which is what prevails. Whether that continues will be a matter for the next session of the Parliament, but I note that we can make

progress. We have seen an uplift in social care funding in this budget, and with the commitment for sectoral bargaining in social care, which will begin in earnest for the financial year 2027-28, we have a real opportunity to work collaboratively to increase resources for social care. However, that will be a matter not just for the next Administration but for the next session of the Parliament.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise the chamber that we will struggle to get in supplementaries if the questions and responses remain as long as they have been.

Stoma-friendly Toilets (National Health Service)

6. **Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government how many NHS boards have all of their accessible toilets as stoma-friendly toilets. (S6O-05706)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): I thank Edward Mountain for raising this important issue. We recognise that the lack of a suitable surface to assist with changing a stoma bag can be an inconvenience as well as a source of stress. We do not hold any data centrally on the number of accessible toilets with a stoma shelf, but that data should be available from individual health boards. However, as Mr Mountain has brought the issue to my attention, I have asked officials to work with NHS Scotland to improve the provision of stoma shelves or equivalent surfaces within all NHS accessible toilets. The Scottish Government recognises the importance of those facilities in users' lives and administers the changing places toilet fund to support the availability of toilets that support a range of needs, including those of people requiring to change a stoma bag.

Edward Mountain: I thank the minister for that, and I thank her for her work during this parliamentary session in helping me to achieve my aim. As a result of my campaign, I am pleased to report that NHS Highland has made good progress in making its accessible toilets stoma friendly. I am also pleased to report that the Parliament has made good progress, too.

Recently, I was pleased to secure a commitment from Morrisons to immediately make all its accessible toilets stoma friendly across the United Kingdom. All that it requires is a mirror, a hook, and a shelf. Marks and Spencer, Asda and Tesco have all agreed to review their policies, and Lidl has committed to making its store specification comply with Colostomy UK's recommendations from the start of the next financial year.

I am pleased about the Government's commitment, and I ask the minister to ensure that, if she is re-elected in the next session, she continues my drive on this issue.

Jenni Minto: If you will allow me, Presiding Officer, I would like to pay a very personal tribute to Edward Mountain for his focus and the light that he has shone on this important issue. As Mr Mountain knows, I understand from a personal perspective the importance of our getting this right. The work that Mr Mountain has done has given us all a recognition of the importance of supporting those who are living with a stoma bag, and I thank him very much for that. I appreciate the way in which we have been able to communicate on the issue—even though he does call me "the bag lady". I appreciate that communication very much, however.

If I am privileged to be re-elected to this place, I would be very happy to continue his campaign.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We always discourage nicknames.

Accident and Emergency Departments (Waiting Times)

7. **Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of any excess deaths associated with long waiting times in A and E departments, including the action it is taking to reduce preventable mortality. (S6O-05707)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): Excessively long waits are not acceptable, and we apologise to all patients who have had to wait too long to receive treatment. We have always recognised the relationship between long waits and increased risk of harm, which is why we remain committed to deliver improved A and E performance—so that everyone in urgent need of care can receive timely treatment. As Maggie Chapman will be aware, the pressures facing our A and E services are not unique to Scotland.

Our boards are responsible for investigating any incidents of harm. If an incident occurs, we expect boards to fulfil their statutory duty to be open with patients about what happened and to learn the necessary lessons to prevent it from happening again.

Maggie Chapman: Earlier this week, the Royal College of Emergency Medicine published its "State of Emergency Medicine in Scotland" report, and it is pretty grim reading. The college estimates that, in 2025, 818 deaths were linked to prolonged emergency department waits—a situation that remains unchanged from 2024. In the North East Scotland region, which I have had the privilege to represent for the past five years, just over a third of patients attending the Aberdeen royal infirmary ED were admitted, transferred or discharged within four hours, which is well below the 95 per

cent national health service standard—some 17.4 per cent of patients waited 12 hours or more for care.

What is the Scottish Government doing to reduce avoidable deaths as a result of long emergency department waits and to improve hospital flow? When will it adopt a whole-system approach, with responsibility shared across the entire patient pathway?

Neil Gray: I thank Maggie Chapman for her question and for advocating on behalf of the Royal College of Emergency Medicine, whose representatives I meet on a regular basis. After my most recent meeting, I instructed officials to have more in-depth dialogue with the college as to how we can ensure, using the whole-system basis that Maggie Chapman highlights, that the issues that we face with accident and emergency—which are driven not by accident and emergency but by the wider system—can be resolved at the same pace at which emergency medicine staff respond to issues.

I am conscious of the performance issues that Maggie Chapman raises regarding NHS Grampian, and that is part of the reason why the board is currently escalated. There is a new leadership team there, and indeed a new site director at Aberdeen royal infirmary, whom I have met. I am heartened not just by the grip and control that I see from the new leadership team, at both a site level and a board level, but by the whole-system collaboration that I want and need to see, in both city and shire, so that the issues that are driving the problems faced by the Scottish Ambulance Service may be resolved.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We can have a couple of very brief supplementaries, with brief responses.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): The Royal College of Emergency Medicine estimates that,

"at the current rate of progress, it could take more than 200 years to reduce the number"

of Scots waiting long hours at A and E to levels seen just a decade ago. Will the Government accept that its current approach has failed and commit to a whole-system approach that also tackles the social care crisis, where there is underfunding of £500 million for this financial year and record levels of delayed discharge?

Neil Gray: It is absolutely not this Government's intention to take anywhere near that long to resolve some of the challenges that are being faced in that regard. The operational improvement plan sets out very clear programmes of work, including the utilisation of hospital at home, the utilisation of health board funding to support social care services, working with frailty services and providing wider system support, which we are doing. That work is informed by the Royal College of Emergency Medicine to ensure that we see the necessary progress. I am confident that the next Government will continue to make progress.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I place on record my thanks to all the hard-working NHS staff, including those in A and E. The excess deaths that are associated with long waiting times in A and E departments do not lie at their door but are the fault of the system that has been created.

With that in mind, does the cabinet secretary agree that it is time for a new approach, to be agreed to by this Parliament, that includes whole-system measures, such as deploying technology and investing in prevention and social care, to make the NHS sustainable for years to come?

Neil Gray: There are a number of points on which I am in agreement with Brian Whittle. The first is in relation to his tribute to our NHS and social care staff for the incredible work that they do. I have been fortunate enough to work with them, and to be cared for by them as an unexpected secret shopper last week. I have seen at first hand the world-class care that they provide—it is exemplary.

I also agree that we need to see change in the system. We have published three documents in order to move that forward: the operational improvement plan, which I have been speaking about, the population health framework and the service renewal framework. I have engaged with Mr Whittle on all of those. There is a rather larger consensus on some of the steps within those documents than might be portrayed in the election campaign that we are about to embark on.

NHS Grampian (Savings)

8. **Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of reports that NHS Grampian is looking to save £177 million over the next five years, what impact this will have on the board's staff and services, and, in particular, on Dr Gray's hospital. (S6O-05708)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): Progress has been made by NHS Grampian since the decision to escalate it to level 4 of the NHS Scotland support and intervention framework on 12 May last year. NHS Grampian has strengthened leadership capacity significantly, with a new chief executive taking up post in September last year, and the recruitment of additional executive team members. NHS Grampian has established a value and sustainability programme to drive the development of annual plans, which will deliver efficiencies across all areas of the board's work.

Changes in the workforce profile must be facilitated through established approaches, including vacancy management, turnover and redeployment, and any proposals will and must be developed in partnership with colleagues and the staff side. Safe and effective delivery across all services that the board provides and the wellbeing of staff are paramount. I have made that point clear to the Government's assurance oversight board as well as to the leadership of NHS Grampian.

Tim Eagle: I was delighted to get the final health question of this parliamentary session. Ahead of today's questions, I asked the people of Moray what issues I should raise. Katrina asked about attracting health professionals, and Helen raised concerns about children and young people. Zena, Fiona and others spoke about ensuring that patients can access the nearest suitable hospital rather than being forced to travel unnecessarily long distances. Many others also contacted me.

My constituents are already worried about the health service and accessing timely local care. Talks of big savings only heighten those concerns. If you are in the next Government, what guarantees can you give that, in the next session, we will finally resolve any cross-border issues between NHS boards, that we will attract new workers and that patients will get the respectful, timely care that we all want them to have?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Neil Gray: I was going to say—if Mr McArthur is in the next Government, I wonder what the answers to those questions might be.

Before we contemplate the work of the next Government, I can give the assurance that that is already the case. The service renewal framework sets out very clear principles on how we take forward the service delivery change that will make our health and social care services more sustainable and will make a critical shift in the balance of care, so that more care is provided in local communities, in both community and primary care settings.

I encourage Mr Eagle to familiarise himself with the service renewal framework, because there is a lot that we would have in common when it comes to its principles of achieving a more sustainable health service.

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

Social Justice and Housing

Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2026 to 2031

1. **Foysol Choudhury (Lothian) (Ind):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of reports that it is not currently on track to meet its target to reduce child poverty to less than 10 per cent by 2031, what its response is to children's charities stating that its child poverty plan is "timid" and does not go far enough. (S6O-05709)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The tackling child poverty delivery plan, which was published earlier this month, commits to concrete action for the year ahead. That includes helping parents to increase their earnings, with £55 million in funding for a new package of skills support and help with transport and childcare. There will also be further action to tackle the cost of living, including investing £9 million to mitigate the effect of the United Kingdom Government's local housing allowance freeze and putting more money in the pockets of families by increasing our Scottish child payment to £40 in 2027-28 for children under the age of one. It is estimated that the actions that are in the plan will keep 100,000 children out of relative poverty next year.

Foysol Choudhury: As this is the last time that I will speak in the Parliament, I thank all my colleagues for all the help and support that they have given me in the past five years. It was an honour to serve as an MSP.

Given that the City of Edinburgh Council housed 42 per cent of Scotland's children who live in temporary accommodation in 2025 and given that rough sleeping has doubled in three years, what action is being taken urgently to eradicate child homelessness and poverty in Lothian and nationwide?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Between the work that is outlined in the tackling child poverty delivery plan and the work that my colleague Ms McAllan has been doing on the housing emergency, it is critical that we work together across the Government to support children in Edinburgh, the Lothians and across Scotland. That is why we have a commitment to affordable housing in the delivery plan. We have also emphasised and doubled the money to address voids and acquisitions, to ensure that we are taking action where some of the greatest pressures are, which includes Edinburgh and the Lothians.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to tackling child poverty and its investment through the whole family support third sector delivery fund. Will the cabinet secretary say more about how the

delivery model will work alongside existing local partnerships? In particular, will the Government consider ensuring that there are locally led, place-based approaches in the delivery model for the fund, such as those in Dumfries and Galloway, so that local partnerships can be supported to ensure the best possible outcomes for families?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: It is important that we learn from the good practice that is happening across Scotland. Emma Harper rightly pointed to some examples in her area of how important place-based approaches are, because local communities know what is needed most. That is why there is so much emphasis placed in the action plan on whole family support. It is about giving support to families where and when they need it and delivering it in a way that is right for communities. I look forward to continuing to work with Emma Harper on how we can take that forward in the south of Scotland and elsewhere.

Adult Disability Payment (Mental and Behavioural Disorders)

2. **Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of any increase in case load for the adult disability payment, particularly in regard to mental and behavioural disorders. (S6O-05710)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): I am proud that the Government is delivering for disabled people by continuing to invest in helping them with the cost of everyday tasks. The causes of increased demand for disability benefits were analysed in a report that was published in January by the Government's chief social policy adviser. The report found that the main contributors of increased demand are rising ill health and the United Kingdom Government's raising of the state pension age, which, combined with an ageing population, means that more people can get adult disability payments for longer.

I am sure that Dr Gulhane will be aware that statistics that were published by Social Security Scotland on 17 March confirm that the proportion of adult disability payment awards that relate to mental and behavioural conditions has remained stable over the past two years.

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

The adult disability payment case load is growing at an astounding rate, with 750,000 Scots expected to be in receipt of the benefit by 2030. The increase is being driven by a rising number of people claiming for mental disorders, including 60,000 people claiming for anxiety.

Recent surveys have shown that GPs simply do not have the time to appropriately assess fit notes, which undermines the entire system on which those notes rely. Will the cabinet secretary commit to introducing a robust assessment system that does not include GPs, who are under immense strain and pressure?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am sure that, as a practising GP, Dr Gulhane is aware that fit notes are not used in relation to adult disability payment; that is an entirely different part of the social security system. The part that Social Security Scotland uses, which was built with the clients in mind, was developed with contributions from the NHS and doctors.

We will continue to consider what other changes can be made. However, I urge caution, because mixing up the reserved and devolved benefits systems does not do anyone any favours—particularly the clients who get those payments and require us to have a good knowledge of how the system works.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): A constituent of mine said:

> "I've been begging repeatedly for months for them to process my ADP claim, only to be ignored, told to contact charities or completely brushed off. We frequently go hungry due to severe financial hardship because I cannot afford to pay for essentials alongside bills, and universal credit alone is not enough to support us."

When I contacted Social Security Scotland to raise the issue, it could not say when a decision would be made, it would not say how long applications are expected to take and it said that the case was being processed at the usual rate. That is cold comfort to my constituent. Will the cabinet secretary please commit to engaging with my office so that we can get an urgent resolution to this case?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I would be delighted to do so, but the member will have to be exceptionally quick in progressing the matter, as she will be aware that the pre-election period is coming up. I would have been delighted to take that forward at an earlier point had she raised the matter with me sooner. However, if she can get information on the case to me exceptionally quickly, I will be happy to look at it. I reassure her that we look carefully at the processing times in Social Security Scotland to ensure that we are doing everything that we can—both within the Government and within the agency—to keep those times down. As I said, I will look at the case, if at all possible, before the pre-election period starts.

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I, too, am proud that the Scottish National Party Government continues to strengthen social security support and maximise incomes for our

most vulnerable. The recent report by the Institute for Public Policy Research Scotland on the welfare state highlights that high spending on social protection does more than just place a safety net for the economically disadvantaged; it helps economies to become more productive.

Does the cabinet secretary agree with IPPR Scotland's assessment? Can she tell us more about how the Scottish Government will ensure that people who are eligible for adult disability payment receive the support to which they are entitled?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The Institute for Public Policy Research Scotland's recent work on the issue is exceptionally important. During a recent visit to Glasgow to launch the anti-stigma campaign encouraging people to apply for social security and to get the money that they are entitled to, I was particularly struck by an individual who told me that the way in which people are spoken about in this chamber and in the media puts people off coming forward to apply for social security, although it is a human right. We should encourage people to go through that process and support them when they make an application. Of course, after an application is made, there should be a robust decision-making process.

The IPPR's report made it very clear that it believes that it is a myth that a strong social security system is incompatible with economic success. I concur with its conclusions on that issue.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Ind): Does the cabinet secretary agree that ADP helps people to get into and stay in employment? If ADP is cut, more people in Scotland will have to claim other benefits because they are not able to work. I remind members that I am in receipt of higher-rate ADP.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: This will probably be the last time that I will have the opportunity—at least in the chamber—to thank Jeremy Balfour for the work that we have undertaken together over the years. We have disagreed on many things, but we have also agreed on a lot, particularly on social security.

I am pleased to end on a note of consensus with Mr Balfour. It is important that we recognise that ADP is there to support disabled people who are both in and out of work, to help them with the increased costs of a disability. That encourages people to work and keeps them in work. Once again, he makes a very important point in the chamber, and I thank him for doing so.

Older People's Housing

3. **Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to ensure that older people's housing, including sheltered housing, is prioritised in local housing planning and delivery. (S6O-05711)

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): Local authorities, as statutory housing authorities, are required to assess housing requirements locally and to set out how those will be met in their local housing strategies and development plans. That includes requirements for accessible, adaptable and wheelchair housing and housing that meets the needs of older people, including sheltered housing. The Scottish Government works closely with our partners in local authorities to support the development of those strategies and to ensure that identified priorities are reflected in the strategic housing investment plans. We also continue to offer flexible grants through the affordable housing supply programme for the delivery of specialist housing where that is required.

Karen Adam: Over the past five years, in representing Banffshire and Buchan Coast, I have met many older constituents who are deeply worried about the future of such complexes. Those cases have touched my heart, and they are urgent. Those people want to stay independent and they want homes that are secure, modern and properly maintained. With demand set only to grow, does the cabinet secretary agree that sheltered housing must be treated as a priority? How will the Scottish Government ensure that local authorities such as Conservative-led Aberdeenshire Council, which is closing sheltered housing, plan for more of it, not less?

Màiri McAllan: I share Karen Adam's view on the importance of specialist housing. To be clear, I expect local authorities to ensure that the housing needs of their older population are met through the provision of high-quality and well-maintained homes. In that regard, I am pleased to advise that, just this morning, I published revised local housing strategy guidance to support local authorities in that work. The guidance makes absolutely clear our expectations in relation to older people's housing, which includes the sheltered provision that Karen Adam has shone a light on today.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Housing for older people is a key priority that is driven by an ageing population. Does the Scottish Government recognise that prioritising the right type of housing can improve quality of life and reduce the need for public services, particularly in health and social care?

Màiri McAllan: I agree with that. In my responses to Karen Adam, I was clear about local authorities' responsibility to plan for that and the

co-operation that we have with local authorities in making sure that it is delivered.

I place on the record that the Scottish Government has committed to updating "Housing for Varying Needs" within two years of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2025 having come through Parliament. We understand that, as we develop new housing, it has to be fit for people's needs, now and in the future. Equally, looking at our existing stock, we have committed to reviewing the adaptations system as a whole to ensure that it continues to deliver for people who need it in our communities.

First-time Buyers

4. **Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting first-time buyers. (S6O-05712)

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): I have heard from many young people—and, increasingly, not so young people—in Scotland for whom the hopeful prospect of owning their own home one day is becoming ever more distant. We all know that, by the end of the month, by the time that food costs, energy costs and rent have been met, there is very little left to put away for a mortgage.

Through our rural and islands housing grant scheme, which has recently been announced, we will support first-time buyers in rural Scotland. We also have the extant low-cost initiative for first-time buyers, which is running currently. The First Minister recently confirmed that, if re-elected, we will introduce a first homes fund, offering a £10,000 equity contribution to assist first-time buyers with their deposits.

Meghan Gallacher: My supplementary is on those first-time buyer schemes. The Scottish National Party has tried such schemes before, but with little to no success, because they do not address the fundamental problem, which is a severe lack of building the homes that we desperately need. Does the cabinet secretary agree that those pre-election gimmicks do nothing to help first-time buyers? Does she agree that, instead, the next Government must focus on cutting red tape so that developers can build the homes that Scotland needs, while also reducing the cost of housing by abolishing land and buildings transaction tax?

Màiri McAllan: Not for the first time—and probably not for the last—I completely disagree with Meghan Gallacher's assessment. The individuals in Scotland who have benefited from our open market shared equity scheme do not consider it "inadequate", as she has put it. I am sure that there are people throughout Scotland who consider the prospect of £10,000 support for their deposit to be very attractive.

What does not help first-time buyers—nor others throughout Scotland—is the mortgage volatility that we have experienced, which was triggered not least by Liz Truss's disastrous budget.

Members: Oh!

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Members!

Màiri McAllan: Equally, the prospect of scrapping the land and buildings transaction tax or stamp duty land tax is for the birds, and I am afraid that it demonstrates that the Conservatives realise that their chances of implementing any such policies are, to put it politely, very slim.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Fulton MacGregor has a supplementary question.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I never pressed the request-to-speak button.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I beg your pardon. That was my fault.

Social Housing Waiting Lists (Kirkcaldy)

5. **David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking in light of reports of increasing pressure on social housing waiting lists in the Kirkcaldy constituency, including how it plans to support local authorities and housing associations to expand the availability of affordable homes in the area. (S6O-05713)

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): I regularly meet Fife Council, and we discuss the local housing emergency, affordable housing supply, temporary accommodation and homelessness pressures. One of the most impactful ways to reduce the pressure on waiting lists is to deliver more affordable homes. In the Kirkcaldy constituency area, 308 affordable homes have been completed in this parliamentary session, and further affordable homes are on the way.

The Government has confirmed a record sum for our affordable homes supply programme for next year and over the coming four years, and that increased funding and certainty will help to deliver the affordable homes that Scotland needs.

David Torrance: Given the sustained pressure on social housing waiting lists in the Kirkcaldy constituency, will the cabinet secretary outline how the Scottish Government can ensure that local authorities make full and effective use of the resources that are available to them, particularly in the light of Fife Council's £9 million housing underspend in 2025, at a time when families in communities such as West Wemyss—who were

recently served eviction notices by Torah Capital Limited—are desperate for affordable and secure homes?

Màiri McAllan: At the end of my last answer, I noted the record funding that the Scottish Government is making available next year and in the coming four years for affordable homes. I do not want to see any underspends given that commitment. It is the responsibility of councils such as Fife Council to make the best and most effective use of their own housing resources, particularly when they have declared a housing emergency. I assure David Torrance that there will not be any underspend of the £39 million that the Scottish Government's affordable homes supply programme is providing for Fife in 2025-26.

In response to the question about the tenants in West Wemyss, I assure David Torrance that I continue to be briefed on the issue by Fife Council, and I am ready and poised to provide support when it is requested.

More Homes Scotland (Affordable Housing and Homelessness)

6. **Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether addressing affordable housing need and tackling homelessness will be more homes Scotland's core mission. (S6O-05714)

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): Increasing the supply of affordable homes is key to addressing housing need and critical to tackling homelessness. I am pleased to confirm that more homes Scotland will have a key focus on bringing speed, simplicity and scale to the delivery of more homes, including affordable homes, as quickly as possible. The agency will help to advance key Government priorities, including our child poverty ambitions, by ensuring that more children, families and individuals have the foundational opportunity in life of a safe, warm and affordable home.

Elena Whitham: I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests—I am a member of Shelter Scotland's committee.

Given that far too many children live in temporary accommodation, more homes Scotland must be integral to ending homelessness, and its creation is most welcome. To succeed, it must move quickly, which requires proper funding and a singular clarity of focus. Some voices call for the agency's focus to be on increasing the supply in all housing tenures, but does the cabinet secretary agree that delivering more private homes does not necessarily reduce homelessness, and that the measure of the agency's success must be more social homes being built and homelessness being reduced?

Màiri McAllan: One of the main drivers—if not the main driver—of homelessness is poverty. More homes Scotland will help to drive forward the Government's core priorities of eradicating child poverty and growing our economy. To do that, we must focus on building more social homes and maximising investment in Scotland's housing sector generally.

We have a very strong record in Scotland in that regard. Since 2007, the Government has delivered 141,000 affordable homes, 101,000 of which have the most affordable social rent. That leaves us with 69 per cent more affordable homes, per head of population, than there are in Wales and 45 per cent more affordable homes, per head of population, than there are in England. However, we are crystal clear that the number of such homes needs to grow, and the agency will help us in that regard.

Heating Oil Prices (Low-income Rural and Off-grid Households)

7. **Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking through its fuel poverty programmes to support low-income rural and off-grid households that are unable to heat their homes due to the recent increase in heating oil prices. (S6O-05715)

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): Today, we have announced that the Scottish emergency heating oil scheme will be delivered by Advice Direct Scotland and will be open for applications from 1 April. The scheme will be available to users of both heating oil and liquefied petroleum gas. Low-income households and those at risk of self-rationing will be able to apply for support worth £300 towards their bills. That is in addition to our energy saving schemes, which already deliver average savings of £300 annually. Our islands cost crisis emergency fund will continue into the 2026-27 financial year, with an additional £1 million allocation. This year, we have also invested a further £5.5 million in the Scottish welfare fund, which provides vital support in difficult times.

Rona Mackay: I thank the cabinet secretary for that welcome response. One of my constituents has seen their heating oil bill triple overnight, has no savings and has been told to wait until April for support that amounts to pennies per household. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the £4.6 million that has been allocated to Scotland is wholly inadequate? Will she join me in calling on the Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer to do far more to protect the off-grid households that Westminster's energy price cap has left behind?

Màiri McAllan: I express the Government's sympathy with those who are wrestling with dramatically increased oil prices, which will have come as a very unwelcome shock to households. Rona Mackay is absolutely right that the £4.6 million that the United Kingdom Government has allocated is absolutely inadequate, especially when one considers how much money has gone from Scotland's North Sea to the UK Treasury since the 1970s. However, we have acted quickly to complement the fund with £5.4 million, bringing the total funding to £10 million—with £300 being offered to eligible households, which, we think, equates to about 200 litres of heating oil—to directly support those in need. That simple process is administered through trusted partners and is open to those in need.

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

Temporary Accommodation

8. **Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP):** Forgive me, Presiding Officer, but I hope that you will indulge me, as I wish to thank all those working across the Parliament campus to support MSPs, including the clerks, the Scottish Parliament information centre and the legal teams, and I wish all my colleagues the very best for the future. To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to reduce the time that households spend in temporary accommodation. (S6O-05716)

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): I echo Clare Adamson's thanks. On her question, temporary accommodation provides a vital safety net as part of our housing system in Scotland, but we, of course, want people to spend as little time as possible there.

I will run through some of the actions that we have taken recently, which underline the importance that we place on the issue. I have mentioned the record funding of £926 million that we have secured for next year, which has been coupled with record certainty. We have doubled to £80 million the voids and acquisitions funds, which help councils to buy properties or turn them back round for use. We are supporting the flipping of temporary accommodation to permanent accommodation. We have created a national fund to leave. We have expanded our housing first scheme.

We have introduced evidence-based rent controls, but we have made clear exemptions for mid-market and build-to-rent properties. We have brought Awaab's law to the floor of the Parliament. We have passed new laws to remove perpetrators of domestic abuse from social homes. As my colleague Shirley-Anne Somerville noted, we have just introduced a £9 million fund to mitigate the United Kingdom's local housing allowance freeze, together with a new delivery agency and a promised first-home fund.

Clare Adamson: One of my most frustrating constituent issues is when people who are expecting to move into accommodation cannot do so because it is not ready on time, which can cause stress for families. Will the cabinet secretary explain how the targeted £80 million investment to support local authorities that are experiencing the most sustained temporary accommodation pressures can help to get people into permanent housing more quickly?

Màiri McAllan: That fund, which goes directly to councils to help them to turn around social voids quickly and to acquire family homes on the market, is a critical part of our response to the housing emergency, because although we are putting a huge amount of work into delivering more affordable homes more quickly, it is clear that immediate action is needed. That £80 million fund, which forms part of the larger sum of £120 million that we have provided since the emergency was declared, is supporting the acquisition of at least 1,200 homes and helping between 600 and 800 children to move quickly from the vital safety net of temporary accommodation into permanent settled homes.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): In the past five years of the Government's tenure, 17,811 children have been trapped in temporary accommodation for more than a year. Whoever is elected to this Parliament next month must commit to it never being repeated that so many children have had to suffer for so long. My question is a simple one: does the cabinet secretary agree?

Màiri McAllan: I would say that, although I said in response to Clare Adamson that temporary accommodation is a vital safety net for families and individuals who find themselves facing homelessness, we must reduce the length of time that people spend in temporary accommodation and make rapid rehousing in a permanent home something that is realisable for everyone. Much of what I put on the record in response to Clare Adamson—I set out a list of strong and clear interventions that the Government has made—will help us to realise that.

However, if the Scottish National Party is fortunate enough to be returned to government by the people of Scotland, we will turn our minds back to exactly that task.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio question time. There will be a short pause before we move on to the next item of business.

Motion of Thanks

16:22

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Before we turn to the next item of business, I hope that members do not mind if I say a few words. I would like to say specifically what an honour it has been for me to serve in the Scottish Parliament, which, of course, was reconvened by my late mother, Winnie Ewing, in 1999. As the MSP for Cowdenbeath, I have met so many inspiring people across my constituency, and I have tried my best, along with my hard-working staff, to fight their corner and to stand up for them.

It has also been an honour to serve for the past five years as Deputy Presiding Officer. The role demands three things in particular: treating every member equally, without fear or favour; protecting the right to freedom of expression in our chamber; and gently, may I say, encouraging members to be the best parliamentarians they can be. I hope that members feel that I have discharged my duty. I thank you for having given me the opportunity to be your Deputy Presiding Officer, along with Mr McArthur, and I wish each of you all the very best. [*Applause*.]

The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-21180, in the name of the First Minister, John Swinney, which is a motion of thanks. I call the First Minister to speak to and move the motion.

16:23

The First Minister (John Swinney): As this sixth session of the Scottish Parliament comes to a close, I extend my thanks to the Presiding Officer and the Deputy Presiding Officers for the service that each of them has given to the Parliament over the past five years.

The Presiding Officers have always managed their roles with principle, professionalism, pragmatism and, importantly—the Deputy Presiding Officer has just mentioned this—impartiality. It has been a demanding parliamentary session with a significant legislative workload, in which major issues have required scrutiny, and the Presiding Officers have undertaken so much impressive work in promoting all that work to the communities of Scotland. In all those roles, the Presiding Officers have acted effectively in undertaking their responsibilities.

While Liam McArthur is seeking re-election to Parliament, the Presiding Officer and you, Deputy Presiding Officer, are two of the 42 MSPs who have chosen not to stand for re-election. So, on behalf of all members of Parliament and the people of Scotland, I express my warmest thanks to the Presiding Officer and to the Deputy Presiding Officers for the outstanding service that you have given to Scotland in the sixth session of the Scottish Parliament.

Among the many members who are standing down at this election, some are long-standing members and some have been here for a shorter period, but I know that all have sought to serve their constituents well, and I thank all those who have dedicated themselves to public service.

We say farewell to people who have served in the Government, at my side, for many years, and I pay particular tribute to those who have served Scotland so well: former First Ministers Nicola Sturgeon and Humza Yousaf; my Deputy First Minister, Kate Forbes; current cabinet secretaries Shona Robison, Fiona Hyslop and Mairi Gougeon; current ministers Graeme Dey, Natalie Don-Innes and Richard Lochhead; and former ministers Joe FitzPatrick, Michael Matheson, Kevin Stewart and Elena Whitham. I also make mention of Christina McKelvie, who, before her sad death last year, had announced her intention to stand down at the forthcoming election. It has been my enormous privilege to work alongside each and every one of my colleagues, and I thank all of them for their service.

Eight of the members who are stepping down were first elected in 1999. I pay tribute to Sarah Boyack, who also served as a minister as part of her long-standing service; to Rhoda Grant; and to the incredibly formidable mother of the Parliament, Christine Grahame. At the weekend, my mother-in-law asked me what would happen to her collection of visible brooches on parliamentary occasions, and I told her that I thought they would be safe in Christine Grahame's hands forever.

We also acknowledge that two former party leaders—Richard Leonard and Douglas Ross—are stepping down at this election.

Personally, I will miss enormously my fellow local representatives in the Mid Scotland and Fife area, Liz Smith and Alex Rowley.

To all those stepping down, I express my warmest wishes for all that lies ahead.

Although we thank those people for their service as members of the Scottish Parliament, we are all conscious that we carry out our responsibilities with the support of our staff teams, who assist us in every way. I take this opportunity to express a very personal and sincere thank you to my private office and the wider staff in the Scottish Government who support ministers so well, to my team of special advisers and to my constituency staff, without whom I could not undertake my

responsibilities as First Minister. All members are aware of the tremendous service that is given by those who support us in our constituencies, who address the needs and priorities of the members of the public we serve. I express today, on behalf of Parliament, our thanks to all those who support us in our constituency work.

In drawing my remarks to a close, I would like to express my thanks, and the thanks of my party and the Government, to the supportive members of staff in the Scottish Parliament, no matter where they work, because we could not operate as members of Parliament without their assistance. I thank those in security who greet us when we arrive, the clerks, the official report, the Scottish Parliament information centre, the broadcasting service, the British Sign Language service and the business information technology staff, who are, frankly, run off their feet attending to members who consistently cannot access the mobile voting app—without them, we would not be able to carry out our democratic functions. I thank the cleaning team, who keep the Parliament looking at its best; the catering staff, who keep us fed and watered; and the communications team, the participation and communities team and the public engagement team, who support Parliament's engagement with members of the public. I also thank the chief executive, David McGill, and his team for the stewardship of our parliamentary business. We could not and would not be here without their support. For that, I am truly thankful, and I know that members of Parliament will echo those words. [*Applause*.]

As we embark on the election campaign, to all who are not returning I express my warmest wishes for the future. To those who are engaged in the election campaign—of whom I shall, no doubt, be seeing quite a lot in the next few weeks—I say that I look forward to engagement in the democratic process and returning to serve the people of Scotland in the years to come.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: First Minister, could I possibly ask you to move the motion? [*Laughter*.]

The First Minister: I move,

That the Parliament expresses its thanks to its Presiding Officer, Alison Johnstone, for her dedicated service to the Parliament; thanks her Deputy Presiding Officers, and pays tribute to all of those Members who are standing down at the end of this session.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Russell Findlay.

16:30

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): Thank you, Presiding Officers, in the plural. Unlike at First Minister's question time today, all you will hear from me just now are warm words in a soothing tone.

I begin by thanking you, Presiding Officer, and your colleagues Annabelle Ewing and Liam McArthur. Your job is difficult—indeed, thankless—but essential. When temperatures rise, you are here to cool everyone down.

I also thank all the staff who work at Holyrood: my team, security, catering, cleaning, information technology, research and everyone else. I will single out Stephen Imrie and his colleagues on the Criminal Justice Committee, on which I served for three years. The clerking teams make this place run smoothly.

I thank all MSPs who are standing down. Whatever your party, you stepped up, put your name on the ballot paper and put your head above the parapet.

I will single out a trio of MSPs—not Messrs Simpson, Balfour and Greene, but three female opponents, who are all Scottish National Party members, although maybe not for long after being praised by the Tory leader. I will start with Kate Forbes, who is a true conservative. [*Laughter*.] I regret that that is with a small C, not a capital C—at least, for now.

Then there is Audrey Nicoll, who, like me, joined the Parliament five years ago. Audrey was good cop to my bad cop on the Criminal Justice Committee.

Michelle Thomson was brave enough to stand up to her own party. I worked with Michelle on amendments to the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill—the gender self-identification bill—to protect victims of sex crimes.

Of my many wonderful Conservative colleagues, six are standing down. Douglas Ross will be missed by everyone at Holyrood, with the possible exception of the Presiding Officer. [*Laughter*.] Douglas knows how hard this job is, and I have appreciated his support.

Liz Smith has been here since 2007 and is widely respected for her wisdom and decency. She got her Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill passed and has been a ferocious advocate for the victims of a rogue surgeon.

Then there is Maurice Golden, who is also known as the dog's best friend. Like Liz, Maurice has managed to get a member's bill passed.

Tess White has been our superlative voice on equalities. She has been at the forefront of defending women's rights when those have come under threat.

Edward Mountain has been a forensically effective committee convener. As a former military man, Edward is a strong supporter of our veterans.

That leaves Oliver Mundell. Modest, decent and unassuming, Oliver is a quietly effective and astute parliamentarian who serves his constituents with dedication.

I thank all of them, and all other departing MSPs, for their contribution and service.

16:33

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): I will start by not only supporting the motion in the First Minister's name but echoing all his comments.

Presiding Officer, I thank you for your dedication over the past five years and for your dedication over 15 years to your constituents and to the great people of Scotland.

To the Deputy Presiding Officers, I say thank you for how you have managed our sessions fairly and tried to manage each and every one of us fairly, particularly when we have attempted to misbehave. Annabelle Ewing, I wish you all the very best in your retirement. Liam McArthur, I wish you all the very best in the election.

I also pay tribute to all MSPs, across the parties, who are either pursuing new challenges or planning to enjoy what I hope will be long and happy retirements. To those who are retiring, I say that every retired politician I meet always looks 10 years younger.

I say a particular thank you to my colleagues Sarah Boyack, Rhoda Grant, Richard Leonard, Alex Rowley and Mercedes Villalba, who are stepping down from the Parliament. Each and every one of you has made a significant contribution to the Parliament and to public life in Scotland. You have represented the very best of the Scottish Labour Party and, more importantly, the very best of Scotland.

One of our retirees, Rhoda Grant, is from the Parliament's original intake in 1999. Sarah Boyack served in Donald Dewar's first ever Cabinet. Alex Rowley is a former deputy leader of Scottish Labour, as well as a former general secretary. Richard Leonard was one of my predecessors as party leader from 2017 to 2021. My thanks go to all of them and to the many members from other parties who are stepping down.

One third of MSPs are moving on. Although that means that there are too many to mention individually, I thank each and every one of them for their invaluable public service. Among the most notable departures are two former First Ministers; the current Deputy First Minister; other cabinet secretaries; and, of course, the former leader of the Conservatives, whom I know many people will look forward to continuing to encourage enthusiastically from the football stands.

I pay tribute to my fellow Glasgow MSPs. In particular, I pay tribute to Nicola Sturgeon, who served as the Parliament's first-ever female First Minister for almost a decade. I am sure that both of us are relieved that we will no longer be sparring partners in the south side of Glasgow, as we have been for almost 30 years. I also pay tribute to her successor, Humza Yousaf, who led the way by becoming the first—I hope that he will not be the last—First Minister from an ethnic minority background. I am sure that both of them are looking forward to new challenges, but they must also be looking forward to being free of the personal burden that I know high office places on them as individuals and on their wider families. I am sure that their families are looking forward to having a lot more of their time and, of course, their headspace.

My thanks go to the Parliament's chief executive and all the parliamentary staff who have looked after us so well during the past five years. Whenever I am in this place, I make a point of speaking to as many of the people who are responsible for the smooth running of the Parliament as I can. To those working in reception, security, maintenance and catering, and all their other colleagues, thank you for your immense efforts. Most of all, enjoy the six-week break from each and every one of us.

My thanks again to you, Presiding Officer. I hope that you enjoy spending those extra hours with Alan and your daughter.

When we all return after the election on 7 May, there will be lots of work to do, and I hope that we will do it by representing the very best of Scotland.

16:37

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): This has been a hugely challenging session, so I want to be a wee bit more light hearted before turning to thanks for the Presiding Officer. I thank parliamentary and MSP staff, as others have done, for their work this session. We would not be able to do our jobs without them.

I acknowledge some of the members who are standing down. There are too many of you to mention but, on behalf of the Scottish Greens, I thank you for your work and hope that you enjoy whatever comes next.

I will certainly miss Richard Leonard in my Central Scotland region. I have always appreciated his sage analysis. Sometimes he gives it with a smile and sometimes with a near-audible eye roll.

One half of the Parliament's resident Waldorf and Statler duo, in the form of Gordon MacDonald, is stepping down. Once he finds his way back to the right constituency, I hope that he has a wonderful retirement. However, before he does, we need to settle on who has to take responsibility for George Adam. [*Laughter*.]

A raft of fantastic women are also standing down. They have been hugely supportive not only to me but to many other younger MSPs from around the chamber. I thank Liz Smith, Fiona Hyslop, Rona Mackay and Shona Robison for their support and kindness. The chamber will be worse off without them.

When talking about those who have offered support, I cannot not mention the wonderful Christina McKelvie. Not having her light and laugh in the chamber has undoubtedly made it a poorer place for us all.

It is unprecedented to have two former First Ministers standing down at the same time. Nicola, thank you for bringing us into government, for giving your backing to safe access zones and for your contribution to politics.

Humza—good luck. [*Laughter*.] I am, of course, just kidding. Despite the ending, we did some powerful things together in government, and Humza's commitment to humanitarian causes, particularly the people of Palestine, has shone through in his work. I hope that whatever comes next, he will get to continue with that work. At the moment, it has never been more important to have such strong advocates for peace.

Also unprecedented, Presiding Officer, is the amount of poor behaviour that you have had to put up with in this parliamentary session. I have seen the toll that some of that behaviour has taken on you and the grace with which you have handled it.

You have been unlucky with some of the things that you have had to deal with. I know that, at times, it has felt relentless; there have been too many firsts in one parliamentary session. Don't cry—you will start me off. The way in which you have dealt with us is just an extension of the Alison I have always known: a diligent campaigner, a fierce advocate and a brilliant MSP. She has been a councillor, health spokesperson, animal rights champion and advocate for physical activity and access to green spaces.

In the time that I have, it is hard to sum up everything that Alison has done. She has achieved more in 15 years than many achieve in much longer. She has been central to my political journey and has inspired many others. Those in here who really know her will know of her fantastic sense of humour and infectious laugh. Regrettably, I have only once nearly made her laugh in the chair. As we would all acknowledge, the chamber very often runs on hope and caffeine. I am not immune to that but, as I do not like tea or coffee, the odd energy drink is usually my go-to. When I asked the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health about restricting sales of energy drinks to under-16s, not only did I get the look; it nearly broke into a laugh.

There have been several light-hearted moments in the past 12 years, including an emergency stitching up of a hem before a hustings and leaving halfway through her own house move to campaign, but some of the most impressive things that I have seen the Presiding Officer do were during Covid. Her First Minister's questions had real impact, holding the Government to account while making sure that her contributions genuinely helped our collective efforts during the pandemic.

The way in which the Presiding Officer has handled the chamber and protected this institution should also be commended. Unbelievably, there is a possibility that the behaviour in the chamber could be worse next parliamentary session, and I am sure that whoever has to keep us all on task will appreciate her advice.

Presiding Officer, I sincerely hope that you get a good break and far more time with the family, and that you are never a stranger in here. Green politics would not be where it is without you—I would not be where I am without you. Never doubt the contribution that you have made to public life and to individuals across the country. I am so proud of you. [*Applause*.]

I again thank parliamentary staff and the chief executive for everything they do, and I look forward to seeing you all on the campaign trail.

16:42

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I start by paying tribute to both Deputy Presiding Officers, and I echo the words that have been said about you. In particular, I say to Annabelle Ewing, what a loss you will be to the chamber—I wish you well with whatever comes next.

There is a poignancy about today. I think about the giants of Scottish politics lost to us not just from this parliamentary session but from parliamentary sessions that have gone before, whether that is Jeane Freeman or our beloved Jim Wallace, but I particularly echo the remarks that have been made about Christina McKelvie, who was always a good friend to me and a wonderful centre of light and warmth at the heart of our chamber. They will all be missed.

There are too many outgoing MSPs to mention by name, but I will mention Beatrice Wishart, my

chum from the northern isles, who has been a passionate advocate for Shetland and has kept me right on a thing or two.

I thank all those who are leaving Parliament and their staff. Let us remember that our careers as parliamentarians are built on the backs of staffers who have bigger brains but smaller pay packets than we do. We owe so much to them for our success, so I thank them.

I also thank the Parliament staff. There are too many branches and directorates to mention, but I thank the cooks, the caterers, the posties, the porters, business information technology, payroll and pensions, human resources and all the clerks for all that they do.

My thanks go in particular to broadcasting. I thank especially—he has given me permission to do this—my lovely younger brother, Nick Cole-Hamilton, who is in the booth today. Nick has, in effect, held the broadcasting sword of Damocles over me for much of my parliamentary career, with the power to mute my microphone, and I love him all the more that he has never exercised that power—

Members: Do it now! [*Laughter*.]

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Each member of our staff in this institution exhibits professionalism every day, and none more so than when circumstance and situation command it of them. When the Parliament needs to be in full sail in the eyes of the world, they have it thrumming like an America's cup yacht.

I think about the state opening of Parliament, which was conducted while we were still in Covid restrictions, and the staff managed to make that work. I think of the quiet bedrock of support with which they have provided each of us in those late late-night sittings, while we have considered some very controversial and difficult issues that our constituents sent us here to discuss. Then, of course, there was operation unicorn, when, in the most sombre circumstances—the passing of Her Majesty the Queen—they showed this Parliament and this country at their very best, in particular by working through the night, as I know that so many of them did.

It was in those days around the passing of the late Queen, Presiding Officer, that I think I got to know you the most, as you were a constant source of advice on protocol and things like that. It would be wrong—entirely wrong—to describe you as a matriarch in the Parliament; I think of you more as a big sister and, like a big sister, you have been there to offer support. When it was difficult for the Liberal Democrats to come in when we were not officially a group, you met me, as their leader, every month to keep me up to speed with what was going on in the Parliamentary Bureau.

I wish that I had always taken your advice. There was one occasion—I think that it was actually the funeral of the late Queen—when you suggested that I might consider using the facilities in Westminster abbey before we sat down. Four and a half hours later, I really wish that I had done, and I had to barge past Emmanuel Macron to use the bathroom.

Presiding Officer, that support and advice has, I know, been extended to everyone in the chamber. You have had to deal with difficult behaviour—some histrionics have been on display, that is for sure—but I thank you for everything that you have done for us, and I wish you well with whatever is still to come.

The final thing that I will say is this. I reflect on the words of Jamie Greene, who I know is not done with Scottish politics, and Scottish politics is not done with him. He said—rightly, I think—at First Minister's question time that the promise of this new Parliament, the Parliament to come, is there for the taking. It is a blank canvas—we can put aside a lot of the enmity that has held us back in this Parliament and reach for the better nature of the people who send us to this place. I hope that we grasp that with both hands.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the motion of thanks.

Decision Time

16:47

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): There is one question to be put as a result of today's business. The question is, that motion S6M-21180, in the name of John Swinney, on a motion of thanks, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament expresses its thanks to its Presiding Officer, Alison Johnstone, for her dedicated service to the Parliament; thanks her Deputy Presiding Officers, and pays tribute to all of those Members who are standing down at the end of this session.

Presiding Officer's Closing Remarks

16:47

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): I have the great pleasure of handing over the microphone to our Presiding Officer, who wishes to address the chamber.

16:48

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): It is actually so much easier when people are not saying nice things about you in the chair. [*Laughter*.]

Seriously, though, friends—it is my privilege to make some remarks to close this last scheduled meeting of session 6. We began this session during the Covid pandemic, in a socially distanced chamber, and I did not chair a full chamber until April 2022, some 11 months after the previous election. No wonder I thought that those early sessions of First Minister's question time were very quiet.

As we end the session, the Parliament looks a little different than it did in May 2021. We have celebrated some of life's most joyous milestones together, and, sadly, mourning has often been all too present.

We lost our very dear colleague, Christina McKelvie, and we have lost too many distinguished former colleagues who served the Parliament at the highest level. My thoughts are with all those who have lost those most dear to them.

I did not get actively involved in politics until I was in my 30s. I joined neighbours to attempt to save some local school playing fields. I then went on—almost immediately—to join the Scotland forward campaign for a Scottish parliament, before I joined a political party.

When Robin Harper was elected as the sole Green MSP in the first election to the newly formed Parliament, he advertised for two staff. I was not a party member, but I had 17 years of experience in the private and public sectors. Robin gave me a chance. In September 1999, I got on the bus to the Parliament headquarters. I felt my privilege on that day as I feel it today. As part of Robin's team of two, with Steve Burgess, I vividly remember a meeting when we sat in a little office that looked over George IV Bridge where we discussed Robin's bill proposal and how we were going to work with others to bring about the change that he sought. In that moment, I felt the unique privilege that elected representatives have to make life in

Scotland better for people. That sense has never left me.

I worked with Robin as he served the people of Lothian from 1999 until 2011, when I was elected to do so myself. I am not a 99er in the traditional sense, but I have been here for 27 years. I served for three four-year sessions as a staffer and for three five-year sessions as an elected member. I learned a great deal as a staffer—not least how impossible it is to be an MSP without a committed team. I thank all staffers. I thank my current team of Richard, Sally and Mhairi, and I thank each and every one of you who has worked with me in representing and serving the Lothian region. I thank the people of Lothian for granting me the privilege of doing so.

It is fair to say that much has changed since 1999. The impact of email and social media on engagement is huge. The pace of the news cycle and parliamentary life is so much faster and the powers of the Parliament are greater. The core purpose of the Parliament and parliamentarians remains to represent constituents, hold the Government of the day to account, debate ideas and work together to legislate and improve the lives of the people of Scotland.

With Patrick Harvie, I was elected as one of a party of only two members in 2011. We each tried to cover half of the Government's portfolios. [*Laughter.*] Collaboration and relationships across parties were absolutely essential, which is how I have worked. On the Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill, the Health and Care (Staffing) (Scotland) Bill, the Social Security (Scotland) Bill, the Animals and Wildlife (Penalties, Protections and Powers) (Scotland) Bill, the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill and more, I worked across all parties with many MSPs to get the amendments that I lodged agreed to. I thank all members for their collaboration.

It is an immense honour to be elected by your peers to preside over the Parliament. It is a profound privilege to chair our business and to represent the Parliament at home and abroad. It is always stimulating, endlessly varied and never dull. I pay tribute to my Deputy Presiding Officers, who have shared the challenge with me. I thank them for their hard work, support, wise counsel and, indeed, the laughs that we have shared. As a team, we extend our thanks to the staff in the Presiding Officer's office—Joanne, Gail, Jen and Mark—for their steadfast support throughout the session.

It is fair to say that we and colleagues recognise that we are all well supported in the Parliament by all staff. As the Presiding Officer, I have had the privilege of learning more about what it takes to run the Parliament and have had the pleasure of working with many different staff teams that I had not met before. Whatever you do in the Parliament, whether you work face to face with MSPs every day in public-facing roles or behind the scenes, I thank each and every one of you for all that you do. I know that your efforts are deeply appreciated by every member.

In this session, it has been an honour to deepen relationships with those who serve us in so many ways, including civic Scotland, the emergency services, faith communities and the armed forces. It has been an honour to welcome thousands of people into the Parliament to meetings, events and conferences. It is always a particular honour and joy to welcome and meet in the chat room our youngest citizens who come to the Parliament on school visits—it is fair to say that I have always found their questions the best preparation for hustings. I give special thanks to the Scottish Youth Parliament and the Children's Parliament for their partnership. I tell our young pupils that I could never have imagined myself standing for election. I tell them that I have learned that democracy will never be optimal until we are all involved. I tell them that democracy cannot be at its most powerful if only some voices are heard, if only some votes are cast or if only some folk know that they can respond to a consultation. The Parliament belongs to the people of Scotland, and all must be heard.

As Presiding Officer, I have sought always to ensure that all members have optimal opportunity to hold the Scottish Government to account and to represent our constituents who send us here. The Deputy Presiding Officers and I have worked scrupulously to ensure that those opportunities are available equally to all members. I have used opportunities for topical questions and urgent questions to the fullest extent possible, and I have sought to reclaim the final 15 minutes of First Minister's question time for back benchers. We have worked to get in as many members as possible across portfolio question time sessions. Throughout session 6, I have advocated for reform of question sessions to make them as responsive as possible. It is essential that the Parliament has the opportunity, each day, to discuss the most important concerns of the people of Scotland.

I have heard it said that social distancing prevented members from getting together in the early days of this session, and that that has contributed to a less collaborative approach than has been experienced in other sessions. I would say: wherever an opportunity presents itself to get to know a colleague, take it, because we have so much more in common than that which divides us.

There are only 129 of us in the entire country who have the great privilege of speaking in this beautiful chamber. In the chair, the Deputy

Presiding Officers and I have sought to encourage and model respectful behaviour. With a recognition that there is a high premium on freedom of speech for elected members, debate has been very robust at times, but we must use that freedom wisely. We work in an incredible building, which has been built for democracy, and we are free to debate ideas here. That is an aspiration that many continue to strive for around the globe, and we must never take it for granted.

We can debate passionately and disagree whole-heartedly. We can scrutinise policy robustly and defend policy robustly, and we can do so while respecting one another. In respecting one another and respecting the Parliament, we respect the folks across this amazing country who sent us here. We respect their aspirations for their Parliament, and we challenge the disillusionment with politics that we must acknowledge.

This session, we have celebrated our most diverse Parliament ever. We know that Parliaments that more truly represent the communities that they serve are more trusted and make better decisions. I hope that the 45 per cent of women colleagues we have today is not a high point, but the foundation of a truly representative Parliament.

The welcome progress that we have made cannot be taken for granted, so I thank all parties for being part of the Parliament for all audit. Much progress has been made, and other recommendations will be carried forward by the Parliament in the next session. Thank you to our incredible women experts and the willing staff secretariat who supported us, and to each and every one of my colleagues for their support in that work. “Implement those recommendations” is not the catchiest phrase, so I will instead say, “Just do it.”

To those members who have decided that now is the time to step down, thank you so much for your service to the people of Scotland and for your part in the history of the Parliament. To those who are seeking re-election, my very best wishes for the days ahead. I will now have the opportunity to spend more time with family and friends, who have supported me throughout this incredible journey—throughout this privilege. Thank you all.

On that note, I close session 6 of the Parliament. [*Applause*.]

Meeting closed at 16:58.

This is the final edition of the Official Report of this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament Official Report archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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