Official Report
Aithisg Oifigeil

DRAFT

Meeting of the Parliament

Coinneamh na Pàrlamaid

Wednesday 27 May 2026

Session 7

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

© Parliamentary copyright. Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body

Information on the Scottish Parliament's copyright policy can be found on the website—
www.parliament.scot or by contacting Public Information on 0131 348 5000

Wednesday 27 May 2026

CONTENTS

	Col.
FIRST HOMES FUND	**1**
The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing (Shirley-Anne Somerville)	1
CHILDCARE	**14**
The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan)	14
Katherine Sangster (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)	19
Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green)	22
Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Con)	24
Willie Rennie (Fife North East) (LD)	27
Angela Ross (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform)	29
Calum Kerr (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)	32
Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)	34
Bob Doris (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)	38
Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP)	42
David Smith (West Scotland) (Reform)	44
Clare Haughey (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)	45
Paul McLennan (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)	48
Q Manivannan (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)	51
Laura Mitchell (Moray) (SNP)	53
Yi-pei Chou Turvey (North East Scotland) (LD)	56
Holly Bruce (Glasgow Southside) (Green)	60
Amanda Lindsay (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform)	62
Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab)	64
The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Siobhian Brown)	66
BUSINESS MOTION	**71**
PARLIAMENTARY BUREAU MOTIONS	**73**
DECISION TIME	**73**

Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 27 May 2026

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

First Homes Fund

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): Good afternoon. The first item of business is a statement by Shirley-Anne Somerville on the first homes fund. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:01

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing (Shirley-Anne Somerville): I welcome the opportunity to set out to Parliament, in these early days of the new session, the Government's commitment to tackling one of the defining challenges that our country faces today: access to safe, secure and affordable homes.

Housing remains a central priority for the Government. Bringing it together with social justice, I will be ensuring that the Government delivers a joined-up and strategic approach to tackling poverty, homelessness and the housing emergency while recognising the sector's importance to the Scottish economy.

Since declaring a national housing emergency last year, we have stood up a co-ordinated national response. Our housing emergency action plan is operational across the country and is delivering a set of focused actions to relieve the most acute pressures, to support local authorities and to accelerate delivery of the homes that people need.

We have delivered substantial progress in responding to the housing emergency, with 75 per cent of the actions having been delivered in the first six months. Crucially, we are making £926 million available this year for the affordable housing supply programme, which is a 21 per cent increase compared with the previous year. Our record investment of up to £4.9 billion over the next four years—£4.1 billion of which is Scottish Government investment—will support the delivery of 36,000 affordable homes, which, it is estimated, will provide homes for up to 24,000 children.

I want a housing system that works for Scotland—one that balances affordability, availability, quality, sustainability and fairness. I am focused on our target of delivering 110,000 affordable homes by 2032, with at least 70 per cent of them being for social rent and 10 per cent of them being in rural and island areas. More than 32,000 affordable homes have been delivered as of 31 December 2025, 77 per cent of which are homes for social rent. It is crucial that there is affordability across all tenures, which will include social rent and affordable mid-market rent, private rented sector rent controls where appropriate, and opportunities for private ownership for those who want it.

For too many people across Scotland, particularly younger people and first-time buyers, home ownership has felt increasingly out of reach. We are hearing the same story in communities the length and breadth of our nation: people are saving what they can, but they are finding that the cost of a deposit is simply too great a barrier. Rising living costs, high rents and broader economic pressures have made it difficult for households to put money aside month after month. Indeed, many are now spending more on rent than they would on a mortgage, yet they remain locked out of ownership because they cannot raise a deposit. That is the context in which the Government will act.

I can confirm today that the Scottish Government will introduce the first homes fund, a demand-led scheme designed to support up to 50,000 first-time buyers over the course of this parliamentary session. The fund will provide a deposit contribution of up to £10,000 towards a home with a property value of up to £300,000 to support individuals and families to take their first step on to the property ladder. The first round of the fund will open to applications by the end of June and, depending on demand, it is expected to support up to 2,000 households within our first 100 days in government.

The fund is a direct response to the experience of people across Scotland. We have listened, and we are taking fast and decisive action.

Often, the single biggest hurdle that first-time buyers face is not their ability to repay a mortgage; it is the difficulty in saving for the initial deposit—the up-front cost that prevents their even entering the market. Too many people cannot rely on financial support from family to bridge that gap, nor should they be expected to. The result is a rent trap: a situation whereby households are locked into paying high rents and are unable to save and, therefore, unable to move forward.

This fund is designed to break that cycle, building on the success of earlier interventions. Previous support helped more than 10,000 households between 2019 and 2022, which demonstrates the scale of demand and the effectiveness of targeted Government support. The fund that I am announcing the details of today will be open to first-time buyers across Scotland and is designed to work alongside wider housing and financial systems. It will complement our low-cost initiative for first-time buyers shared equity

schemes, which, since 2007, have helped more than 12,000 people to buy a home.

The first homes fund aims to support first-time buyers and their families. For many families, a home is not just an asset—it is where their children grow, stability is built and futures are shaped. The ambition of the first homes fund scheme is clear: over this parliamentary session, we aim to support up to 50,000 households into home ownership. That is 50,000 households gaining stability, putting down roots in their communities and taking a step towards a more secure future.

We are under no illusion, however, that the scheme alone will solve all the challenges in Scotland's housing market. That is why it sits in a broader programme of action and is supported by our record levels of investment. We are working with local authorities, housing associations and partners across the sector to increase delivery and improve access, and we are taking measures to ensure that Scotland's housing system is fair, sustainable and responsive to need.

Let me be clear about what underpins the fund. First, it is fairness. The fund will support all first-time buyers: people who can sustain home ownership but are held back by the initial barrier of a deposit. Secondly, it is simplicity. We will ensure that the application process is clear and accessible, with support available to guide applicants through each stage. Thirdly, it is partnership. We will work closely with lenders, industry partners and stakeholders to ensure that the scheme operates effectively and complements existing products and services. There is already energy and enthusiasm from our partners to ensure that first-time buyers receive our support.

We are also mindful of the wider pressures in the housing system. Scotland continues to face significant challenges, including affordability pressures and supply constraints, and the introduction of the first homes fund is one part of our response to those challenges. It is a targeted intervention to help those who are ready to buy but who cannot yet make that step, and it will be complemented by sustained action on housing supply, planning and infrastructure.

At its heart, the policy is about giving people the tools that they need to build a future. It is about recognising that housing is fundamental not only to our economy but to our wellbeing, our communities and our sense of security. Throughout the opening round of the first homes fund, we will test how it works, to ensure that it is a smooth and simple process with clear guidance and support at every stage, and that it makes a difference to people and their families. We will monitor closely the operation of the scheme to ensure that it works in the interests of buyers and supports a fair housing system. Crucially, we will learn from what that first round tells us, to ensure that the first homes fund remains fit for purpose throughout its duration.

I know—or I hope—that members across the chamber will share the ambition to make home ownership more accessible. I also recognise that there will be scrutiny, questions and debate about how best to achieve that goal. I welcome that. I invite members across the Parliament to work with us to ensure that the fund benefits their local communities, reaches those who need it most and delivers lasting change for the people of Scotland. The issue matters deeply to the people we represent, and it is one on which we must work together, across parties and sectors, to deliver real progress.

I return to the individuals and families whom the policy is designed to support. It will support the young couple who rent and save but never quite reach their target, the key worker who is priced out of the community that they serve and the family who are looking for stability and a place to call their own. From our island communities to our towns and cities, and from rural areas where supply is constrained to urban areas where rents are the highest, the first homes fund will help first-time buyers in every part of Scotland to take that crucial first step. The fund is for them. With it, we are saying clearly that we understand the barriers that they face and that we will act to take those barriers away. We are saying that, for those who need extra support to be able to purchase their first home, the Government will take practical steps in this new session to help them to achieve that. With the first homes fund, we are opening a door not only to home ownership, but to stability, security and opportunity.

I commend the statement to Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business. It would be helpful if members who wish to ask a question were to press their request-to-speak buttons now.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Lab): I welcome the cabinet secretary to her new, updated role. I welcome any measures that are designed to support aspiring first-time buyers who cannot afford to buy a house, and I look forward to working with the Government to ensure that the first homes fund delivers for our communities.

In that vein, will the Government provide an estimate of the proportion of recipients of the scheme who are expected to come from lower-income households? How will ministers ensure

that the scheme primarily benefits first-time buyers who face the greatest affordability barriers, when the Government closed the previous fund on the basis that 72 per cent of recipients did not need to use it to purchase their first home? How will the Government ensure that the scheme supports housing supply, particularly in high-pressure markets, where there is concern that additional purchasing power risks artificially inflating prices?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I welcome Mark Griffin to his new post, and I look forward to working with him again.

Today, we are presented with an example of the opportunity that members have to work together across the chamber. Mr Griffin has raised points about how the scheme should act and the lessons that we should learn. I reassure him that we have learned lessons from previous schemes. For example, the scheme will be available for homes with a property value of up to £300,000. In that respect, it is different from the schemes that have operated in the past.

We are also learning about the fact that although our other low-cost home ownership schemes help, they do not take away all the barriers. Different people face different barriers, and the first homes fund represents another opportunity to tackle those barriers.

This morning, the First Minister and I went on a visit and spoke to developers. We heard at first hand their hope and expectation that the first homes scheme will immediately be able to help people who wish to become first-time buyers but who are not able to. We have tried to present the scheme in a simple way, and the property value threshold will help the people who need help the most.

As with all issues in my portfolio, I will be happy to work with Mr Griffin on the further details of the scheme as we go about learning for the next round.

Thomas Kerr (Glasgow) (Reform): I welcome the cabinet secretary to her post and thank her for providing advance sight of the rhetoric that we have heard. Bluntly, that is exactly what her statement is. It is yet another wasted opportunity from a failing Government. It is another gimmick, not a real solution. The cabinet secretary should know that the Government cannot spend 20 years digging a hole and then expect applause for arriving with a ladder.

Although there are bits of the statement that I and Reform welcome, including the proposals to help first-time buyers, we await the detail. Let us be honest—the policy will not even scratch the surface when it comes to tackling the housing emergency. The statement includes nothing of substance on social housing, nothing on planning reforms—it does not tell the country who the planning minister is—or on cutting red tape and bureaucracy to make building easier for developers, and nothing on the provision of assistance to people who are struggling in working-class communities such as mine, many of whom can only dream of having large savings to set aside for a deposit. Today's announcement will do very little to help them. The cabinet secretary knows that a pathetic 10,000 quid handout will not work. It is a smokescreen simply to grab headlines instead of delivering. Indeed, the likelihood is that prices will rise across the country.

The Presiding Officer: Question.

Thomas Kerr: If the cabinet secretary is serious about tackling the housing emergency, rather than focusing on a party-political gimmick, will she put back in place local connection for social housing and finally prioritise local people over strangers who have arrived here illegally?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I will try hard, in my first discussion with Mr Kerr, to very gently say a few things to him.

This is a statement about the first homes fund. That is why it talks about the first homes fund. We can discuss other things in questions following other statements and in other debates in due course. He can, indeed, speak to the minister with responsibility for planning, who is sitting right behind me, if he wishes to discuss planning.

I will try not to take it to heart, but I am genuinely disappointed by the fact that Mr Kerr has, I presume, just read out a bit of the press release that he is about to issue on this matter. Once he has done that and we have got past the rhetoric, I will work together with him if he wishes to come forward with proposals and suggestions. I will perhaps leave my comments there for the moment.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): How will the first homes fund work in rural and island areas such as Argyll and Bute, where it can be difficult for first-time buyers and their families to take their first steps on the property ladder because of the affordability and supply constraints that the cabinet secretary has referenced in her statement?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Jenni Minto raises an important point, and the issue of ensuring that the scheme works for all parts of Scotland is a challenge that we must rise to—I alluded to that in my statement. That is why we are taking a whole-Scotland approach. The scheme can work effectively in rural areas, alongside the other rural and island support that the Government has for key workers and for housing in general.

It is a demand-led scheme and will be open to applicants across Scotland, including, of course, all areas of Argyll and Bute. As I said to Mr Griffin earlier—I address this suggestion to Mr Kerr, too—if, during the learning that takes place in the first phase, members come back to us about aspects of the scheme that can be adapted to ensure that it works for all areas, we will be keen to learn from them and we are keen to support members in that regard. The scheme will work for rural and island areas, and I value Ms Minto's contribution to allowing the Government to do that most effectively.

Donald MacKinnon (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): The previous iteration of the fund—the first home fund—underperformed in rural Scotland, with remote and island areas representing only 1.3 per cent of supported sales in 2019-20. I heard the cabinet secretary's response to Jenni Minto, and I appreciate what she said. I note that the target for rural house building is set at 10 per cent in rural areas. Will the cabinet secretary apply a similar target to the proportion of the first homes fund that will be targeted in rural areas?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I welcome Donald MacKinnon to the chamber. I welcomed him to the Parliament privately yesterday, after his first speech. It was an exceptionally good first contribution, and I look forward to working with him on issues to do with island housing.

Like Jenni Minto, Mr MacKinnon is quite right to challenge the Government to ensure that the scheme works across Scotland. There are challenges around the island housing market, which present challenges to first-time buyers in particular. However, the scheme can work right across Scotland, including in his constituency.

I am not minded at this stage to have targets in different areas, but if, during this first phase, Mr MacKinnon feels that the arrangements are presenting a challenge to his constituents, I am more than happy to pick that up with him in due course.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): It is fantastic to hear the cabinet secretary roll out the manifesto commitment on the first homes fund so quickly. Will there be any consideration of regionalisation or prioritisation of funding, or will it remain a Scotland-wide fund? Will there be consideration of a review of the success of the scheme that will consider the impact on house prices and, hopefully, a positive uptick in what is now a more sluggish new-build housing market?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I said to Donald MacKinnon, I am not minded, at this stage, to look at regionalisation or the prioritisation of funding in this open round, but I am keeping an open mind on that.

One aspect that is being discussed with stakeholders, including house builders, is how we ensure that the fund works for new build as well as existing properties, and what implications there are for the market. However, I go back to the points that the First Minister and I heard this morning—that there is a keen demand out there for a fund such as this one and an appreciation among developers that it could be a tipping point for someone's being able to afford their first home.

I do not think that we need to look at regionalisation to get success from the scheme. However, the member can make that point, if he wishes to do so, once we have learned from the first round of the scheme.

Graham Simpson (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform): We all want the scheme to work, so it is important that we try to learn lessons in the first round. My question to the cabinet secretary—[*Interruption*.]—if I could stop being heckled, because it is a serious question and Stephen Flynn may want to listen to it, is, how will we guard against people who have money using the scheme and taking advantage of it?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: One important way in which we will look at the success of the scheme is in how we help people with the pressure of the cost of living. I am mindful of the fact that someone's ability to own their own home is very much to do with the affordability of the deposit and the mortgage versus the rent; however, it is also to do with their energy costs, which, again, are just about to increase, as we heard this morning. Food inflation is still expected to be exceptionally high.

It is important that we recognise that, across Scotland, many people in our communities are struggling with not just the cost of housing but the cost of living across a variety of areas. That is why it is important that, in looking to help with our first homes fund, we recognise that it will help with the pressures of the cost of living for many families and individuals across Scotland. It will help them to bear the burden of other costs that we do not have the powers to impact, such as energy—we will come back to that tomorrow. We also hope to help people with the cost of their food bills.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP): I am delighted to see the first homes fund progressing to deliver much-needed support to first-time buyers. The issue was certainly a hot topic in my Rutherglen and Cambuslang constituency during the election.

Previously, the Government offered support in that area via the first home fund and the LIFT

scheme. What lessons has the Government taken forward from those initiatives?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: One important lesson led to the introduction of the property cap maximum of £300,000. The need to better target support to individuals who might not otherwise be able to purchase their first home was a key lesson that we learned.

As I have said to members across the chamber, we are committed to monitoring the effectiveness of the first round, but I believe that it is important that we get that started by the end of June, so that we can provide that support to people across Scotland, as we promised in our document, "100 Days of a New SNP Government". However, in addition to learning from past schemes, the new scheme will be evidence led, and we will ensure that we optimise the fund for its full five-year delivery.

Another important point is the fact that it is a multiyear scheme, to provide reassurance to not just those who are looking to buy a home but developers and those in the private sector.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Although I share the cabinet secretary's ambition for homes, I have concerns. Evidence from previous help-to-buy schemes is that they make properties less affordable, not more. An evaluation by the London School of Economics found that a scheme in London caused a 6 per cent rise in house prices, with no increase in supply at all.

The average deposit for a home last year was more than £43,000, so the scheme would still require the buyer to find more than £30,000. Does that not risk providing help to those who are already better off, as we have seen in previous schemes?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: No, I do not think that it does. I go back to one of the points that was alluded to in my visit this morning. It is about ensuring that those who want to own their own home—home ownership is not for everyone—get additional support to be able to do so. It will also allow those people to move out of private rented or mid-market rent accommodation, which will allow someone else to get into a different part of the affordable housing system.

The fund is important for first-time buyers, but we must also recognise the flexibility that it can give the housing market in order to support mid-market rent, the private rented accommodation sector and social housing. That is another important part of the scheme.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Con): I welcome the cabinet secretary back to her portfolio, which has been extended, and make a plea that Scotland's housing emergency be prioritised. Analysis of the previous first homes fund found that around 68 per cent of buyers had household incomes that were above the Scottish median, which meant that the policy did not benefit people on lower incomes. We need immediate relief if we are to get people on to the housing ladder and tackle Scotland's housing emergency. Does the cabinet secretary not agree that we can help those people now by backing the Scottish Conservatives' idea to abolish land and buildings transaction tax for people buying their first home, because that would encourage aspiration and help people to get on to, and move up, the property ladder?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: If that continues to be the Scottish Conservatives' policy, and if the party wishes to take a different approach to forthcoming Scottish Government budgets and to have costed discussions about whether to take the tax away and the implications that that will have for spending, I am sure that the Deputy First Minister will be delighted to hear Meghan Gallacher's detailed and costed proposals.

As I said to Ariane Burgess, it is important to recognise that this is not only about support for first-time buyers—important though that is—but about the support that can be given to those who will then move into the private rented sector, mid-market rent housing or an affordable social home. We will design the scheme to ensure that it helps people. I go back to the property value limit that has been put on the scheme; it is important to recognise the flexibility that that will provide, to ensure that others can benefit from other parts of the affordable housing supply.

Stuart McMillan (Inverclyde) (SNP): The first homes fund's success undoubtedly goes hand in hand with the wider housing sector's success in Scotland. Can the cabinet secretary speak more about the Scottish Government's plans to increase our housing stock by maximising growth and investment?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I touched on in my statement, the scheme is one part of the wider support that the Scottish Government will give the housing market. It is important that we recognise the social rented supply, which is exactly why we are making £926 million available for the affordable housing supply programme, which will help with social rent, mid-market rent and low-cost home ownership. That is £4.1 billion of Scottish Government investment that will go in over the next four years, which shows this Government's determination to take the housing situation exceptionally seriously and to work not only to assist those who wish to own their own home but to help others across the affordable housing supply programme and across Scotland.

Willie Rennie (Fife North East) (LD): The cabinet secretary knows that Liberal Democrats will always be constructive, as we have been for a number of years. We are still in the midst of a housing emergency—it is an emergency—but she has not answered the question about the scheme potentially providing a subsidy to those who can already afford to buy their own home. I will give her another chance to explain what lessons she has learned from previous schemes so that that does not happen.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Let me try again for Willie Rennie. I am sure that he will tell me if I have once again not succeeded in explaining it. One of the important lessons that we have learned relates to the £300,000 property value limit that we have placed on the fund. The scheme is much more targeted than our previous schemes, which is important. We will ensure that the scheme is targeted and in place not only for buyers right across Scotland but for those who are buying their first home at the lower end of the market.

I appreciate that members might wish for different criteria to be included in the scheme. I have a preference for it to be as simple as possible for the buyer and for the lenders taking part in the wider transactions.

If Mr Rennie is still not convinced—I am looking at his face, and I think that he is not—I would be happy to work with him, as I have done in the past, because it is important that we get the most out of the scheme and that we support the people right across Scotland who need it. I believe that the fund does that because of the changes that have been made and the lessons that we have learned from the past.

I am happy to work with Mr Rennie if he is yet to be convinced by my argument.

Emma Roddick (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): I am pleased to see the support for first-time buyers and the recognition of how difficult it can be to pull together a deposit when you are living rent payment to rent payment. Will the Government explain how it will work with mortgage providers to ensure that deposit requirements are not simply uplifted as a result of the scheme?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Emma Roddick makes the important point that we need to work with mortgage lenders and those with an interest in the first-time buyers market to ensure that we support people and that that support makes a genuine difference to them.

Such schemes have been available in the past, but, as I said to Mr Rennie, this one is more targeted. We take very seriously the lessons that we have learned from those schemes about how we work with lenders.

Further details of the scheme will, of course, be made available before it opens at the end of June. That will include information about how we have worked with lenders to give exactly the types of reassurance that Emma Roddick has suggested.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I thank the cabinet secretary for her statement, and I welcome her to her newish role.

A scheme of £100 million would mean approximately £20 million per year. Ending homelessness together, the Government's flagship fund for tackling homelessness, provides just more than half of that—£11.5 million of funding this financial year. That £100 million could also build more than 500 social homes. What does the cabinet secretary have to say to people who are waiting years and years for a social home or, indeed, to those who have no home at all? Why is the Government prioritising people who can already afford a home and people who want to buy a home over those without somewhere safe to live?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: That is quite an unfair assessment, if I may say so. However, I thank Maggie Chapman for welcoming me to my nearly new role.

It is important that the Government is there to support people across Scotland in all tenures. I deeply value the importance of the social rented sector, and I welcome the role of councils and housing associations in supporting people in the social rented sector.

The private rented sector is also important to people in Scotland, as is private owner occupation. I do not put one above another. As I have said to other members in relation to the cost of living crisis, it is important that we are there to support people regardless of the tenure that they are in and the tenure that they wish to be in.

As I said in my statement, providing support for first-time buyers is one area that the Government is working on, but as I also alluded to, there are other strands of the Scottish Government's work that will support affordable housing in general. I go back to the £926 million this year for the affordable housing supply programme to support people in the social rented sector, in the mid-market rent sector and in low-cost home ownership.

Kim Schmulian (Glasgow) (Reform): The cabinet secretary talked about monitoring the outcomes of the policy as it evolves. Will she tell me what that means in practice in detail, in relation to her objectives for the policy?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The essence of the test-and-learn approach is to ensure that, as the first wave of the project is launched at the end of June, we ensure that we are continuously

speaking to private developers, lenders and others to measure the impact.

At the start, the scheme will be quite small, but—as I said in my statement—if the demand is there, it could support 2,000 households in the Government's first 100 days. That will give us a good basis on which to work with lenders, developers and others to ensure that we receive their feedback on how the scheme can be developed. As I have said to a number of members, I would welcome members' thoughts and contributions on the lessons learned from the impact on their constituencies as we move forward.

Childcare

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is a debate on motion S7M-00128, in the name of Màiri McAllan, on expanding childcare. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now. I call Màiri McAllan to speak to and move the motion—13 minutes, please.

14:36

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): I am delighted to open the debate for the Government on the important topic of early learning and childcare and the Government's plans to transform provision in Scotland. The early emphasis that we are placing on the topic, and its centrality in our manifesto, will, I hope, underline to members the importance that the Government places both on the precious early years of a child's life and on the need for high-quality childcare as a means of growing our economy.

Before we begin the debate and delve into the detail of what is an exciting expansion project, I have a few acknowledgments to make. First, I personally thank the highly qualified, professional and—I have to say—loving childminders who support me to be here today and to lead this work for the Government. I am sure that my wee Somhairle is out in the sun just now, learning through play and spending time with his pals.

I also extend that personal thanks to all the early learning and childcare professionals who are doing that very job the length and breadth of Scotland. I saw some of that at first hand this morning when I visited Clovenstone primary school's breakfast club, before attending the Hailesland early years centre. I sincerely thank them and reiterate how much the Minister for Children, Young People and the Promise, who is also a working mammy, and I look forward to working with them.

Willie Rennie (Fife North East) (LD): I echo that appreciation for the work that those early learning and childcare professionals do. However, if the cabinet secretary believes that, will she finally tackle the difference in the pay rates between the private, voluntary and independent sector and the council sector? Staff are paid massively different amounts for doing exactly the same job, so will the Government finally get a grip on that problem?

Màiri McAllan: When it comes to pay, I am proud that Scotland is the only part of the United Kingdom that, through its funding for early learning and childcare, creates the circumstances in which the real living wage can be paid. However, I understand the call for parity. All those aspects will

be taken into account as we take on what is a massive expansion project, and I will work with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the sector on that.

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Did I understand correctly that the cabinet secretary said that the lack of parity that Willie Rennie identified, which she has acknowledged, will be addressed as part of the revised approach to this policy?

Màiri McAllan: We are in the early days of a significant expansion project. I say to the chamber that I am open minded about learning with regard to the delivery of 1,140 hours as we work to expand the provision. Pay, rates and flexibility, among many other issues, will be taken into account.

Willie Rennie: The difficulty is that the cabinet secretary's predecessors have been open minded for years about the issue and we have not made any progress. We need more than open-mindedness and open doors; we need a solution.

Màiri McAllan: I do not think that it is realistic to say that progress has not been made. In my first response to Willie Rennie, I noted that Scotland is the only place in the UK that funds the real living wage, because we have put fair work at the centre of our expansion to 1,140. I say to members across the chamber that I understand that there are a number of areas that we need to learn from with regard to 1,140 and that I will discuss those with them. That is a broad commitment.

I want to acknowledge parents and carers who are wrestling every day with the joys and challenges of raising children. They do that with varying support networks and in a cost of living crisis, but they always do it to the best of their ability. I saw that this morning and I thank them for that.

That allows me to say, in my first debate as Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic, that I am proud to take over this area, which has been prioritised by the Scottish Government: from the baby box, which provides the essentials for the first six months of life, to our transformational 1,140 childcare offer; and from our breakfast and after-school club investment to free school meal provision, investment in health visiting, family nurse partnerships, supporting women with breastfeeding and, of course, the groundbreaking Scottish child payment. I am very proud of the fact that we are putting in place the building blocks of success for children in Scotland.

On that note, my colleague Shirley-Anne Somerville, who spoke in the chamber before me, published "Bringing Hope, Building Futures" prior to the dissolution of the Parliament. It sets out the concrete action that we will take in pursuit of our goal of eradicating child poverty in Scotland, which we estimate will keep 100,000 children out of relative poverty this year. Surely that is a goal that we can all get behind.

In its aim of eradicating child poverty, the plan is absolutely clear that supporting parents and carers who are currently locked out of the labour market to work is an important part of our work. We know that those barriers exist particularly for women, who are more likely to take on caring responsibilities, reduce their working hours, or feel that they cannot work at all because it does not make financial sense. That is fine if that is what families choose to do, but it is not fine if it is not a choice. I have that at the forefront of my mind. We will take action to remove those barriers, not only because it is the right thing for families but because it is the right thing for our economy.

I will look for a moment at the Government's record in childcare and what we have been delivering to date: the universal early learning and childcare offer for every three and four-year-old, as well as around a quarter of two-year-olds. They are often referred to as "eligible two-year-olds", but I prefer what the City of Edinburgh Council calls them, which I was told today is "terrific twos". We are delivering that through an investment of around £1 billion a year, which is worth about £6,400 per family per eligible child. I think that we would all agree that that is a sizeable contribution to family budgets. It has to be said that going from the around 600 hours that we inherited when we came into government to delivering the 1,140 hours that parents have been benefiting from since 2021 is a massive achievement. We are also clear that now is the time to move on to the next transformational change in provision.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Con): The Scottish Government announced in 2023 that it would expand funded childcare from nine months onwards. What progress has been made since that promise?

Màiri McAllan: I was going to come to that later, but I will address it now. I will talk about some of the work that we have been doing in our priority communities. We have been working with our six priority families and testing the roll-out of childcare as it is needed in different circumstances, whether that is communities that are affected by poverty or children who have disabilities. We have been taking forward that work and it will inform the expansion of childcare.

To give members the details, although I am sure that they are acquainted with them, I should say that we want, by the end of this parliamentary session, to provide the choice of childcare support for every child in the country from nine months old

to the end of primary school. Importantly, the support is to be provided for 52 weeks a year and will be designed to fit around families, rather than families being expected to fit around the system. I must say that it is a substantial project that will take a team Scotland approach.

On the note of working together, I was really pleased to see that the importance of early learning and childcare featured in most of the parties' election manifestos. I hear the concerns from Green colleagues about cross-border placements and the variation in funded ELC eligibility dates when a child turns three. I commit to working on those issues as we develop the expanded offer.

As my colleagues have stated, and as I maintain, the statutory guidance is clear that, whenever possible, families who access cross-border placements should be treated on the same basis as families who access local provision. I am sympathetic to the issue of when a three-year-old begins to receive the childcare, although we must take into account practical issues. For example, how manageable would it be for staff to have an intake every week or every day? Those are practical considerations, and I will work with the Greens and COSLA on such issues. On that basis, we will support the Green amendment.

We will also support Labour's amendment, and I look forward to hearing Labour members' contributions.

I note the Liberal Democrats' desire for a focus on support for working families only. I understand the reasons behind that, and I want to work with them to better understand what they are looking to achieve. However, first, we cannot fail to understand the importance of childcare to finding and sustaining work. Secondly, it is important that we do not have a system that denies children whose parents are not working the important early learning opportunities that are provided, particularly if those might be the children who could benefit most from them. I say that as an early point of principle, but I look forward to working with the Lib Dems on such issues.

As I have said to a number of members, as we develop the provision, we will draw on the successes of the 1,140 hours policy and be clear on the opportunities for improvement.

Victor Currie (Highlands and Islands) (Reform): The previous expansion to 1,140 hours, which the cabinet secretary has mentioned a few times, required an additional 4,000 full-time equivalent staff. If the proposals are not tied specifically to a skills training pathway for our domestic workforce, will the Government not simply be legislating a skills shortage into existence?

Màiri McAllan: The member is absolutely right to point out the importance of the workforce. The workforce, which consists mainly of women, is the single most important factor in whether good, high-quality early learning and childcare is provided. The roll-out of 1,140 hours necessarily resulted in the number of staff growing, and we are very open minded and clear eyed about the fact that that will have to happen once again as we expand the offer.

We know that uptake has been good. A census that was published in 2025 shows that uptake is nearly universal for three and four-year-olds, with almost every child taking up their registered hours. We also know that the vast majority of parents and carers are satisfied with the quality of ELC.

Stephen Kerr: Will the cabinet secretary give way on that point?

Màiri McAllan: Will I get the time back, Presiding Officer?

The Presiding Officer: Yes.

Màiri McAllan: I will, of course, give way.

Stephen Kerr: I want to follow up on the previous question and what the cabinet secretary has just said. What are the Government's estimates on the number of additional staff who will be required? What is the Government's estimate of the total cost of the expansion over the lifetime of the parliamentary session?

Màiri McAllan: In our manifesto, we set out an estimate of about £500 million. However, the Government is in the early days of developing the policy, so the estimates on costs and workforce requirements will be developed in due course. I remind members that the commitment is to have completed the policy by the end of the five-year period. It is a huge piece of work, and we will all have to work together on it. We are in the early stages just now.

The Diffley report, which we commissioned and which reported recently, set out an important perspective on what has worked and what needs to be improved. I am short of time, but there are a couple of points that I want to draw out. First, it is clear that funded childcare has had an important impact on maternal employment. Secondly, it was demonstrated that, once an eligible two-year-old has undertaken a year, little developmental difference can be observed between them and a three-year-old peer who is starting on the universal offer. I see that as a really important bit of success for the project.

Of course, as colleagues have said, recruitment, skills development, rates, flexibility, additional support needs aspects, practical issues of roll-out and costs must all be developed. I sincerely look

forward to working with colleagues across the chamber on the project.

I have focused my remarks on the 1,140 hours, but there is a huge amount of other work that the Government has completed or is looking to take forward, such as the expansion of breakfast clubs, our extra time programme and our work in priority communities. It is worth noting that those communities are Clackmannanshire, Dundee, Fife, Glasgow, Inverclyde and Shetland. We have deliberately chosen those areas to help us to understand how best these measures work across different demographics in Scotland.

I will bring my remarks to a close so that we can have a good and full debate. However, Presiding Officer, it has to be said that, as you will know from your previous role, we are facing some of the most challenging fiscal conditions since devolution, and so are households in Scotland. Therefore, we have to make every penny that we spend work for the people of Scotland.

The Government and I believe that there is a strong case for expanding childcare. It reduces inequalities, tackles poverty and provides new economic opportunities across the country. It is an ambitious but vital task. I know that there is consensus across the chamber and I look forward to getting to work with colleagues and the minister to deliver that expansion for Scotland.

I move,

That the Parliament believes that every child deserves the best start in life and that a child's earliest years are crucial in their development; recognises the importance of high quality, accessible and affordable childcare in tackling poverty, supporting employment opportunities for parents, supporting child development and driving inclusive economic growth; acknowledges the Scottish Government's investment in early learning and childcare to date, and supports its aim to extend year-round childcare support to every child from nine months old to the end of primary school.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, cabinet secretary. I call Katherine Sangster to speak to and move amendment S7M-00128.2. I remind members that this is Katherine Sangster's first speech, so there will be no interruptions or interventions.

14:52

Katherine Sangster (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab): It is a huge privilege to make my maiden speech as Scottish Labour and Co-operative MSP for Edinburgh and Lothians East. I thank the voters across our communities who placed their trust in Scottish Labour and in me. I also thank those who ultimately decided to put their cross elsewhere for our conversations and for sharing their challenges with me.

Politics should take place not just online or in the chamber but on doorsteps, in community meetings and in conversations with our neighbours. That is where mistrust of politics and politicians can be overcome, consensus can be reached and progress can be made.

Although the election result is settled, the challenges that Scotland faces are not. The need to tackle deep-seated issues in Scotland remains as urgent today as it was during the campaign, and this Parliament must rise to that challenge.

I pay tribute to Sarah Boyack, who represented the Lothian region before me, for her years of public service, her commitment to the Labour movement and her wise counsel over many years. I also thank Chris Murray MP, who campaigned by my side, proving that Westminster and Holyrood can sometimes work together.

Politics is indeed a team effort. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to the people who supported me over the past few years—they know who they are and I thank them not only for their belief in me but for their belief that Scotland can be a fairer, better country.

I am especially proud to represent a region that has been my home for most of my adult life. Over the years, I have made many friends here, raised my family here and worked here. I know the communities of Leith, Portobello, Musselburgh, Wallyford and Elphinstone not simply as places on a map but as places that welcomed me and my family—places that are full of warmth, resilience and enormous potential.

One of the first votes that I cast was for the establishment of a Scottish Parliament—never imagining then that one day I would stand in this chamber. I believe deeply in the power of devolved Government to improve people's lives—however, good intentions alone are not enough; Government must deliver in practice. A policy cannot just sound good on a campaign leaflet; it must make the everyday lives of working families better.

I am therefore pleased that my maiden speech comes in a debate on childcare. My involvement in politics began with campaigning for fairer access to childcare for working parents some 10 years ago. Many of the problems that parents faced then are still with us today. Across Scotland and the Lothians, parents speak about nursery costs consuming huge chunks of household income, long waiting lists, inflexible hours and free childcare provision that does not cover the full cost. For many families, childcare determines whether a parent can return to work, increase their hours or progress in their careers. Therefore, although I welcome the commitment to expanding

childcare provision, we must address the pressures that families are under now.

In Edinburgh, restrictions on cross-boundary nursery placements have affected families from East Lothian and Midlothian who need childcare close to where they work. Parents have lost access to nurseries that match commuting patterns and working hours or they have lost funding for places where children were happy and settled. Those points speak to a wider challenge at the heart of Scotland's childcare system, which is to align national ambition with local delivery and the everyday realities that working parents face.

Childcare is one of the most important investments that we can make in Scotland's future. When childcare works, parents can participate fully in the workplace, women are more able to continue their careers and children get the best possible start in life. However, for too many families, that is not the reality.

On behalf of the families and staff who need change, Scottish Labour will hold the Scottish National Party to account in keeping its promise on delivering childcare policy in this parliamentary session. The SNP introduced this debate, and our questions for the Government are simple: when and how will the delivery of childcare policy happen? Scottish Labour has set out its own plan to reduce the cost of childcare for working parents, improve the flexibility of the system, support childminders and give parents more choice and control. A failure to tackle those matters would be a missed opportunity that no family can afford.

I turn to the motion in the cabinet secretary's name. In the election campaign, the First Minister and his party promised big on expanding childcare, and they now have the responsibility to deliver. Parents such as me have been raising these issues for 10 years. That is why I am calling on the Government to fix the issues now and to set out a fully costed plan and a timeline for delivery.

As a new member of the Parliament, I hope to contribute constructively and seriously to that work. I came into politics because I believe that Scotland deserves a Government that is relentlessly focused on making the country work better for working people. It is the honour of my life to stand here representing Edinburgh and Lothians East, and I look forward to serving its people.

I move amendment S7M-00128.2, to leave out from "acknowledges" to end and insert:

"further recognises that the Scottish Government needs to do more to reduce the costs of childcare for working parents, improve the flexibility of the childcare system, support childminders and give parents more choice and control over the childcare that works for their family, and calls on it to set out a fully costed delivery plan and timeline for its commitment to extend year-round childcare support to every child from nine months old to the end of primary school."

14:56

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Every child deserves the best possible start in life. Every parent deserves the chance to work, study, rest or simply breathe without the crushing anxiety of impossible childcare costs. Every childcare worker deserves dignity, fair pay and recognition for the profoundly valuable work that they do. That is why the Scottish Greens were proud to stand in the recent election on a pledge to introduce the biggest expansion of childcare in a generation.

We see today's motion as the start of the changes that need to happen, and our amendment pushes the Scottish Government to go further and faster. Expanding childcare is not simply a matter of economic policy; it is about equality, justice and human dignity. I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for her letter last night, which stressed the importance of working together on this vital work. I welcome her to her new role and confirm that the Greens will work with her to deliver the best for our children and young people and those who care for them.

We have much work to do. For too long, childcare has been treated as a private burden that is carried disproportionately by women rather than as the essential social infrastructure that it is. The reality that faces families across Scotland is stark. Research from Pregnant Then Screwed found that two thirds of mothers in Scotland say that their childcare costs are the same as, or more than, their income. Half of mothers said that, after paying for childcare, it simply does not make sense for them to work. More than a third said that they regularly face a choice between paying for childcare and paying for household essentials. Those figures should shame us all.

Behind every statistic is a person, a family or a mother who is trying to hold everything together. One mum in Aberdeen said:

"I have two children 20 months apart and pay over £2000 a month for childcare that isn't even full time. There is no support. It's exhausting, terrifying."

Another mum, from Angus, said:

"Recently, I found out that I am pregnant with my second child and the joy I should be feeling is dampened by already worrying about childcare costs when it's time to return to work."

No parent should describe raising children in Scotland as terrifying. The joy of a new baby should not be marred by anxiety about childcare costs. However, that is the reality for many families in one of the wealthiest countries in the world. That

is why the Scottish Greens are clear that childcare must be universal, flexible and genuinely accessible.

Universal provision matters, because cliff edges punish families and means testing leaves people behind, whereas universal services create dignity, certainty and fairness. Flexibility matters, because families' lives are not neatly lived between 9 and 5. Too many people—shift workers, rural families, parents of disabled children, single parents and parents working irregular hours—are locked out of the current system because it was not designed around the reality of modern life.

That is why our amendment calls for immediate, practical changes. First, by making available cross-border placements across Scotland, so that funding follows the child rather than stopping at arbitrary council boundaries. Secondly, by providing access to funded hours immediately after a child's relevant birthday, rather than forcing families in some council areas to wait months for support, costing them thousands of pounds. Thirdly, our amendment recognises something that is too often ignored: expansion will work only if we properly value the workforce.

Care work is work. Childcare workers are not volunteers propping up a broken system through goodwill and exhaustion; they are skilled professionals carrying enormous responsibility for children's wellbeing and development. The childcare workforce, which remains overwhelmingly female—95 per cent—is underpaid and undervalued, and poor pay and conditions are driving problems in recruitment and retention.

If we want a world-class childcare system, we need world-class terms and conditions. That means fair pay across councils and private providers. It means workforce planning and investment in training, particularly around additional support needs. It means collective bargaining that puts power in the hands of workers to negotiate better terms and conditions. It means recognising childcare not as a cost to be minimised but as a public good worthy of investment—because investment in childcare delivers enormous social and economic returns. The evidence is clear: childcare investment creates jobs, supports women into employment, reduces child poverty and boosts economic participation.

Care jobs are also low-carbon jobs. Investment in care creates more jobs and less pollution than equivalent investment in traditional infrastructure. This is feminist economic policy, green economic policy and, fundamentally, humane economic policy.

Let us build a childcare system that is rooted not in patchwork fixes or postcode lotteries but in equality, dignity and collective responsibility—a system that values children, parents and, finally, truly values care.

I move amendment S7M-00128.1, to insert at end:

"and further agrees that as a first step towards this expansion, the Scottish Government and COSLA must work together to ensure that cross-border placements are available across Scotland, that all children can access the current funded hours the week rather than term after the child's relevant birthday, and that the required flexibility in provision will only be achieved with proper workforce planning."

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I call Meghan Gallacher to speak to and move amendment S7M-00128.4.

15:02

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Con): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I welcome you to your post. I also welcome the cabinet secretary to her post.

I will begin on a point of consensus with the Scottish Government: I believe in expanding childcare provision across Scotland.

Throughout the previous parliamentary session, I repeatedly called on the Government to expand the early learning and childcare from nine months onwards for working parents. In 2023, I believed that those calls had finally been heard when the then First Minister, Humza Yousaf, announced a pilot to expand childcare to children from nine months onwards. However, since that announcement, despite my trying repeatedly to establish what progress has been made, there has been little to no clarity on that point.

I believe that there is an opportunity to reset relationships and work constructively across parties to find solutions. First, however, the Scottish Government must provide answers and explain—not just to parents but to the Parliament—why it failed to deliver the expansion that it had previously promised. Right now, too many parents simply do not trust that the Government can deliver.

During the election campaign, I had the privilege of serving on a cross-party steering group led by Pregnant Then Screwed Scotland. Together, we discussed how childcare could better support parents, particularly mothers, and explored practical ways to improve the current system.

One statistic that I have pulled out today from the state-of-the-nation survey that Pregnant Then Screwed Scotland conducted should concern the Scottish Government: 66.8 per cent of Scottish mothers did not believe that the Scottish

Government would deliver on expanding childcare provision.

Behind that statistic is a simple reality. Parents feel that the system is not built around modern day life. Parents are doing everything that they can to stay in work, provide for their children and build a future for their families, but childcare costs are making that harder.

Màiri McAllan: I hear Meghan Gallacher's points about delivery and public trust. I take the opportunity, early in the development of the policy, to acknowledge the importance of delivery, to put on record that it is what I want to happen, and to ask her whether she will work constructively with the Government so that, in a few years' time, when the policy comes to fruition, the mothers who she is talking about can say that the Scottish Parliament, including Meghan Gallacher's party, delivered for them.

Meghan Gallacher: I said right at the start that I believe in expanding childcare. Later in my contribution, I will speak about what I believe it should be expanded to, but I am more than happy to meet the cabinet secretary on that. I believe that childcare is fundamental not just for parents and families but for our wider economy.

To go back to the point that I was making, for some families, childcare costs now rival mortgage payments. Parents across the country have to cough up more than £1,000 a month to pay for childcare. When families sit down at the kitchen table to work out whether it is financially worth while for one parent to return to work, the answer is far too often that it is not. For mothers in particular, the choices can feel impossible. Some reduce their hours because childcare costs do not match working patterns. Others leave the labour market altogether because the cost of childcare wipes out much of their income.

This is not just a family issue; it is an economic issue. When skilled workers are pushed out of employment, Scotland loses talent, productivity and economic growth. If we are serious about growing our economy, childcare must be viewed as economic infrastructure that is every bit as important as transport or housing.

Affordability is only part of the problem. Flexibility matters, too. Parents have repeatedly told me and my colleagues who have previously held the education brief that funded hours might exist on paper, but they are often delivered in ways that simply do not reflect the realities of working life. Shift workers, national health service staff, hospitality workers and parents with irregular hours cannot always make rigid nursery patterns work.

I want to talk about some of the other issues that are currently faced not just by parents but by the sector. If the Government is serious about expansion, it must confront the reality that is facing the private, voluntary and independent sector, which delivers a substantial proportion of childcare across Scotland. Too often, the PVI sector feels like an afterthought, despite being critical to delivery on the ground. Providers are struggling with rising costs, staffing shortages and Government guidance that does not reflect the economic position. There are also serious concerns about the unfair distribution of funding between local authority settings and the PVI sector, which Willie Rennie has already mentioned.

That is not sustainable. We cannot continue as we are and then put an expansion on top of the current model. If the Government wants the mixed-market childcare model to survive, the funding must absolutely follow the child fairly and sustainably because, without the PVI sector—

Stephen Kerr: Would the member go as far as to say that, unless the disparity in funding is properly tackled now, the expansion, which we all support, will fail?

Meghan Gallacher: When I entered the Parliament in 2021, one of the first issues that came across my desk was that the PVI sector did not feel part of the overall 1,140-hour package. That is why people were leaving the sector. Childminders did not want to remain part of the sector. That it is one of the issues that needs to be addressed urgently.

I know that I am running out of time, Presiding Officer, but I am moving towards my conclusion.

Before ministers make new promises, they must answer basic questions: who will deliver the expansion, where will it happen and how will it be paid for? Those are my concerns today, and I believe that we will probably address those issues later in the debate this afternoon. I welcome the approach so far from the cabinet secretary and I will take up the offer to meet her in due course.

I move amendment S7M-00128.4, to leave out from "acknowledges" to end and insert:

"notes with concern that many families still face limited availability and choice of early learning facilities and high childcare costs, which is a barrier particularly for mothers seeking to return to work; understands that the funded childcare current model has resulted in wage inequalities, a severe decline in childminders and unfair distribution of funding between local authority-run nurseries and the private, voluntary and independent sector; believes that, should the Scottish Government wish to extend childcare policy, it should fix the current funding model and address staff shortages within the sector, and calls on the Scottish Government to publish a clear and properly-funded timetable for expanding childcare support from nine-

months-old, with reassurances of working with the sector, detailing any learnings from the pilot scheme they said they would introduce in 2023."

15:09

Willie Rennie (Fife North East) (LD): I will begin where Meghan Gallacher and Stephen Kerr finished. We need to get the fundamentals of the provision of ELC in Scotland right before we look to expand it. There is a fundamental problem with the PVI sector, which provides the flexibility that many parents are looking for. Many council nurseries are simply unable to provide that flexibility. If we want childcare that is suitable for a variety of family needs, we need to sort out the significant leakage of experienced staff from the PVI sector to better-paid jobs in the council sector. Sometimes, people get paid more in a supermarket than they would be paid in a private nursery. We need to sort that out in order to maintain the quality of provision in the PVI sector—and not just the provision itself. That is essential for any expansion that comes.

A number of other factors need to be addressed, too. The level of take-up by two-year-olds—the terrific twos was discussed earlier—has varied. Although we have managed to develop a relationship with the Department for Work and Pensions, so as to share the essential data and to identify the families concerned, the number of people who are taking up the provision has dropped in the most recent period. We need to reverse that, because we can make the biggest impact on the life chances of that group of two-year-olds if we can get them into that provision at an earlier stage.

We have already discussed cross-border placements and the issue of the third birthday. I accept the point about the practicalities of dealing with constant flux on the third birthday. There must be a better way than losing months of provision because the child happens to have their third birthday at the wrong time. Childminders are also essential, particularly in very remote and rural areas, where it is impossible to have a fully constructed nursery, and they provide the flexibility that many families are looking for. Those issues need to be addressed.

I thank the Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic, and I welcome her and her ministerial colleague to their posts. We now have a ministerial team that can be fully focused on the Promise—following on from the outstanding speech that my colleague Duncan Dunlop made yesterday. Màiri McAllan's predecessor was recused from addressing the issues around the Promise, but we now have a team that is dedicated to it, and I hope that we will see significant progress on those issues in this session, because it is sorely needed.

Let me deal with some of the fundamentals around childcare and early learning. The early learning bit is incredibly important. We sometimes forget that it is not just about the hours that we provide but about the quality of the provision as well. We sometimes forget about quality in the race for expansion, which is why investing in good-quality staff is essential, particularly in the PVI sector.

We should remember the role of families. Some families want to look after their children, and they sometimes feel guilty for not putting them into ELC provision. We should welcome the fact that families want to look after their children for longer, because we know from Suzanne Zeedyk, the acclaimed academic, that attachment is incredibly important in the early years. Too often, children do not have the warmth of a loving relationship, so we should ensure that that is valued in our discussion. I want the focus to be on families who want to take up the provision—I think that the cabinet secretary also pointed to that. Families should not be made to feel guilty for not taking it up.

I remember, some years ago, taking part in a discussion run by Save the Children. Everybody was arguing about the expansion of the provision. People were asking, "When are we going to get it?" "How are we going to get it?" "How quickly are we going to get it?" and "Will it be available in my community?" A lone mother stuck up her hand and asked, "Why don't you want me to look after my own children?" You could hear a pin drop. That was something that needed to be said, and it was important that it was said.

Another issue is the economy. We have a major problem with economic inactivity and high levels of unemployment, particularly among women who have had children. We need to incentivise and encourage people, which is why I disagree fundamentally with the universal approach. Of course, childcare should be universal for three and four-year-olds, so that, in the years just before they go to school, they can get that extra lift before they go into the education system proper. However, we must make sure that work pays. When finances are tight, we must use our money in the best way that we possibly can to make sure that work pays. It is essential that everybody participates in the economy and in society.

I make no apologies for targeting that issue. We are in a crisis. The Parliament has a £5 billion deficit coming down the track, but, sometimes, you would not think that that was the case. Too often, we think about spending money without thinking about exactly how to spend it to have the best effect on families or on the economy and the

Government's finances. All of that needs to work—and it needs to work well.

The final issue I want to raise is about after-school clubs and flexibility. We should talk not only about childcare up to the age of five but about supporting after-school clubs, many of which are precarious and find it difficult to make ends meet. We must make sure that there is extra provision for them, particularly in rural areas where families find it difficult to sustain them.

For those reasons, we will work with the Government to make this work. I am desperate to make it work—I have a long-term commitment to it. For decades, I have argued for the expansion of childcare, but we must get the foundations and the expansion right.

I move amendment S7M-00128.3, to leave out from "and supports" to end and insert:

"but notes that parents must be provided with the choice that they were promised as part of the rollout of 1,140 hours of funded childcare by introducing fairer rates for private, voluntary and independent providers to cover the actual costs of delivering high-quality early learning and childcare (ELC); believes that working families need to be prioritised in any extension of ELC funding, starting with shifting the 1,140 funded hours to start on a child's third birthday, thus treating this as a critical part of our economic infrastructure that would help parents return to work, close the gender pay gap and raise additional tax revenues; calls for local authorities to be brought together to strike a partnership agreement that ensures parents who live in one council area but work in another have choice on where their child attends nursery, thus guaranteeing that funding really does follow the child; considers that childcare options in remote and rural areas can be more limited; therefore believes that there needs to be a new support package for childminders in these areas, and calls on the Scottish Government to make sure that there is no postcode lottery for childcare in Scotland."

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I call Angela Ross to make her first speech.

15:16

Angela Ross (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform): I, too, congratulate the cabinet secretary on her appointment.

As this is my first speech, I thank the voters of Edinburgh and Lothians East, who have put their trust in me. I will serve them diligently.

I will start by saying a little bit about myself. I have a background in education. For nearly 30 years, I have been either teaching or involved in instructional design, helping public and private organisations globally with learning. I understand the importance of having the appropriate structure and pedagogy for learners of all ages, so this subject is a particular passion of mine.

I am sure that we all agree that every child deserves the best start in life. We all agree that childcare matters for families, for work and for child development. However, agreeing on the principle is not the same as agreeing on the policy. We cannot keep pretending that a system that is already under strain can simply be stretched further without consequences. That is why we cannot support the motion as it is drafted. In the spirit of being constructive, we offer a different approach—one that is targeted, sustainable and grounded in evidence.

We believe that the solution should provide choice for parents, because a system without flexibility and competition risks becoming one in which families have fewer, not more, options. We suggest that the existing 1,140-hour offer should be strengthened by prioritising working families and by targeting support on the basis of need. We insist that funding should follow the child, so that the provision is flexible, transparent and not restricted primarily to council-run delivery. We recommend a phased approach to expansion, with published results and evaluation at each stage, focusing on ages two to five alongside early primary school—that is, primary 1 to 3—wraparound care. A phased approach would allow the opportunity—which we have in the business world—to reflect and to measure, understand and assess success before moving on.

We, in Reform, believe in supporting families and not limiting their options. We believe in childcare that enables work, not a system that ignores cost, capacity and choice. We must also be honest: childcare supports participation in the labour market but it does not, on its own, drive economic growth. It is an enabler, not an engine.

Before the existing system is expanded, we need to ask whether it has delivered as intended. The 1,140-hour policy was meant to improve child development, close the attainment gap and deliver more support for parents who were in work or who wanted to get into work, but, although some progress has been made—I acknowledge that the Government's policy has had positive aspects—overall, the reported outcomes seem to be mixed. The attainment gap has certainly not narrowed, and the impact on employment has been, to use the Government's own word, modest. I agree with Willie Rennie that the targeted approach to support for two-year-olds has delivered the best signs of improvement. The more universal provision for children from the age of three onwards seems to be the area that is struggling, and that is where the evidence is far less certain. Therefore, the question before Parliament is not whether access to childcare matters—I am sure we all agree that it does—but whether expanding a universal taxpayer-funded model on such a scale is the right way to achieve the aims set out in the motion.

We must also look at the reality of the system today. The 1,140-hour system costs close to £1 billion without clear and consistent evidence of success. Private nurseries have struggled to deliver funded hours sustainably—some have fallen short and even closed—and there has been a significant loss of places offered by childminders. Staff are under incredible pressure. Surveys by organisations such as Unison have shown the level of stress that staff are experiencing. In some cases, providers are withdrawing from offering funded hours. That raises concerns about long-term capacity and choice for parents. We must remember that, behind the figures, there are real families and real providers. Parents are struggling to find places, and staff are working under tremendous pressure to keep services going. That is not a secure platform for expansion.

There is also the question of funding, as we have heard. Scotland faces significant fiscal pressures, and we are being asked to support an expansion that would require billions more in spending. I think that the £500 million figure is a low estimate.

The motion assumes that economic benefits will follow from the proposed expansion, but that assumption is not guaranteed. The Quebec model is often cited as a good example, but that model was released in times of economic growth and fiscal stability in Quebec. In Scotland, the opposite is the case, and we are being asked to expect childcare to deliver that growth. The reverse is true.

We should be cautious about relying on that aspect. Policy cannot override economic reality. Even if funding could be found, there is the serious issue of the workforce, which we have mentioned previously. Infant care is the most complex and resource-intensive form of childcare, and, if we are to expand entitlement to it, we must take the workforce into consideration. Without a credible workforce plan, not only will further expansion be difficult, but there is a risk that it will be undeliverable.

We encourage a more responsible approach that is not about doing less but about doing things properly. If the intention is to support economic growth, responsible policy must focus on providing support where it is most needed, ensuring that funding follows the child and prioritising working families.

The motion asks Parliament to expand a system that is already under pressure without offering a clear plan for funding or delivery. For the reasons I have given, we cannot support it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): We move to the open debate. I call Calum Kerr to make his first speech.

15:23

Calum Kerr (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): What an honour it is to have the opportunity to speak in our national Parliament, not least as the representative for Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale—the constituency that I was born in and have called home for most of my life.

Before I come to the very important subject of the debate, I pay tribute to my predecessor, Christine Grahame. [*Applause*.] She served as MSP for the area, in its various forms, for 27 years and as a Deputy Presiding Officer of this Parliament. She was a formidable and determined champion for her constituents who always put people first and took no prisoners—even, occasionally, on her own side of the political aisle—to get results for them. She is, and will remain, a patriot and a champion for Scotland and for independence. I am grateful for her support and wish her well in her retirement.

I whole-heartedly support the motion. The case for expanding childcare is clear, and, from the introductory remarks, I can say that it is in safe hands. For the best part of a year, I have heard about the issue's importance from parents on the doorstep, from Peebles to Penicuik and Galashiels to Gorebridge, and from the charities and providers that work with them.

I was brought up in a household where childcare was a truly valued part of working life. My dad was a teacher and my mum, Grace, trained at Barnardo's, became a nursery nurse and then a nanny, ran her own playgroup and then built and ran her own nursery in Peebles, which all three of my children went to. I do not claim to be an expert, but I have been steeped in the importance and value of good professional childcare, in the value of those who deliver it and in the reality that they can sometimes feel undervalued.

When we announced the policy during the election campaign, the response from my constituency was instant. Parents welcomed the ambition, and they had questions about the how and the when and about whether it would fit their specific circumstances. The sector immediately got in touch to raise practical concerns about delivery and the workforce that would have to carry out the policy. Our manifesto has given us the ambition and has committed funding. The opportunity is now ours to seize.

I will share two stories from the constituency: one concerns the challenges that parents face, and one concerns the good practice that we can build on.

In rural areas in particular, there are fundamental gaps in provision. A constituent in Galashiels wrote to me during the campaign to say

that her child's after-school club had closed and that there was no local alternative, although she lived in the second-biggest town in my constituency. So that she can keep working, she now pays £10 a day in taxi fares to get her child to a club in Melrose. That is what those gaps look like in real life. It also represents the cost of living in the most literal sense.

However, also during the campaign, I visited Stow primary, which is a few miles up the road from that constituent's town, where Stow Kids Club, with support from School's Out, runs a breakfast club and an after-school club on site. Built by parents and providers and run on a tight budget, it shows what is possible.

Our ambition for childcare extends in two directions: down to nine months and up through primary. In practice, those are two very different operations. Extending wraparound care to the end of primary offers the chance to build on infrastructure and models that already exist. After-school clubs, breakfast clubs and holiday provision represent the fastest path to real relief for working families. The Government recognised that in the previous budget, with an initial £15 million for breakfast clubs and £2.5 million for after-school provision. The work now is to make sure that our investment grows to match the scale of the gap and that what works in Stow becomes the norm rather than the exception.

As we all know, the extension down to nine months is a different proposition. At that level, requirements on staffing ratios, training and equipment are all much higher. I know that we will make sure that we get this right, but a phased approach would give us an opportunity to deliver benefits early while building out that capability.

Whatever the phasing, we have to do this with the sector, not to it. Providers tell me that they feel stretched and sometimes undervalued. As one person put it to me, this is not just playing with children all day; it is skilled professional work, and we must treat it that way, with pay, training, career structure and regulation that fit the setting. Childminders, private nurseries and school-age providers such as School's Out all want to be part of what we are doing. Let us make sure that we do not unintentionally undermine them; instead, let us ensure that we build on what is working with them in partnership.

This is one of the most significant pieces of work that the Parliament will deal with over the next five years. The expansion of childcare can be transformational, with childcare built around families rather than families having to fit around childcare. It can give children the best start in life. It can support more parents into the work that they want. As a party and as a Parliament, let us get this done, for the families in Galashiels, in Stow and in every town and village beyond.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I call Claire Baker, who has seven minutes; however, we have time in hand.

15:30

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): There seems to be an issue with the lectern. [*Interruption*.] I will switch to a different one—no, that is it.

I welcome the cabinet secretary to her new post. Every child deserves the best start in life, and every parent deserves a childcare system that works for the reality of modern family life. A good childcare system should support the child's development, help to reduce poverty and give parents the flexibility and confidence to work, train and study.

Scottish Labour recognises that high-quality, flexible and affordable childcare is essential both for children's outcomes and for Scotland's economy. However, expansion has to be credible, sustainable and deliverable in practice. Families need a system that genuinely works for them.

The SNP manifesto promised a

"transformational national expansion of childcare, from 9 months to the end of primary school, 52 weeks a year, making life easier for families."

That was a commitment, not an aspiration or an ambition, but it came without a clear timetable, a workforce plan or detailed costings to make it credible.

The first step must be to publish a fully costed delivery plan with a clear timetable for implementation. We are just beginning the parliamentary session, but it is one in which fiscal responsibility will be more important than ever. Difficult choices will have to be made across devolved budgets. That means that we must have transparency from the outset—not simply headline announcements, but clear planning, clear funding models and clear accountability—so that the Parliament can properly scrutinise delivery and the people of Scotland can have confidence in it.

Ahead of the election, the now Deputy First Minister promised an additional half a billion pounds in childcare funding. The Parliament deserves to know how that money will be delivered, how it will be distributed fairly across local authorities and private providers, and how the Scottish Government will ensure that the expansion does not simply place even greater pressure on a childcare sector that is already struggling with workforce shortages, closures and capacity constraints.

The reality is that the current system is already under strain. Parents are struggling to access places, and private and voluntary providers warn that the funding model is unsustainable. In some parts of the country, because of shortages in provision, parents cannot even secure their third choice of nursery.

The briefing that we received from COSLA ahead of the debate outlined some of the pressures on current funding and the consequences of the tension between choice and quality. It also makes clear the need to ensure that the current model is suitable and sustainable in resource and workforce before any further expansion can be considered. Talk about expanding entitlement means little if, already, families cannot access the places that they are promised.

Any expansion of funded childcare relies heavily on an increase in the capacity of the private and voluntary sector as demand rises, and on sufficient capacity in every community. Without that, families are left frustrated, providers are stretched and inequalities deepen between areas where provision exists and areas where it does not exist.

We also need to have a full discussion about the purpose of childcare and early years provision. Is childcare the primary purpose, to enable parents to work, or is it nursery education, which focuses on children's development and early intervention? How do we ensure that the system supports vulnerable families, including eligible two-year-olds, when parents may not currently be in work?

The reality is that the system is trying to achieve all those things, but that means recognising the practical implications of that ambition. For many families—especially those who face poverty or vulnerability—early years services provide much more than childcare. Early intervention at that stage can have a lasting impact on educational attainment, wellbeing and life chances; the services can provide speech and language support, identify developmental concerns early, offer parenting support, reduce isolation and connect families to wider services. Largely, however, we run a drop-off-and-collect system.

If the purpose of provision for vulnerable two-year-olds is to tackle inequality and support vulnerable families, we need to consider whether the current model builds family resilience and capacity. Willie Rennie talked about the importance of attachment in early years. I have spoken to education authorities, which have told me that they are seeing a spike in disruptive, dysregulated and even violent behaviour in some young children as they start school. We need to consider how the early years offer addresses that trend and whether it has unintended consequences that we need to be aware of.

Màiri McAllan: To pick up on Claire Baker's point about the value of provision for eligible two-year-olds, I completely agree with her about the importance of early learning at that point. Will she, like me, welcome the findings in the evaluation report—I said that it was published by Diffley, but it was the Scottish Government's report, so I will correct the record on that—which demonstrated that, after one year, those who had been eligible two-year-olds showed no developmental difference when compared with the three-year-olds who were coming into childcare on a universal offer?

Claire Baker: I recognise and welcome that, and I do not denigrate the policy on two-year-olds in any way. However, last week, figures were released on violence in schools. In Fife, a 50 per cent increase in violence in schools was reported. When I recently met education authorities, they highlighted particular pinch points and said that there was a trend of increased violence among younger children when transitioning between nursery and school. We need to think about whether the nursery offer prepares children for school and whether any issues arise from having families drop off young children but not taking the opportunity to build relationships between parents and their children.

That is why, in our recent manifesto, we argued for wider family support through measures such as family network hubs, which are based on sure start principles, that would help families access advice on childcare, employment, housing and financial support in a more joined-up way. The benefit of the vulnerable two-year-olds policy is that we support the child, but we must ensure that parents or the family are still involved. Equally, if childcare is intended to support employment, it must function in a way that allows parents to work. Currently, too many parents say that it simply does not.

Childcare costs are among the biggest outgoings for working families. Research from Pregnant Then Screwed found that around two thirds of mothers surveyed in Scotland said that childcare costs are the same as, or more than, their income. Around half said that it does not make financial sense for them to work, and more than a quarter said that they relied on debt or savings to pay for their childcare. That should concern every member of this Parliament, because childcare should remove barriers to employment, not create them. At the moment, many parents, particularly women, are reducing their hours, turning down promotions or leaving work altogether because childcare costs and inflexible provision make participation in the

workplace impossible, which is damaging for family finances, economic growth and equality.

We need childcare that is built around the realities of family life, which means: greater flexibility; recognising the needs of shift workers, single parents and families of children with additional support needs; ensuring that funding genuinely follows the child, so that parents have a meaningful choice over providers; and supporting childminders and private providers, which are essential to making flexible childcare possible in many communities.

There is a lack of clarity about how the current 1,140-hour system works, with the Scottish Government giving money directly to local authorities that then decide what to keep for their own provision and what to pass to partner providers. Some partners say that they do not get enough funding to meet their costs and that they are not advertised equally by local authorities.

At the same time, I recognise the need for local authorities to be properly funded to provide their nursery provision, because they provide the bedrock system for many families. We need to see progress towards an agreement—

Meghan Gallacher: Will the member take an intervention?

Claire Baker: If there is time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Yes, there is time.

Meghan Gallacher: Does Claire Baker believe that we need to look again at the guidance that the Scottish Government wrote and which local councils implement, as it has led to these problems?

Claire Baker: I agree with that. I understand that a difference has been made in England, where there is an agreement in place that has led to a more sustainable approach to rate setting and how the funding is distributed. I agree that we need to look at that.

We also need to look beyond the nursery years. One of the biggest pressures for working parents comes when children transition from nursery into primary school. Families can move from longer nursery hours into a school day that finishes in the middle of the afternoon, which creates immediate childcare gaps and additional costs. That is one of the reasons why wraparound care is so important and has to be of good quality and flexible.

That is why Scottish Labour has argued for breakfast clubs and better holiday care provision to support working families and provide stability for children, because childcare challenges for parents do not suddenly disappear when a child starts school. I look forward to hearing much more detail about how and when the Scottish Government will deliver that support across all our communities.

The debate is about much more than counting funded hours. It must be about whether the system genuinely works for children and families, whether it supports child development and tackles inequality, whether it allows parents to work and progress and whether this Scottish Government is prepared to match the scale of its promises with the funding, planning and reform that are needed to deliver them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I call Bob Doris, to be followed by Patricia Gibson. We still have some time in hand.

15:40

Bob Doris (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP): I am pleased to hear it, Presiding Officer. I welcome you to your position and the Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic to her position.

This may surprise you, Presiding Officer, but this is by no means my first speech in this place. However, it will be my first speech as the MSP for Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill, with the substantial boundary changes that were put in place ahead of the 2026 Scottish Parliament elections. It was a privilege to represent areas such as the Garngad, Springburn and Milton, but that now passes on to Ivan McKee MSP. I look forward to continuing to represent my constituents across the wider Maryhill corridor, however, and the many new communities that were formerly part of the Glasgow Kelvin constituency.

The real reason for mentioning the changes is that it allows me to mention Glasgow Kelvin. I pay tribute to Kaukab Stewart, who was the MSP for Glasgow Kelvin from 2021 up until the election. Kaukab was the first woman of colour elected to the Scottish Parliament, and she served diligently as a hard-working constituency MSP and as a Scottish Government minister. She will be a loss to this Parliament.

I turn to the substantive debate on the Scottish Government's ambition to expand early learning and childcare provision. The Scottish Government has already presided over a more than doubling of free early learning and childcare for three and four-year-olds in Scotland, as well as eligible two-year-olds. Although that doubling has not been without its challenges, some of which I hope to refer to during my speech, it is still a tremendous achievement, and that should not be forgotten in the debate. That achievement was driven and secured by an SNP Government. However, it was delivered on the ground not by politicians but by early learning and childcare professionals employed by local authorities or by providers in the

private, voluntary and independent sector, which is often referred to as the PVI sector.

The 1,140 hours have been in place since 2021, by and large, and have been worth more than £6,000 for every eligible child each year. That has benefited my family, and we have used our hours mixed between a local authority provider and an independent provider as we have tried to best match our family needs with the available provision.

That mixing and matching of provision to best meet family circumstances will be a common experience for families. Flexibility is essential. The Scottish Government is, of course, aiming to move towards year-round childcare provision for children from nine months old up to the end of primary school. It was a central manifesto commitment. More than £0.5 billion has been earmarked for expenditure on that endeavour, and that will have to be kept under review as we plan for the next five years.

I think that we can all agree that achieving that aim would be hugely welcome and transformational.

Stephen Kerr: As usual, Bob Doris is giving a thoughtful speech about an important matter. However, he has just indicated that the Government has "earmarked" £500 million for the expansion programme, but I do not think that that is what the cabinet secretary said. In the Scottish National Party manifesto, it was estimated that that would be the ballpark figure, but nobody really knows, and there is not an earmarked fund of money set apart for the purposes that Bob Doris suggests, is there?

Bob Doris: I will need to mind my Ps and Qs with Mr Kerr for using the word "earmarked" in the chamber. If Mr Kerr is more comfortable with the term "ballpark figure", let us go with that and move along with a degree of consensus.

I very much hope that the policy will command strong cross-party support, receive constructive and meaningful scrutiny along the way and have the good will of Parliament. Achieving the ambition to have as much childcare as necessary to fit around family needs and circumstances will be challenging—it will also be expensive, I suspect. It will require innovation, flexibility and a mixed-model approach to delivery. Our councils will and must remain the cornerstone of successful delivery.

Willie Rennie: Bob Doris and I have a long track record of debating this issue over many years, and he will understand that, in order to have a mixed model, we need a private, voluntary and independent sector that is treated on an equal basis with council nurseries. Will he pledge to support all of us who want to achieve that?

Bob Doris: I specifically mentioned the PVI sector, which shows that I think that we have to acknowledge the sector's growing importance and fund it as effectively as possible. I will say more about that in the latter part of my speech, but I appreciate the member's intervention.

Our councils will, and must, remain the cornerstone of successful delivery. However, it will be vital that we have a truly meaningful, respectful and constructive partnership with the private, voluntary and independent sector, as well as with childminders. I welcome COSLA's acknowledgement of that in its briefing to members for this debate. Although that partnership has often worked well, we should also acknowledge that the issue of councils paying PVI providers a sustainable rate has been the subject of much debate by those in the sector, who do not always feel that that has been forthcoming from councils. That must be addressed—I hope that that will reassure Mr Rennie. I very much hope that that key relationship can be developed and that the matter is addressed.

The success of our transformational childcare offer will also require a major uplift in the early years and childcare workforce, and that has to be considered strategically. It is a great opportunity to develop a pathway back to employment for some, often women, and to support others to increase their working hours, given that underemployment, as well as unemployment, is a challenge for society. It is ironic that the absence of affordable childcare when required might have been a barrier for some who might now, with the policy, be able to consider employment. That new workforce might require specific additional and transitional support.

Duncan Dunlop (South Scotland) (LD): I appreciate Mr Doris's comments that the policy will certainly suit working families and the economy. However, does lowering the age of the children for whom there is free childcare to nine months impinge on a child's rights to be loved and to a family life? Half of a child's brain development happens in the first 1,000 days of life, and the broader evidence out there says that a child really needs attachment. Yes, that should be in a mixed economy with group interaction, but having alone time with a parent really matters. The policy seems to be pushing us away from really respecting a parent's ability to parent.

Bob Doris: I very much welcome that intervention, as it allows me to put on record that, as the cabinet secretary said, there is no compulsion for a parent to put their child into a childcare establishment at nine months old.

I acknowledge Mr Dunlop's expertise, however, and if he has concerns in that area, he is absolutely right to bring those to the Parliament and work through them as part of the positive, constructive scrutiny of this policy proposal.

I understand that the childcare workforce increased by 8,000 to 46,000 individuals to support the doubling of early years provision, and that colleges were supported to assist with the upskilling of the sector. I hope that those statistics are right, because they are on the Scottish Government website. Many more will now be needed to expand early years childcare further. Well-paid and supported workers will be central to the delivery of the commitment, and anything that we can do to address the associated costs and make it more affordable would be very welcome.

I will make one suggestion. Perhaps the Scottish Government could reach out to the UK Government to look at changing rules over employer national insurance contributions where employers seek to expand their early years workforce. Such dialogue and potential co-operation between the Scottish and UK Governments should be the norm, and should be supported cross-party in this place, irrespective of our constitutional positions. I hope that, on these types of things, we can start to make common cause. After all, moving someone into employment or providing someone with further hours reduces the benefits bill and bolsters the tax base, and it is a better outcome for all involved. The cost to an employer of NI contributions, however, can be as much as £2,800 each year.

In closing, I will say a bit about wraparound childcare and all-year-round childcare for young people of primary-school age. Breakfast clubs, after-school clubs and holiday clubs have been a mainstay for many years now. Some provision may look like a more traditional after-school club, but there is also the growth of emerging additional provision that is based around various activities such as football and dance, in particular during the summer holidays.

In my constituency, I am lucky to have various providers such as Summerston after-school care, Maryhill mobile crèche, Achieve More! Scotland, and North Kelvin Sports Development Group, to name just a few. There are huge opportunities to expand provision in exciting, innovative ways; however, how and when delivery will take place will have to be co-ordinated. That also applies to funding, which can come from different pots of cash—for instance, for the Scottish Football Association's extra time initiative partnership with the Scottish Government. Local organisations offering different opportunities and models of delivery, often with very different cost bases, must be seen as partners, not competitors. Planning will be crucial.

Given the time that I have taken, I will draw my remarks to a close. I hope that we can come together as a Parliament and deliver this transformational Scottish Government policy.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): You have helped us to make up time.

15:50

Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I congratulate the Deputy Presiding Officer on securing her place.

I am delighted to speak to the motion in the name of Màiri McAllan. The proposals are radical and will take some time to fully come to fruition, but they must be welcomed for the support that they will deliver for our young families. Early learning and nursery education is extremely important, because all the evidence shows that children who benefit from early learning in positive settings, such as a nursery, tend to have better and more successful longer-term outcomes. It is important not just to support young mums into work but to ensure that those who are already in work can stay in work. Well-funded flexible childcare is good for parents, children and our economic growth.

At this point, it is important to say that many mums—I say mums, because most of the childcare falls to them—would love to have the opportunity to stay at home and be full-time carers for their children but, too often, that is not financially viable, although that, too, is work.

We all know that childcare is extremely expensive. We do not want to see a situation in which a parent has to stop working because the cost of childcare that meets the needs of their family is prohibitive. I am pleased that the cabinet secretary addressed that in her remarks. The 1,140 hours of high-quality childcare that parents can access and that is worth up to £6,000 per year per eligible child is welcome. I am delighted that the Scottish Government is going further to reflect the needs of hard-pressed working parents. As we have heard from others today, I have also spoken to parents who found that returning to work full-time after maternity leave posed practical and financial difficulties that the current system does not address.

The SNP's commitment and transformational offer of year-round childcare for children from nine months old until the end of primary school, which is backed by over half a million pounds of new investment, will be a real boon to all working parents, as well as those who are trying to get into the workplace, perhaps after a period of absence or even for the first time. Finding appropriate and

affordable childcare will help them to deal with that problem on an on-going basis.

We are aware anecdotally of parents who find that the current childcare arrangements simply do not have the flexibility that they need built in. A new system that will fit around families, instead of families having to fit around the system, including cross-border childcare placements, is exactly what working parents have been asking for. In the early days of the new SNP Government, I am pleased that the cabinet secretary is announcing those new plans. I know that that will hearten many parents who have been struggling. I am sure that the cabinet secretary will ensure that the current providers are part of conversations as the initiative is rolled out.

Of course, as we have heard, capacity is an issue. I know that the cabinet secretary is mindful of building workforce capacity in the early learning sector to deliver the childcare commitment. Perhaps we could have a little bit more detail about how that might work and what the timeline might be. I agree with my colleague Calum Kerr's comments that, very often, early learning education and childcare is undervalued as a service. Unfortunately, that is just the world that we live in. I wonder whether the cabinet secretary has considered what might be done to further professionalise that important sector.

This is all part of a wider package of measures, and I am glad that the work is taking place. It is good to see that provision has been made for improved wraparound activities to expand after-school clubs. That is not just good in further supporting children's social skills; it has a vital role to play in developing children's confidence and offers them more options instead of, unfortunately, sitting in front of a screen. Anything that takes children away from screens and social media is good for their mental health. Living in the real world, making and mixing with friends and discovering and developing hobbies and latent talents will help to foster happy and healthier young children who will have much more positive outcomes and much better mental health.

If you will indulge me, Deputy Presiding Officer, I want to say a few words about the expansion of breakfast clubs—a universal offer by August 2027—which is one part of the larger package of measures. We all know that hungry children do not learn well, and ensuring that a healthy, nutritional breakfast is available is a key aspect of raising attainment and levelling the academic playing field for young people. Together with free school meals for primary school children up to primary 5; the best start grant, which helps parents to equip their child with essentials for the new school year; the school clothing grant; and the best start food payments—not to mention the Scottish child payment—that will ease the financial burden on families during these difficult times.

I know that providing free school meals for all primary school children from primary 1 to primary 5 took time, because we had to build capacity, but I wonder whether any further detail can be provided on when the offer can be extended to include those in primary 6 and primary 7.

Taken together, the Government's commitment to our young people and the focus on supporting household budgets, which remain under such pressure, mean that an unprecedented level of support is being provided. As someone who grew up in deep poverty, I can barely imagine the impact that such support would have had on my childhood and that of my siblings, had it been available.

The measures that the Scottish Government is taking to support families are not, and should not be considered to be, a silver bullet, but they will chip away at the barriers that too many young people face and level the playing field just a little bit. Incrementally, the Government will help young people to reach their potential and develop their talents by removing some of the everyday barriers to accessing early learning and by ensuring that they have access to nutritional food in school, a new school uniform for the new school year and the essentials that they need. After 25 years of secondary teaching, I know that not having those things can scar children's school experiences and create clear and obvious social barriers in our schools, which do not support learning.

Therefore, I very much welcome the proposals and the support that they will provide for families, and I applaud the early inclusion of such funding in the 2026-27 budget.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I call David Smith to make his first speech.

15:58

David Smith (West Scotland) (Reform): Deputy Presiding Officer, I congratulate you on your election, and I welcome the cabinet secretary to her role. I also extend my thanks, welcome and congratulations to all the other members in the Parliament.

I thank my family and friends for their love and support during the election campaign, and I thank everyone who has been working in my party over the past few years to get us all elected.

I am here to represent the West Scotland region. Therefore, I give a very special thanks to everyone from our region for all their incredible efforts so far.

With regard to receiving childcare, nine months seems an incredibly young age to me. I remember when my oldest children were growing up. They

were fortunate enough to be able to stay at home with their mum. My youngest child went to a childminder, and she would fondly describe her childminder as her best friend. That went on for a number of years.

With regard to Scottish Government funding over many years, policies that sound fantastic are created, but providers are often short changed at the end. Private nurseries are struggling to deliver funded hours sustainably, which has resulted in a significant loss of childminders and places. Staff are under incredible amounts of pressure, and many of them are leaving the sector.

The National Day Nurseries Association has stated that seven out of 10 private and third sector nurseries in Scotland say that the hourly rate for three and four-year-olds in relation to the 1,140 hours that we have been talking about does not cover their costs. The estimated average shortfall is £1.25 per hour, per child, which equates to £1,425 across the year for that placement.

My party's position has been made very clear by my colleague Angela Ross. We think that, now more than ever, the Scottish Government needs to get on with fixing the system that is already in place, before any expansion happens.

I appreciate the time given to me, but I will keep my contribution short and leave it there.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I call Clare Haughey.

16:01

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP): Deputy Presiding Officer, I welcome you to your new role, and I also welcome the cabinet secretary and the minister to their posts. As this is my first speech of this session, I also give my thanks to the people of Rutherglen, Cambuslang, Halfway and Blantyre. This is the third time that they have elected me to this place, and it is an honour and a privilege to continue to serve my home community.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak in this important debate. We all know that a child's earliest years are the most crucial for their development, and high-quality childcare can act as a critical catalyst to provide the cognitive stimulation, social interactions and emotional scaffolding needed during the formative years.

Early years environments are where first friendships blossom, curiosity and independence are encouraged and developed, and opportunities to learn and grow are provided and nurtured. As children get older, school-age childcare can continue to provide a wide range of developmental benefits for children. Social and emotional learning can be enhanced through peer interaction, physical and mental wellbeing can be supported, and cognitive development can be boosted via enriching and stimulating activities. Of course, school-age childcare supports employment and the economy, and that secure and sustainable employment helps to lift families out of poverty.

I was the Minister for Children and Young People when the near doubling of funded early learning hours came into force, and the difference that that has made for families in my constituency and across Scotland is hard to overstate. For a start, if families still paid for those childcare hours, it would cost them more than £6,000 a year for each eligible child.

In my Rutherglen and Cambuslang constituency, Scottish Government funding brought two brand-new purpose-built nurseries—Millburn ELC and Lightburn ELC. Like all the providers in my constituency, they sit right at the heart of the communities that they serve and provide high-quality learning environments.

On my most recent visit to Lightburn ELC, it was a gloriously sunny day and children were making the most of the carefully planned and curated outdoor play resources. I spoke to staff about projects relating to their mission to create a nurturing, rights-respecting environment for the children in their care. It is a wonderful environment with highly qualified and expert staff.

The 1,140 hour expansion, including the construction of brand-new facilities such as those in my constituency, took place in an extremely difficult context—that of a global pandemic, Brexit and periods of historically high levels of inflation, which factors all undoubtedly had significant impacts on national Government, local government and the childcare sector as a whole. The Scottish Government took action to support the sector; for example, by providing more than £35 million of dedicated financial support during the pandemic and by providing 100 per cent rates relief to day nurseries.

Ultimately, the expansion was as successful as it has been because of the combined efforts of the Scottish Government, local government and the childcare sector. Infrastructure projects were completed, the ELC workforce was significantly expanded, and local authorities and PVI providers worked together to offer flexibility to families in time for the statutory implementation in August 2021.

By that time, all eligible families were able to be offered funded places. That is a hugely significant achievement, particularly when so many capital projects were required to meet the level of need.

By contrast, I was interested to follow conversations about the roll-out of an expansion to

childcare in England. The chief executive of the Early Years Alliance described providers

"being forced to bear the brunt of parents' understandable disappointment"

when the sector ran into capacity challenges. He set the blame for the lack of consultation and investment that was needed to make it work squarely at the door of the UK Government.

It has always been a key plank of the Scottish Government's childcare plans to ensure that the delivery of our priorities is supported by a sustainable, diverse and thriving sector. The development of new entitlements, such as those that we are talking about today, must and will be done hand in hand with existing providers, local authorities and parents and carers, conducted at a sustainable pace, mindful of the existing landscape and based on a robust evidence base.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Does the member share my concerns that the initial costings that were set out for the policy seemed to be based on a lower level of uptake than the equivalent level in the rest of the UK? In developing the costings for the policy, we are assuming that, for the earliest years, there will be a lower uptake in Scotland than in the rest of the UK. Does that cause her some concern?

Clare Haughey: It is interesting listening to this debate. We have heard arguments from both sides of the chamber about nine months being too early for children to go into childcare, and Mr Marra is now worried that the costings are not correct. I am sure that the cabinet secretary will take all that into account in her discussions with the sector, COSLA and local authorities. I have no doubt that there will be challenges on the way, but they must be worked through as we progress the offering and the expansion of childcare, not only to early years but to later years and into primary school.

Working with its partners, the Scottish Government has already done that through the delivery of the 1,140 hours. We have put in the hard graft and built the foundations to do it again. We have continued to make progress, including supporting the creation of new childminding businesses and investing in wraparound care.

About 7,000 children and families who are most at risk of living in poverty now benefit from school-age childcare programmes. We are not starting with a blank slate; we are building on a knowledge base, having already considered the frameworks that are needed to grow capacity and support the sector, and we are building on a framework of engagement to make sure that our commitments reflect the needs and views of children, families and our communities. [*Interruption*.] Sorry—I thought that someone was trying to intervene on me.

Things are tough out there for families. I am proud that the Scottish Government's record of doing those things can support them through the tough times that have been caused by factors such as the pandemic, Brexit and the cost of living crisis.

Every child in Scotland deserves the best start in life, which is why we are committed to eradicating child poverty and giving families the support that they need. We have delivered ambitious and successful changes in the ELC sector and in childcare before. That made a huge difference to families across our country, and I am confident that we are ready to do it again.

16:08

Paul McLennan (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP): Deputy Presiding Officer, I welcome you to your position, and I welcome the cabinet secretary and the minister to theirs.

As the SNP MSP for the now-renamed constituency of East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs, I thank voters for placing their faith in me. I am proud to stand here and talk about one of the most important things that we can do as a community, which is giving every child the best possible start in life and supporting every family in my constituency and across Scotland.

During the election campaign, when I spoke to the many parents in Prestonpans, Dunbar, North Berwick, Haddington and Longniddry, and across rural communities in Lammermuirs, the same things came up time and again: the cost of living, the juggle of work and family and the desire to give our kids every opportunity. That is why the SNP's childcare expansion matters so much to families in East Lothian.

I will show my age when I say that, like so many others in the past, I had to rely on grandparents to help bring my kids up. It was tough bringing kids up then and it still is now. However, we have already delivered a transformation. The Scottish Government doubled the funded early learning and childcare entitlement to 1,140 hours a year for every three-year-old and four-year-old and for eligible two-year-olds, which is about 30 hours per week during term time. That is real, practical help that is worth thousands of pounds to the average family every single year—we heard the figure of £6,400 mentioned.

In East Lothian, our council and local providers—nurseries, childminders and community groups—have worked hard to make provision flexible and high-quality so that it fits real family life.

Next week, I will meet the council to discuss that very issue. In East Lothian, the expansion will involve, as it did with 1,140 hours, capital

investment in buildings and resource investment in, and recruitment and training of, staff.

We have heard about the importance of the PVI sector, which is worth mentioning—and it will continue to be worth mentioning as we consider further expansion.

Stephen Kerr: I am listening carefully to what Paul McLennan is saying about the situation in his constituency, but does his experience not reflect that of, for example, Calum Kerr, who gave a very thoughtful speech, and of Patricia Gibson, who noted the gaps in the provision that is currently available and the lack of flexibility for working families?

Paul McLennan: One of the key things that I will touch on is co-production. That must be not only with the sector, but with parents and other groups. I will come on to that point later in my speech.

As I said, that includes working with the PVI sector. The cabinet secretary has highlighted other areas of discussion that will be part of the process going forward, and co-production is an incredibly important part of that.

I have seen the difference that the 1,140 hours provision makes. Indeed, I heard about it on the doorstep many times during the campaign—I am sure that we all did. I heard about parents returning to work or study with confidence, and mums and dads having a bit more breathing space.

One important point is that the provision allows children to thrive in a nurturing environment—they are learning through play, making friends and getting ready for school. That is despite the challenges that we faced during the global pandemic a number of years ago.

What does the expansion mean? The SNP will deliver the next big leap: a transformational expansion of childcare from the age of nine months right through to the end of primary school, available 52 weeks a year. That means wraparound care—before and after school, breakfast clubs, which have been mentioned, and holiday provision—and proper support for childminders and all types of providers.

To come back to Mr Kerr's point, we are backing the expansion with—this is a ballpark figure—£500 million of investment.

For East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs, the proposed expansion is huge. It is one of the fastest-growing areas in Scotland, with young families choosing to settle in East Lothian because of our schools, coasts, communities and quality of life.

However, many parents still face real pressures, such as commuting to work. We must ensure that the policy offers flexibility, given that some people are catching trains at seven o'clock in the morning and not returning until six o'clock in the evening. Other parents face pressures from working in local tourism, agriculture or small businesses, or simply from trying to make ends meet.

The expansion will be a game changer. A parent in Dunbar, in East Lothian, told me that they can go back to work knowing that their nine-month-old is receiving loving, high-quality care. Families in Prestonpans with primary-age children will no longer be scrambling for expensive after-school arrangements. Working mums and dads across Longniddry will be able to balance careers and family without losing out financially. There will also be better support for families with additional needs, and more flexibility for everyone.

Of course, this is not just about childcare. It is about tackling child poverty, closing the attainment gap, supporting women back into work or training and growing our local economy. For far too long, lack of childcare has been a block on economic growth. Increasing childcare will help growth in our local economy.

High-quality early learning helps every child, and especially those who need it most, to develop socially, emotionally and cognitively.

We know that delivery is key. That is fundamental in times of tight fiscal management. That is why there has already been a £1 billion-a-year investment in the current programme and the Government has worked in partnership with local authorities to pay staff the real living wage.

As a local MSP, I will continue to work closely with East Lothian Council, providers and parents to ensure that the next phase of the policy is delivered smoothly and sustainably in our communities.

The next phase must be delivered in partnership with parents. It must be a model of co-production. Changes that East Lothian Council made last year highlighted the need for closer co-operation. I have pledged to continue working with parents' representatives moving forward.

I say to the parents and carers here today: I see the demanding work you do every day. The SNP is the party that has consistently put families first. We delivered the 1,140 hours provision, and now we are ready to go further. Flexibility and capacity will be key, as we have heard today.

To everyone else in the East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs area, I say that the Government will deliver the big ambitious changes that will make life better. That means continuing the progress that is already transforming lives across our towns, villages and countryside.

Together, in this Parliament, let us make East Lothian—and Scotland—the best place on these islands in which to raise a family.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I call Q Manivannan, to be followed by Laura Mitchell, both of whom are making their first speeches.

16:14

Q Manivannan (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green): Thank you so much. Deputy Presiding Officer and cabinet secretary, I offer my warmest congratulations to you both. It is a profound honour to speak in this Parliament for the first time, by the grace of my constituents, my family, my lovely Green colleagues and colleagues from every other party who have cared for me during this time.

When I made my affirmation last week, I said that I was doing so for the people of Scotland and their care, and today's motion is precisely what I had in mind. Childcare is not an ancillary issue; it is the load-bearing wall of our economy and the future of our communities, and right now that wall has cracks in it.

As we have heard often enough today, the Pregnant Then Screwed survey found that, for half of Scottish mothers, it simply does not make financial sense to go to work. A part-time nursery place for a child under two costs on average £133 a week, and there is no funded entitlement for that age group. Right now, we are doing less than England, and families are paying the price. The staff nursery in the Scottish Government's own Victoria Quay building closed down last year.

Prior to my election, for years, I sat in community halls, union meetings and drop-ins across Edinburgh and heard people's difficult stories directly, and they are the people who I speak for: a healthcare assistant who said that her shift starts at 7 and who told me that her entitlement applies only if she works 9 to 5; a lone parent in Leith who wanted to retrain and whose life could have changed but who could not find a nursery place for her 14-month-old; or a grandmother in Musselburgh who became a full-time unpaid carer not because she chose it but because there was no affordable alternative. Those are not fringe cases; they are the centre.

The Scottish Greens support the motion and welcome the cabinet secretary's willingness to collaborate. Together we must go further. We went into the election with the most ambitious offer of any party—for 1,140 funded hours for all two-year-olds, regardless of the parents' working status, and 570 hours for every child from six months old. That would not be means tested or conditional; it would be universal, because conditionality, too, has costs, from administrative overheads to take-up gaps and cliff edges that cut families off the moment that a parent's hours change. Twenty-six of Scotland's 32 local authorities report gaps in provision and, in 19 of them, the gaps relate specifically to one and two-year-olds. Universality is not charity or generosity; it is cost efficiency.

On cost, the affordability argument has come up ample times today and, yes, full expansion is expensive, but expert groups and economists have shown that early years investment produces the highest economic return of any investment in the education system. Removing childcare barriers for parents will add hundreds of millions of pounds annually to Scottish gross domestic product, if paired with adequate employability support.

A funded entitlement that works only 9 to 5 in term time is not a real entitlement. We know that 43 per cent of mothers in Scotland work part time, on shifts and in the evenings. Any expansion must include flexible delivery, childminder networks, community settings and extended hours, or it will work only for some families and not others. The question is thus not whether we can afford to do this but whether we can afford to keep not doing it.

We need to bridge the disparity that we have discussed between PVI and LA salaries, but we also cannot expand childcare without fixing the wider workforce crisis that exists in education, health and social care sectors, which will determine whether any of this is deliverable in the first place. Four in five care workers are women and a high proportion are also international workers, who comprise 32 per cent of the average social care organisation's workforce.

Some organisations who responded to a Scottish Care survey reported that international workers are covering 90 per cent of shifts. Too often, their work is devalued and treated as an afterthought. Indeed, some respondents to the survey—some of which were organisations that work in exactly the spaces that we are talking about today—said that

"British nationals do not want to work in care".

That is a damning indictment of the state of the care work sector and our treatment of British women and immigrants alike.

Those are the people who the care system depends on, and they are disproportionately excluded from the entitlements that we are debating today by non-standard hours, eligibility rules that are tied to visa status and a system that is not designed with them in mind. We need fair work conditions, a sectoral pay agreement and a funded training pipeline. I ask the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise, when

she closes, to give the Parliament an update on when the workforce strategy will be published.

As every member of the Parliament has been violently informed over the past few weeks, I am an immigrant. Some members have called for my investigation, deportation and removal. However, when I came to Scotland, I was introduced to a version of this country that is beautiful, kind and all-encompassing in ways that no other place I have ever known is—a country that believes that anyone who is here deserves the right to live a full and dignified life. I have worked for that belief and, in return, I ask for something that I do not think is unreasonable. I ask for a Scotland that is kind, that cares for its children, that looks after the people who need it the most and that does not open every conversation about childcare with talk of cost or market or economic efficiency but starts instead with what I believe every single person in the chamber agrees on: that children deserve the best start and that mothers deserve to be supported.

Can we please begin there? Let us begin from that common ground and then work outwards towards our differences and, hopefully, at some point resolve them. I do not know every member of the Parliament quite yet, but I choose to believe that everyone here came to do some kind of good. That is the Scotland that I came here for. Can we please try to be worthy of it?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I call Laura Mitchell, and I remind members that there should be not be any interventions during this speech, following which we will be moving to closing speeches.

16:20

Laura Mitchell (Moray) (SNP): It is a privilege to stand here as the new MSP for Moray, the community that raised me and the place that I love. I will work every day to repay the trust that voters in Moray have placed in me. It is particularly special to be the first constituency MSP for Moray to have grown up in Moray. I hope that young people in Moray see that as proof that they belong here in this building.

I of course wish to pay tribute to my predecessors. Richard Lochhead represented Moray for almost two decades. He served in the Parliament from 1999, and he served in government under four First Ministers. He was part of that historic first-ever SNP Cabinet. Throughout my campaign, people spoke to me of their deep affection for Richard, and many expressed sincere sadness at his decision to stand down, which is testament to the way in which he served the people of Moray over so many years. I also wish to recognise the late Margaret Ewing. Margaret was a passionate, determined and fierce advocate for her constituents and for Scotland's cause. To follow in their footsteps is a privilege, and to represent the best constituency in Scotland is a responsibility that I take very seriously.

I promised the good folk of Moray that I would be a strong voice for our community in the Parliament. Today, I will focus my contribution on how the SNP Government's ambitious childcare plans—if we get them right—could be transformative for the young people, families and businesses that I am here to represent.

Moray punches well above its weight in its contribution to Scotland's economy. We are home to world-class manufacturers and iconic food and drink producers such as Johnstons of Elgin, Walker's Shortbread and Baxters—and, of course, Speyside is the spiritual home of Scotch whisky.

Our greatest strength is our people—resilient, community-minded, determined people who want to build a good life for their families. That is exactly what today's debate is about: giving the people the support that they need to build that good life for their families.

Investing in childcare is not just about childcare; it is an investment in our infrastructure and in our economy, and it is central to tackling some of Moray's biggest challenges. Scotland's gender pay gap sits at just under 10 per cent. In Moray, it is almost 15 per cent. We know that women still shoulder most of the caring responsibilities in our communities. Without affordable childcare for nine months and without after-school clubs and holiday provision, too many women will continue to lose earnings, lose opportunities or leave the workforce entirely. I have spoken to so many families in Moray whose experience is just that.

The impact goes far beyond individual families. People who have businesses across Moray tell me that childcare is a major recruitment and retention issue for them. In the lead-up to the election, Moray Chamber of Commerce set out its ambitious plans and key asks to grow and diversify our local economy. That plan was clear. Expanding access to childcare provision is vital to growing Moray's economy.

As we have heard a lot today, childcare is a pressing cost of living issue. We know that families are struggling with more month than money, and childcare costs are putting a real strain on many family budgets. In Moray, where annual pay is among the lowest of any local authority in Scotland, childcare is one of the biggest bills that many households face. For lots of families in my constituency, childcare costs will be as much as their mortgage or their rent. That is why affordable childcare matters. Flexibility matters, too, however. The nature of our local economy means that many parents work shifts, and the cabinet

secretary is right to say that we need a system that fits around families, not the other way around.

I am proud of the progress that has been made by the SNP in government, delivering on the 1,140 hours of provision that is fully funded, which has truly made a difference to households across the country.

More than 7,700 young people in my constituency have benefited from that universal provision. Families have saved thousands of pounds. However, it is right that ministers have the ambition to go further, to expand the childcare offer to nine months, to deliver on wraparound care, to support families during the school holidays and to give parents more freedom to work if that is what they choose.

As we progress with plans to widen our childcare offer, it is vital that we get it right. That means working alongside local authorities and private providers, without whom funded childcare would be undeliverable in constituencies such as mine. It also means ensuring that we have the skilled workforce in our rural communities to deliver equitable access across the country. It means learning from organisations such as Flexible Childcare Services Scotland, which runs the excellent Strathisla children's centre in my constituency.

Every family deserves the support that they need to build a good life. If we get this right, the benefits will be enormous for Scotland's children, for women, for families and for Scotland's economy.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): We move to closing speeches. I call Yi-pei Chou Turvey, who is making their first contribution.

16:26

Yi-pei Chou Turvey (North East Scotland) (LD): I am humbled and proud to be here to serve the residents of North East Scotland. I thank my helpers, family and friends, and the people on the doorsteps who remember the good days of Mike Rumbles, Nicol Stephen, Alison McInnes and—certainly—Robert and Malcolm.

The Scottish Liberal Democrats are back in North East Scotland. I can hardly believe that I have the ability to be there alongside the residents, to work for them, and to work with their businesses, educational institutions, industry and third sector.

One topic that, more than anything, makes me want to help people as fast as possible to have better and fairer lives is the one that we are debating today: childcare. Colleagues are all aware that the United Kingdom has the highest childcare costs in Europe. That is one reason why our economy is not progressing in the way that it should be. When parents have to stop working, reduce their hours or take a step back in their careers, that is not right. It is not right that they are only able to work at certain hours and times and must fit childcare around the hours that their jobs demand. Many parents wait three years between having children in order to afford the childcare. Some do night shifts and weekends shifts, and take turns to cover their childcare. Some have to move closer to their relatives or make their relatives move closer to them.

When the SNP manifesto landed, I was surprised that there was a promise of free childcare and support for childcare for children from nine months onward. Maybe I was a bit delighted, because it is something that I had wanted to see for a long time. However, I also wondered why it took the SNP so long to see the cost of childcare as a Munro in the achievement of a fairer society and in helping to grow our economy. Colleagues, the SNP has had 19 years in government. The babies who were born when the SNP arrived in power can have babies of their own now.

The Scottish Liberal Democrats' goals do not seem as fancy and affordable as that. That is because we budgeted the cost of our manifesto promises. In my ward, the average cost of childcare from 8 am to 5 pm, five days a week—outside the 1,140 hours—is around £1,750, so I question the budget that has been tabled to cover that childcare from the age of nine months.

The Scottish Liberal Democrats know that it is nearly impossible to deliver free breakfast clubs in a rural region. Any members who have worked in a rural council will know that. We know that help with childcare needs to be serious and fair and must help parents to work or to go back to work.

As a councillor in one of the most underfunded council areas, I know that decisions that we make here in Holyrood cascade down to local government, but it is unfair for underfunded councils to have to meet the costs of delivering those decisions, which increases the risk—depending on where in Scotland people live—of already overstretched localities having to find savings elsewhere.

Scottish Liberal Democrats recognise that such promises must be followed by the funding to deliver them, and we will fight for all hard-working families and their support networks, which include grandparents, friends and nurseries, to be able—finally—to achieve their choice in life and to feel that they are treated with fairness and equality.

16:30

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I have to say that I have been greatly encouraged by the contents of many of the first speeches that have been given by SNP and Green members in this debate, because they have focused on the issues relating to capacity, availability and so forth that dog the current system. Frankly, I welcome that approach of greater scrutiny that has been taken. In that respect, I specifically mention the speeches of Calum Kerr and Patricia Gibson, which I thought were very valuable. I intervened on Paul McLennan to invite him to follow suit, but he was unprepared to do so.

I say to SNP members and those on the Government benches that it is all right to say, "Yes, we've made some progress, but we can do better. There are things that we need to fix—there are things that don't quite work for everyone." That is okay—you are allowed to do that in a Parliament. [*Interruption*.] Even I am allowed to do that. The Deputy First Minister is encouraging me to continue in the pattern of my previous contributions in this Parliament, which has been to highlight occasions when things have gone well but to point out where we could do better. That is what I wish to do in this speech.

I want to say that, because I believe in repentance, I welcome much of what has been said from the Government front bench this afternoon. For the past five years, it was my colleagues in the Scottish Conservatives who pointed out all the issues that are now being acknowledged. It is quite delicious to witness ministers now proclaiming to Parliament the virtues of parental choice, flexibility and childcare that is built around family life. That is quite a conversion, but, as I said, I believe in repentance. I welcome that conversion—it is five years late, but I welcome it nevertheless.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): On the subject of repentance, given that Stephen Kerr's party proposed a £1 billion cut in the Scottish budget to pay for tax cuts and that it has said today that it wants to abolish land and buildings transactions tax, how does he propose to fund the requests that his party has made? Will he repent from his party's stupid decisions of the past? [*Interruption*.]

Stephen Kerr: I thank Keith Brown for his helpful intervention. I do not know why members applauded what he said, because the SNP Government has committed to making a cut of more than £1 billion in the cost of the public purse. I look forward to Ivan McKee—Ivan the Terrible, as my colleague Murdo Fraser has christened him—bringing forward those proposals. At that time, perhaps Keith Brown will repent of pouring scorn on the idea that we can do more with less.

The Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform (Ivan McKee): [*Made a request to intervene*.]

Stephen Kerr: I give way to Ivan the Terrible.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I remind members that nicknames should not be used in the chamber.

Ivan McKee: In order to help Stephen Kerr with his arithmetic, I point out that any cuts that Conservative members are proposing are in addition to the measures that we are already taking forward. That needs to be factored in when considering the impact on public service funding.

Stephen Kerr: Well, there is already an identified £5 billion gap in the Government's sums, so I look forward to Ivan McKee bringing forward his radical proposals for public sector reform that, as I said a moment ago, mean that we do more with less—I hope that he recognises that valuable economic rule.

As I said, those are the arguments that the Scottish Conservatives have made, and, in response to Keith Brown's intervention, I say that I do not repent of those at all, because those policies matter. We are not talking simply about social policy or economic policy; we are putting those elements together and are advocating a childcare system that works, that enables fathers and mothers—both parents in the household—to return to work, increase their hours, pursue careers, support their families and contribute to economic growth. I know that economic growth is anathema to the Scottish Greens, but I am delighted to see a consensus forming across the chamber on the need for it. More people in work means higher productivity, stronger businesses, a broader tax base and stronger public finances to sustain the services that we all rely on. That is not ideology; it is practical economics and common sense.

In the time that I have left, I will very quickly go to the questions that I wish to ask the cabinet secretary, because this has to be more than a press release or a few lines in a manifesto.

Where is the detail? Ministers promised support for every child, but what does that mean? Is that full provision for everyone, or is it something that is tapered according to income? Will support be prioritised for households where both parents work? What exactly are ministers proposing? It is not clear.

Where is the workforce plan that was mentioned earlier? A third of nurseries already report staff shortages. We cannot announce a huge childcare expansion and simply hope that staff will appear. Where is the plan to recruit, train and retain the workforce that is needed to make that credible?

Where is the implementation timetable? Ministers say that implementation will happen over the course of the session. Those are fine words, but we in the Opposition parties have learned to interpret such words, because, frankly, they can mean just about anything that the ministers choose them to mean. They are fine words, but where are the milestones? How will Parliament judge whether delivery is actually happening?

Màiri McAllan: Will the member give way?

Stephen Kerr: Yes, I would be delighted.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I am afraid that the member is in his last few seconds.

Stephen Kerr: That is a shame. Am I not allowed to give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): No.

Stephen Kerr: All right. I apologise, cabinet secretary. I would be delighted to continue the conversation in another way.

In my final few seconds, where is—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): You must come to a conclusion.

Stephen Kerr: Yes, I will.

Where is the fully costed delivery model? That is my question.

In conclusion, I say to ministers today that they should not be performative—[*Laughter*.] We have had enough of them congratulating themselves and enough of progressive posturing without practical delivery. Members can all laugh, but this is the most performative Government that they will ever experience.

The Government must tell Parliament how the policy will be paid for and delivered, and when families that are trapped by failures of the current system will finally see meaningful change, because parents need childcare that works.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I call Holly Bruce to make their first speech, to be followed by Amanda Lindsay.

16:38

Holly Bruce (Glasgow Southside) (Green): I declare an interest as an elected member of Glasgow City Council.

It is the honour of my life to stand here today representing the people of Glasgow Southside, a community that has made history by choosing a bold new progressive direction.

Our victory was built on the doorsteps of Govanhill, Pollokshields, Mount Florida, Battlefield, Shawlands, Toryglen and the Gorbals and was driven by the relentless, hard-working dedication of volunteers who built a Green momentum out of the very thing that defines the southside: community campaigning and a demand for tangible change.

This election defined a seismic political shift for the Scottish Greens, and we do not take that lightly. In my own seat, our campaign succeeded because we focused on proving that Green politics is all about the warmth of a well-insulated home, the security of fair rent controls, the freedom of free public transport and the stability of funded childcare. Glasgow Southside sent a clear message. Social and environmental justice are one and the same, and I intend to deliver exactly that.

I realised that we had done something truly special on election night. At around 9.30 pm, a group of us were running—literally—about Govanhill, finishing our get-out-the-vote operation, and a man stopped us in our tracks. He told me that he and his family of 12 had made the leap to voting Green. He ushered his wife and children to the window, excited about what we could achieve. I will be honest: I stood and cried, due to not only exhaustion but a hope for change.

I am not bitter that Lorna Slater beat me to the history books by a mere 15 minutes, to win the first-ever Green constituency seat in Holyrood. I will let Lorna have that one. However, jokes aside, I take the mandate from the southside with the utmost seriousness. My promise is not perfectionism but to do my best every day for the place that I call home.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, Nicola Sturgeon, and her positive track record of serving this country. Being from a somewhat similar beginning—brought up in a working-class family that “doesn’t do politics”, as well as being the first in my family to go to university and study law—I believe that the Southside always pushed Nicola to be better in her politics, and I welcome it to do the same for me.

I also want to be clear about what the Southside rejected during the election. We saw some in the chamber resort to hostility and intimidation tactics. Glasgow Southside overwhelmingly rejected that, and I pledge to my constituents that I will stand with them to ensure that hatred never takes root.

I am sure that it will come to no great surprise to members that I am a feminist. My work on feminist town planning as a councillor in Glasgow City Council attests to that. Now, as an MSP, I will work to bring a feminist lens to all areas.

Addressing the crisis in childcare is a necessary place to start. Audre Lorde wrote that childcare is the

"the battleground for community survival and a collective political necessity."

For too long, women have quietly provided the unpaid labour of care in our communities. I say to members, look around the chamber, into your communities and at your friends and family, and ask yourself, who are the primary caregivers, whose careers are put on hold, who do you see caring for children and who makes up the vast majority of our underpaid and underresourced childcare workforce? The answer is women. Those reflections are not to say that men or non-birthing parents do not want to care for their children. However, it helps to highlight the cultural scripts that are embedded in our society, due to the system that has been built to ensure business as usual. It is time that we disrupt business as usual, in the interests of equality.

I have spent four years banging the drum for childcare provision in Glasgow City Council. I have worked with organisations such as Engender, the Scottish Women's Budget Group and Pregnant Then Screwed on their campaigns. I did what I could with the powers that I had. However, we must now go further.

Just this month, Pregnant Then Screwed launched its annual summer survey. A mother in Glasgow Southside shared that

"It seems unfair that childcare costs so much. I have gone from being the highest earning person in the relationship to the lowest, simply because I had to go part-time. I cannot afford full-time childcare for two children."

Many families are told to rely on informal childcare networks—grandparents, friends and neighbours. However, let us be honest: in 2026, those networks are not readily available to everyone. A lack of proximity, shift patterns—as we heard—ageing relatives and the right of women to pursue their career ambitions mean that we cannot use family favours as a substitute for social infrastructure.

We must ensure that the Parliament stays family friendly—maintaining our creche and robust family policies—so that we practise what we preach. However, we must also demand that the Scottish Government makes good on its commitments to fix the issue of cross-border placements and ensure that no childcare is left to a birthday lottery. I thank the cabinet secretary for accepting our Green amendment to ensure that those immediate issues that are faced by children in Scotland are addressed as soon as possible. I look forward to working with her.

The Green momentum is here because it feels right, necessary and urgent. I step into the chamber not to play the game of status quo but to dismantle the barriers that are faced by working-class families, women and our environment. The southside has trusted us with its historic vote, and I intend to spend every day of this parliamentary session proving that that trust was well placed.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I call Amanda Lindsay to make their first speech.

16:44

Amanda Lindsay (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform): I welcome you, Deputy Presiding Officer, and the cabinet secretary to your posts. I also thank the voters in Central Scotland and Lothians West who put me here.

I agree that every child deserves the best possible start in life. The earliest years shape a child's future, and high-quality, accessible childcare plays a vital role in tackling poverty and supporting working parents. On that, there is common ground, but agreement ends where ideology begins. We are teaching some of our youngest children—boys and girls as young as four—that they might have been born in the wrong body. That is not kindness but a profound and reckless experiment with developing minds. Children who still believe in Santa Claus and the tooth fairy are being asked in nurseries and primary schools to declare a gender identity and to socially transition.

In 2017, LGBT Youth Scotland, an organisation that is funded by this Government, produced guidance that promoted social transition for children and which was adopted across education. Millions of pounds of taxpayers' money have since flowed to such organisations to embed that approach. It directly contradicts the findings of the independent Cass review, which was the most comprehensive examination of gender medicine conducted anywhere in the world. Dr Cass was clear that there is no robust evidence for a child being trans. Social transition is not a neutral act, and schools should not lead children down that path.

The consequences are now visible. Referrals to the Sandyford gender clinic in Glasgow have exploded in recent years, with hundreds of children on waiting lists—some are as young as five. We are setting children on pathways to puberty blockers, cross-sex hormones, infertility and surgery—interventions that Cass described as being built on "weak evidence" and poor clinical practice.

This ideology has harmed women, too. In December 2022, this place passed the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill, which would have allowed any male aged 16 or over to self-

identify as a woman without medical diagnosis. We saw the results of that in cases such as that of Isla Bryson, a double rapist who was housed in a women's prison. Attempts to add basic safeguards were dismissed as bigotry. Only Westminster's use of section 35 prevented that bill from becoming law. Thank God for that safeguard in the union.

We still have male prisoners housed in female prisons. Women are referred to as "chest feeders" and "womb havers" in the NHS, and female nurses face disciplinary action for refusing to undress in front of male colleagues who identify as women, even after the UK Supreme Court confirmed that references to women, as defined in the Equality Act 2010, relate to biological sex. The Scottish Government's attachment to such ideology has come at a heavy cost to child safeguarding, women's rights, free speech and biological reality.

We must change course. We should immediately withdraw guidance that promotes social transition in nurseries and schools. We must prioritise evidence over activism and child protection over adult feelings. The Cass review must not be ignored; it must be implemented.

This is not about prejudice. [*Interruption*.] Members laugh, but it is not—it is about protecting vulnerable children from irreversible decisions and about defending the rights of women to access single-sex spaces and have fair treatment. It is about refusing to lie to children about biological reality, even when that truth is uncomfortable for some.

Scotland has a proud tradition of clear thinking and child-centred policy—let us return to it. Let us put evidence, safeguarding and reality first, especially for the youngest and most vulnerable among us.

16:49

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I begin my first speech of the parliamentary session with broad congratulations to the many people who have to be congratulated. I will not list them all, but they certainly include the front benchers of the Government, who have won a handsome victory in the election just passed. I also congratulate you on your position, Deputy Presiding Officer, and members on the many excellent maiden speeches that have been made today.

The five years will pass in a flash, then people will look at you as if you know what you are doing. I still do not have a clue where the committee rooms are based on their different numbers. If somebody new or an old hand could explain it to me, I would appreciate it.

I have to say that I was particularly impressed—we should not be surprised—by my colleague Katherine Sangster's speech. She touched on the issues of cross-boundary placements for children, which I think all returning MSPs will have experienced in our casework.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic identified the consensus among many—but not all—party manifestos. That provides an opportunity to touch on these substantial and substantive issues for our constituents. Childcare is in all those manifestos because people have told us that the costs are eye watering and that they struggle to get the support that they require. It is right that this is one of the first areas of concern that the Government brings to Parliament in the first weeks of term.

I was struck by Maggie Chapman's example about the joy of a pregnancy being limited by the thought of the cost. It is little wonder that this country has the lowest birth rate in our history. We have to make sure that the social barriers to having families are lowered wherever they can be.

The SNP's record in this area has been, I believe, bedevilled by a lack of definition of the issue. Too often, we have been told that expanding childcare was about the attainment gap and expanding female participation in the workplace. That brings us to the points about policy design that have been covered by many colleagues. The way in which we design the policy will get us different outcomes.

Meghan Gallacher made a good point about whether we can get a realistic assessment at the start of the process of what has been delivered against the last set of promises that were laid out. Let us start from that moment of truth and set that out.

I come to the economic side of the issue with a bit of scepticism. I do not particularly believe that we will get significant economic growth just through growing our workforce—I do not agree with Stephen Kerr's definition of how that economic growth works.

Stephen Kerr: Will the member take an intervention?

Michael Marra: I will do so in a moment. The things that have bedevilled our economic growth in this country have been issues of productivity as well as issues of labour force participation.

Meghan Gallacher: Will the member take an intervention?

Michael Marra: I am sorry, Mr Kerr, but I will take Meghan Gallacher first.

Meghan Gallacher: I thank Michael Marra for giving way. Surely, given how much a policy of

expanding childcare will cost, we need more incentives to get people into work and grow the tax base, which will allow us to look after those services, if there is consensus to do so.

Michael Marra: That certainly plays a role, and expanding the workforce can do that, but the basis of our growth in Scotland over the past 40 years has been additional inputs rather than innovation or total factor productivity growth.

Stephen Kerr: Will the member take an intervention?

Michael Marra: Are we getting time back under the new regime?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Yes.

Michael Marra: I give way to Mr Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful to Michael Marra for giving way, but let us be absolutely clear that workforce skills are one of the key levers in improving productivity in this country. We are talking about a significant proportion of the population—mainly women—who have skills to bring to the workplace. I reject Michael Marra's rebuttal of my economic theory on how we improve productivity, because skilled workforces make all the difference in the world.

Michael Marra: I know that Mr Kerr shares my concern for the education system in this country and agrees that we want it to be improved and returned to its previous glories. Scotland's decline in international league tables has been a cause of great concern for many people in the country.

The policy design questions have already been answered by the Government. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has pointed out that the application of means testing will limit the participation increase. My plea is that we should define what we want to achieve so that we can design the policy appropriately. That is the only way in which we will get it right.

There is a growing consensus that the issues around the PVI sector must be dealt with. However, I caution the cabinet secretary in this area. As long as the Government takes the dysfunctional approach to local government that it has done over the past 20 years, the situation will continue, because local government, when it is pushed into making cuts, will make such decisions.

Finally, in the time that I have, I note that the costs remind us that it is really important that we look at the overall budget for the provision. In the little exchange that took place between Bob Doris and Stephen Kerr about earmarking or ballpark figures, the latter was absolutely correct, as the word "earmarking" implies that the money has been found. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has said that it is far from apparent where the money for the policy is coming from. We are facing a fiscal deficit of £5 billion by 2029-30, and we are looking at additional spending of £1.5 billion by the end of that period.

Bob Doris: Will the member give way?

Michael Marra: I am afraid that the Presiding Officer is nodding at me, so I will have to end my remarks there, but I thank members for this initial debate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Mr Marra and other members may wish to know that our committee rooms are numbered by size, which might help.

16:55

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Siobhian Brown): I thank all members for their contributions, and I recognise that many of us are working parents who rely on childcare. As a working mum myself, I have been juggling childcare for more than 20 years—my youngest is only 10 years old—and I can tell members that, during that time, we have come a long way. Twenty years ago, I had to return to work after nine months—that was just something that I had to do, as it was not financially viable for me to stay at home.

Today's debate provides a strong foundation for consensus.

Emma Roddick (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): I apologise for intervening quite so early in the minister's speech. Does she agree that it is a shame that this very necessary debate about childcare was dragged into the space of a transphobic diatribe earlier? Does she agree that we should condemn that fully and that all children, regardless of whether they are LGBTQ or otherwise, deserve the absolute best care that we can offer and the respect of all members in the Parliament?

Siobhian Brown: I thank the member for the intervention. I personally feel that what she refers to was not a very well-balanced reflection in this debate on childcare.

It is clear that the Parliament is open to finding the right mix of early learning that is needed to support children's development in the early years and a further expansion in childcare that supports parents' ability to take up or sustain employment. The existing early learning and childcare programme is delivering much-needed support, backed by significant investment, but it is now time to deliver year-round support and to provide increased support for varying working patterns. We will also improve the availability of services in

some areas, particularly remote and rural locations, and will keep improving the accessibility services for children with disabilities and additional support needs.

Andrew Baxter (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD): Does the minister recognise that one of the biggest challenges in expanding childcare in rural areas such as my constituency is the lack of childminders? Will she investigate how we can change current regulations to allow those childminders to operate in our excellent rural community facilities rather than from their own homes? Those regulations are a significant barrier to those who wish to enter the sector.

Siobhian Brown: Yes, absolutely—we recognise how vital early learning and childcare is, especially in rural and island areas. I am not sure whether the member is aware of the Scottish Government's support for the Scottish Childminding Association's childminder recruitment and retention programme, which is available in nearly all areas of Scotland. That work has been ongoing as we progress the expansion of childcare, but I am happy to meet the member if he has any concerns about that, now and in the future.

We have also heard that families need childcare support for a much wider range of ages and that the cost of living challenge has further raised the barriers that are presented by high childcare costs for families, pushing some families out of the labour market or forcing working parents to reduce their hours or change their working patterns.

We can deliver on our ambitious plans to expand childcare only through our hard-working, dedicated childcare sector, so I put on record my thanks to those who are delivering our childcare services across the public, private and third and childminding sectors. The cabinet secretary and I hope to meet sector representatives soon to hear their views on our ambitious plans to expand childcare to benefit families, children and the economy.

In 2026-27, we are making £13.4 million available to enable childcare staff who deliver ELC funded hours in private and third sector providers to continue to be paid at least the real living wage. That is on top of the additional £25.7 million in recurring funding that we have delivered to support previous increases.

We remain committed to growing the childminding profession, in order that more families have access to the unique and flexible experience of childcare that childminders can offer. We have made more than £4 million in funding available to the Scottish Childminding Association to enable it to deliver a national three-year programme of childminder recruitment and retention, which is now available in 31 local authority areas.

I recognise those members who made their first contributions in the debate: Katherine Sangster, Angela Ross, Calum Kerr, David Smith, Q Manivannan, Laura Mitchell, Yi-pei Chou Turvey, Holly Bruce and Amanda Lindsay. I look forward to working with them during the parliamentary term.

Turning to members' contributions, Maggie Chapman and Holly Bruce touched on the issues raised in the Greens' amendment, and the cabinet secretary has confirmed that we will support it. We look forward to early discussions with the Greens and COSLA to look at the operational implications of the amendment in the context of the wider reform and expansion of childcare.

I welcome Meghan Gallacher's view that this is a new start and that there are opportunities to work together. She brought up the restrictions in the current model. As we move forward, we need to have more flexibility, so I cannot see how the current model can continue. We are doing that ongoing work.

Meghan Gallacher: I welcome the minister to her new role and look forward to meeting with her in due course. If any expansion is going to be considered, the Government needs to look at the current funding model, to ensure that there is parity between the PVI sector and council-run nurseries. Will the minister today commit to doing that?

Siobhian Brown: We have already done significant work on that. I will come to it later in my speech.

Willie Rennie also mentioned the points that Meghan Gallacher raised and noted the importance of childminders. I reiterate what I said about the ongoing work that the Scottish Government is doing with the SCMA to deliver a three-year programme of childminder recruitment. I agree with Mr Rennie about Mr Dunlop's contribution yesterday. Clearly, he is passionate about delivering the Promise, and I am sure that there will be lots of discussions on that moving forward.

Claire Baker raised some concerns about what support is being put in place. I am not sure whether she is aware of the early adopter community programme that the Scottish Government is rolling out. In our early adopter communities, we are expanding access to childcare activities and to the wider support that she mentioned in order to tackle poverty and improve outcomes for families. I am happy to send further information on that programme to the member if that would be helpful.

I thank Clare Haughey for all her work in her ministerial capacity. She played an integral part in

the initial implementation of the expansion of the 1,140 hours delivery in August 2021.

If I may, I will touch on a few other things. The cross-boundary issue has been raised by several members. We are committed to parents and carers accessing their children's ELC funding at a provider of their choice in the public, private and third or childminding sector. Statutory guidance is clear that, wherever possible, families who access cross-boundary placements should be treated on the same basis as families who access provision locally. I want families across Scotland to benefit from the ambitions that have been set out jointly with our local government partners in our funding follows the child approach. It has been concerning to hear of local decisions that are reported to have reduced flexibility and choice, as well as provider sustainability. We will consider recent developments on the issue in partnership with COSLA.

The issue of funding for the PVI sector has been raised. As the cabinet secretary mentioned earlier, the Diffley report was published in March, and it is important that we take time to reflect on its findings with the sector and local government. As I said at the beginning of my speech, we are providing £13.4 million in support to local authorities to enable them to set sustainable rates for staff in the private and third sector.

A few members asked how this will all be funded. We are facing one of the most challenging fiscal environments in recent years. The Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform, along with the Deputy First Minister, will oversee our collective response to ensuring that funding is prioritised in areas in which it will have the most impact.

However, we are clear about the importance of expanding childcare, as has been set out in the debate, and its potential impact on economic growth. We will prioritise funding in our budgets to ensure that the expansion can be delivered, and we are committed to reprioritising an additional £500 million. The Government will have to contend with difficult decisions, given the exceptionally challenging fiscal context, but, as has been evidenced today, the Parliament is in agreement that we must find ways of improving our offer to families. I look forward to working with colleagues on those important issues.

The approach that we will take will reflect the needs of communities across the country. It will reduce inequalities, which often determine who can and cannot work and the sort of roles that they can do. It will recognise the challenge that parents—predominantly women—across the country face every day in balancing the demands of childcare and work. It will also help to grow the economy by supporting families to work the hours that they want to work. Investing in and expanding childcare will benefit everyone in Scotland.

Business Motion

17:06

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S7M-00151, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 2 June 2026

2.00 pm	Time for Reflection
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by	General Questions
followed by	First Minister's Questions (Backbench Members)
followed by	Ministerial Statement: Phone Free Classrooms
followed by	Scottish Government Debate: Summer of Sport
followed by	Committee Announcements
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.30 pm	Decision Time

Wednesday 3 June 2026

2.00 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by	Scottish Government Debate: Investing, Protecting and Renewing Scotland's NHS
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time

Thursday 4 June 2026

1.30 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
1.30 pm	General Questions
2.00 pm	First Minister's Questions (Party Leaders)
followed by	Scottish Government Debate: Wealth Taxation for Public Services
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time

Tuesday 9 June 2026

2.00 pm	Time for Reflection
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by	General Questions
followed by	First Minister's Questions (Backbench Members)
followed by	Scottish Government Business
followed by	Committee Announcements
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.30 pm	Decision Time
followed by	Members' Business

Wednesday 10 June 2026

2.00 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.00 pm	Portfolio Questions: Deputy First Minister Responsibilities, Finance and Local Government, Parliamentary Business and Veterans; Public Service Reform, Europe, External Affairs and Energy
followed by	Scottish Labour Party Business
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.30 pm	Decision Time
followed by	Members' Business

Thursday 11 June 2026

1.30 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
1.30 pm	General Questions
2.00 pm	First Minister's Questions (Party Leaders)
followed by	Scottish Government Business
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time
followed by	Members' Business

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 8 June 2026, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:07

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is consideration of two Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motion S7M-00152, on the office of the clerk, and motion S7M-00153, on parliamentary recess dates.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that between 1 June 2026 and 31 January 2027, the Office of the Clerk will be open on all days except: Saturdays and Sundays, 11 September, 30 November, 24 December (pm) 25 and 28 December 2026, and 1 and 4 January 2027.

That the Parliament agrees the following parliamentary recess dates under Rule 2.3.1: 27 June to 30 August 2026 (inclusive), 10 to 25 October 2026 (inclusive), 19 December 2026 to 3 January 2027 (inclusive).—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

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

Decision Time

17:07

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): There are six questions to be put as a result of today's business. I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Katherine Sangster is agreed to, the amendments in the names of Meghan Gallacher and Willie Rennie will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S7M-00128.2, in the name of Katherine Sangster, which seeks to amend motion S7M-00128, in the name of Màiri McAllan, on expanding childcare, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

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

17:07

Meeting suspended.

17:10

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We come to the vote on amendment S7M-00128.2, in the name of Katherine Sangster, which seeks to amend motion S7M-00128, in the name of Màiri McAllan. Members should cast their votes now.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley) (SNP)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)
Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Campbell, Kate (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP)
Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Day, Martyn (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)
Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)
Flynn, Stephen (Aberdeen Deeside and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Gethins, Stephen (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)
Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Goodlad, Hannah Mary (Shetland Islands) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)
Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)
Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)
Long, Joe (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)
MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)
Manivannan, Q (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn) (SNP)

McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)
Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)
Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
Roddick, Emma (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Thewliss, Alison (Glasgow Central) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

Against

Bannerman, Max (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Beresford, Senga (South Scotland) (Reform)
Bland, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Currie, Victor (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Kerr, Thomas (Glasgow) (Reform)
Kirkwood, David (South Scotland) (Reform)
Langan, Jamie (South Scotland) (Reform)
Lindsay, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Massey, Duncan (North East Scotland) (Reform)
McDade, Helen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
Offord, Malcolm (West Scotland) (Reform)
Ross, Angela (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform)
Schmulian, Kim (Glasgow) (Reform)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Simpson, Mark (North East Scotland) (Reform)
Smith, David (West Scotland) (Reform)

Abstentions

Baxter, Andrew (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD)
Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh North Western) (LD)
Dijkstra-Downie, Sanne (Edinburgh Northern) (LD)
Dunlop, Duncan (South Scotland) (LD)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)
Green, David (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Hoy, Craig (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
Rennie, Willie (Fife North East) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S7M-00128.2, in the name of Katherine Sangster, is: For 84, Against 16, Abstentions 18.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S7M-00128.1, in the name of Maggie Chapman, which seeks to amend motion S7M-00128, in the name of Màiri McAllan, on expanding childcare, be agreed to. Are we agreed? We are agreed. [*Interruption.*]

Members have to speak up. If I cannot hear you say no, it will be assumed that your vote goes the other way. On this occasion, I was unable to hear some members say no, but we will go to a vote.

Members: Aw!

The Presiding Officer: They have just got here, you know. We have all just got here. Without further ado, voting is open.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley) (SNP)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Baxter, Andrew (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)
Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)
Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Campbell, Kate (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP)
Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Chou Turvey, Yi-pei (North East Scotland) (LD)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh North Western) (LD)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Day, Martyn (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP)
Dijkstra-Downie, Sanne (Edinburgh Northern) (LD)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)
Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Dunlop, Duncan (South Scotland) (LD)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Flynn, Stephen (Aberdeen Deeside and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)
Gethins, Stephen (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)
Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Goodlad, Hannah Mary (Shetland Islands) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)
Green, David (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)
Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hoy, Craig (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)
Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)
Long, Joe (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)
MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)
Manivannan, Q (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)
Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)
Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
Rennie, Willie (Fife North East) (LD)
Roddick, Emma (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Thewliss, Alison (Glasgow Central) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

Against

Bannerman, Max (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Beresford, Senga (South Scotland) (Reform)
Bland, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Currie, Victor (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Kerr, Thomas (Glasgow) (Reform)
Kirkwood, David (South Scotland) (Reform)
Langan, Jamie (South Scotland) (Reform)
Lindsay, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Massey, Duncan (North East Scotland) (Reform)
McDade, Helen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
Offord, Malcolm (West Scotland) (Reform)
Ross, Angela (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform)
Schmulian, Kim (Glasgow) (Reform)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Simpson, Mark (North East Scotland) (Reform)
Smith, David (West Scotland) (Reform)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S7M-00128.1, in the name of Maggie Chapman, is: For 104, Against 16, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S7M-00128, in the name of Màiri McAllan, on expanding childcare, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley) (SNP)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Baxter, Andrew (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)
Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)
Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Campbell, Kate (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP)
Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Chou Turvey, Yi-pei (North East Scotland) (LD)

Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh North Western) (LD)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Day, Martyn (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP)
Dijkstra-Downie, Sanne (Edinburgh Northern) (LD)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)
Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)
Dunlop, Duncan (South Scotland) (LD)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Flynn, Stephen (Aberdeen Deeside and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)
Gethins, Stephen (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)
Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Goodlad, Hannah Mary (Shetland Islands) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)
Green, David (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)
Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hoy, Craig (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)
Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)
Long, Joe (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)
MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)
Manivannan, Q (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)
Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)
Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
Rennie, Willie (Fife North East) (LD)
Roddick, Emma (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Thewliss, Alison (Glasgow Central) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

Against

Bannerman, Max (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Beresford, Senga (South Scotland) (Reform)
Bland, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Currie, Victor (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Kerr, Thomas (Glasgow) (Reform)
Kirkwood, David (South Scotland) (Reform)
Langan, Jamie (South Scotland) (Reform)
Lindsay, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Massey, Duncan (North East Scotland) (Reform)
McDade, Helen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
Offord, Malcolm (West Scotland) (Reform)
Ross, Angela (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform)
Schmulian, Kim (Glasgow) (Reform)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Simpson, Mark (North East Scotland) (Reform)
Smith, David (West Scotland) (Reform)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S7M-00128, in the name of Màiri McAllan, on expanding childcare, as amended, is: For 103, Against 16, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament believes that every child deserves the best start in life and that a child's earliest years are crucial in their development; recognises the importance of high quality, accessible and affordable childcare in tackling poverty, supporting employment opportunities for parents, supporting child development and driving inclusive economic growth; further recognises that the Scottish Government needs to do more to reduce the costs of childcare for working parents, improve the flexibility of the childcare system, support childminders and give parents more choice and control over the childcare that works for their family; calls on it to set out a fully costed delivery plan and timeline for its commitment to extend year-round childcare support to every child from nine months old to the end of primary school, and further agrees that as a first step towards this expansion, the Scottish Government and COSLA must work together to ensure that cross-border placements are available across Scotland, that all children can access the current funded hours the week rather than term after the child's relevant birthday, and that the required flexibility in provision will only be achieved with proper workforce planning.

The Presiding Officer: I propose to ask a single question on two Parliamentary Bureau motions unless any member objects.

As no member objects, the final question is, that motions S7M-00152 and S7M-00153, on the office of the clerk and parliamentary recess dates, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that between 1 June 2026 and 31 January 2027, the Office of the Clerk will be open on all days except: Saturdays and Sundays, 11 September, 30 November, 24 December (pm) 25 and 28 December 2026, and 1 and 4 January 2027.

That the Parliament agrees the following parliamentary recess dates under Rule 2.3.1: 27 June to 30 August 2026 (inclusive), 10 to 25 October 2026 (inclusive), 19 December 2026 to 3 January 2027 (inclusive).

Meeting closed at 17:16.

This is a draft *Official Report* and is subject to correction between publication and archiving, which will take place no later than 35 working days after the date of the meeting. The most up-to-date version is available here: https://www.parliament.scot/chamber-and-committees/official-report

Members and other meeting participants who wish to suggest corrections to their contributions should contact the Official Report.

Official Report
Room T2.20
Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

Email: official.report@parliament.scot
Telephone: 0131 348 5447

The deadline for corrections to this edition is 20 working days after the date of publication.

Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

All documents are available on
the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.parliament.scot

Information on non-endorsed print suppliers
is available here:

www.parliament.scot/documents

For information on the Scottish Parliament contact
Public Information on:

Telephone: 0131 348 5000
Textphone: 0800 092 7100
Email: sp.info@parliament.scot

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba