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# Scottish Parliament

Thursday 11 June 2026

*[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 13:30]*

## General Question Time

**The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson):** The first item of business is general question time. In order to get in as many people as possible, I would prefer short and succinct questions and answers to match.

### Patient Waiting Times (Moray)

1. **Laura Mitchell (Moray) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to reduce waiting times for patients in Moray. (S7O-00049)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care (Angela Constance):** My commitment to tackle long waits is unwavering. To date this year, we have invested an additional £100 million to increase capacity and support boards, including NHS Grampian, to build on the progress that we have made in reducing long waits. We have made real and sustained progress nationally, with waits of more than 52 weeks for new out-patient appointments falling for 11 consecutive months and in-patient and day-case waits reducing for 15 months in a row. Since July 2025, new out-patient waits of more than a year have fallen by around 76 per cent and in-patient and day-case waits have fallen by around 47 per cent.

**Laura Mitchell:** I recognise the progress that has been made in recent months to tackle the longest waits for secondary care patients. However, I have been contacted by several constituents who continue to face lengthy waiting times for orthopaedic surgery. Will the Scottish Government set out what action is being taken and how it is supporting NHS Grampian to ensure that waiting times in Moray are coming down for those on orthopaedics waiting lists?

**Angela Constance:** Orthopaedics remains a priority as we continue to focus on the reduction of long waits, which means that in-patient and day-case waits of more than 52 weeks have reduced by almost half. We are also increasing orthopaedics capacity through our national treatment centres, including NHS Golden Jubilee, which is now the largest hip and knee replacement centre in the United Kingdom. Alongside that, we are working closely with NHS Grampian to maximise local capacity, improve theatre utilisation and ensure that patients who have been waiting the longest are prioritised. Yesterday, I met the chief executive officer of NHS Grampian for the first time, and we discussed that issue, among other matters.

### Barra and Vatersay Community Campus

2. **Donald MacKinnon (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the current status of the Barra and Vatersay community campus project. (S7O-00050)

**The Minister for Innovation, Technology and Tertiary Education (Ben Macpherson):** I welcome Donald MacKinnon to the chamber. I look forward to working constructively with him and I pay tribute to his predecessor, Alasdair Allan.

In answer to his important question, the Barra and Vatersay community campus project was included in our programme for government, and the Scottish Government remains firmly committed to its delivery, working in close partnership with the local council and NHS Western Isles. We have held a number of constructive meetings with the council and the national health service to progress that important project. Following our meeting in March, partners are now actively developing a business case. We look forward to the project continuing to move forward as quickly as practicable.

**Donald MacKinnon:** Although I welcome the minister's commitment to the project, it is now 20 years since it was acknowledged that St Brendan's hospital was in need of replacement. The people of Barra and Vatersay have had to deal with repeated false starts, delays and broken promises in that time. Meanwhile, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar has warned that delays are increasing the risks associated with maintaining the existing school buildings, the replacement of which is an important part of the project.

**The Presiding Officer:** Please ask a question.

**Donald MacKinnon:** I plan to be in Barra tomorrow. Can the minister give me a timeline for the delivery of the long-promised campus project so that I can give my constituents in Barra the reassurance that it will finally become a reality?

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**Ben Macpherson:** I underlined our commitment in my first answer: we are working closely with partners, as the majority funder, and we will consider the business case through a robust assurance and approval process once it is submitted.

Let us not look back—let us look forward and work together. Following his meeting tomorrow, Mr MacKinnon should keep in touch with the Scottish Government on the project. The Scottish Government's senior responsible officer will be in place shortly, so let us continue that engagement and deliver the project for the people we both serve.

### **NHS Tayside (Recruitment Freeze)**

**3. Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of any impact of NHS Tayside's recruitment freeze on patient care and waiting times across Dundee and the wider Tayside region. (S7O-00051)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care (Angela Constance):** The Scottish Government leads on the co-ordination of national activity designed to grow and retain the national health service workforce in line with service need. Decisions on the staffing of individual services are matters for health boards, which should ensure that they have sufficient, suitably qualified staff in line with the requirements of the Health and Care (Staffing) (Scotland) Act 2019.

Boards are also responsible for managing service performance, supported by the NHS Scotland national centre for sustainable delivery. The most recent data shows sustained improvement in planned care performance across the system, including in NHS Tayside. We expect boards to build on the progress in the period ahead.

**Michael Marra:** I find deeply disappointing the idea that the Government does not have any position on a recruitment freeze in NHS Tayside for critical posts involved in care. The cabinet secretary should know that there are significant delays—for instance, in gynaecological care and women's health—across NHS Tayside, which is just one example of many shortfalls. What will the Government do to ensure that health boards are not put in the position of having widespread recruitment freezes that impact on patient care?

**Angela Constance:** I very much appreciate Mr Marra's concern, even if I nonetheless believe that it is somewhat misplaced. He might be relieved to know that NHS Tayside is making very clear progress in specialties including gynaecology, for example, where the number of people waiting has reduced from 1,348 to 11. There has also been good progress in waits for ophthalmology. The number of NHS Tayside staff has increased by 9.4 per cent over the past five years.

**Heather Anderson (Dundee City West) (SNP):** I thank Mr Marra for his interest in waiting times across NHS Tayside, and I share some of his concerns. However, I am very conscious that the Scottish National Party Government has achieved month-on-month reductions in waiting times for 11 months in a row. I would appreciate it if the cabinet secretary could update us on how the Scottish Government will build on that progress and deliver for patients not just in Dundee but across Scotland as a whole.

**Angela Constance:** We are committed to building on progress. There is always more to do. Since July last year, long waits have fallen significantly, with new out-patient waits of more than a year down by 76 per cent and in-patient day-case waits of more than a year down by almost half. That has been underpinned by increased activity that is delivered by our dedicated staff, including more than 168,000 additional appointments and procedures last year and a 7 per cent increase in operations over the past 12 months.

### **Scotland's Rural College (Elmwood Campus)**

**4. Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update regarding the future of the Elmwood campus of Scotland's Rural College in Cupar. (S7O-00052)

**The Minister for Innovation, Technology and Tertiary Education (Ben Macpherson):** I thank Julie MacDougall for raising this important issue. Although SRUC is an autonomous institution with responsibility for its own decisions in relation to provision and facilities at Elmwood, I would expect it to take into account the needs of students, staff and the wider community.

I note that SRUC has stated its commitment to retaining a presence at Elmwood and that there are no plans for a closure of the campus. The Scottish Government also continues to work closely with the tertiary sector to secure a sustainable and successful future through its framework for universities and the college sector of the future workstream.

**Julie MacDougall:** I have recently met farmers across the region who are seriously concerned about the lack of available opportunities for the next generation of skilled rural workers. Courses covering horticulture,

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animal care and green-keeping were unique local offerings at Elmwood. If Elmwood were to permanently close down, young people in Fife and the surrounding areas would either have to travel huge distances to study the same courses or be completely closed off from learning some of those vital skills.

Will the Scottish Government provide assurances to the farmers and young people across my region that the bespoke courses and offerings at Elmwood will be preserved and that it will do everything in its power to ensure that the campus remains open and active?

**Ben Macpherson:** I refer to my first answer, but I recognise the importance of the Elmwood campus and that consideration of its future is relevant to skills provision, which was raised by the member, and the local community. If the member wants to write to me with feedback from their engagement with local farmers, that would be interesting and helpful to see.

I also emphasise that SRUC has advised that animal care provision will remain on offer at its other campuses, with horticulture and gamekeeping provision remaining on offer at Elmwood. It is important that we recognise that. However, I would appreciate further engagement; indeed, I had the pleasure of meeting campaigners about Elmwood's future in the spring, and they can engage with me further.

**The Presiding Officer:** I will take a supplementary question from Michelle Campbell.

**Michelle Campbell (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP):** First and foremost, I thank the minister for his dedication to this area. I am glad to see him return as the minister.

The sustainability of Scotland's college sector is vital in strengthening our skilled workforce and supporting our young people into positive destinations. I have Glasgow Clyde College in my constituency, and West College Scotland in the neighbouring constituency of Paisley also serves my constituents. Will the minister advise how the Scottish Government is engaging with key stakeholders to ensure that colleges across Scotland remain an accessible pathway?

**The Presiding Officer:** That is a little bit off the main question. Minister, do you wish to respond?

**Ben Macpherson:** I thank Michelle Campbell for her kind words, and I welcome her to the chamber. I would simply emphasise that she raises important points that are relevant both to the two colleges that she mentioned, which are either in her constituency or serve her constituents, and to SRUC, which was raised in the previous question. Our college sector is crucial to our future, communities, economy and the success of our country. On Tuesday, I was at a conference with stakeholders, including college principals and Colleges Scotland. There is a real determination in the sector to look forward and to think about how we build the sector to meet our skills need and to help people achieve in their lives. I hope that the whole chamber will work constructively with me to help deliver that.

**The Presiding Officer:** I will take a supplementary question from Willie Rennie.

**Willie Rennie (Fife North East) (LD):** The minister will know that Professor Sir Ian Boyd has been commissioned by the board of SRUC to produce a report into the future of the institution in north-east Fife and Cupar for the longer term—a vision that has been long awaited. That report has now been handed over to the board. When it is published, will the minister and the Government get right behind it and make sure that it turns into reality?

**Ben Macpherson:** As Willie Rennie referred to, the report by Professor Sir Ian Boyd will be shared publicly, alongside SRUC's response, after its board meeting later this month. As Willie Rennie will do, the Government and I will consider that report carefully. I look forward to engaging with the report, and to engaging with Willie Rennie and all other interested members about the future of SRUC, particularly with regard to the Elmwood campus.

## **Business Support**

5. **Calum Kerr (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the steps it is taking to support businesses to further grow the Scottish economy. (S7O-00053)

**The Minister for Business and Fair Work (Tom Arthur):** Although the biggest levers for boosting economic growth remain reserved to Westminster, the Scottish Government is creating conditions for growth and thriving businesses here in Scotland. We are streamlining regulatory processes for business while investing in skills, employability and housing, enabling firms to expand and create jobs. We back innovative and high-growth businesses through programmes such as Techscaler, supporting the creation and scaling of tech start-ups. Scotland remains the top United Kingdom foreign direct investment location outside of London, recently securing investments such as Ryanair's £40 million investment at Prestwick airport, creating 450 jobs, and the £445 million Center Parcs investment in Hawick, supporting 1,300 jobs.

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**Calum Kerr:** I thank the minister for his comprehensive answer. I also welcome the quick engagement after the election with the Confederation of British Industry and businesses by the First Minister, the cabinet secretary and the minister himself.

I have recently been contacted by a constituent who has raised concerns about the interaction between recent property revaluations and the thresholds in the small business bonus scheme. The scheme has been fantastic in supporting our small businesses, with more than 100,000 properties benefiting from 100 per cent relief. What steps is the Scottish Government taking to ensure that there is fairness in the business rates system and that as many businesses as possible continue to benefit?

**Tom Arthur:** I thank Calum Kerr for raising those matters pertaining to non-domestic rates. The small business bonus scheme has garnered much support in the business community. The Federation of Small Businesses in particular has been very forthright in advocating on its behalf. All of us, in our roles as constituency and regional MSPs, will be able to identify many businesses in our town centres, villages and high streets that benefit from the SBBS. As Calum Kerr highlighted, it benefits around 100,000 businesses across Scotland.

More broadly, we recognise that specific concerns have been raised about non-domestic rates by a range of sectors, particularly hospitality. We are committed to engaging constructively, and we will soon undertake a comprehensive review of non-domestic rates, which builds on our commitment to examine the impact and configuration of all our reliefs in advance of the next revaluation on 1 April 2029.

**Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con):** I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests. Over the past couple of months, businesses in the Borders have come to me concerned about the extreme rise in their non-domestic rates. Passing the buck on the methodology to the assessor will not wash with businesses, nor will waiting for the Gill review. Will the minister help those businesses to contribute to their local economy by intervening in this unfair process?

**Tom Arthur:** I recognise the concerns that have been expressed by Rachael Hamilton on behalf of businesses in her constituency. I assure her that the Government takes those matters seriously. The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport and I will engage closely with our colleague the Minister for Public Finance on those matters. Decisions on non-domestic rates in relation to reliefs and poundage are considered, as would be expected, as part of the annual budget process, so there is an opportunity for members from across the chamber to make representations to the Government.

I assure Rachael Hamilton that we are cognisant of the concerns that have been raised and that we are committed to constructive engagement, particularly, as I said in my previous answer, ahead of the next revaluation.

### **National Litter and Fly-tipping Strategy**

6. **Kate Campbell (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to support people reporting and providing evidence of fly-tipping and other antisocial behaviour to enable enforcement action to be taken, as part of its national litter and fly-tipping strategy. (S7O-00054)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Rural Affairs (Gillian Martin):** People should report fly-tipping incidents and share any relevant evidence with their local authority, which, in most cases, leads on investigation and enforcement. The national litter and fly-tipping strategy is clear on the importance of effective reporting and evidence gathering in supporting enforcement action. Through the strategy, we are working with partners including the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and Keep Scotland Beautiful to improve the quality of fly-tipping data, strengthen intelligence sharing and support a more co-ordinated approach to tackling fly-tipping and environmental crime. Updated action plans are published annually on the Scottish Government website.

**Kate Campbell:** A barrier to reporting for many people is that they may be asked to make a statement to back up any photographic evidence that they have provided, and they might need to give evidence in court against their neighbours. Will the cabinet secretary support exploring a model of third-party reporting sites with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and agencies such as the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency to enable people to provide evidence and report antisocial behaviour anonymously, and will she meet me to discuss that?

**Gillian Martin:** I recognise that, for some people and in many instances, concerns about potentially providing a statement or giving evidence in court may act as a barrier to reporting antisocial behaviour. We want to better understand concerns and, where possible, work with partners to address them, so that people feel able and supported to come forward. There are already routes such as Crimestoppers to provide information anonymously where criminal activity, including large-scale illegal dumping, is suspected. The

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Scottish Government will continue to work with local authorities, COSLA and other partners to consider ways to remove barriers to reporting fly-tipping and supporting effective enforcement.

### **E-bikes, E-scooters and Quad Bikes (Police Powers)**

**7. Bob Doris (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what consideration it is giving to increasing the powers of the police to confiscate and retain e-bikes, e-scooters and quad bikes used antisocially or in connection with criminal offending. (S7O-00055)

**The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Kirsten Oswald):** The Scottish Government is working with Police Scotland to ensure that we implement our manifesto commitment to increase the powers of the police to tackle antisocial and criminal use of illegal e-bikes and e-scooters. We are reviewing police vehicle seizure and disposal powers, including the retention period. I am committed to doing all that we can to support enforcement and I am open to further legislative action. Although the law is already clear that the police can seize non-compliant or unlicensed e-bikes and e-scooters on public roads, we want to do more to protect the public. Crucially, we continue to urge the United Kingdom Government to use its reserved powers regarding vehicle registration for those vehicles.

**Bob Doris:** I welcome the minister to her place and thank her for that answer. In the previous parliamentary session, I met ministers on several occasions to raise concerns over the illegal use of such vehicles. I hope that we continue to have a similar relationship in this session.

I was pleased to see the Scottish National Party manifesto commitment on the issue. There is an intended consultation to update the Police (Retention and Disposal of Motor Vehicles) Regulations 2002, as mentioned by the minister. What stage is the consultation at? Does the minister agree that greater fines and greater powers in relation to retention and disposal must be actively considered as key deterrents to the antisocial behaviour that is impacting on the communities that I represent?

**Kirsten Oswald:** I am grateful to Bob Doris for his continued interest in this issue. I will be happy to meet him and other members from across the chamber to hear from them and update them on progress. We very much understand the concerns.

As Bob Doris mentioned, work and conversations are ongoing, including with the police. We are committed to increasing the police powers to confiscate and retain illegal e-bikes and e-scooters. We will continue the regular meeting process with Police Scotland and partners, and I am happy to write to Mr Doris with more details, if he would find that helpful.

**Kate Nevens (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green):** The Workers Observatory has found that delivery riders who use e-bikes in Edinburgh are frequently the target of racially abusive behaviour, but there is very little public discussion of the exploitative employment practices that force gig workers to race around the city. We know that people of colour who are overrepresented in that insecure occupation can be subject to racist patterns of policing. What assurances can the minister give that the use of powers for the police to confiscate e-bikes is subject to equalities impact assessment to guard against further marginalising already highly marginalised delivery riders?

**Kirsten Oswald:** I am grateful to Kate Nevens for that question, which is important and raises a complexity in this area that we need to be mindful of. If anyone has a concern about any kind of illegal activity or if they feel threatened or unsafe, they should absolutely contact the police. The police have specific powers to deal with crime and will do so, including under the Public Order Act 1986. However, the specifics of what Kate Nevens has raised are in a different area of law. I am happy to meet her to discuss that and would welcome a further conversation. The key priority is for people to make the police aware, if they have any concerns, so that the police can act.

### **Early Learning and Childcare**

**8. Katherine Sangster (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government, regarding its policy providing 1,140 hours of funded early learning and childcare, what action it is taking to address any parental concerns about flexibility and choice. (S7O-00056)

**The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Siobhian Brown):** Flexibility and choice are fundamental to our offer of 1,140 hours of funded ELC for all three and four-year-olds, as well as eligible two-year-olds. The latest ELC census reported that uptake by three and four-year-olds remains near universal, with a recent survey showing that 90 per cent of parents and carers were satisfied that they had been offered the flexibility to use funded hours in a way that met their family's needs. We know that there is more to do, and we will consider how best to ensure that childcare offers the flexibility that families need as we develop our plans to expand provision.

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**Katherine Sangster:** One of my constituents in Danderhall has got in touch about their difficulty in securing a funded place that is convenient for their working and living arrangements. The only option that is available to them would mean crossing the infamous Sheriffhall roundabout four times a day. My constituent needs a solution now, not in years to come. Can the minister reassure my constituent that action will be taken now to resolve the inflexibility in the current system and that it will not wait until ELC is expanded further?

**Siobhian Brown:** I am not sure of Katherine Sangster's constituent's situation or of whether it is between local authorities, which is one of the issues that was raised in the childcare debate several weeks ago. I am happy to take that on. As I said, we are still working on this, and I would hope that, moving forward, local authorities will work together to ensure that parents and families can get the childcare that they need.

#### **Berwick Bank Offshore Wind Farm (Environmental Assessment)**

**9. Miles Briggs (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what further assessment it has made of any impact on the environment following the granting of planning consent for the Berwick Bank offshore wind farm, in light of the significant updates and changes to guidance and regulations since consent was granted. (S7O-00057)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform (Ivan McKee):** The Scottish ministers comprehensively examined that application, and the decision in July 2025 to grant consent was taken after careful consideration of the project's potential environmental impact and its potential impact on other users of the sea. It is a requirement of the consent that the developer must deliver compensation to address the environmental impacts of the wind farm, alongside taking measures to mitigate and minimise the impact on other sea users. The Scottish ministers will consider any application to vary the section 36 consent in line with current regulations.

**Miles Briggs:** In the cabinet secretary's response, he stated that SSE Renewables will compensate for any predicted adverse impacts. In the company's own impact assessment, there are projections that the development could kill 4,000 gannets, guillemots, kittiwakes, puffins and razorbills every year—and ministers seem to see that as an acceptable cost. How does the cabinet secretary intend to keep that under constant review and how will potential ongoing negative environmental impacts be reported to the Parliament?

**Ivan McKee:** The Electricity Act 1989 controls that. The Scottish Government has worked collaboratively with the United Kingdom Government in the past few years to reform aspects of the habitat regulations for wind, with the dual purpose of enabling a more flexible approach to securing compensatory measures and of maximising opportunities for investment. The Scottish Government is working at pace on Scottish statutory guidance, following a period of stakeholder engagement on draft guidance; we aim to publish that as soon as possible. That will provide practical guidance on how the regulations for offshore wind in Scotland operate with regard to compensation.

#### **Pre-hospital Critical Care Service (Edinburgh and East of Scotland)**

**10. Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the commissioning of a new pre-hospital critical care service for Edinburgh and the east of Scotland. (S7O-00058)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care (Angela Constance):** The Scottish Ambulance Service has deployed a business case for a new pre-hospital critical care service for Edinburgh and the east of Scotland, which will be considered under the new national health service subnational planning structures. It is the responsibility of NHS boards to make appropriate operational decisions to ensure a high level of quality in emergency medical care for the members of their communities.

**Daniel Johnson:** It has been two years since the Medic One helicopter was grounded. The Scottish trauma audit group has stated that, since then, only 3 per cent of the population of Edinburgh and the south-east of Scotland receive life-saving advance pre-hospital care. The comparable figure for Glasgow and the west of Scotland is 32 per cent. That is a ten-fold difference.

The business case was nine months late and has been on ministerial desks since March. When will we get a decision about this life-saving service for Edinburgh and the whole of the east of Scotland?

**Angela Constance:** I appreciate the member's interest in the issue; I know that he has asked several questions in that area, as have other members. He is correct that the business case was submitted in March this year. That business case was requested in 2023 and has only now been submitted. As I said in my original answer, it will be a matter for the subnational planning structure, which is best placed to make that decision. The decision must be consistent with the needs of the population base and the planning must take place across NHS and territorial boundaries.

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This is an important piece of work. The member will recall the long history of it, which I have looked into—the decision was taken by NHS Lothian, back in 2024, and it consulted neither the Scottish Government nor the Scottish trauma network. My expectation remains the same: that NHS boards all ensure that high level of emergency medical care for their communities.

**The Presiding Officer:** That concludes general question time.

## **First Minister's Question Time**

### **Party Leaders**

13:59

**The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson):** The next item of business is First Minister's question time for party leaders. The first question will be asked by Anas Sarwar.

#### **Trust in Politics**

1. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** I apologise, Presiding Officer—you caught me off guard by starting 30 seconds early.

I start by wishing the Scotland team and the tartan army the best of luck as the world cup kicks off later today. [*Applause.*] I am sure that the one thing that unites all of us in the chamber is our support for Steve Clarke and the Scotland team.

Speaking of unity, like many people, I was horrified and angered by the knife attack in Belfast. Justice must be done and lessons must be learned, but there is never any justification for such horror and anger to turn into violence, racism and disorder on our streets. Those who are being intimidated on our streets or in our places of worship—whether that is a mosque, a synagogue or any other faith centre—must hear loudly and clearly from us all that this is not who we are, that those who seek to divide us do not speak for us and that Scotland belongs to us all.

As we face the rising challenge of disillusionment with and mistrust of our politics and our institutions, does the First Minister agree that rebuilding and restoring such trust is the responsibility of all us who want the politics of hatred to be defeated?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** I will begin on the question of the world cup—I associate myself directly with Mr Sarwar's comments. I look forward enormously to travelling to Boston, which I will do later on, after question time, to support Scotland on Saturday evening. I extend my warmest wishes to Steve Clarke, Andy Robertson and the whole of the Scotland men's team, who have done Scotland proud in getting to the world cup. We look forward enormously to their success.

To contribute to the occasion, I decided to wear my no Scotland, no party tie to First Minister's question time today. I hope that that will bring some good cheer to the team at the weekend.

On the serious issue of disorder, I agree 100 per cent with what Mr Sarwar said. There is a rising tide of hateful rhetoric spreading in our society, which is inciting people to behave in a reckless, aggressive and thuggish fashion. This is a peaceful country. Scotland is a welcoming country, and I will exercise the leadership—as, I know, will Mr Sarwar—to make sure that Scotland always remains a tolerant, welcoming and inclusive country.

**Anas Sarwar:** I thank the First Minister for that response and wish him well on his travels. I wish even more that Scotland gets the results that it needs at the world cup.

On the issue of trust, last night, the Scottish National Party voted down an inquiry into the lessons and implications of operation branchform and the conviction of Peter Murrell. The reason given was that the SNP believed that that proposal was an attempt by political rivals to investigate the inner workings of another political party. As I made clear yesterday, that is not my intention.

The crimes of Peter Murrell are for Peter Murrell, but issues have been raised that go beyond the internal workings of the SNP. There are legitimate questions for Police Scotland, the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, the Lord Advocate, the Electoral Commission, His Majesty's Revenue and Customs and others, including the Scottish Legal Aid Board, on why a wealthy man, who owns property abroad and says that he has the means to immediately pay back £400,000, had access to legal aid. Scots demand answers to those valid questions.

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John Swinney says that he wants to avoid an inquiry into the inner workings of the SNP. I agree. So, will he work on a cross-party basis to agree the terms of reference, the scope and the remit of any parliamentary inquiry before supporting any such inquiry?

**The First Minister:** If that was an attempt by Mr Sarwar to provide some order and clarity on his position, it was absolutely necessary, because anyone who listened to the incoherent gibberish that Jackie Baillie came out with on the radio this morning in trying to defend the Labour position will know that Labour has just been trying to score grubby political points on this whole issue for weeks. Labour should be ashamed.

We have gone through a process in which my party has been the victim of an embezzlement, which has been the subject of a criminal case that has been researched by Police Scotland and put in front of the Crown, and for which a successful prosecution has been obtained. That is what has happened in this particular case. I do not believe that there is a case for an independent inquiry or a parliamentary inquiry into that issue, because that work has been done by the police, and no organisation can take forward an investigation into the issue in a more sophisticated way than the police can. Mr Sarwar should leave it at that.

**Anas Sarwar:** I am not asking to get into the inner workings of the police investigation or of operation branchform; I am talking about the institutions in this country and about legitimate questions. Following the letter from the Government this morning, I have written to the Electoral Commission saying that we will support, and engage in, any review of party finances. My question is about operation branchform, its implications and the lessons to be learned from it. That was an investigation into the governing party of Scotland and it would further undermine public trust and confidence, and our democracy, if the governing party were now to block any attempt to look at the lessons and implications of that investigation and of the subsequent convictions.

Rebuilding trust is a task for us all, which is why, today, I have written to all political parties, asking them to meet and to start the work of agreeing on the terms of reference for and scope of any potential inquiry. That should be a process that the SNP and the Greens are willing to engage with in good faith. The governance of the SNP is for John Swinney and the SNP, but scrutiny of the Government and our institutions is for Parliament and parliamentarians—it is, in fact, our duty. So, I ask John Swinney whether he is prepared to confront a culture of secrecy and cover-up and to put country before party by agreeing the terms of a meaningful inquiry.

**The First Minister:** What does Mr Sarwar think we are engaged in just now? This is scrutiny. I am here to answer questions in front of Parliament, twice a week—as are all my ministers on a regular basis—so that the Government is put under scrutiny.

Mr Sarwar keeps on saying that he does not want an internal investigation into the SNP, but that is exactly what he has just made the case for and was the case that failed in Parliament yesterday. Mr Sarwar is going to have to accept that democratic outcomes must take their course. The first one he is going to have to accept is that Parliament rejected the argument that he put forward. *[Interruption.]*

**The Presiding Officer:** Excuse me, First Minister. Mr Sarwar, if you are asking a question, do the First Minister and those in the chamber the courtesy of letting him answer the question that you have asked.

**The First Minister:** Mr Sarwar is setting out an argument about examining a case that Parliament democratically rejected yesterday. That was what Parliament decided.

The other democratic outcome that Mr Sarwar will have to come to terms with is the outcome of the election, when all those issues were thrown about by Mr Sarwar. He came to Parliament, week after week, issuing comments, smearing his opponents, smearing me, my Government and the SNP—and the people decided to send fewer Labour MSPs to this Parliament as a consequence of the election. I simply say to Mr Sarwar that it is time that he acknowledged the failure of his strategy to hold this Government to account and that he should come up with a better strategy than the one he is pursuing.

## **Immigration**

**2. Malcolm Offord (West Scotland) (Reform):** I start by adding my best wishes and sending the best of luck to the Scotland team in America. Let us hope that they get to the last 16 for the first time since 1974.

At First Minister's question time, Reform Scotland will continue to focus on the issues that matter most to voters in Scotland, which are that energy costs are too high, taxes are too high and immigration is too high. Therefore, at this, my third FMQs, I wish to focus on immigration. *[Interruption.]*

**The Presiding Officer:** I remind you that immigration is a reserved matter and does not come under the First Minister's remit.

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**Malcolm Offord:** There is a specific Scottish matter that I want to raise in relation to immigration, which I will explain now.

Thousands of the immigrants who arrive illegally in the United Kingdom come, when they are granted leave to remain, specifically to Scotland and present as homeless, because local authorities here have less discretion than those in England have about how they allocate accommodation. As a result, councils across Scotland are being forced to indefinitely pause the allocation of permanent accommodation to local Scots who have been on social housing waiting lists—in some cases, for years—in order to provide temporary accommodation to the new arrivals instead.

My question for the First Minister is whether he will now restore to Scottish local authorities the powers to put local Scots first.

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** I think that Mr Offord is under a misconception about the local connection rules. The change to the local connection rules by this Government in 2022 did not change the local connection rules for refugee households. The local connection rules relating to refugee households have been in place for, I would think, in excess of 20 years in the current context, so Mr Offord is fundamentally wrong in the point that he puts to me.

However, a deeper point is exposed by the question that Mr Offord puts to me. Mr Offord is trying to pursue an issue on immigration at the same time as his party is associated with the stirring up of hatred within our society, and I want to call it out for what it is. During the election campaign, I made it abundantly clear that I would not co-operate with Reform in this Parliament because of the way in which it pursues this issue, which incites racial hatred in our society. I am glad that I took that stance in the election, and I am determined to sustain it during this session of the Parliament.

**Helen McDade (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

**The Presiding Officer:** We take points of order only at the end of First Minister's question time.

**Malcolm Offord:** The First Minister has not answered my question. Instead, he has thrown false accusations at my party.

Let me address directly the terrible riots that we have seen in Belfast. First, I condemn the brutal and unprovoked attack on Stephen Ogilvie, and, secondly, I echo his family in saying that violent protest is not the answer. Whatever the problem is, violence is not the answer, but that is not to ignore the problem. The reality is that there is a very real problem with immigration, which was created by the Tories and is now being exacerbated by Labour. Weak politicians have created this unrest in our society. If we, the politicians, do not fix it democratically, other, less savoury actors will fill that vacuum.

In Scotland, will the First Minister now take immediate action to restore the priority need for scarce housing resources to local Scots ahead of strangers?

**The First Minister:** On Malcolm Offord's question, I simply point out to him that the problem that was created by the Conservatives, in his words, was created by a Conservative Party of which he was a member and a serving Government minister. It stretches credulity for Mr Offord to come here and present himself as some form of a solution to a problem that he allegedly, in his own words, created in the first place.

I want to explore some of the comments that Mr Offord has made on the issues around protest, because I fear that the issues around "less savoury" characters are not too far from home.

On Tuesday, there was disorder in the streets of Scotland, particularly in the city of Glasgow, which I unreservedly condemn, and I condemned it yesterday. At the same time as I was condemning it, Thomas Kerr, who is sitting beside Mr Offord, was saying to people that it was important that people went out and protested last night. At the same time, I was making it abundantly clear that, in the current context, nobody—although they have democratic rights—should be out protesting last night, given the climate that we are in. That was my advice: for people not to protest. Mr Kerr said that people should get out and protest.

What happened last night? In Greenock, which I know is a town that is very close to Mr Offord's heart, police officers were attacked, two officers sustained minor injuries and damage was caused to police vehicles as the police were simply doing their duty of protecting the citizens of our country. Mr Offord should condemn his colleague Thomas Kerr right now. [*Applause.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** Let Mr Offord speak.

**Malcolm Offord:** I say, once again, unequivocally, that we condemn violence. Violence is not the way to protest. However, protest is a valid mechanism to make one's views heard when in frustration. In all the

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interviews that Thomas Kerr gave yesterday, he was very clear that there is no line to cross into violence, but a right to protest remains valid. Thomas Kerr says that as a local Glaswegian.

Following a recent freedom of information request, *The Times* showed that Glasgow has become home to 20 refugees per week in the past year, with the vast majority of those being fighting-age men of undisclosed nationality. *[Interruption.]*

**The Presiding Officer:** Excuse me—let him finish.

**Malcolm Offord:** That is unsustainable. We all agree on that, sensibly. However, sadly, it is not surprising, because the First Minister wore a T-shirt that said, “I welcome refugees”, while advocating open borders. I say to the First Minister that we cannot have that. These are the consequences.

We are asking the First Minister to reapply local connection rules, which he can do, to alleviate the pressures on the big issue of social housing. That will rebalance the system, once again, to put our own people first.

The Scottish National Party and every other party in the chamber have championed mass uncontrolled immigration—

**The Presiding Officer:** Will you wind up your question, please?

**Malcolm Offord:** However, Reform Scotland does not do that. I ask the First Minister, one last time, whether he will immediately reintroduce the priority need and local connection rule to our housing system and finally put Scotland first.

**The First Minister:** I think that what the Parliament and the country have just heard for the first time in this parliamentary session is exactly what I was warning about during the election campaign. Language has been used about “strangers” and to create division between people who walk the same streets of our country.

On Tuesday night, Police Scotland issued a statement that indicated:

“Officers responded to disorder and violence, including incidents in Glasgow where members of the public were attacked because of the colour of their skin. Officers were also attacked.”

Members of the public will ask—they say this to me when I am out and about in the country—how on earth has Scotland become like this? Well, Scotland has become like this because people on that side of the chamber—Malcolm Offord, Thomas Kerr and various others—are inciting racial division in our society, and this Government will stand up to all of that. *[Interruption.]*

**The Presiding Officer:** Okay, members. Thank you. Settle down.

### **Racist Demonstrations**

**3. Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Green):** I follow others in wishing Steve Clarke, the Scotland men’s team and the tartan army a safe and productive journey in the US.

The racist violence that we have seen on the streets of Belfast, as well as in Glasgow and elsewhere in Scotland this week, has been utterly shameful. People were trapped inside Glasgow central mosque and the St Enoch centre, sheltering for their own safety. Others were attacked in the street because of the colour of their skin, while mobs shouted “Send them home” at children because they were not white.

Nobody should be made to feel unsafe on our streets, and it is horrific that that has happened to so many people. No so-called legitimate concerns can justify that kind of hateful action. What will the First Minister do to provide reassurances to people and communities who are worried about their safety and that of their loved ones?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** One of the fundamental duties—if not the fundamental duty—of ministers is to ensure that people are safe in their own country. The Government takes that approach in all its communications. Prior to Christmas, we set out the merits of the we are Scotland campaign, which communicates and supports the advantages of multiculturalism in our society. In the light of recent events, I intend to revisit the campaign, to ensure that its messages are heard. They were heard loudly and clearly in the run-up to Christmas, but I want to make sure that that is still the case.

I also note that Police Scotland is active in supporting individual communities. I know that that is the case, because I have heard from the Jewish and Muslim communities about the degree to which they feel that they have good and strong connections with Police Scotland. They feel that Police Scotland is responsive to their concerns—and they must always feel that.

I assure Gillian Mackay that the police force, which has the advantage of being a single force, has the capacity to deploy formidable resources to ensure that members of the public are kept safe when such actions

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take place—Police Scotland demonstrated that on Tuesday evening. We must at all times remain vigilant to make sure that we have in place the resources to ensure community safety.

**Gillian Mackay:** This is a time when our Parliament must stand together to condemn racists and fascists who seek to divide our communities, and I am heartened by most of the response that we have had so far this afternoon.

However, today, *The National* has revealed that an active member of Reform UK, who attended the election count in Glasgow alongside the party's deputy leader in Scotland, not only took part in the racist scenes on Buchanan Street but also boasted that he would do so again. Last year, that man, who is clearly a friend of Reform UK's leadership, wrote:

"Jews are forcing us to swallow hordes of migrants, flooding land with the dregs of the world to dilute our Protestant stock and shatter the Union."

Just quoting that makes me feel sick.

As we have seen this afternoon, this is a party that has consistently branded new Scots as strangers, attacked Glaswegian schoolchildren who speak more than one language, and scapegoated and demonised our migrant communities. What does the First Minister have to say to those on the Reform benches who have fanned the flames of hate and actively welcomed racist and antisemitic members?

**The First Minister:** I have seen the comments to which Gillian Mackay refers, and I am horrified by their content. They represent the worst of communication in our society, demonising individuals.

As I made clear in my response to Malcolm Offord, I deplore the way in which Reform is stirring up division in our society, as well as its association with individuals who are creating that division and who—based on what I have read in the newspapers today—appear to be involved in the disorder that we have seen on our streets. There is no place for democratic politicians to be associated with that. I say to Reform that it should establish the strongest possible distance from that rhetoric and the behaviour of those individuals, or its members will forever be known as the people who incited racial tension in our society in Scotland.

**Gillian Mackay:** The violence this week has been stirred up by an online landscape that is designed to promote hate and by social media algorithms that deliver fascist propaganda into people's news feeds 24 hours a day. The world's richest man, Elon Musk, used his personally owned social media platform to share abhorrent content, including quotes that call for millions and millions to be deported from the United Kingdom, along with adverts for those protests. That is a direct threat to the safety of communities across our country, and it cannot go unchallenged.

Online regulation is largely reserved to Westminster, but there is one area that this Parliament has control over. Will the First Minister work with the Scottish Greens to class social media platforms as publishers, since the content that they show people is the result of their algorithm instead of people's choices as users? That way, we can finally start to take action on hateful and misleading online content.

**The First Minister:** I am very happy to co-operate with the Scottish Green Party and other colleagues in Parliament who wish to tackle some of the online harm that is propagated to individuals in our society. I have seen some of the messages that Elon Musk has communicated, promoting messages that Tommy Robinson has circulated and encouraging people to take part in demonstrations in our country. That is absolutely abhorrent.

The toughest regulatory regime needs to be in place. As Gillian Mackay said, the overwhelming majority of that policy is reserved to the United Kingdom Government. We have had ongoing productive discussions with the UK Government as it wrestles with how to handle the expansion of social media and how to have in place the correct regulatory environment. If we can take measures in this Parliament, I assure Gillian Mackay of the Scottish Government's appetite and enthusiasm to take whatever steps are available to us to do exactly that.

### **Parliamentary Inquiry**

**4. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con):** Before I ask my question, I want to say, come on, Scotland—let us at least get into the next round and out of the group stages.

I also on behalf of my party whole-heartedly condemn the ugly scenes that we saw in the streets of my home city of Glasgow.

John Swinney has blocked a parliamentary inquiry into the Scottish National Party crime scandal. He does not want to know whether Peter Murrell stole taxpayers' money, the terms of his plea deal or why Nicola Sturgeon was not prosecuted.

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A lady called Margaret Killah joined the SNP in the 1950s and donated money to the party for years. When she died, aged 84, she left the SNP £20,000. Peter Murrell told Margaret's solicitor to deal only with him, not the party treasurer. Margaret's executor told me this morning that she would have backed an inquiry in Parliament. She said:

"Margaret truly believed in the SNP and would have been so upset and so angry. We will never know if Peter Murrell stole her money."

Why is John Swinney so scared of doing the right thing?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** First, I welcome the comments that Russell Findlay made about the disorder in Glasgow. It says something very significant that the Conservative leader, along with other leaders in Parliament, has reinforced the comments that have been made, and I unreservedly welcome that support from the Conservative benches today.

On the points about the embezzlement case that has affected my party and my party alone, I appreciate and value the contributions that are made to my party by its members, and that has been at the heart of my response to this incredibly distressing experience. That is why I am taking action—I hope that you will forgive me, Presiding Officer, as this is outwith my responsibilities as First Minister, but they are part of my responsibilities as the principal trustee of the Scottish National Party—to make sure that the losses that we have experienced are repaid. I have taken the action that I have taken, in concert with, and with the approval of, my national executive committee, in order to secure the return of that money at the earliest possible opportunity, because of the commitment and devotion of individuals who have given us money and who will feel injured by the situation.

Of course, I am one of those people as well; I donate to the Scottish National Party and I want that money to be used to take forward the activities of the SNP and the cause of Scottish independence. That is why I have acted as the principal trustee of the party—to make sure that that money is returned to where it rightfully belongs, which in the funds of the Scottish National Party.

**Russell Findlay:** Margaret Killah lived in Aberdeen South, where people will choose a new MP next week. Many of the residents who I have been speaking with are dismayed by the SNP's desperate Peter Murrell and Nicola Sturgeon cover-up, but they are even more angry at the SNP's duplicity over oil and gas. Thousands of jobs are being lost because of Ed Miliband's idiotic opposition to new drilling. The SNP pretends to back oil and gas, but it still has a presumption against new drilling in the North Sea, so will John Swinney get off the fence and back our candidate Douglas Lumsden's clear call to get Britain drilling again?

**The Presiding Officer:** Even Mr Findlay smiled at that one.

**The First Minister:** About the only moment of significance that I have heard about Douglas Lumsden is the fact that he lodged thousands of artificial intelligence-generated questions in the Parliament—he could not even think them up for himself. That tells us how useless Douglas Lumsden is. Nobody should think about voting for a useless candidate who cannot make up his own questions.

### **Teacher Shortages**

**5. Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh North Western) (LD):** On behalf of the Scottish Liberal Democrats, I echo the remarks about the Scotland world cup side and wish Steve Clarke and his squad all the best in the Americas.

On the violence that we have seen on Scottish streets in recent days, the heat and hate that are stoked by bad actors online and amplified by voices in this chamber do not reflect the welcoming and internationalist country that I recognise. If they seek to gain advantage by trying to divide the people of Scotland, they underestimate the people of Scotland, and they will fail.

A leading education expert warned this week of a persistent and worsening shortage of specialist teachers in Scottish schools. This is not just an education crisis; it is an economic one. Today, the Scottish Liberal Democrats are publishing new research that shows that more than 500 teaching jobs had to be readvertised due to shortages. Posts have been left unfilled for as long as two years. In Kirkwall, the maths teacher post was readvertised 14 times. Subjects such as science, computing and technology are the industries of the future. Why on earth are they being taught by history teachers or being dropped entirely?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** I welcome Mr Cole-Hamilton's comments on division and disorder and I am not surprised by them.

In relation to teacher numbers and specialist teachers in schools, there are acute challenges—particularly in rural Scotland—with filling teaching vacancies in general, which becomes more acute with specialist

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teaching posts. The Government has mechanisms in place to try to encourage those teaching posts to be taken up, which is part of our active workforce planning arrangements.

We also have available other educational mechanisms, particularly e-Sgoil, which is a digital-based platform that enables live teaching on subjects around the country. It is designed to address some of the shortages that Mr Cole-Hamilton referred to when we are unable to fill all the vacancies.

The Government works with local authorities to take forward workforce planning activity to ensure that we have a full and comprehensive network of teaching personnel in every part of the country.

**Alex Cole-Hamilton:** The First Minister is quick to lean into the likes of e-Sgoil, but that requires far more support than the Government is currently providing.

I am not sure that the First Minister fully understands just how depressing it is for new teachers to come out of training and to have to head to the likes of Dubai or Darwin for a job because they cannot find one here. It makes no sense. On the one hand, we have teachers who cannot find jobs and, on the other, subjects are being cut due to a lack of teachers.

One practical way in which we can fill those vacancies is to make it much easier for primary school teachers to requalify to work in our secondary schools. Indeed, the General Teaching Council for Scotland said that that was a

“practical solution for ... employers to address specific recruitment issues.”

Scotland’s young people deserve the right to study whatever they want, wherever they are. Will the First Minister instruct his Government to sit down with the Liberal Democrats and teaching bodies to deliver sensible solutions such as that?

**The First Minister:** As I understand it, work is already under way with the General Teaching Council on exactly the point that Mr Cole-Hamilton raises. If additional input is to come from the Liberal Democrats, the Cabinet Secretary for Education will be happy to engage on that question, because we have to explore all the practical steps.

Mr Cole-Hamilton said that teachers were leaving the country to go to teach in Dubai or other locations and could not find jobs in Scotland, but he was pressing me about teaching vacancies in Scotland. There is a slight contradiction in that argument; there are plenty of teaching opportunities available, and we will work with individuals to ensure that that is the case. [*Interruption.*] I am not quite sure what point Mr Cole-Hamilton is making to me when I spell out the illogicality at the heart of his question, but I will leave it for Mr Cole-Hamilton to study the record and work out where we are going.

I am keen to ensure that every available teacher is able to be deployed in Scottish education, and the education secretary will happily work with others to ensure that that is the case.

**The Presiding Officer:** That concludes First Minister’s question time. I have to say that I was disappointed by the lack of ambition for Scotland’s world cup campaign—last 16, last 32. Come on, everyone.

**Helen McDade (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am learning. The last time I learned that I need to know the standing order and this time I have learned that I need to wait to the end of First Minister’s questions.

I refer to rule 7.3 of standing orders, which states that members

“shall not conduct themselves in a manner which would constitute a criminal offence”.

The First Minister believes that saying the word “strangers” incites violence. What does he think the word “racist”, aimed at me, does to my risk? I think that it increases the risk to me as a public figure. I ask the Presiding Officer to rule on the use of the word “racist” in this Parliament, or to ask the First Minister, who has known me for 20 years, to say to my face that he thinks that I am a racist.

**The Presiding Officer:** I am not aware of the First Minister addressing his comments specifically to any individual, but that is a point of argument, not a point of order. Members are responsible for their own contributions in the chamber—

**Helen McDade:** He was—

**The Presiding Officer:** Excuse me, do not interrupt when I am speaking—do not heckle.

It is not actually a point of procedure, which is what a point of order should be. It is a point of argument, not a point of procedure.

As I have already said, that concludes First Minister’s question time.

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## Maternity Services

**The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson):** We move to the next item, which is a statement by Angela Constance on improving maternity services across Scotland. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement and there should be no questions or interruptions.

We will have a two-minute break to enable a changeover of members on the front benches.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark):** I ask members who are leaving the chamber to do so quietly, and I call Angela Constance.

14:36

**The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care (Angela Constance):** This Government is determined to ensure that the maternity services that are provided across our country meet the highest of standards, for all women and their families. The core principles of safety and choice must remain at the heart of what we do.

I know that members will share my deep concern about recent reports on maternity services, including last week's Healthcare Improvement Scotland inspection report on the Queen Elizabeth university hospital's maternity services. My statement will respond to those findings and set out the further action that we will now take nationally, including through an independent review of maternity services.

I know that, for women and their families, pregnancy and birth can be both exciting and worrying. Giving birth in Scotland is, in the vast majority of cases, very safe, and our national health service staff are highly skilled. Any woman who is pregnant should always access care.

Women generally report positive experiences. The National Childbirth Trust's recent study, "From expectation to reality", found that 87 per cent of surveyed new mums in Scotland said that they received good-quality care, and an audit report on perinatal deaths of babies born in the United Kingdom in 2024, published today by MBRRACE-UK—mothers and babies: reducing risk through audits and confidential enquiries across the UK—shows that Scotland had the lowest rate of all four UK nations.

That said, I have heard the concerns that have been shared by women, their families and members of this Parliament, and one poor experience is one too many. Care must be safe, compassionate and of the highest quality, regardless of where or when women give birth.

Ministers have already laid some important groundwork that is needed to address the challenges facing maternity services, but it is clear that much more remains to be done.

Last year, Healthcare Improvement Scotland began a rigorous programme of inspections of maternity units, instigated by this Government. Those inspections are independent of Government and are conducted wholly unannounced.

Last week's HIS report into the Queen Elizabeth university hospital identified serious issues, particularly in relation to women's experiences of birth and access to timely, personalised care. Inspectors reported delays in triaging to labour wards and instances of failures to provide interpretation services where they were needed. I find those issues unacceptable, and I have made that very clear to the chief executive of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde. I expect all of Healthcare Improvement Scotland's 26 requirements to be taken forward urgently, and ministers will be meeting the board's chief executive again before recess to review progress.

Although the report identifies failures, it also highlights kind care delivered to women, babies and their families, demonstrating the dedication of maternity staff. I will shortly meet Jaki Lambert, director of the Royal College of Midwives, to discuss the concerns of the workforce and to reiterate my thanks for the exceptional dedication of midwives.

Members might also recall last year's HIS inspection of the Royal infirmary of Edinburgh maternity unit. Progress within NHS Lothian is positive: 24 of the 26 HIS requirements have been delivered, with the board launching a maternity culture charter and recruiting new staff. However, NHS Lothian maternity services remain escalated under the framework that we have for supervision, and we will continue to work with the board to ensure that it meets all of HIS's requirements and recommendations.

With seven of the 18 HIS inspections completed, common themes are emerging. These include inconsistent approaches to maternity triage, delays in induction of labour, workforce pressures, concerns around governance and culture, and failures to consistently meet core mandatory training requirements. Each of the boards inspected by HIS has submitted a detailed action plan setting out how it will address the issues identified, and they will be held to account for delivering on those commitments.

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It is clear, nonetheless, that decisive national action is needed to tackle the issues that we are seeing again and again in different parts of the country. That work has already begun. First, we commissioned HIS to develop standards that describe the level of service expected in every maternity unit. Those were published in March, and HIS will incorporate the new standards into its inspection programme from September. Last year, we published an action plan to address racialised health inequalities. This provides boards with clear actions to improve the care provided in perinatal services. We have developed a delivery framework for miscarriage care to make sure that women and their families receive the compassionate care that they need, at the right time, in settings that meet their needs. Our triage working group is producing a target operating model that describes how maternity triage services should look in small, medium and large units, and in rural and urban communities. Work is also being taken forward to support the sustainability of the maternity workforce through our nursing and midwifery task force, including improving recruitment pathways, retention and workforce wellbeing. Minister Maree Todd will take forward work to develop rural midwifery apprenticeships.

Although those actions are important, they will not be sufficient. That is why we have committed to an independent review of maternity services in Scotland. This review will draw on inspection findings, but we cannot wait for HIS's programme of inspections to conclude next year before it gets under way. That is why, today, I have published the core principles of the review, and I will outline these to members now.

First, the review will consider whether we have the right maternity services in place to meet the changing needs of women and families. Women are increasingly having children later in life, and more women are entering pregnancy with complex health needs. These factors can have a significant impact on the care required during pregnancy and birth. This review will provide a strategic assessment of need that will help us match our services to our population. The review will be forward looking and consider service sustainability, taking account of workforce, culture, safety, quality and equity of access.

The review will consider maternity services in rural and island areas and the experiences of women living there. I have heard very clearly—particularly from Maree Todd, David Green, Finlay Carson and Laura Mitchell—of the strength of feeling in Caithness, Wigtownshire and Elgin. I know that progress has been made in meeting our commitment to Dr Gray's hospital in Elgin, and I want to ensure that progress continues. This review will look at the experiences of women in Caithness, Wigtownshire and Elgin, and in other rural and island communities.

The review will consider inequalities and outcomes, including the higher maternal mortality rates experienced by black and Asian women, and will assess whether current work to tackle racialised inequalities is achieving the required impact. That will be informed by the voices of black and Asian women.

Lastly, the review will consider how NHS boards engage with their local communities on the decisions that they make about maternity services. I know that that has been a key issue that has been raised by the Patient Safety Commissioner for Scotland.

This work will demand an experienced and trusted chair, and I am therefore very pleased to announce that the review will be chaired by Professor Christine McCourt, who is professor of maternal and child health at City St George's, University of London. Her wide-ranging expertise includes focusing on the experience of women, informed choice in care, place of birth, induction of labour, group care and continuity of carer, and on approaches to improve equity, quality and safety in care. She is a trusted leader in the UK in maternal health and is well placed to lead the transformation that we need to see.

Professor McCourt will engage with women, families, patient groups, clinicians, midwives, nurses and the wider maternity workforce across Scotland, including in Caithness and Wigtownshire. It is essential that the voices of those receiving and delivering care are heard directly through the process.

I will also ask Professor McCourt to examine service models and make robust evidence-based recommendations on the best possible clinical pathways to ensure that women are safe when they give birth and that their needs and those of their families are met.

Pace is essential, and I expect the review to be commenced after summer and completed within nine months. We will publish a more detailed scope and terms of reference in due course. To ensure that the Parliament is fully involved in that work, I will ask Professor McCourt to host a cross-party meeting before she begins the review.

I close by providing reassurance to women that they will be heard. Welcoming a new arrival to the world is the most precious and special moment, and women must be able to trust the services that are being provided to them. The independent review is about ensuring that women can have the confidence that the Government will take swift action where it is needed. That not only delivers now on our 100 days commitment but, importantly, will deliver real and tangible change for women, their babies and their families.

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**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark):** The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues raised in the statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move 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.

Thirteen members have indicated that they wish to ask a question of the cabinet secretary. To enable all those questions to be put and answered, questions and answers will require to be brief.

**Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** I welcome the cabinet secretary's statement, and I welcome the appointment of Professor Christine McCourt. She has her work cut out for her. For example, inspections have revealed the significant delays for women who are waiting to be induced in Glasgow. Others are forced to travel 100 miles to give birth in Caithness, and there are shortages of midwives in Lothian.

Parents who have lost babies are frustrated by the lack of transparency. Promises were made previously that parents such as Julie Keegan, who lost her baby boy, and Lori Quate, who lost both his wife and unborn child, would be part of the task force. Why have they not been involved?

Only this week, we learned of further delays to the opening of the Baird family hospital, which provides maternity services. It is seven years late. There is also the downgrading of the award-winning Wishaw neonatal unit. Consideration of neonatal services appears to have been dropped, and it would be helpful to know whether the cabinet secretary would reconsider that.

In my constituency, midwives and expectant mothers are concerned by reports that triage calls that are currently dealt with by their local hospital, the Vale of Leven, could be centralised. What steps will the minister take to ensure that women who are giving birth receive safe, high-quality care, wherever they are in Scotland?

**Angela Constance:** I will do my best to answer those points in turn while also trying to achieve brevity.

Jackie Baillie said that Professor McCourt has her work cut out for her. I suggest that we all have our work cut out for us, because time does not stand still for any of us. Where there are issues, I hope that the chamber and Ms Baillie know that I will always be candid and direct. If I need to lift the lid on something, I will do that.

Transparency for families is absolutely crucial. I have been concerned by reports that I have read with respect to serious adverse reviews. At the very heart of those reports are issues around quality and timing. Those reports have to be done timeously, they must involve families and they must be of good quality, because they facilitate learning for the future.

On Baird and ANCHOR—Aberdeen and north centre for haematology, oncology and radiotherapy—issues, we want those services to be open as soon as possible. However, they need to be safe before they are open. I think that we have all learned those lessons.

With regard to Wishaw neonatal, if someone has a very sick baby and that wee baby is not being cared for in the hospital closest to them, I well and truly understand the tension and distress that will cause. However, I also understand what we have to do to save young lives. On the basis of clinical advice, and with the support of organisations such as Bliss, we are moving to a model that has safety at its heart. I am happy to discuss that further.

The terms of reference have still to be published. We would, of course, not publish the terms of reference before a chair was appointed, as a chair has a crucial role in drafting those, because they are, indeed, independent.

**Helen McDade (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform):** I thank the minister for her statement and I welcome the independent review. As someone who has stood for this Parliament once before, in relation to saving local hospitals in Dunfermline, Perth and Stirling, I am interested to see how things have progressed in 20 years.

The key issue of the workforce remains the same. In Caithness and other areas, it is often a case of death by 1,000 cuts. First, you do not have the medical staff—there is no housing for them, so they do not want to come. Then you have a problem with midwives and you maybe do not have midwives. Then you say that anybody who is anything other than a low risk has to be moved—and so it goes on.

I will not speak about the problems, as Jackie and others have often mentioned them, but what specific steps is the Scottish Government taking to increase the recruitment and retention of midwives?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark):** Members must refer to other members by their full names.

**Angela Constance:** For the record, over the past 10 years there has been a 13 per cent increase in the number of qualified midwives, which equates to just under 318 whole-time equivalents. Nonetheless, there are significant workforce issues to be addressed.

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As I said, I will meet the Royal College of Midwives later today, and Maree Todd will continue to be involved in the nursing and midwifery task force, which has been designed specifically to look at those workforce issues. Recruitment can be a challenge, particularly in rural areas, and we need to retain those who join that very important vocation. There is work to do, but I assure Ms McDade that we are well and truly on the journey.

**Laura Mitchell (Moray) (SNP):** The cabinet secretary will be aware that it is now eight years since NHS Grampian downgraded maternity services at Dr Gray's hospital. Restoration of a consultant-led service has been supported by the Scottish Government, and the project team is now undertaking the most challenging phase of work to recruit key clinicians to restore our full obstetric service.

I welcome the reference to Elgin in the cabinet secretary's statement. I ask that she confirm that the review will not impact the Scottish Government's commitment to a consultant-led service in Moray and that the Government will do all that it can to support the project team as it continues its work to rebuild services at Dr Gray's hospital.

**Angela Constance:** As I said in my statement, we remain committed to supporting the return of obstetric maternity services to Dr Gray's hospital. Since 2023, we have invested with NHS Grampian to support that return. In this financial year, there is a further £6.5 million of investment.

Since 2024, NHS Grampian has made progress on obstetric day care and antenatal scanning services, and it is also performing elective daytime caesareans. Of course, there is further work to be done, which hinges on ongoing recruitment.

**Kayleigh Kinross-O'Neill (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green):** I echo the cabinet secretary's appreciation of, and sincere thanks for, the exceptional dedication of midwives. When they start their journey as midwifery students, there are often barriers to their staying in the sector due to the costs of living and studying. Will the cabinet secretary confirm whether the review will also look at paying midwifery students while they learn?

**Angela Constance:** The purpose of the midwifery and nursing task force is to look at those issues, and I mentioned the work that Maree Todd will be leading on apprenticeships. Kayleigh Kinross-O'Neill raised an interesting point about earn-as-you-learn routes into the profession. In a former ministerial role, I was the Minister for Youth Employment, so I am committed to vocational learning and models that are otherwise adapted with regard to what we have learned from the success of apprenticeship-type models.

**Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Con):** Over the past 10 years, there have been three reviews of maternity and neonatal services. I do not believe that there is any joined-up thinking in this Government about its approach and how it will improve those services for mums and their babies.

I want to raise an issue about the number of beds that are available for parents in neonatal wards. The work that was undertaken by Bliss Scotland shows that, for every 10 children who need specialised care, there is only one bed for parents who want to stay overnight. I worked with the previous minister on the issue and I am willing to work with the cabinet secretary. Will she give an update today on the number of beds that are currently available for parents? Will she ensure that there is a positive change in the number of those beds, to ensure that parents can stay with their babies who need specialised care?

**Angela Constance:** Ms Gallacher makes an important point about the need to keep mothers with their babies, irrespective of the health needs of the children. We want to ensure that that happens as much as is conceivably possible, and I would be delighted to work with Ms Gallacher on that. I will follow up on the specific question that she has asked about the number of beds, their availability and where they are.

What will be different about this review is that it will be on the back of seven Healthcare Improvement Scotland maternity inspections, and there are broad themes in relation to those. The work of the nursing and midwifery task force and the midwifery and neonatal task force will be important in ensuring that the review can build on those inspections. I am confident that we have an excellent and outstanding chair to lead that work and that she will be open to engaging with parliamentarians and, most importantly, all the communities that we seek to represent.

**David Green (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD):** The Liberal Democrats have long called for an independent review, so I welcome the appointment of Professor McCourt as an independent chair. It is imperative that local campaigners and those who have lived experience are fully engaged, including Willie Rennie's constituent Lori-Mark Quate, who was previously given a commitment on involvement in the task force, although that has not happened to date.

Will the cabinet secretary recommend that Professor McCourt meet the Caithness Health Action Team and experience at first hand the 100-mile-plus journey that mums in the far north are forced to make? Will she also clarify whether the review will examine restoring consultant-led maternity services in Caithness?

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**Angela Constance:** It will be an independent review with an independent chair, but I hope that the principles that have been published today will give at least some reassurance until the review has been set up and established.

On the point about the existing midwifery and neonatal task force, some of that work will be paused. The proposition, which is subject to consultation with the chair, is that there will be a panel to advise her.

I am clear that, as well as being independent, any review must engage with the affected communities, which specifically includes Caithness and other rural communities. Members will note from my statement that, as well as maternity triage, clinical pathways will be important. This is a comprehensive, independent review for all of Scotland, and it is inclusive of the communities that many of the members who are here today represent.

**Alex Kerr (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP):** It is vital that everybody planning for a family in Scotland should feel confident that they will have a positive and safe experience of maternity care, whereby their choices are respected and supported. Therefore, I was delighted to hear the cabinet secretary talk about equity of access, particularly in rural areas, including many communities in my constituency. Will the cabinet secretary say more about the plans to improve equity of access for expectant families across the country?

**Angela Constance:** Alex Kerr raises a crucial point about equity, which is an issue with regard to access. We have heard about very long journeys, travelling across Scotland, that birthing mothers have taken. Equity is also important in considering the impact of deprivation. I will give one or two examples. Women from the most deprived communities are more likely to have complex health issues, including diabetes; they are more likely to have a pre-term baby; and their baby is more likely to be small for its gestational age. This is a comprehensive, independent review, and inequity in all its forms will be at its heart.

**Donald MacKinnon (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab):** Western Isles hospital maternity care service received an excellent report following an inspection earlier this year, showing that staff are doing a great job of providing compassionate and responsive care to women and their families. However, the report from Healthcare Improvement Scotland also stated that recruiting and retaining staff is a concern, with housing being a key issue. What role does the Scottish Government see the key worker housing fund having in ensuring that maternity care in our islands remains excellent?

**Angela Constance:** Donald MacKinnon makes an important pragmatic point. That is why we need all our services and every portfolio in Government to be joined up. The housing fund for key workers is absolutely imperative. We all know of the recruitment and retention challenges, particularly in our rural communities, and I appreciate that there are additional challenges with our island communities.

**Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP):** I, too, associate myself with the cabinet secretary's comments with respect to the staff who work in maternity services, especially those in Argyll and Bute.

This is a follow-on question from Donald MacKinnon's. To ensure that the current 24-hour midwife-led community service is maintained in places such as Argyll and Bute, staffing levels cannot be reduced. What discussions is the Scottish Government having with health boards and health and social care partnerships to ensure that there is appropriate staff funding to improve maternity services across Scotland, especially in rural constituencies such as Argyll and Bute? How are the very important rural and island voices being included in the maternity review?

**Angela Constance:** I am grateful to Ms Minto for her question. She has done, and will continue to do, great work in championing the healthcare needs of women, and she will continue to be a strong voice for rural Scotland.

I am sure that Ms Minto will be aware that local authorities and health and social care partnerships are responsible for planning and delivering services that meet local needs. I want to be clear that safe and effective care for women using maternity services is of the utmost importance. I recognise the challenges that women face in rural areas of Scotland, including in Argyll and Bute. With another hat that I used to wear, I was the minister with responsibility for resilience, so I have become intimately familiar with the weather challenges, whether in Argyll and Bute or in Caithness, and I appreciate the logistical challenges for public services and, indeed, emergency services. However, I would point out that we have provided a record £17.5 billion to health boards and that, since 2018, we have provided more than £34 million to invest in maternity and neonatal services alone.

**Senga Beresford (South Scotland) (Reform):** I thank the cabinet secretary for her statement. I appreciate the attempts, which she outlined, to address the issues that maternity care in Scotland faces. While we wait for the outcome of the new national review of maternity services, will action be taken to help the expectant mothers who, since the Galloway community hospital maternity wing was shut down, have had to travel 75 miles to access maternity care?

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**Angela Constance:** I am becoming aware of the history of the range of local issues in different parts of Scotland, including the south-west. We cannot turn back time, so we must look forward and address the issues that are being wrestled with in relation to choice, safety, access and equity—equity irrespective of where a woman stays and in relation to the other challenges that women might face in their lives.

The purpose of the review is to build on the previous work that has been done—we are not going to reinvent the wheel—and to get some impetus, rather than waiting until the cycle of Healthcare Improvement Scotland reports has been completed. The eighth report is due to be published soon, and there will be 18 in total.

We need those Healthcare Improvement Scotland reports, because they shine a light on the good practice, the compassionate care and the value of midwives in this country. They also shine a light on where improvements must be made. The job of the task force will be to work at pace to implement change that, I hope, we can all get behind.

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

The Queen Elizabeth university hospital in Glasgow was recently ordered by Healthcare Improvement Scotland to make 26 improvements. Many of my Rutherglen and Cambuslang constituents access maternity care at or from the hospital. What reassurances can the cabinet secretary give my constituents that those improvements will be made and that their maternity care will be safe?

**Angela Constance:** We must reassure women, especially those who are currently expecting a baby, that they should be confident in accessing care and that—in recognition that that is a special time but that it can be worrying—if things do not operate as planned, there will be absolute transparency around that. With that in mind, we always want to encourage women to access the care that they need.

In my statement, I intimated that I quickly met the chief executive of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and, separately, Healthcare Improvement Scotland. That was my way to cross-check what the chief executive had relayed thoroughly to me about the progress that was being made with the published action plan, the additional investment in midwives and the work that was being done to engage with the workforce, address issues of culture and address access to interpretation services. I specifically raised access to interpretation with the chief executive, because I can imagine that, if English is not your first language, it must be frightening to be unable to communicate your needs. Being able to communicate your needs and have them be understood is fundamental to care.

I also took the opportunity to engage with Healthcare Improvement Scotland, which confirmed the proactive leadership and ownership by the chief executive and the board.

I assure Clare Haughey, so that she can reassure her constituents, that I and other ministers will follow through on that with further meetings. A range of options are available to us if the current progress does not continue.

**Cara McKee (West Scotland) (Green):** I thank the cabinet secretary for her statement, and I welcome the commitment to work with black and Asian women to inform the review.

I am sure that the cabinet secretary will be aware of the shocking statistic that black women are more than twice as likely as white women to die in pregnancy, childbirth or the postnatal period. As some of the women who engage with the review might have experienced significant trauma as a result of being racialised by maternity services, how will the cabinet secretary ensure that the review is trauma informed and that sufficient emotional support is available for those who take part in it?

**Angela Constance:** I am acutely aware of the very sobering MBRRACE-UK maternity mortality stats, which show that there is a threefold difference between maternal mortality among black women and maternal mortality among white women, and that the maternal mortality rate for Asian women is a bit higher than that for white women. We must recognise the disparities in outcomes that the audits and confidential inquiries that have been carried out across the UK show.

It is therefore crucial that racialised health inequalities are tackled. Work has been ongoing in that area—a maternal care action plan was published in February 2025—and I want that work to proceed as a priority. In addition, Cara McKee will note that racialised health inequalities are an important part of the brief for the chair of the new independent review.

**Zen Ghani (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP):** I welcome the cabinet secretary's statement and the manifesto commitment to an independent report on the maternal mortality that is faced by Scotland's black and Asian communities. It is essential that communities that face systemic barriers and bias are properly

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supported to ensure the best outcomes for everyone in Scotland. Can the cabinet secretary say any more about the Government's expectations for that work and what it hopes to achieve as a result of its commitment?

**Angela Constance:** I will not repeat what I said to Cara McKee, other than to reinforce that tackling racialised health inequalities is a priority. The matter is one on which I have engaged with the Minister for Equalities and International Development, Simita Kumar. I have also made it clear to my health officials that it is not just an issue for the health department and that we need to reach out to different communities.

As I intimated, last year we published our action plan on tackling racialised health inequalities in maternity care, which contained 14 actions to be addressed in the first instance. Activity is under way on all the actions that were identified in the action plan for local delivery by NHS boards. I assure Mr Ghani that I will continue to monitor the implementation of those actions through NHS board updates.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark):** I apologise to the members I was unable to call. Before we move on to the next item of business, I will allow a moment for front-bench teams to change over.

## **Public Service Reform (Staff, Service Users and Local Communities)**

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark):** The next item of business is a debate on motion S7M-00309, in the name of Ivan McKee, on public service reform: empowering staff, service users and local communities.

15:14

**The Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform (Ivan McKee):** I am delighted to open this afternoon's debate on public service reform, which I believe will be the defining task of this session of Parliament.

Public service reform is about delivering our vision of a Scotland where citizens enjoy excellent public services that meet their individual needs and where the staff who provide those services feel valued and are empowered to make a difference to people's lives. It is a vision rooted in what we believe about public services, which is that they are critical to delivering a fairer future with opportunities for all, that they are an asset and an investment, and that they must be protected for the future by wise investment. That vision is enabled by more joined-up and integrated services, with greater investment in prevention, that are delivered efficiently. Those principles were set out by the Christie commission and are embedded in our public service reform strategy, which was published last year.

Public service reform is at the heart of this Administration. We are not making marginal changes; we must reimagine the state as an enabler, which means rewiring our public services system to deliver on that vision. That means listening to and working with communities, those who rely on services, and the workforce in order to make changes and improve service delivery.

I have high hopes for today's debate and hope that I will not be disappointed. We will not deliver the scale of change that we need without some consensus across the chamber and, although the Government is brimming with ideas for innovations to transform public services, we recognise that we do not have an exclusive hold on good ideas. I look forward to hearing from Opposition spokespeople about their perspectives on public service reform and, importantly, about where we can work together. I also look forward to hearing from back-bench colleagues, who have a wide range of experience and perspectives, about where they see opportunities to make Scotland's public services preventative, joined-up and excellent, because that is what the people of Scotland deserve.

We have already shown what is possible. More than £300 million has been saved through more efficient procurement in the past two years and we are projecting savings of more than £50 million through the rationalisation of estates—13 core Scottish Government buildings have been closed in the past three years and there are more to follow. There is an extensive automation programme, with more than 140 automations having been implemented, delivering more than £15 million in cost avoidance. There has been a rationalisation of the public sector landscape with the formation of Police Scotland and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, the regionalisation of colleges and, more recently, the launch of Public Services Delivery Scotland. Legislation has empowered communities to acquire public assets and we have passed the world-leading Community Wealth Building (Scotland) Act 2026.

We have also introduced a wide range of effective preventative initiatives, including childsmile, the Caledonian system for addressing domestic abuse, minimum unit pricing of alcohol and family nurse partnerships, to name but a few. We have seen the roll-out of digital services, including the ScotAccount app, which expands people's access to essential services via a single sign-in process and now has 750,000 users, and ScotPayments, which supports organisations across the public sector to make faster, safer payments.

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This summer, we will launch the Scottish Government's mygov.scot app, which will allow people in Scotland to conveniently access a range of public services from their own devices.

**Andrew Baxter (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD):** I am glad that the cabinet secretary has got on to talking about prevention, which was a central tenet of the Christie commission report. I listened to the cabinet secretary when he appeared on Radio Scotland this morning and heard him mention prevention several times, but I did not hear any detail about what he thought that actually meant. Since the Christie commission report was published, we have seen a cut in preventative services, particularly in rural healthcare. How does he plan to reverse that?

**Ivan McKee:** I will talk more about that in the course of my remarks, but, briefly, prevention is one of the four core principles of the Christie commission. When we published the public sector reform strategy last year, we also published an extensive document outlining all the preventative innovations that have been implemented. There are many of those and there is an extensive piece of work that backs up that approach and shows how the numbers stack up with regards to investment and return. As we take forward the budget process for 2027-28, we will implement a process of tagging spend so that, for the first time, we will know what is classed as preventative spending, at what level that prevention sits and what impact it is having.

Despite the progress that we have made, we recognise that we have not delivered the scale and pace of reform that is required. The public service reform strategy identified the systemic barriers that we face: siloed organisations, budgeting that supports structures but that is not always aligned to services and a culture that can be slow to change.

The strategy sets out the actions that we are taking to tackle those barriers. Those include very clearly setting out our expectations that public service leaders should focus on systems, not silos, and our intention to empower staff, service users and communities. We will reform the national performance framework and change our budget processes so that funds flow to where they can make the biggest impact rather than getting stuck in silos, and we will ensure that the workforce and communities are part of the reform process rather than reform being something that is done to them.

Public service reform is about the future of public services in Scotland—how we design them, deliver them and ensure that they meet the needs of the people they serve. It is about driving integration, simplification and collaboration. That means that we must be open to changing how our system fits together, where decisions are made and how investment takes place to deliver for people. In our first 100 days, we will lay out our plans for public service renewal and the bill that will follow.

We know the pressures that public services face—demographic change, rising demand, fiscal constraint, global uncertainty, increasing complexity of need and increasing expectations from the public that they serve. In last year's medium-term financial strategy, we published our assessment of the scale of the fiscal challenge over the next five years, and in the fiscal sustainability delivery plan we set out the actions that we are taking to close that deficit. Nevertheless, without reform, those pressures will outstrip the resources that are available. The choice is clear: either we change how we deliver services or we risk being unable to sustain them. That is a risk that this Government is not willing to accept.

Public service reform is not just about the services of today; it is about stewardship and protecting public services for generations to come. We have to prevent problems before they start and not just respond when they reach a crisis point. Poverty, poor health and inequality are not inevitable. They are challenges that we can address earlier and more effectively, and when we do so, the benefits are profound, including better outcomes for people, stronger communities and reduced long-term pressure on services. That is why we are committed to focusing on prevention and expanding early intervention. Prevention is not just the right thing to do to improve lives; it is essential for long-term sustainability.

**Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Con):** The Christie commission was established in 2011. We are talking about prevention, which was mentioned then, and about joined-up working, which was also mentioned then. What is going to be different this time?

**Ivan McKee:** I do not know whether the member came into the debate late, but she should have heard the first part of my speech in which I listed a whole page of things that we have delivered on the back of the Christie work. However, we recognise that there is more that we need to do to take such work forward, and that is the whole point of the public service reform strategy.

Of the four Christie principles—empowerment, prevention, integration and efficiency—this debate rightly focuses on the one that I believe underpins all the others, which is empowerment. Individuals should not have to navigate a maze of disconnected services in order to access the support that they need. Too often, people, and particularly those who are facing the greatest disadvantage, have to tell their story multiple times, undergo repeated assessments and deal with fragmented support. That is not good for people and it is not good for

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the system. It involves unnecessary duplication, stress and waste. Services must organise around the person and their family in order to understand what is important to them.

Our commitment to whole-family support is a great example of place-based, person-centred change in action. We must consider how we deliver public services to ensure that families get the right support at the right time and in the right place for as long as they need it, and join up different parts of the system to focus on efficient and effective preventative support for service users. We know that, when services are designed in that way, we achieve better outcomes and better value for every pound that we spend. Achieving that requires significant change at both local and national levels in order to move away from one-size-fits-all approaches and siloed and crisis-driven responses towards the design and delivery of support for individuals and families that is more flexible, person centred and preventative.

With regard to the empowerment of communities, I recognise the hugely important role of development trusts, social enterprises, supported businesses and the voluntary sector in the delivery of services at a community level, which is why we talk about public service reform and not just public sector reform. Empowerment of communities is critical to public service reform.

**Willie Rennie (Fife North East) (LD):** I agree with all of that, but it sounds as if the cabinet secretary is trying to run the whole of Government by himself. Can he give us an idea of how he is going to prioritise? If he does not do so, I think that he is going to get lost.

**Ivan McKee:** I thank the member for his comments. He can rest assured that all my Cabinet colleagues are 100 per cent on board with this important agenda and the First Minister has his weight behind it. We have the strategy, which lays out everything that needs to be done across 18 workstreams. People have asked why there are so many workstreams—as many as 18—and the reason is precisely that, as Mr Rennie identifies, there is an awful lot of work to be done here across a very broad front. That is laid out, with more than 80 actions, and we are moving forward on all of those, because it is important that they come together as we take the agenda forward.

The empowerment of communities is critical to our agenda—communities coming together to address the unique needs and challenges of their local area; working hand in hand with the public sector in bringing new ideas and fresh thinking on how to deliver better services and improve people's lives; taking ownership and stewardship of lands and buildings, thanks to legislation from the Government; and being partners in how services are designed, making sure that they are focused on what is important to people locally. Our democracy matters work has shown that there is a real appetite for people to have more control and influence over how services are designed and—importantly—how money is spent.

Service delivery must also adapt to meet the unique needs of rural, island and urban areas. Our single-authority model, working with island communities, is leading the way on how integration of services locally can improve service delivery. By empowering communities further, we will build capacity in all our towns, villages and neighbourhoods to do more, making public services more agile, responsive and accountable to the people that they serve.

Public service reform is also very important in unlocking improvements through empowering the staff who work in our services and who know them best to come forward with ideas to make those services better and their work more fulfilling. I will be clear: a culture that does not empower staff, and leaders who do not see that as central to their role, must change. Organisations that are excessively hierarchical, with multiple layers of management, and stifling to innovation, need to change. We will work closely with our trade union partners to deliver that change.

No one who uses or works in public services would say that they are as streamlined or seamless as they should be. Everyone can identify waste in the system. That is why efficiency is a core part of public service reform—tackling duplication; sharing services across organisations; making better use of data, digital tools and our public estate; and being honest about where we can improve.

That is why we have set ambitious targets. Every pound that is saved through doing things better is a pound that we can invest in care, education and communities.

That is not something that the Government can do alone. Partnership is required with public bodies, local government, trade unions, businesses and communities—and across parties. Everyone will want to provide excellent public services.

Every party recognises the need for change—although, to be fair, in their amendments, some have articulated that more coherently than have others. The Parliament can come together to deliver the change that is needed. I am more than happy to work with colleagues who are here today to make that possible. I invite members to work with me, give me their positive ideas and ensure with me that our public services continue to meet the expectations and needs of the people of Scotland.

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I move,

That the Parliament welcomes that the Scottish Government's Public Service Reform Strategy centres on the importance of prevention in the development of public services; believes that it is vital to empower staff, service users and local communities to be part of the design and delivery of services that meet the needs of the people of Scotland, and agrees that the delivery of excellent and sustainable public services should be the goal of public service reform, rather than the preservation of existing corporate structures.

15:27

**Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):** I am pleased to speak to the amendment in my name, in which we set out very clearly, as we did in the election campaign just a few short weeks ago, that Labour believes that our public services are in need of widespread, root-and-branch reform.

We believe that the shape of the Scottish state needs to adapt to the reality of three accelerating major trends that our citizens are living with every day: demographic change, technological change and climate change. Where the change that the Government leads meets the core principles that we have laid out in our amendment, we will work with it constructively to deliver on it.

However, I have to say at the outset that the Scottish National Party's £4.7 billion fiscal gap will loom large in today's debate in two significant ways. The cabinet secretary said that every pound that is saved can be reinvested in other purposes. I am not sure that I entirely agree. Most pounds that are saved will be used to close the £4.7 billion gap between the Government's spending plans and what it can afford—between the spending trajectory that the cabinet secretary has set, along with his colleagues, and the amount of money that has been identified by the Scottish Fiscal Commission. That gap has led to three emergency budgets from the Government in the past four years. SNP members are late converts—principally on that basis—to the need for reform.

Using that gap as the animating principle of this programme is a dangerous place to start, because it can lead to the wrong decisions, driven by the greatest short-term savings rather than long-term efficiency or a vision of where the state might go. What we require is a sense of destination. What is the Government's vision of a modernised Scottish state for the third quarter of the 21st century? I have never heard that, let alone seen it described.

**Ivan McKee** rose—

**Michael Marra:** If the cabinet secretary wants to tell me that vision, I will gladly hear it right now.

**Ivan McKee:** Michael Marra talks about fiscal sustainability being the driver. That is one aspect, of course; however, as I articulated in my opening remarks, the driver is to deliver excellent joined-up public services that are preventative in nature and to empower staff, communities and service users to help to do that.

**Michael Marra:** I will say two things in response to that. First, I am sure that the cabinet secretary is a keen advocate for that, but I would believe him a bit more if we had not gone for 20 years without the Scottish National Party substantially reforming the public sector. There have been some reforms, but they clearly have not met the trends or achieved the scale of transformation that is required—I will come back to that.

Secondly, I am afraid that if we do not have an idea of what is going on, that will result in a management consultancy strategy that is not very likely to gain public buy-in. All we had from the cabinet secretary were some adjectives for what reform could look like, instead of a description of the shape of services that we absolutely require.

I will give the example of health service reform. The recent division of boards into two regions—east and west—has been put in place without any real explanation. It came as a huge surprise to leaders in our national health service and it was imposed without any form of consultation with the trade unions. It did not meet fair work principles from the outset—it is a good example of how not to do reform. Whether there was a case to do it is not the question; the process that the cabinet secretary set out in the strategy and in his speech was not followed, and on that basis, we are concerned about it.

The cabinet secretary knows that I fundamentally believe in the empowerment of citizens. I have told him that my vision of a future Scottish state is very much one in which citizens are empowered, where they own and have control of their data and understand what is happening. However, that requires a broader vision of technological implementation, which I find lacking in the strategy.

Willie Rennie was right to talk about prioritisation. If we do not understand what success would look like, it is really difficult for Parliament and the public to see whether any of this is working. We need the Government to tell us something specific—what a service will look like or that a service will cease to exist—so that it can

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hang its hat on that and we can understand whether it is making progress, instead of its just talking about the fiscal savings. I think that that is at the heart of this.

Change is, of course, not cost free. When the United Kingdom Labour Government was elected in 2024, I met the then Cabinet Secretary for Finance and said that that moment, with the significant increase in public investment, was a unique opportunity for rapid change. She looked at me as if I had walked out of a spaceship instead of the lift to the ministerial corridor because the very idea was a completely alien concept to the SNP. That is because the SNP was elected in 2007 on the basis of no reform, and it has pursued that for 20 years.

We could say much more about this agenda. It is a huge challenge. I absolutely agree with the cabinet secretary about the preventative aspect. Delayed discharge has cost this country billions of pounds because, under this Government, there was no reform of health and social care when it was clearly needed, on the basis of demographic trends.

I will close by talking about the two practical things that we have asked for in our amendment. The first is “a timetable for the reduction in ... public bodies”.

After five years, I still trip over new ones every week, and I have no idea what they actually do.

Secondly, we are looking for an understanding of the displacement effect of the withdrawal of public capacity in our third sector. It is vital that the Government explains that. Those are practical things that the Government could be doing right now to set the framework on better footing. I look forward to the other contributions in the debate.

I move amendment S7M-00309.3, to insert at end:

“that the Scottish Government’s approach to public service reform should align with the principles of Community Wealth Building, Fair Work and the European Charter for Local Self-Government and the need to encourage economic growth, and calls on the Scottish Government to produce a detailed timetable for the reduction in the number of public bodies as part of a drive to reduce broader waste and to produce a holistic assessment of the impact of the public sector reform programme on Scotland’s vital third sector.”

15:33

**Malcolm Offord (West Scotland) (Reform):** I congratulate Ivan McKee on his appointment. His role could be the most interesting in the Parliament in the next five years; if he delivers on the targets and beyond, he could make a significant contribution to the welfare of Scotland.

Public sector reform is the subject of the debate. The clue is in the name—Reform UK absolutely believes in reform in every area of public life. We would start by looking at the headline numbers that have been running in Scotland since devolution began. We have just had the 25th anniversary of devolution, which is always a good time to review what has happened—the good, the bad and the ugly.

The total spending for Scotland across Westminster and Holyrood in 2025 was £117 billion. Of that, £72 billion was spent on Holyrood, which controls 60 per cent of the total budget for Scotland. In 1999, that figure was £35 billion, which means that, over 25 years, we have had compound annual growth in spending of 5 per cent.

By any measure, that cannot be described as austerity. It is year-on-year growth of 5 per cent—in effect, organic growth—in spend in Scotland. The issue is not the amount of money but how we spend that money and what choices are being made for that £117 billion, and, in particular, the £72 billion spent here in Holyrood.

It is worth making some comparisons.

**Willie Rennie:** What Malcolm Offord says is interesting. From his extensive experience as a Conservative minister in the UK Government, what can he teach members about reform of public services across the UK, particularly in his portfolio?

**Malcolm Offord:** I will be delighted to cover that, because there are some insights that I was able to glean when I was a minister in the UK Government. Those are part of the reason why I left the Conservative Party, so I will come to that issue directly.

The £117 billion spent in Scotland is 55 per cent of GDP. In the UK, total spending is 44 per cent, going to 45 per cent, of GDP, so Scotland is spending considerably more per capita than England. The exam question is, are we getting better public services? Are our schools better? Are our hospitals better? Are our roads better? Is our policing better?

New Zealand, which has the same population as Scotland—5.5 million people—spends 42 per cent of GDP versus our 55 per cent, yet its GDP per capita is 10 per cent higher. That tells me that this is not about money.

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There has not been a shortage of money but a shortage of value for money for the taxpayer. Ivan McKee can intervene on that point.

**Ivan McKee:** The New Zealand example is instructive. The big difference is that, as a country of 5 million people, New Zealand is a normal independent country. It does not have many tens of billions of notional spend allocated to its accounts that are actually spent in Whitehall.

**Malcolm Offord:** Of course, the response to that is that Scotland spends £117 billion but raises £87 billion in taxes, so there is a £30 billion structural deficit that is paid for by the UK Treasury. We can take that comparison either way.

I suggest to the cabinet secretary that what he has outlined on artificial intelligence, digital improvement and so on should be considered the ordinary course of business. That is how any department should be running; it should be running to maximise its efficiency on any budget. That should not be considered groundbreaking or revolutionary.

I encourage the cabinet secretary to start looking immediately at where we are wasting money, where there is duplication of money and where we are not getting value for money.

I will give three quick examples of that. As referred to by Michael Marra, we have the 132 quangos, which are spending £6 billion. We can talk about the money all day long, but what is interesting is the democratic deficit in how the country is run, with ministers not being able to control spending because it is at arm's length. To come to Willie Rennie's point, I saw that at first hand when I was a minister in the Department for Business and Trade and I was given the brief of trying to deal with the compensation for Post Office workers.

What I saw over the past 20 years, when I unravelled it, was a complete disconnect in the lines of authority between ministers and an arm's-length body that behaved on its own account and did its own thing. The result was that the postmistresses and masters could not get accountability. There was no point in firing the minister, Ed Davey, because he was not in control of it in the first place. Quite apart from the money, can we please bring services back into our control under Ivan McKee, so that he can see the value for money, and so that when he pulls a lever, he can see where the money comes from?

Secondly, we know that energy is reserved to Westminster, so why does the Scottish Government spend £5 billion on net zero? Again, we cannot find that line. We cannot push a button in the public accounts of Scotland and get that number to spit out. We have to do a lot of work and go through many places, but we find that, in the current 2026-27 financial year, the Scottish budget commits more than £5 billion, which is described as record investment, to climate action and net zero measures. In the context of the £72 billion budget, that is approaching 8 per cent. I direct the cabinet secretary to that area as well.

The third area to which I would direct him is welfare. We all in the chamber believe in the welfare state to help people, as a safety net, as they move through life. In particular, we need to do a lot more to help people who have fallen out of the way of work to get back into work. I want to hear a lot more about the effort that we put into helping our colleagues and fellow citizens back into work.

The issue with welfare is that, over the past 10 years, the choices made by the SNP Government—particularly under Nicola Sturgeon, when she created a welfare economy—meant that 15 per cent, which was the biggest spend, was allocated to welfare, versus 3 per cent to education. The welfare budget is out of control. We are heading towards having a million Scots of working age who are not working, which is a national disaster for us all. That is the third area to which I would point Ivan McKee.

At the end of the day, the cabinet secretary has been in business, which is a good thing. We need more people in the chamber who have worked in business. He will know that any business can save 5 per cent of its costs without directly impacting its top line: 5 per cent of £72 billion is £3.5 billion. That would go a long way to fixing his budget, and he would be commended by the Scottish people for that.

I move amendment S7M-00309.4, to leave out from “welcomes” to end and insert:

"believes that public money is limited, whereas demand is infinite; further believes that meaningful reform starts in its chamber by using the time available to reach meaningful and defined decisions; believes that using parliamentary time to debate a motion that lacks any substantive action, and therefore leads to no definitive change, undermines the Parliament's expressed desire for reform; recognises that emphasis on public service provision should be focused on outcomes and not inputs; believes that the recipients of public services are the most important people in this process and must be the focus of the Parliament's attention; looks forward to co-operation with staff and legitimate representative groups to raise standards and improve provision, and calls on the Scottish Government to publish a programme of concrete action."

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark):** I call Lorna Slater to speak to and move amendment S7M-00309.2.

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15:40

**Lorna Slater (Edinburgh Central) (Green):** Reforming our public services means making sure that they are sustainable for the long term. It also means ensuring that they are delivering what we need them to deliver, including healthcare that is free at the point of need. Poverty is expensive. Not only is so much human potential lost when children grow up in poverty, because they lack the opportunity to thrive, but their health outcomes are worse and social structures are more fragile. We all have to pay the costs of repairing that damage.

Although I am sceptical about the focus on AI in the Government's reform strategy, I support the cabinet secretary's emphasis on prevention. Preventing children from growing up in poverty will alleviate much of the strain on our public services down the line. Simple things such as ensuring that our children have enough healthy food to eat while they are growing up will lessen the strain on our NHS in the future.

I absolutely do not support Scottish Labour's approach, as set out in its amendment, that a list should be created of all public bodies and that someone—possibly the cabinet secretary—should look down that list and, with a black marker pen, cross out organisations to satisfy that party's desire to make cuts. The Scottish Greens believe that reform in our public services should be worker led. Reform should be designed by the front-line workers who deliver the services and by the communities that depend on them, not by someone sitting in St Andrew's house with a whiteboard and a black marker pen.

The Scottish Greens believe that public services should be under public ownership and should not be run for profit. We would bring more of Scotland's buses back under public control, and we would support having publicly owned ports that could be key economic drivers of the energy transition to develop local supply chains, bring oil and gas workers into new opportunities and diversify our marine economy.

There is a larger conversation to be had about the responsibilities of the public and private sectors. For too long, private companies have generated profits while polluting our environment—pollution and litter that our councils and other public bodies have had to clean up at public expense. Industries should pay to clean up after themselves—that is, the polluter-pays approach. If the public purse is stretched, that is the first place that we should look for money. It might involve taxing polluters or using extended producer responsibility schemes such as the deposit return scheme, but in any case it is clear that we can no longer afford to subsidise polluters.

The same goes for carbon emissions. Through tree planting, peatland restoration and carbon capture schemes, the Scottish Government is spending—and will spend—a lot of money on desperately trying to pull carbon out of our atmosphere. It would be much cheaper to prevent those emissions in the first place, by removing the direct and indirect subsidies for producing them.

Of course, we would know more about who is receiving public subsidies and what they are doing with them if we had a complete land registry. It is a matter of urgency that Scotland's land register be completed so that a comprehensive and publicly accessible online map can be created. I would be very interested to hear the cabinet secretary's view on the importance of that aspect.

The Scottish Greens believe that public money can be spent more effectively if conditions are attached to it. We would make fair work first conditions mandatory for public procurement, grants and economic development funding, which would ensure that no company in receipt of public money could use exploitative practices such as fire and rehire or zero-hours contracts. The Scottish Greens believe that public bodies should have clear duties to protect the environment, build resilience to climate change and uphold human rights. Reform of the public sector must embed those duties throughout.

In the previous session of Parliament, I was part of the cross-party SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee. I would like to highlight to the cabinet secretary two of the recommendations that resulted from that committee's work. One says:

"While the Committee was tasked with reviewing the SPCB supported landscape only, this small fraction of the public sector should not be seen in isolation from the wider public sector. The evidence is clear that many of the measures we are recommending in this report could also apply more widely."

Another says:

"In particular, while we welcome the Scottish Government's public service reform programme, we were surprised to learn about a lack of understanding of the functions and potential overlaps and duplication among the public bodies it funds. We therefore recommend that the Scottish Government urgently undertakes a strategic mapping exercise to identify the functions of all Scottish public bodies and where they overlap, to inform decisions on future size, structure, and coherence across the public sector."

**Michael Marra:** It strikes me that that is precisely what Scottish Labour's amendment describes. We must understand the shape of those public bodies, decide where there is duplication and stop having some of them.

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Given that the committee that the member sat on said that that was a good idea, will she vote for our amendment?

**Lorna Slater:** The Labour amendment specifically talks about cutting public bodies, but not about making sure that their remits do not overlap, which would involve changing the remits of those bodies. It may be that, in the course of consultation with the public and workers, decisions may be made to change the number of public bodies. However, for Labour to come in, right off the bat, saying, “Let’s cut some”, before we have even asked questions and done the mapping exercise, seems to be putting the cart before the horse, and it hardly represents the worker-led reform that we are after.

As with many aspects of governing in Scotland, we can do only so much because of the limitations of the devolution settlement. We can try to implement initiatives such as the polluter-pays approach, but we can be vetoed by the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020. We can try to do things differently on taxation or benefits so as to increase revenue or improve outcomes, but we will always be trying to fight poverty and climate change with one arm tied behind our back.

It is clear to the Scottish Greens that public sector reform must be accompanied by a greater devolution of powers to Scotland.

I move amendment S7M-00309, to insert at end:

“; agrees that any programme of public sector reform must be worker-led; believes that public service reform must incorporate community wealth building principles, including procurement reform, to ensure that more public money is spent locally; agrees that public bodies and organisations receiving public funding must adhere to fair work principles, and that public bodies should have clear duties to protect the environment, build resilience to climate change and uphold human rights and that public sector reform should be accompanied by a greater devolution of powers to Scotland.”

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson):** I call Murdo Fraser, who joins us online.

15:47

**Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** I should explain that I am having to contribute remotely today due to a family issue, otherwise I would be in the chamber.

I welcome Ivan McKee to his new role as Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform. I know that he is keen to dispel the notion that he is here as an axeman to make cuts to public services—that is, to be “Ivan the Terrible”, as my colleague Meghan Gallacher suggested some weeks ago—but I think that we need some clarity from the Scottish Government about what public service reform actually means.

When, in a debate last week, I challenged the Scottish Government on how it would address the looming £5 billion black hole in public finances, the cabinet secretary’s response to me was that it would do so through public service reform. However, in other interviews, he has made it clear that public service reform is not about making cuts. However, those statements cannot both be true at the same time, which is why we need some clarity on what exactly reform is intended to deliver and how that £5 billion black hole will be filled.

**Ivan McKee:** I have been through this a number of times with Mr Fraser, but we will go back through it again for his benefit.

First, what he calls the black hole is a projected gap that is based on projecting past spending patterns into the future. As Mr Fraser well knows, the Scottish spending review that was published last year identified, over a five-year period, how the Scottish Government would close that gap, as it is called, to ensure that income balances expenditure. That has already been laid out.

In relation to public service reform, Mr Fraser needs to understand the difference between cuts to services—that is, delivering reduced or fewer services—and being more efficient while delivering the same or better services. That is about taking waste out of the system, which I am sure that he will agree exists, in order to make those services more efficient.

**Murdo Fraser:** We will come on to waste in a moment—I have some suggestions to make in that regard—but I refer Mr McKee to today’s Accounts Commission report on local government, which highlights the scale of the cuts that the Scottish Government has passed down to councils over the 19 years that it has been in power. I hope that that is not a model that the Government intends to follow.

Looking at this whole agenda, we cannot ignore the fact that the SNP has now been in power for almost two decades, so it has had 19 years to start addressing the issue. As my colleague Meghan Gallacher reminded members just a few moments ago, the Christie commission reported on it in 2011. Fifteen years on, we are still hearing about the need to make progress on the same themes of prevention, joined-up services

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and efficiency, but little progress has been made. The Government can talk a good game, but it needs to start actually delivering.

The SNP has promised before now to shrink the state, but instead it has grown bigger and more expensive. In June, 2025, the then finance secretary, Shona Robison, set a target to reduce the public sector workforce by 0.5 per cent a year, but, by the fourth quarter of 2025, the head count, at 601,600, was higher than it had been in the previous year. She had already pledged to reduce the public sector workforce in 2023, but it has continuously increased. The devolved civil service alone has grown by almost 60 per cent since just 2018-19.

What should the Scottish Government do? In the spirit of being helpful, let me give the cabinet secretary some practical suggestions as to the way forward. First—and this is in line with the comments made by Michael Marra and other members—there needs to be a comprehensive assessment of the number of public bodies in Scotland and whether there is any duplication or room for rationalisation. Even the Information Commissioner has said that he is astonished at the number of public bodies in Scotland and that he keeps finding new ones that he did not know about. Whatever the value of their work, each one of those independent bodies needs to have its own board, chief executive, finance director, human resources functions, audit and reporting. When we produced our manifesto just a few weeks ago, we identified that, in the field of economy alone, there were more than 100 different organisations offering business advice. Therefore, we need a simplification and rationalisation of the landscape, and considerable savings could be made if we went down that route.

Secondly, the Scottish Government needs to reconsider its policy on no compulsory redundancies, because relying solely on voluntary severance means that the public sector could be left employing people whose jobs have effectively disappeared and cannot be redeployed elsewhere into valuable roles.

Thirdly, we need to look at the whole public sector estate and assess whether there can be much better sharing of resources. We want to see more public servants back in the office, working on a hybrid model, rather than the default being just working from home. However, even with that, we have substantial buildings sitting underutilised, and we could see significant rationalisation and cost saving through sharing. That sharing should not just be done at a Scottish Government level—it could also be done with local authorities or, indeed, UK Government bodies and agencies. We could start with international offices, for example.

**Ivan McKee:** *[Made a request to intervene.]*

**Murdo Fraser:** I will happily give way again if I get the time back.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson):** Cabinet secretary, I am afraid that Mr Fraser is in his last minute or so.

**Murdo Fraser:** Perhaps the cabinet secretary could respond to that point in his winding-up speech. I will cover a couple of other points quickly.

Fourthly, we need to focus on front-line services. Do we really need an army of diversity, equality and inclusion managers in every organisation?

Fifthly, we need to end the practice of funding supposed arm's-length charities through Government. These so-called charities depend almost entirely on Government funding for support and they use that money to lobby the Government for policy change. I am thinking of the Equality Network as a very good example. If people want to lobby the Government, they should do it with their own money, not at taxpayers' expense.

Presiding Officer, we want to see—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson):** You must wind up, Mr Fraser.

**Murdo Fraser:** We want to see that black hole in the public finances closed. It needs to close. We need to hear the meat of the Government's argument on what public service reform means. That is the point that is made in our amendment today, and I am very pleased to move it.

I move, as an amendment to motion S7M-00309, to leave out from “welcomes” to end and insert:

“acknowledges that the Scottish National Party administration has failed to deliver on public service reform during its 19 years in power; agrees that the delivery of excellent and sustainable public services should be the goal of public service reform, rather than the preservation of existing corporate structures; notes that, while a long overdue commitment to deliver public service reform is welcome, the Scottish Government's finances will remain unsustainable until Social Security Scotland's ever-rising benefits bill is controlled, and calls on the Scottish Government to clearly set out how it plans to close the near £5 billion forecast black-hole in Scotland's finances.”

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson):** I call David Green to speak to and move amendment S7M-00309.1.

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15:54

**David Green (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD):** I begin by welcoming the cabinet secretary to his new role and wishing him well. As we have already heard, Mr McKee has been handed what might become the defining task of this Government, which is tackling the £5 billion black hole in Scotland's finances. As Murdo Fraser has just said, although the cabinet secretary insists that his role is not about cutting front-line services, time will certainly tell.

It is often said that voters are never wrong. As my colleague Willie Rennie said in his opening remarks of this parliamentary session, given the low turnout of voters and their rejection of some of the established parties, it is clear that people are pretty fed up. They are working hard and they are playing by the rules, yet things are simply not getting any better. Therefore, we are in urgent need of a change in approach.

Liberal Democrats were therefore encouraged by the First Minister's comments at Prosper's annual forum held last week. He was right to say that our planning system is broken and needs to "work better". He was also right to say that we need to change how public services are delivered, starting

"from the needs of the citizen, of the business, of the community."

However, I warn the cabinet secretary that he faces an uphill struggle to rebuild public confidence, particularly in rural Scotland. I agree with what Michael Marra said earlier. We must recognise that there has been almost 20 years of an SNP Government, and some contrition about what has not gone right or what has not been reformed would be welcome.

Too often under this SNP Government, the term "reform" has been code for ever-greater centralisation. The centralisation of the police led to the closure of the Inverness control room and the loss of local operators with detailed knowledge of our communities. The one-size-fits-all approach taken in the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has left stations in north-west Sutherland, in effect, unavailable for years. There is also the long-term trend of concentrating specialist healthcare in the Highlands at an overstretched Raigmore hospital, or, worse, losing services altogether, not least vascular care—an issue that I know Edward Mountain of the Conservative Party raised in the previous session.

As I said in my first speech in the chamber last week, Liberal Democrats believe that the best decisions are made when local people are empowered to make them. I therefore welcome the intent shown in the empowering people, places and communities workstream, but I urge the Scottish Government to go further and give my constituents greater reassurances by using its rural renewal bill to put rural proofing into law.

Turning to the cabinet secretary's commitment to making public services more efficient, I will use what I have left of my time to focus on one key area: social care, including delayed hospital discharge. It is quite astonishing that our NHS is losing £1.2 million a day because, on any given night, around 2,000 patients are stuck in hospital. Those are people who should be cared for in their communities at a fraction of the cost. If we are serious about tackling delayed discharge and reducing pressure on the NHS, the Scottish Government must deliver on its commitment to join up services.

In the Highlands, the end of life care together partnership, which is co-led by Highland Hospice, is a great example. I see Jenni Minto nodding in agreement. Between May 2023 and September 2024, people who accessed its helpline spent more than 4,000 fewer days in hospital, thereby generating savings of up to £3.8 million. Highland Hospice estimates that, with an investment of around £1 million a year, it could deliver that service right across the Highlands. That would be a compassionate choice. It would reduce delayed discharge, save money—which I know the cabinet secretary is looking to do—and ensure that more people receive the care that they want, where they want it, which is at home.

In closing, I commit the Scottish Liberal Democrats to holding the Government to account and working constructively where common ground can be found. However, we must be guided by the principle of empowering local communities, not by a one-size-fits-all approach.

I move amendment S7M-00309.1, to insert at end:

"notes concerns that previous reforms undertaken by the Scottish Government have led to the centralisation of public services, including through the creation of Police Scotland, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and the proposed National Care Service; believes that the centralisation of services and the adoption of a one-size-fits-all approach have had a detrimental impact on rural Scotland, and further believes that any future public service reform should be guided by the principle of local decision-making, with communities empowered to shape the services on which they rely."

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson):** We move to the open debate.

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15:58

**Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP):** I congratulate Ivan McKee—I will call him super Ivan, given the scale of his task, based on his speech and the vision that he has set out today.

From listening to colleagues from across the chamber, I am struck that there is a lot of common ground here, and I think that we need to explore that. I am also struck that talk of black holes and gaps and the SNP failing to do X for 300 years misses the point and misses the opportunity. The black hole is predicted, if nothing else changes, so things are going to change. We are all agreed on that. Equally, we have the opportunity to redesign the state. That is a significant opportunity for all parties individually, and I say to them that the SNP is going to do this, so come and be part of it.

There are things that we can work on. I have read the manifestos of the other parties, and all of us in this chamber stood on a platform of change of one sort or another. We all know that what we are doing needs to change. There is a huge opportunity to redesign the state: to take a fresh sheet of paper and decide what services we need and what structures will best deliver them, to empower citizens and, crucially, to empower staff to decide what those services should be, and to design the structures that will best deliver them. Everything is on the table—everything has to be on the table.

It is not about filling a gap or reducing the headcount; that misses the opportunity. It is about doing things more effectively and efficiently and delivering better services for the people we all serve. It is about identifying the need and designing the service. I am personally deeply agnostic about how we deliver those services and what structure is necessitated. I am game for changing everything, be that state, third sector or private.

The point has been made that, “The SNP could have done that”. Yes, it could have done that. I will take that criticism and accept it. However, often things could not be changed because there was not support in this chamber to do it. We can talk about 19 years of failure, as some people would say, or we can accept that the elections happened, that the SNP was massively endorsed by the people of Scotland and that we all have a job to do and common ground to do it. So, how about we raise our game and think about the future? I will take that criticism, but there is a lot that we can do together.

**Michael Marra:** I point gently to the fact that Alyn Smith’s party had an outright majority in the Parliament for one of those parliamentary sessions, so not having had the numbers is not a foolproof excuse.

Alyn Smith will find common ground across different areas. My note of caution to him would be to say that, if we set the closing of the fiscal gap at the front end, we could come to the wrong decisions. Is that not the case?

**Alyn Smith:** I agree with that. That is my point about a fresh sheet of paper. There is an opportunity to do this. The First Minister is behind this, we have a cabinet secretary who is empowered to do this, and we know that it needs to be done. So, let us do it. We will not agree on everything—we cannot agree on everything—but there are things that we will agree on, such as the need for change, and so let us see about pushing that through.

If we are looking for ideas, I commend the Enlighten manifesto to the chamber. It has a number of excellent ideas in it. I do not endorse them all—the whips will be glad to hear that—but there is a good job of work in there, with some fresh ideas to take forward. It is a challenging read for all of us. If we are willing to think new thoughts, let us do it. While we are at it, let us think about some difficult questions.

**Murdo Fraser:** *[Made a request to intervene.]*

**Alyn Smith:** Forgive me, but I need to make some progress.

While we are thinking about changing the status quo, I note that I was not elected and did not come into Scottish politics to administer stuff; I came into Scottish politics to change the face of Scotland, because I did not think that Scotland was working as well as it could. I believe that independence is a big part of that change. Others do not, which is fine. However, if we can agree that change is necessary, let us get on with it.

I have some questions of my own. We have local government in Scotland that is neither local nor government. Much of its money is spent before it gets there. Hard-working councillors up and down the country, of all parties, are trying to do their best, but they are operating with their hands tied and they are not responsible for their budget. The Forth Valley local authorities—Stirling, Clackmannanshire and Falkirk—are working very hard together, but we need an honest discussion about what local government is for.

Our planning system is, frankly, not fit for purpose. It is holding us back and slowing down development, and we need to accelerate it. On health boards, I ask: why do we have so many? What value is being added? Is it more effective? I think that we can restructure that.

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We also do not have a national health service, but a national illness and accident service. Surely we need to get to preventative spend to make people live healthier lives. We have integration joint boards that are struggling right now, and they will struggle even more into the future.

Why are stretched local authorities operating schools? Surely a national framework with greater local accountability for headteachers running the primary schools, and better connections with colleges for lifelong learning, would give better skills as the world changes around us.

We have a huge task under way, colleagues: think about it, and it makes your head spin. However, it is a challenge that we all share. If we all accept that we need to work on this, then let us do that. Let us not think about what has not been done, but let us think about what we are going to do.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson):** We have a number of first speeches in this session, so I remind people that the convention is not to intervene on a first speech.

I call Dawn Black to make their first speech.

16:04

**Dawn Black (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP):** I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, which states that I am a councillor in Aberdeenshire Council.

It is an absolute pleasure to be here, in this chamber, representing the people of Angus North and Mearns. I thank the hard-working activists that did so much in the campaign to ensure my election and to those who placed their trust in me.

I also pay tribute to my predecessor, Mairi Gougeon, who represented this constituency for 10 years as well as serving as the Minister for Public Health and Sport and, latterly, as the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands. From steering through historic land reform legislation to leading significant agricultural reform, Mairi demonstrated the power of kindness and respect in politics while always striving to build consensus across the chamber. She brought an incredible energy to her roles and I can only hope to match that.

As many of my colleagues have done in their first speeches, I claim my constituency as the best constituency in Scotland. It is a constituency that has a bit of everything, from incredible beaches and historic fishing harbours to market towns, an industrial port, a small city, beautiful glens and a Munro.

I moved to Stonehaven, in the north of the constituency, at the age of 13 when my family's circumstances and my father's job brought him to work in Aberdeen as part of the oil boom in the mid-1980s. It is in my soul and, despite having spent some time living overseas, it is and always will be home.

At the constituency's most northerly point stands the iconic Dunnottar castle, as well as the historic Stonehaven auld toon and harbour. There is the Howe o' the Mearns, which was the home of one of Scotland's most famous and loved writers, Lewis Grassie Gibbon, who had a love of the land and the earth and the communities that worked on it, which were so evocatively depicted in the Doric of "Sunset Song" and the other books of "A Scots Quair". The rich agricultural heritage of the Mearns and Strathmore that he depicted lives on and is vital for our country's food security.

There are the Angus glens of Glen Esk, Lee, Lethnot and Ogil, each of which is stunning in its own right. They lead up to the Cairngorms national park, which includes the easternmost Munro, Mount Keen. There is the small city of Brechin, which is rich in medieval heritage and the birthplace of Sir Robert Watson-Watt, the inventor of radar. Just down the road is Forfar, home of the delicious Forfar bridle and historically a major manufacturing hub for linen and jute and home to Ramsay Ladders.

On the coastal southernmost point of the constituency is Montrose, with its working port that is so vital for offshore support to the oil and gas industry and the emerging renewables industry through offshore wind maintenance and support operations. It also has the impressive Montrose basin, which is the largest inland saltwater basin in the UK and attracts more than 100,000 migratory birds every year.

All those places are beautiful and quintessentially characteristic of the north-east of Scotland, from the North Sea to the mountains of the Cairngorms. However, it is the people and the communities that make those places extra special—communities that are proud and passionate about their places. I have been proud to represent those communities as a community activist through my local business association and community council to becoming a local councillor in Aberdeenshire Council and now here in the Parliament.

I move to the essence of this debate. In the face of rising demand for public services and public finance pressures, there must be more partnership working. There is currently far too much duplication. More needs

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to be done to share services and there needs to be a willingness to work more collaboratively and efficiently—to work smarter.

It must be acknowledged that people who work and volunteer in communities and the third sector are experts in their fields. However, they are all too often marginalised or ignored by public authorities, and there needs to be far more respect for their contributions to local life and services. Those contributions often come from places of lived experience and concentrate on early intervention and prevention, without which many vital community services would, quite frankly, collapse. We also need to recognise that, rightly or wrongly, a pound in the hands of the third sector goes much further than when spent by either the Government or the local authority.

It is vital to understand that a one-size-fits-all approach just does not work. Every place has its own needs, foibles and quirks that need to be taken account of as we make decisions on legislation, guidance and delivery. Place must be taken account of and be respected. For that to happen, the culture needs to change. It is necessary to ensure that there is buy-in at all levels of Government and local authority delivery, and we will achieve that by breaking free of entrenched ways of working and listening to the staff and volunteers who work at the coal face.

I also question whether our local authorities are truly local—as my colleague Alyn Smith has already said, many are geographically so large that they cannot possibly be. To be frank, many of our local authorities are just too vast. Aberdeenshire—part of which makes up the northern part of my constituency, and where I am a councillor—has an area of 2,437 square miles, yet that is just the fourth-largest local authority in the country. It stretches from Braemar in the west, in the Cairngorms national park, to St Cyrus at its most southern coastal point, and to Peterhead, Fraserburgh and Banff on the north coast, and each of those places has vastly different needs. Economies of scale for procurement and management structures might be a justification for such large authorities, but they do not serve local communities well.

We cannot expect change in our local government and public services from just tinkering around the edges. We must be bold and radical in our thinking. I suggest that we look north to the model that is set by our Scandinavian neighbours, where local authorities truly are local. Since 1996, in Scotland, we have had 32 local authorities, averaging a population size of around 175,000. However, in Finland, for example, there are 308 municipalities with a median of just 6,000 residents. That is truly local. Although they are overseen by 19 regional councils that handle broader regional planning and development, the municipalities have a much higher degree of autonomy, as well as the power to levy local taxes. It means that all local decisions are truly local and made by people living and working in the space that the decisions impact, which is similar to what we had before 1996.

As we look to transform our public services, we must change the way in which things are done, work with our communities and empower them to ensure the provision of public services that fulfil their needs.

16:12

**Joe Long (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** I note that the register of members' interests will show that I worked until 8 May for Scottish Autism, which is a third sector organisation.

As Michael Marra laid out at the beginning of the debate, Scottish Labour fully recognises the need for public service reform. Since the shape of that reform is still evolving, I offer three thoughts that should contribute to the framing of the decisions.

First, I hope that public service reform is undertaken with a long-term perspective in mind. In recent times, there have been useful contributions to the public debate by Carnegie UK, which is based here in Scotland, and other organisations about the need for policy making to look beyond the horizons of a five-year parliamentary session and to consider the needs of future generations.

I understand that there will be pressure for quick wins in public service reform, but, as we look to employ new technologies and adopt new ways of working, I hope that we explicitly consider future generations—whether in terms of the skills and training that we need or the sustainability of the changes that we make—and that we acknowledge the technological, environmental and demographic changes that Michael Marra laid out at the beginning of the debate.

Having worked in public services for the past two decades, I note that we have seen many pilots of new ways of working, innovative projects that demonstrate how we can do things differently, and cross-sectoral partnerships and collaborations. However, all too often, we do not see long-term evaluation of impacts or the roll-out of successful projects, even when we know that there is a need for systemic change. We already have multiple evaluations, pilots and proofs of concept that we can draw on across a range of policy areas, so let

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us not miss this opportunity to implement that learning system-wide for long-term benefit. We do not need to reinvent the wheel when we have tried things that work.

Secondly, and with that first thought in mind, I welcome the motion's focus on preventative spending. We have heard consensus on that in the chamber today. Like many who have worked in public services, I lament that, 15 years on from the recommendations of the Christie report, we have not seen the full-scale shift to prevention that many of us know is needed. People in mental health crisis, young people with additional support needs who struggle to cope in busy classrooms, young people who find themselves on the path to crime or addiction, and those with health difficulties that go unchecked until they present at accident and emergency—all those failures bear a heavy human cost and require a significant resource to address. I think that we are agreed that we will not avert that crisis-driven spend without significant upstream investment, so I look forward to seeing the plans brought forward in line with the Scottish Government's motion.

Thirdly, I appeal for recognition in our planning and thinking that our public services are delivered not only by the public sector. Next week, there will be a separate debate about the role of the third sector—one that I welcome—but thinking about the public sector and third sector in a siloed way will not help us. Scotland relies on the agility of the third sector to fill in gaps where statutory services are not present and we must be mindful that, if statutory services retreat in any way, those gaps will get bigger.

The third sector provides a significant proportion of our social care services. Not-for-profit service providers innovate and provide specialist services on behalf of local authorities and health and social care partnerships across Scotland; and charities and voluntary groups often provide the services that fill the preventative function envisaged in the Government's motion. As many charities grow from particular communities or groups with shared experience, voluntary sector organisations are often well placed to engage people who rely on those services in the processes of user involvement, decision making and planning that the motion envisages. Yet, all too often, third sector services are commissioned on a short-term basis, with little certainty about contract renewal. That often leaves their employees on more precarious contracts while budgets are settled, and with less beneficial pay and conditions than their public sector peers.

Often, those third sector preventative services are the first to be cut when times are tough. Many third sector organisations are in stressful, financially precarious situations right now and there is anxiety about what public service reform will look like. Inevitably, the third sector will be impacted, so the Scottish Government's promised third sector partnership needs to be firmed up in dialogue with the process of public service reform.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson):** You must wind up now.

**Joe Long:** Like the consideration of the impact on future generations and the commitment to prevention, I hope that, when we talk about public sector reform, we can build in serious consideration of the impact on the third sector.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson):** I call Zen Ghani, who is making their first contribution.

16:16

**Zen Ghani (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP):** I declare my interest: I am an elected councillor on Glasgow City Council.

I congratulate you, Deputy Presiding Officer, on your election, and Ivan McKee on his appointment as Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform.

It is the greatest honour and privilege of my life to serve the people of Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok in the Parliament. I do not take lightly the trust that they have placed in me and I will work hard every day during the next five years to deliver the change that they expect.

Before I talk about the constituency, I will mention my two predecessors, both of whom served their constituencies with a dedication that I aspire to follow. First, James Dornan, who diligently served the people of Glasgow Cathcart during the past 15 years. I saw first hand how he always put constituents first in everything and anything that he did. He consistently went above and beyond to secure positive outcomes for the people of Cathcart.

Secondly, Humza Yousaf served the people of Glasgow Pollok with passion. Not only was he a committed local MSP but, as we all know, he was someone who served this country with dedication in Government and in his time as First Minister. Many people across Scotland will also remember the dignity and compassion that he showed during one of the most difficult periods in his time as First Minister, when members of his family were trapped in Gaza. The concern felt across this Parliament and the country for their safety

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demonstrated the very best of our shared humanity. I know that members will join me in wishing Humza, Nadia and their family all the very best for the future.

It is fair to say that, without people such as Humza being elected and breaking the many glass ceilings that he did, people like me might not be in the chamber today. I am sure that the chamber will join me in thanking James and Humza for all that they have done for their constituencies, and in wishing them all the best for the future.

Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok is a constituency like no other. It is defined by its diversity, by its rich history and, above all, by communities filled with hope and determination. It is home to communities such as those of old Pollok, Nitshill, Darnley, Crookston, Arden, Newlands, Auldhouse, Pollokshaws, Croftfoot, Cathcart, Castlemilk and Kilmarnock. It is a constituency that is rich in civic pride. That spirit is reflected in many organisations including the Southwest Arts and Music Project—SWAMP—the Village Storytelling Centre, Home-Start Glasgow South, Barlia football centre, Threehills community supermarket. Those are all vital community resources and make Cathcart and Pollok what it is today.

My constituency includes places such as Castlemilk, a community that has produced generations of talented footballers who have gone on to represent Scotland on the world stage, Carmunnock, Glasgow's only remaining village, and Nitshill, which has a rich history in coal mining. It also includes the two biggest parks in the city, Linn park and Pollok country park, with the latter being home to Highland cows and the world-famous Burrell Collection.

When my grandparents came to Scotland in the 1950s and built their lives, first in Stornoway and later in Tarbert on the Isle of Harris, they arrived with little more than hope, the ability to work hard and a determination to build a better future for their family. They could never have imagined that one day their grandson would take a seat in our national Parliament. Their story is not unique. It is the story of so many families across Scotland who worked hard, contributed to their communities and wanted their children and grandchildren to have opportunities that they never had.

I am proud to stand here today because of the sacrifices that my grandparents made and the values that they passed on to me. However, this honour would not have been achieved without the hard work of the activists who dedicated their time to speaking to residents across the constituency. My thanks go out to every one of them.

I would also like to mention one person in particular who inspired me to get involved in politics and who always challenged my thinking on topics—my former modern studies teacher Thomas Donnelly. It is surreal to have gone from watching First Minister's question time and parliamentary debates in modern studies classes in 2018 to finding myself sitting in this chamber, and I will use this opportunity every day to deliver the change that people in Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok, and across Scotland, expect.

We were all elected to serve the people of Scotland and to improve their lives and the services that they use. Whether members support independence or support Scotland remaining part of the UK, it is clear from the first few weeks of this parliamentary session that there is more that unites us than divides us.

That brings me to today's debate on reforming our public services and ensuring that our constituents get the best services possible in modern-day Scotland.

The SNP is committed to reforming our public services so that they can meet the challenges of the day and of the future. We have all seen from events in recent years that the world is moving at a much quicker pace than ever before. Every month, across the world, new technologies and innovative ideas come into force, and if we are to ensure that our various public bodies can meet the needs of the future, it is vital that we embrace such reform as a united Parliament.

Technologies such as artificial intelligence have the potential to reduce administrative burdens, to support our workforce and to improve the delivery of public services. Using AI effectively will help us to ensure that public services are more responsive, efficient and accessible for the people we serve.

I know that progress is what many of my constituents want, and I am sure that it is what many other members' constituents want, too. I ask members to support the motion, please, so that we can ensure that our public services are fit for the future.

16:23

**Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP):** I would like to continue the theme that Murdo Fraser and Meghan Gallacher started, which Alyn Smith followed up on, by suggesting that, in Ivan McKee, we have Ivan the Great.

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Prior to moving to Argyll and Bute, I lived in Glasgow and worked for BBC Scotland, where I had the pleasure of using my skills as an accountant to empower people to make programmes as creatively and efficiently as possible and give best value to the audience. I have never made a television or radio programme in my life, but I know that, when I had to provide business plans or budgets, the best people to give me the right information to crunch the numbers were the programme makers themselves.

I believe that I created an atmosphere of collaboration, not competition, between different programme makers, and I believe that I gained their trust. Therefore, I believe that learning from those on the front line can drive change and enable progress to be made.

Islay has been my home for the past 15 years. What struck me when I first moved there was the importance of the role that the public sector plays in rural and island communities. People in such communities are closer to the public sector. We see the consequences of public sector decision making. We know the refuse collectors, the teachers live up the road from us and we bump into the doctor in the Co-op. The public sector, which provides the services that we all need, is the beating heart of small communities, and I thank it for its work. I would argue that it is the people who provide those services who know where efficiencies can be achieved, and I agree with the cabinet secretary's point that organisations need to be structured in a way that allows such dialogue to take place.

When I served in Government, I visited NHS Ayrshire and Arran with the women's health champion, Professor Anna Glasier, and we saw two amazing examples of small teams working together to find ways of integrating disciplines and using new technologies to improve women's health and change the culture. They knew that they had no more budget. However, they also knew that, by utilising that budget differently, they could invest in prevention and improve women's health, which is exactly what Joe Long was talking about. I also highlight that the hospital at home service is very successful in my community.

I support the new thinking around subnational planning in our NHS to spread good practice but, having listened to constituents, I have the following observations. When it comes to specialisms such as hip and knee replacements, a national service is the way forward. However, kidney dialysis services should, in my view, be local. I have seen the difference that the dialysis service on the Isle of Bute has made there and how different that is to the experience of my constituents in Lorn and the isles, who have to travel to Fort William for dialysis. I hope that distinction will be recognised by the Government and acted on by cabinet secretaries.

I attended many hustings during the election campaign and the question of ferries always came up. It was clear from the questions we were asked that the triangle of CalMac Ferries, Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd and Transport Scotland does not work. I am pleased that our manifesto includes a commitment to look at that. One suggestion—the Norwegian operating model—was considered and I hope that both Mr McKee and Mr Flynn will take that on board, so to speak.

I strongly believe that the fantastic third sector will help to provide the answers to many of our questions, as others have said. Those in that sector understand the people whom they support, are willing to find innovative ways of working, and are trusted by communities, as Dawn Black mentioned.

In March, I attended a fashion show in Oban, where four local third sector organisations came together to collaborate—not compete—to raise funds for the amazing work that they do across the Oban area. It was fun, colourful and had a clear message: look what we can do if we are empowered to pool our scarce resources. I would advocate for a memorandum of understanding between statutory bodies and the third sector to enable such collaboration, and I absolutely recognise what David Green said about Highland Hospice.

In the time that I have left, I will drop some pebbles into the pool and hope that the ripples that they create will shift public service reform in the right direction. Dawn Black was absolutely correct to talk about Mairi Gougeon and her work on the good food nation, which could really empower local procurement and community wealth building. I heard a suggestion from Argyll and Bute Council about childminders looking after children outwith their homes. I also think, as others have said, that we should move away from yearly budget allocations and, as I mentioned yesterday, I think that we need simpler forms. We should listen directly to communities that find solutions to situations. For example, Tiree has a community vet, a solar array and a community interest company for local carers. Those are all things that local people are doing to try to change the way in which their community operates.

As you know, Presiding Officer, I am trying to bring Gaelic into the chamber. There is a proverb that I hope the cabinet secretary and others will take note of, and that they recognise the importance of Scotland's public service teams. That proverb is, "An rud a nithear gu math, chithear a bhuil", or, "What is well done will be shown by results."

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**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson):** The final speaker in the open debate is Gary Bouse, who is making their first contribution.

16:28

**Gary Bouse (Falkirk West) (SNP):** Congratulations on your election, Deputy Presiding Officer.

Before I continue, I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests: I am a serving councillor in Falkirk.

Most of us who are elected here have the same ambition, which is to do our best for our constituents who have placed their trust in us as their representatives. I am deeply honoured to be elected as the member for Falkirk West, the constituency that has been my home for more than three decades.

Having lived, and brought up my family, in Larbert, I have been incredibly well served by two giants of Scottish politics: Dennis Canavan and Michael Matheson—Dennis from 1999 to 2007 and Michael for almost two decades. Both were first elected in 1999 and both have a legacy of exemplary service to Falkirk West. In government, Michael Matheson made a hugely positive impact, introducing the world-leading domestic abuse legislation criminalising coercive and controlling behaviour, establishing self-directed support, renationalising Scotland's railways and banning the display of cigarettes at the point of sale. In addition, he is always standing up for the workers of Alexander Dennis.

I do not claim that my constituency is the best in Scotland—if you know, you know. Falkirk has a deep history, which runs from the Romans, with the Antonine wall, to the Jacobite period and then to the industrial revolution. Without the Carron works, the industrial revolution does not happen in Scotland. We also have the odd thing to go and see. One or two members may have heard of a thing called the Kelpies in Helix park and the Falkirk wheel, which is an amazing place to go. We also have secrets such as Callendar park. If members have been to Callendar house, they will know that it is a wonderful place, especially for an afternoon tea. I have been there many times.

Although I plan to chart my own course in this place, it is with grateful thanks that I take up the mantle to be the best MSP that I can be and to honour the legacy of the two gentlemen who have gone before me. My commitment to the people of Falkirk West is to act thoughtfully and to carry out my duties with fairness, integrity and respect for everyone.

My earliest years were spent growing up in Glasgow tenement slums, where life could be extremely challenging but for the people who were around us. The deep sense of community that I have today grew from those people helping people, and I see that sense of community across my constituency and throughout Scotland. Cycling Without Age Scotland, which is based in Larbert, where I live, brings freedom and joy to people who have found themselves isolated at home or wherever they are cared for. Falkirk District Scouts builds resilient young people and gives them opportunities and experiences to explore and contribute to a bigger cause. I also note the work that is undertaken by Keeping Larbert and Stenhousemuir Beautiful. Those groups support with dignity those in the area who are most in need, breaking down social isolation, organising community events and nurturing and strengthening our communities, which are empowered to come together for everyone's benefit.

However, transforming our public sector requires partnership. As in business, we must ensure that resources are deployed effectively to produce the best possible results while reducing waste and duplication. Most important, we must ensure that services are fairly and appropriately financed in order to guarantee positive outcomes. Key to that is engaging our dedicated public sector workforce and service users and fostering an environment in which they can take ownership of change. Falkirk Council has many examples of that, and I would welcome an opportunity to discuss that further with the cabinet secretary. I take this opportunity to invite him to visit Falkirk and see that in action.

I urge the Government to take forward any action that will protect jobs, including in Falkirk West, where recent announcements of job losses at Alexander Dennis and Hescott Engineering have added further pressure to an already precarious situation. Scotland, like any normal independent country, should have the ability to use public funding to support local jobs and protect our vital industries. Where the Scottish Government can act, it has done so.

However, I make a further appeal. The United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 and the Subsidy Control Act 2022 are holding Scotland back from being able to meaningfully improve our prospects and industries. In the meantime, while the Scottish and UK Governments are engaging on matters that are vital to my constituents' livelihoods, amending that legislation should be the foundation on which we build. If the UK Government is, as we expect, unwilling to accommodate, it should get out of the way and let us in Scotland

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do the right thing, in the right way, for the right reasons and for the benefit of our businesses, families and communities, because that is what our constituents expect of us.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson):** We move to closing speeches. We are running behind, so if those who are not making a first speech could stick strictly to their times, that would be very helpful.

16:35

**Andrew Baxter (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD):** Too often, the SNP has confused reform with reorganisation and reorganisation with centralisation. Real reform should push power closer to communities, not further away from them. However, this afternoon's debate has demonstrated a broad agreement that Scotland faces significant challenges in delivering reform to our public services and, in doing so, empowering our communities and those who use those services.

I was therefore heartened by the thoughtful contributions from SNP members—including, in particular, those who were making their first speeches—demonstrating a willingness to work across parties. I wholeheartedly agree with Dawn Black that a one-size-fits-all approach simply does not work and that many of our local authorities are too large. Dawn Black would be very welcome to go to my website and sign my petition to break up Highland Council.

I was particularly struck by Alyn Smith's positive speech, in which he said that we are here to redesign the state. That is a bold task. If the Government is willing to take it on, it will go way beyond this one session of the Parliament, so the cabinet secretary will be sat in that position for a long time to come—beyond the next election.

The Liberal Democrats wish to work constructively with the Government rather than simply criticising. We have three simple positive tests for reform. First, does it increase local accountability? How will local councils, communities and individuals influence decisions in their area?

Secondly, does it improve outcomes? That key test is not whether the structure has changed but whether the final outcome for our constituents has improved.

Thirdly, does it strengthen prevention? During his Radio Scotland interview this morning, the cabinet secretary used the word "prevention" several times, but I am still no clearer, even after my intervention on him, what shape he thinks preventative services will take. A list of recent initiatives is simply not enough.

The cabinet secretary cites the creation of Police Scotland as the perfect example of SNP public service reform. Yesterday, he looked on enviously as I offered the Deputy First Minister a road trip to Skye. I say to the cabinet secretary that there is a spare seat for him, so he can come with me, and I will introduce him to police officers who, privately, will tell him that they view Police Scotland as the greater Strathclyde police force, even 10 years after reform. They will share their experience of his party's flagship public service reform.

Following the creation of Police Scotland, officers are still overstretched in rural areas. Huge swathes of the Highlands are covered by just two officers on a weekend. They are put in the intolerable position of deciding between responding to acts of vandalism and dangerous parking along Glen Etive or heading to a domestic abuse incident in Fort William. They have to think twice about whether to arrest an offender, as that would require a two-hour journey up the A82 to a custody suite in Inverness, because the local facility is unmanned or unavailable.

For ministers, centralisation can look efficient on a spreadsheet. For someone in Portree, Mallaig, Lochaline or Kingussie, it often means that decisions are being taken further away, by people who know less than they do about the community that is affected.

The test of reform is not whether civil servants and ministers here in Edinburgh have reorganised services. It is whether people receive better services in their own community. Too often, the SNP's previous reforms have passed the first test and failed the second.

16:40

**Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Con):** I begin by congratulating all the members who have, this afternoon, made their first speeches in the chamber, including Dawn Black, Alyn Smith, Zen Ghani and Gary Bouse. All spoke passionately about their communities and predecessors. I refer to Gary Bouse's speech in particular, because his constituency is part of the region that I represent. He is absolutely right to mention the jobs in Falkirk and concerns about the number of industries and businesses that have closed in recent times. I welcome the opportunity to work on a cross-party basis on that issue, because we know how important it is to the people of Falkirk.

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I come to the crux of the debate. Two hours on, the Government has not properly explained how it plans to reform public services in Scotland. If it is not about cuts, what is it about? Is it savings, efficiencies or streamlining? I know those terms well, and I know this story. When I was a councillor, we were instructed to pursue cuts every year in order to agree a budget. After all, balancing the books is a legal requirement. Councillors in the chamber—past and present—will know that.

However, the Scottish Government has had no qualms about taking an axe to local government budgets over many years. Although ministers in the chamber passed the sentence, it was councillors who were left to carry out the difficult decisions, reduce services and manage the consequences in our communities. That is finally catching up with the Scottish National Party. As Michael Marra said, after nearly two decades in government, the SNP has finally been forced to confront the consequences of its decisions. The looming £5 billion black hole in Scotland's finances will simply not disappear by itself, especially when the Government spends money as though it is going out of fashion.

The Government is now in the same position that it has put councillors in year after year, and it has only two realistic options: cut spending or raise taxes. Instead, it appears to have chosen a third route: rebrand the problem as public service reform. As Murdo Fraser rightly pointed out, the new cabinet secretary has already insisted that public service reform does not mean cuts. I hate to break it to the cabinet secretary, but "public service reform" is precisely the kind of language that councils have long been encouraged to use when trying to soften the blow of reductions in services. We have been here before. Two decades on, we are still hearing the same promises about joined-up services, prevention, efficiency and transformation. That is why I asked the cabinet secretary earlier what is going to be different this time. What is the point of holding a debate when there is nothing concrete before the Parliament to scrutinise? Given the SNP's track record on delivery, why should anyone take it at its word?

The Scottish Conservatives have attempted to be constructive by making practical proposals that could help to deliver meaningful public service reform. We believe that it is necessary and the right thing to do, but any serious discussion must also address the ever-rising welfare bill. If the Government is genuinely committed to reducing demand on public services and creating a more sustainable system, it cannot continue to ignore one of the fastest-growing areas of public expenditure. The Scottish Fiscal Commission has made it clear that spending on social security is rising more quickly than funding provided through the block grant adjustment. By 2026-27, the gap will exceed £1 billion, and it is expected to grow further.

The question that the Government never seems willing to answer is this: if the benefits system is costing more every year, why are so many of the underlying problems facing Scotland getting worse? Every pound that is absorbed by the spiralling welfare budget is a pound that is not being spent to tackle the root causes. The result is a vicious cycle—less investment in opportunity, more economic inactivity, greater reliance on benefits and ever-growing pressures on public services and finances.

No one is arguing against supporting those who genuinely need help. However, when we look at compassion, we also need to look at whether the current system is delivering the outcomes that people deserve.

I am in my final few seconds. During the debate, we have heard a few different phrases to describe the cabinet secretary—we have had "Super Ivan", "Ivan the Great" and "Ivan the Terrible", but time will tell which version of the cabinet secretary will be his legacy in this role.

16:45

**Laura Moodie (South Scotland) (Green):** As I close the debate for the Scottish Greens, I return to the question of what public service reform means for communities on the ground, because communities across Scotland are already doing remarkable work. The voluntary and community sector delivers services that are essential to daily life, from social care and community transport to services that tackle isolation and support people through crisis.

About 40 per cent of the sector's income comes from public funding, including more than £1 billion from our local authorities and a further £1 billion from the Scottish Government. That tells us something important: not that the sector is overreliant on public funding, as Murdo Fraser's comments indicated, but that its work is not peripheral but central to how public services in Scotland function.

In the south of Scotland, we see community wealth building in action through development trusts taking on local assets, creating jobs and keeping wealth circulating locally. We see regional partnerships, such as the Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere, bringing together communities, businesses and public bodies to deliver economic development that works with nature and strengthens local resilience. That is prevention in practice, and that is empowerment done well.

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Michael Marra, in his intervention earlier, talked about empowerment. Communities should have power, but they also need support; otherwise, we are just passing the buck. We also have to be honest about the pressures that that brings. Too often, empowerment risks becoming offloading, and that risk sits at the heart of the strategy, because although it talks about prevention and empowerment, it is also driven by a need to deliver savings, which raises a real concern that we end up cutting capacity today while promising transformation tomorrow.

In many rural communities, residents are now taking on roles that were once delivered by the state, such as running transport schemes, building homes and keeping services alive. They do that because they care deeply about their communities, but they do it unpaid, often without adequate support and sometimes at real risk to their own health and wellbeing. That is not a sustainable model for public services, and it is happening in a wider context in which Scotland has about 62,000 fewer public sector workers than it did in 2008, all while demand continues to rise, particularly due to our ageing population.

Communities are being asked to carry more responsibility at the same time as the system around them is under strain. We have to be clear about what that means for workers, too. Reform cannot simply mean a smaller workforce, more automation and more pressure on those who remain. If there is to be a just transition, workers must be partners in change, not the price of it.

That pressure does not fall evenly. As David Green said, decentralisation is fantastic, but localism without resources is not empowerment. It is responsibility without support, again. We need to match local decision making with long-term, reliable funding, not short-term competitive pots. Some communities have the capacity, confidence and professional expertise to navigate complex funding systems, but others do not. The evidence from the voluntary sector is that short-term, competitive and bureaucratic funding arrangements create instability, funding delays and growing stress for staff and volunteers, especially in the places that face the greatest disadvantage.

The result of all that is a quiet inequality. Wealthier, better resourced communities manage to retain services. Communities with fewer resources, which often face deeper poverty and poorer health outcomes, lose out. That is not community empowerment; it is structural unfairness.

Community wealth building must therefore be about shifting power and resources, not just expecting communities and the third sector to fill gaps as the state steps back. There is a real danger that we continue to talk about prevention while budgets remain locked in a crisis response. If we are serious about prevention—I am grateful to Andrew Baxter for raising the issue in his first intervention—we must move beyond short-term thinking. Community organisations repeatedly tell us that one-year funding cycles undermine long-term planning, workforce stability and the ability to build on what is already working.

We know what helps: multiyear funding, flexibility and full cost recovery. Early evidence from fair funding approaches shows improved staff retention, stronger planning and greater resilience. None of that is terribly radical. It is simply aligning funding with the reality of how change happens. Prevention does not deliver instant savings; it requires upfront investment and patience. Investing in youth work now will reduce pressures on the public purse in the future, whether that is through welfare, health or justice costs. As mentioned earlier, the Christie commission told us that years ago, and it remains true.

Public service reform should be an opportunity, not a code for cuts, as we heard from Malcolm Offord. It should be an opportunity to build a wellbeing economy that is rooted in place, reduce inequality rather than entrench it and genuinely share power with communities. However, that will happen only if we are honest about the choices that are in front of us, because reform cannot be a cover for doing more with less and it cannot be austerity repackaged in the language of empowerment.

The question for the Parliament is whether we will step up in the way that our communities have and back empowerment with investment, whether we will replace short-termism with certainty, and whether public service reform will be about fairness, not withdrawal. If we get that right, we will not just preserve services but build a Scotland that is fairer, greener and more resilient for the long term.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson):** I call Max Bannerman to make their first speech.

16:52

**Max Bannerman (Highlands and Islands) (Reform):** I take this opportunity to record my formal congratulations to the Deputy Presiding Officer on her appointment and to the cabinet secretary for his appointment to the public service reform brief.

Everyone in the chamber knows that holding public office is a tremendous privilege, but it is an even higher honour when you have been sent to the Parliament by the people back home. Highlanders are rightly known

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the world over for their independence of mind and spirit and I think that they made that clear in sending not one, but two, Reform MSPs to Holyrood at the recent election. I pledge to always stand up for their interests.

I pay a fulsome tribute to my predecessors. Fergus Ewing embodies that Highland indefatigableness. He has campaigned on the A9 and the A96 for decades and he will be sorely missed by his constituents. As a new MSP, I have greatly valued his wise counsel. I also pay tribute to my friend Douglas Ross who will be missed, too—possibly not by the Government front bench but, certainly, by his former constituents in Moray and beyond. Although he stepped down from the Conservative front bench at the end of the last parliamentary session, it often seemed to some of us that he was still the de facto leader of the Opposition in the chamber. I wish him well.

Finally, I place on public record my deep gratitude to a great friend, mentor and fierce advocate for the Highlands, former MSP Mary Scanlon CBE. Some in the chamber, including the First Minister, will remember her well. When I was growing up outside Tain in Easter Ross, Mary was the standard bearer of centre-right politics in the Highlands. If I do nothing else in the chamber, I hope to follow her example of dedicated service in my five years in the Parliament.

I recall Mary Scanlon imparting to me that, in the north, we do politics a bit differently to the rest of the country. People in the Highlands have no time for endless hyperpartisan posturing if it gets nothing done. Instead, they expect us to leave the party rosettes at the door and be judged on our individual actions and merits. I am not talking about consensus for the sake of consensus. However, in keeping with true Highland tradition, I will work with anyone in this chamber and everyone across the region to address the geographical, demographic and economic challenges that our unique part of the world faces.

Public service reform is key to addressing those challenges. It might sound just like a phrase from a Government strategy document, but, in my region, public service reform will mean the difference between whether the ferry sails on Monday morning, whether the maternity wards in towns are open and whether someone can see their GP without making a 100-mile round trip.

Let me be clear. I am a Reform MSP who is for public service reform. I want it to succeed but I do not want it to be done on the back of my constituents or to be used as yet another excuse to push a centralising agenda. As much as the inclusion of this portfolio in the Cabinet is welcome, the Government cannot be allowed to reinvent the wheel. The Christie commission laid all of the issues out, warts and all, in 2011. Why, then, are we holding this debate today? It is simple: it is because of a failure to deliver. Let us examine the evidence. Scotland has accumulated countless non-departmental bodies, directorates and other quangos, and layer upon layer of management and duplication that no business in my region would tolerate for a week.

Reform should mean chopping middle-management bureaucrats, meaning fewer managers and more nurses, fewer strategies and more services. It should mean measuring by outcomes rather than inputs—that is, by whether the patient is seen and whether the child is taught well at the local school.

Let us look at lifeline ferries. The story of CalMac and Ferguson Marine is, I am sorry to say, a case study in how public services fail, with ferries delivered years late and hundreds of millions over budget, and islanders paying the price in cancelled sailings and lost trade. We all know that ministers can be dragged to this Parliament to answer for such shortcomings ad infinitum, but that makes no difference to my constituents who want a boat that sails—nothing more, nothing less.

On health, Dr Gray's hospital in Elgin—in relation to which I declare an interest, as the doctors there saved my mother's life—has had to send expectant mothers down the road to Aberdeen or Inverness to have their babies because we could not sustain the service closer to home. NHS Highland, meanwhile, wrestles with serious financial pressures. A reformed health service should be protecting such services, not quietly centralising them out of existence.

I want to see the sort of radical reform that we have not seen since the dawn of this Parliament, which reconvened in 1999—nothing less than a radical restructure of the state. Instead of the moniker of Ivan the Terrible, the cabinet secretary might be more comfortable with being known as Ivan the Radical, because public service reform must run in tandem with real devolution and decentralisation. We should push power and money out of this Parliament, out of the quangos and the ministerial departments, into our communities and on to our front lines.

We have already seen some of that in action in my region. Look at the community wind farms in Lewis, which operate without vast subsidy and generate revenue for the local area. That is an example of a community that is taking responsibility and just getting on with it.

I will be an unashamed advocate for that sort of thing in Parliament, because there are consequences for getting our approach wrong. Every ward closed and every job cut that is not replaced by one in the private

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sector will be another reason for a young family to leave the area. Reform must reverse the hollowing out of rural Scotland, not accelerate it.

I will apply one test to every public service reform that comes to this chamber: does it make life better for the expectant mum in Thurso, the crofter in Lewis and the parent in Elgin? Where the answer is yes, ministers will find me a constructive colleague. In that regard, I have been heartened by some of the comments today, particularly those of Alyn Smith. However, where the answer is no, I will stand up for my constituents and hold this Government to account.

I will finish on a personal note, where I began. The motto of my old school, Dornoch Academy, is, in the Gaelic, “Le ionracas ‘s dichioll”, which means “With integrity and industry”. That is the standard that I will set myself, so that every week when I leave this place and go back home, I will be able to look my constituents in the eye, knowing that I have done my very best to advance their interests.

16:59

**Joe Fagan (South Scotland) (Lab):** My entry in the register of members’ interests shows that I am a councillor in South Lanarkshire.

I congratulate all those who have made their first speech in the chamber today. I will say that making a first speech is not quite as daunting as the prospect of making a second, because the second time around the Parliament can answer back.

With that in mind, I thought that I might start tactfully—and, indeed, tactically—with some points of consensus. Most of us agree that a forward-thinking approach to public service reform is about emphasising the importance of place, breaking down silos to become more community focused, partnership, collaboration and prevention, and the shift towards early intervention. I hope that we can also agree that the workforce across our public services is an informed, experienced resource, and that empowering staff, whether they are front line or back office, is critical to developing a progressive approach to public service reform.

Our amendment is not about diminishing the Government motion, but about steering a consensus over what happens next. We believe that our approach to public service reform can align with our approach to community wealth building, densifying local supply chains, fairer procurement, bringing contracts back in-house where it saves taxpayers money and recirculating local wealth. That can all contribute to fairer, more resilient local economies. It always has been and always will be the case that a strong economy is the foundation on which to build good public services, and that is especially true under the current fiscal framework.

The Scottish Government recognises the fundamental importance of partnership to the delivery of the public service reform strategy, so we are asking it to understand the implications for the third sector, to work with trade unions as social partners in delivering fair work and to observe the European Charter of Local Self-Government, which is already endorsed on a cross-party basis.

There is common ground—as there has been in this debate—with the Government and other parties, as well as with the cabinet secretary, whom I will refer to simply as Ivan McKee.

**Bob Doris (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP):** *[Made a request to intervene.]*

**Joe Fagan:** Although Lorna Slater seemed to be falling over herself to find reasons to disagree with us, I thought that we had a lot of consensus with the Green contributions on community wealth and fair work, as well as with the Liberal Democrats’ points about localism.

Just as there are points of consensus, there are areas of real tension, too. The public service reform strategy is a Government strategy. The target to reduce the workforce by 0.5 per cent per year until the end of the decade is a Government target. I have every confidence that local government will collaborate on improvement and transformation and I think that the Scottish Government can learn from local government about improvement and transformation. However, let me be clear: a central Government strategy should not be used to dictate the size of the local government workforce or to justify balancing the books on the backs of Scotland’s councils.

There is a core tension at the heart of the strategy between cost reduction and transformational change. Transformational change requires either patient long-term change—and a fiscal reckoning is looming at some point in this Parliament—or up-front investment and, therefore, a period of double running costs as we invest in alternatives to reactive spending, as the Scottish Trades Union Congress has warned. My concern is that that strategy could fall down in the lack of a plan for transformational investment.

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In the time that I have left, I will pick up on a couple of points that were made in the debate. Both Joe Long and the cabinet secretary were keen to emphasise that the agenda is very much about public service reform and not simply about public sector reform. I felt that the cabinet secretary was slightly more self-aware in the strategy document, in which he acknowledged what a number of members have said—that we have not gone fast enough or far enough.

Lord Offord made an interesting point, but I think that he came to the wrong conclusion. It is true that, other than at three points in our history—two world wars and the Covid pandemic—public spending, as a share of the UK economy, has never been higher, so why do we not feel the benefits of that? I do not think that it is just about quangos and waste—it cannot be. It goes back to the issue of prevention. There is too much failure demand in the system, because there is too much inequality and there was too much austerity, and we cannot go back to that.

It is testament to the wisdom and foresight of the Christie commission that the ideas that shaped its report are still powerful today, but it is dispiriting to know that so much of its ambition failed to materialise. Last year, delayed discharge cost the NHS in Scotland £440 million—a figure that is almost identical to the reported funding gap in Scotland's health and social care partnerships. The prison population is at a record high while local Government often has to squeeze those services that give us safer communities. Tonight, 10,000 children will go to bed in temporary accommodation, while social housing starts have fallen to a record low. That is the cost and absurdity of inaction, and that is why rewiring our public services and how we govern is so urgent.

"Ultimate responsibility for reform rests ... with the Scottish Government. I urge them to act quickly and decisively—as a society we no longer have time for delay."

Those were the words of Campbell Christie in 2011—15 years ago. This session, the new Parliament has to be different. It is time to act and time to change, because people's futures and people's services depend on it.

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