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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 17 June 2026

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

Portfolio Question Time

Justice

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): The first item of business this afternoon is portfolio question time, and the first portfolio is justice. If a member wishes to request a supplementary question, they should press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question.

Rural Crime

1. **Jamie Langan (South Scotland) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on whether rural crime is a serious issue affecting communities across Scotland and local police presence is crucial to its prevention. (S7O-00068)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Neil Gray): The Scottish Government fully recognises the impact of rural crime and supports action to tackle it through the work of the Scottish Partnership Against Rural Crime, which is a multi-agency partnership led by Police Scotland that aims to prevent, reduce and tackle rural crime.

The partnership's strategy includes actions around how perpetrators will be brought to justice, how rural communities can safeguard against such crimes and how individuals can be diverted from being involved in them.

There is also a series of local partnerships that has expanded across the country, strengthening the focus on prevention activity, particularly as criminality recognises no borders. Together, those efforts ensure a co-ordinated, intelligence-led response to rural crime and help to protect our communities.

Jamie Langan: I highlight that the estimated cost of rural crime in Scotland rose by 14 per cent in 2025, bucking declining trends across the rest of the United Kingdom. Does the Scottish Government consider that the closure of 180 police station across Scotland between 2013 and the end of 2025 has stifled efforts to prevent and address crime in rural areas?

Neil Gray: I believe that the resources at the disposal of the chief constable are sufficient to ensure that police numbers can be maintained at 16,500, meaning that we have more police officers per head of population than is the case in England and Wales. That is supported by record investment of more than £1.7 billion.

Deployment decisions and infrastructure decisions are operational matters for the independent chief constable, but that strong resource position, combined with the workforce of more than 22,000, ensures the capacity to respond to both rural and urban demands.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I have a supplementary question from Gary Bouse.

Gary Bouse (Falkirk West) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. It is pronounced "Bowse".

David Linden (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP): You have been called worse.

Gary Bouse: Yes, sometimes. "Blouse" is probably the main one.

Can the cabinet secretary reassure my constituents that, despite the unique challenges of rural policing, the recruitment pipeline remains strong, allowing the chief constable to keep police numbers at around 16,500?

Neil Gray: The Scottish Government is investing record funding of more than £1.7 billion in 2026-27, and the chief constable confirmed at the Criminal Justice Committee that the budget allocation will allow her to maintain officer numbers at around 16,500.

Police Scotland maintains that it has a healthy recruitment pipeline, with around 175 new officers recruited last month and further recruitment planned throughout the year. The chief constable confirmed to the Scottish Police Authority board last month that recruitment will have a particular focus on rural and island communities.

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The justice secretary knows that there is a total mismatch and inequality of arms between organised crime gangs that are operating in rural Scotland and the rural police presence. Ninety-two per cent of NFU Mutual agents are saying that rural crime is seriously disrupting farming activities. As a starting point, will the justice secretary meet my colleague Rachael Hamilton, who is introducing a member's bill that would replicate the measures contained in the English Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act 2023?

Neil Gray: I am happy to meet colleagues from across the Parliament to engage with ideas about how we can ensure that tools are available to our justice partners to make sure that communities across Scotland are kept safe. I reassure Mr Kerr—as I hope that he was reassured by my answer to Mr Bouse—that the recruitment of new police officers through the system has prioritised rural and island communities. That reflects

changing demands and, in particular, the response to organised criminal gangs that are operating across borders, not just in rural Scotland but across the UK.

Hawick Fire Station

2. **Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government when the Cabinet Secretary for Justice last met with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to discuss the future of Hawick fire station. (S7O-00069)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Neil Gray): I had an introductory meeting with the SFRS board chair and chief officer on 4 June, at which we discussed the overall objectives of the service delivery review and the consultation process that has been undertaken by the SFRS. I also met the SFRS deputy chief officer to discuss the service delivery review on 11 June. The SFRS board will meet on 22 June to take final decisions on which of the service delivery review proposals should go forward to implementation. Until then, no decisions have been taken.

Rachael Hamilton: The proposals to downgrade Hawick fire station are simply unacceptable, and they have caused months of agony for residents and businesses across the Borders. I strongly believe that Hawick fire station should be a 24/7 service, to ensure public safety. My constituents in the Borders are asking—I put this directly to the cabinet secretary—who will take responsibility if they receive the news on 22 June that Hawick fire station is to be downgraded and then something goes wrong.

Neil Gray: The location of resources, along with shift patterns, is an operational matter for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. The review does not propose any reduction in fire and rescue cover in Hawick. Indeed, two fire appliances will continue to be located in Hawick. The SFRS has assured me that the proposed move to a day shift duty system is based on a thorough examination of the risks and historic deployment data across the Borders area and that it will not compromise the safety of the public or firefighters.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): The proposals for Hawick and Helensburgh fire stations are essentially the same: a move to a day shift duty system while relying on on-call firefighters at night and at weekends. Attendance during on-call shifts drops off dramatically and leads to delays in crews attending incidents, with potentially devastating results. The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service does not appear to have published the consultation responses and is carrying on regardless. Will the cabinet secretary insist that the responses be published in full and the board decision be delayed until he has had a chance to speak to the Fire Brigades Union?

Neil Gray: I reiterate that those decisions are operational matters for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. The day shift duty system is not a new concept; it is already being operated in Livingston and at multiple other locations across the United Kingdom. There are challenges with on-call firefighter recruitment and retention that are caused by demographic changes, particularly in rural and island areas. The SFRS has concluded that availability at night and at weekends is much better and that there tend to be particular difficulties during the day, which is because people no longer live and work in the same location. That is why having whole-time firefighters working during the day, which is also when the majority of incidents occur, is a viable and sensible solution.

Community Cohesion

3. **Mark Simpson (North East Scotland) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of reported pressures on policing and the justice system, including the local effects of migration, what action it is taking to promote community cohesion across Scotland. (S7O-00070)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Kirsten Oswald): We work across Government portfolios, including with Police Scotland, local authorities and third sector organisations, to support inclusion and to work directly with communities to strengthen cohesion so that everyone feels safe and valued. There is a focus on that work following recent disorder on the streets, which will have increased fear and anxiety.

The police will always respond appropriately to such disorder. That response is necessary only because of the recent behaviour of a small minority of citizens, underpinned by racism, hatred, and the intimidation of people and communities in our society.

I thoroughly condemn such behaviour, as well as the actions of those who are stoking these sentiments and divisions. This is a good opportunity for the member to do likewise and to distance himself from the remarks of Thomas Kerr, who has encouraged people to take part in so-called protests on our streets.

Mark Simpson: Many Scots are expressing concerns over issues such as social cohesion and wellbeing, including one of my constituents from Arbroath, who shared the following with me:

> "I want my daughters to grow up in a Scotland that is safe, cohesive, confident in its identity, and capable of helping genuine refugees while also protecting the interests and wellbeing of the people already living here."

Given that legitimate concern, and the impacts on areas such as public safety and justice, what

specific steps is the Government taking to ensure that the issues that my constituent raises are addressed?

Kirsten Oswald: I do not know the details that lie behind what the member referred to. If it is a live police matter, I will not be able to comment on it.

The recent behaviour that we have seen presents a challenge and is a source of concern for people. In recognition of the challenges that communities face, we continue to work closely with Police Scotland to provide reassurance and to ensure that no one feels isolated or vulnerable.

Police Scotland has established a community reassurance cell to engage with stakeholders and community representatives in order to respond to those concerns.

Again, to be clear, violence must never be used to justify further division or to cause additional concern. My thoughts remain with all those who have been impacted by recent distressing incidents. Our focus must be on bringing communities together in response to difficult events.

Kate Nevens (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green): I thank the minister for her thoughtful responses. My supplementary question very much follows on from those.

Does the minister agree that the recent pressures on policing are far more a result of the actions of fascist and far-right groups than of the actions of anti-racist groups, which have always had peaceful gatherings? Will she outline the steps that the Government will take to engage with and be led by communities that are affected by racism and abuse by far-right and fascist groups? What additional community protection measures will be put in place? I love the sound of the reassurance cell that was mentioned.

Kirsten Oswald: I will try to touch on the various elements of Kate Nevens's question. There is ongoing work within Government to meet and engage constructively with a range of communities. Community cohesion and partnership working are vital to how we move forward.

On police resources and funding, although deployment is clearly and rightly a matter for the chief constable, this year we have increased police funding to more than £1.7 billion, which is an increase of £81.5 million compared with the 2025-26 autumn budget revision. That is to allow Police Scotland to deliver on its priorities, including on important front-line service delivery.

Firefighters (Scottish Ambulance Service Support)

4. **Colin Beattie (Midlothian North) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what conversations it has had with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service regarding the Scottish National Party's 2026 manifesto commitment to expand the role of firefighters to support the Scottish Ambulance Service. (S7O-00071)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Neil Gray): I had an introductory meeting with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service chief officer and board chair on 4 June, when we discussed a variety of topics, including the concept of firefighters expanding the duties that they perform to do more to keep Scotland safe from harm.

I agreed to work closely with the SFRS and the Fire Brigades Union on developing how our manifesto commitment can be delivered by the end of this parliamentary session. I look forward to meeting them both in due course.

Colin Beattie: It is vital that we recruit more firefighters. Will the cabinet secretary outline what measures are being taken to ensure that firefighter numbers are sufficient to meet the demand across Scotland?

Neil Gray: The SFRS is continuing to recruit whole-time and on-call firefighters to ensure that full crews can meet demand and that the right resources are in the right place at the right time.

Currently, the SFRS has 70 trainee firefighters going through initial training and is recruiting for a further 156 posts, which will be filled in 2026-27. The process has recently closed with some 1,400 applications having been received, which shows that working for the SFRS remains an attractive option for many.

The SFRS continues with its on-call improvement strategy to attract more recruits through targeted help with the application process and fitness criteria, along with introducing flexible on-call periods to make the role accessible to a larger number of people.

Social Impact Investment

5. **Colm Merrick (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what its priorities are for social impact investment in the current parliamentary session. (S7O-00072)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Neil Gray): The social impact partnership model is an innovative way of using investment from local and national businesses in projects for community benefit, with the aim of achieving better outcomes for people by offering payment by results. That is a new concept for Scotland, so we will provide a £200,000 kickstarter fund this year to work with

partnerships to bring forward ideas for preventative and early intervention programmes in justice, focusing on reducing reoffending and providing safe spaces for young people to divert them from antisocial behaviour and crime. If the SIP model works, we would want to roll it out to other priority areas.

Colm Merrick: The potential of social impact investment is huge but, at this stage, there is obviously a need for further research and development. Can the cabinet secretary therefore say how the Scottish Government will utilise the latest research and evidence that are available from bodies such as the Government outcomes lab at the University of Oxford while ensuring raised awareness of, support for and co-ordination of social impact investment among stakeholders to help to realise the huge potential of this innovative funding?

Neil Gray: Colm Merrick is absolutely right that we have an exciting opportunity for Scotland to lead the way in investing upstream to deliver better outcomes downstream. We are providing the £200,000 kickstarter fund this year to develop a new £10 million social impact investment fund, which marks a real step change in how we support prevention and early intervention. Our model will draw on the Government outcomes lab's world-class research so that we get the approach right from the outset. By embedding that evidence, learning from best practice and fostering collaboration, we will build a strong and trusted model that maximises impact and value. With the right foundations, that innovative approach will unlock new resources to provide safe spaces for young people and diversion from antisocial behaviour and criminality.

Retail Crime Task Force

6. **David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the work carried out by the retail crime task force. (S7O-00073)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Kirsten Oswald): Police Scotland was able to establish its retail crime task force through an initial £3 million of additional funding that was provided by the Scottish Government. That work will continue, backed by annual Scottish Government funding of a further £3 million each year to 2029.

Through the task force's four-strand approach—to prevent, to pursue, to protect and to prepare—it is targeting repeat offenders of retail crime by using analytical data and intelligence to carry out proactive enforcement activities in the areas that are most heavily impacted. In the first year, that has resulted in more than 6,400 charges for retail crime, with the detection rate having risen to just under 51 per cent, compared with 49 per cent for the previous year.

David Torrance: As the prevalence and types of crime have evolved greatly in recent years, will the minister outline how the Scottish Government is supporting and investing in Police Scotland so that it can adapt to new challenges and keep our communities safe?

Kirsten Oswald: I am grateful to David Torrance for looking at the issue through that lens. It is important that we recognise the challenges of different types of crime and Police Scotland's important role in keeping our communities safe. That is why we are investing record funding in Police Scotland of more than £1.7 billion this year, which is an increase of £81.5 million, or 5 per cent, compared with the published autumn budget revision figure. That includes an uplift of £59 million in resource and £16.3 million in capital funding.

One key thing to think about is that that budget will allow Police Scotland to look at front-line service delivery and to make key areas of transformation a priority, as it wishes to do.

Some of the specifics that David Torrance might be particularly interested in include: funding of £3 million per year over the next three years to support Police Scotland's successful work in targeting retail crime; an additional £2.7 million this year to support Police Scotland's work in the detection and disruption of child sexual abuse and exploitation; and continued close work with the Scottish Police Authority and Police Scotland to manage the police budget provision and ensure that sustainable and preventative policing is available.

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The minister must be aware that there has been a 128 per cent increase in shoplifting in the past four years, and that the figure has not even been fully reported. Does she acknowledge that many retailers believe that in Scotland we have a culture of impunity around shoplifting? Will the minister support the retail sector's ask for stronger consequences for repeat offenders than those that are currently being meted out?

Kirsten Oswald: I appreciate Mr Kerr's question. The Scottish Government recognises the distress that is caused by crime, whether it be retail crime or other forms of crime. The victims are very much in our thoughts, which is why we fully support activity to reduce that harm.

I point Mr Kerr to activities such as the Scottish Government's continued support for the innovative Scottish partnership against acquisitive crime—known as SPAACE—which is led by Police Scotland and includes retail groups among its

members. It is very important that we pursue that partnership approach to ensure that we hear directly from those who are impacted. The Scottish Government absolutely encourages retailers to engage with SPAACE in order to help them safeguard their businesses and the people who work there.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Question 7 has been withdrawn.

Antisocial Behaviour and Public Safety Concern

8. **Kate Campbell (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment has been made of the reported rise in antisocial behaviour, particularly involving people wearing masks and using electric bikes, and the increase in the level of concern over public safety for many people in communities across Scotland. (S7O-00075)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Kirsten Oswald): I recognise and share Kate Campbell's concerns about antisocial behaviour involving the illegal use of e-bikes, particularly in cases in which individuals are engaged in criminality and concealing their identity. I encourage everyone to report such behaviour to Police Scotland so that it, with its local authority partners, is able to continue to deliver targeted action to focus on those issues. I am pleased that the chief constable has noted a 5 per cent decrease in reported antisocial behaviour incidents compared with last year.

I assure Kate Campbell that I am committed to taking robust action to address antisocial behaviour and to keep communities safe, including progressing stronger powers to enable the police to confiscate and retain e-bikes and e-scooters that are used antisocially or criminally and urging the United Kingdom Government to act on licensing off-road vehicles.

Kate Campbell: Evidence shows that early intervention is the most efficient tool in tackling antisocial behaviour among young people. Does the cabinet secretary agree that investing in prevention should be a priority for the Government, particularly through youth services, youth work, peer mentoring and other support measures for young people, and particularly for those who might not have the role models that they need in their lives?

Kirsten Oswald: I am grateful to Kate Campbell for the angle that she has taken with that question. I very much agree with her. Early intervention and prevention work is a very powerful tool in addressing antisocial behaviour and is a real priority. That is why we have increased by £6 million our funding commitment to the successful cashback for communities programme, which is now in phase 7. The programme targets children and young people who are most at risk of being drawn into crime and antisocial behaviour. That investment means that more young people in communities across Scotland who might be in danger of going down the wrong path will have safe spaces and suitable activities to help to combat boredom, frustration and isolation, all of which can contribute to antisocial behaviour.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): I am very drawn to the minister's response on the misuse of e-bikes and e-scooters. We need to look at licensing seriously, and I am aware that work on that is in the very early stages. I regret to say that such misuse is an issue in Stirling. I make the offer that, if the minister is looking for a local authority with which to partner a pilot scheme, Stirling Council would be very willing to be part of that consideration.

Kirsten Oswald: I am grateful to Alyn Smith for highlighting the issue and for his focus on his local area. It is important that we consider the matter in the round, but one of the key issues to focus on is vehicle licensing, which is a reserved matter. In the previous parliamentary session, Ms Brown and Mr Fairlie both corresponded with the relevant UK minister on the issue, and we continue to engage with the UK Government on it. It is important that we take all possible steps to deal with the challenge affecting communities, but we need that extra tool at our disposal. At the moment, we do not have it, so we will continue to engage on the matter.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): I agree with the minister that there is a challenge, because seized e-bikes have been found to be capable of going at up to 70mph, which is far above the 15.5mph legal limit. Many e-bikes have been modified and lack proper brakes for high speeds, which has led to the police calling them death traps. It has also been reported that, in Glasgow, there has been a 600 per cent increase in the number of children aged seven to 15 attending accident and emergency departments due to e-bike or e-scooter incidents.

Will the minister clarify whether the police have the powers to issue warnings or fines for what they regard as the dangerous use of e-bikes in pedestrian or residential areas? In parts of Glasgow that I have covered for many years, I am getting an alarming number of reports of incidents that go beyond antisocial behaviour and are now criminal issues.

Kirsten Oswald: I am grateful to Pauline McNeill for providing such a local focus on the issue. The police take a serious and considered view on the matter. We remain committed to doing

everything that we can to support them in enforcement, and we are absolutely open to further action.

The police have advised that they believe that their current powers are sufficient, but we want to go further where we can. That includes removing the need for a warning before antisocially driven vehicles are seized, as Pauline McNeill mentioned. She also spoke about the speed at which some of the vehicles are driven, which can, of course, have an impact on whether there has been criminality.

I assure Pauline McNeill that we are considering the matter and that we recognise the importance of safety as well as prevention across our communities.

Cashback for Communities (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley)

9. **Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how the cashback for communities programme is supporting projects and young people in the Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley constituency during its phase 7. (S7O-00076)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Kirsten Oswald): The cashback for communities programme is very important in supporting young people who are at risk of being involved in antisocial behaviour, offending or reoffending. So far, there has been investment of £156 million, which has helped 1.4 million young people through projects in all local council areas, because the programme works across Scotland. We are investing £26 million in the current phase of the programme—phase 7—which runs to 2029.

On the local focus of Alan Brown's question, in East Ayrshire specifically, at least 150 young people are expected to benefit from four projects run by Cumnock Juniors Community Enterprise, the National Autistic Society, the Ukrainian St Mary's Trust Ltd and Youth Scotland. Investment in those projects will be backed by £2.27 million over the next three years.

Alan Brown: The programme is important and potentially life saving for a lot of young individuals. However, in relation to historical spend, given that my constituency has some of the highest levels of deprivation and non-attendance at school across Scotland, I am worried that East Ayrshire has missed out on funding compared with comparator local authorities. How can we ensure that national companies that provide such services provide enough in East Ayrshire, including in Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley, to meet the level of need? How can we also ensure that more local companies deliver such services?

Kirsten Oswald: I am grateful to Alan Brown for his continued interest in the matter. The cashback for communities programme is focused on delivering impact at the local level. He is obviously very interested in the programme, so I am happy to discuss it with him further, and I invite him to engage on it. Having listened to feedback from stakeholders, we have redesigned the programme specifically to strengthen the links with local communities, which are so important.

In the most recent phase of the programme, which started on 1 April this year, 35 of the 51 funded projects are neighbourhood focused, and they meet the local priorities identified through community planning partnerships. In Alan Brown's area, projects such as the Cumnock Juniors Community Enterprise play a critical role in engaging young people locally and building links with the broader community in East Ayrshire, which is so vital in the preventative space.

Police Scotland 101 Service

10. **Clare Haughey (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what support it is providing to Police Scotland to improve the 101 service. (S7O-00077)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Neil Gray): Decisions on how resources are deployed, including the operation of contact, command and control—C3—services, are rightly matters for the chief constable, which reflects the operational independence of policing. Police Scotland has been very clear that 101 is a non-emergency number, and callers are advised of other means by which they can contact the service while they are on hold.

The Scottish Government is providing record funding of more than £1.7 billion for policing in 2026-27, giving Police Scotland the resources that it needs to maintain a resilient and responsive service, including the 101 service. We expect that investment to support effective, accessible services for the public and to ensure that communities continue to receive the prompt and reliable policing response that they deserve.

Clare Haughey: I regularly hear from constituents who feel that waiting times for speaking to a call handler can be lengthy. I appreciate that the online service is also available, but many of my constituents, particularly older constituents, tell me that they do not have access to or do not use the internet. Can the cabinet secretary advise me how the Scottish Government expects Police Scotland to maintain a balance between telephone and online services to ensure that the 101 service is accessible for all?

Neil Gray: Clare Haughey is absolutely right. We need to bring people with us and give them the

flexibility to get in touch with services as they need them and in a way that meets their needs. The Scottish Government is fully supportive of Police Scotland's efforts to ensure that a resilient and responsive C3 service is maintained and is accessible to all. Emergency calls must clearly take precedence over the reporting of potential criminal incidents. Police Scotland has been very clear that 101 is a non-emergency number. Callers are advised to phone 999 if the incident that they are reporting is escalating into an emergency situation.

Police Scotland's contact assessment model ensures that resources are deployed to where they are needed most and that people receive the support required. We expect the record investment in policing to support effective, accessible services for the public and to ensure that communities continue to receive the prompt and reliable policing response that they deserve.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): According to the latest survey in May, the average time to answer a 101 call was 10 minutes and 3 seconds, and the longest wait time was 1 hour and 33 minutes. We know from the debate on the matter in the previous session that many callers give up long before that. Does the cabinet secretary agree that putting extra resource into the service must be a priority, so as to take pressure off the 999 service and emergency response?

Neil Gray: The data that I have before me, from March 2026, shows that the average wait time was 7 minutes, 52 seconds. While they are on hold for non-emergency calls, people are given alternative routes through which they can report issues. Katy Clark suggests that people are giving up but, in actual fact, they may be taking up those options and finding other ways to get in touch with the police.

As I said in response to Ms Haughey, I say to Ms Clark that we expect the resources that we are putting in place for Police Scotland to ensure the resilient and responsive service that meets people's needs. That is an expectation that we will carry, with Police Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): That concludes justice portfolio questions.

Health and Care

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): The next portfolio is health and care. I remind members who wish to ask a supplementary question to press their request-to-speak buttons during the relevant question.

Thrombectomy Service

1. **Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what progress has been made towards delivering a fully operational 24/7 thrombectomy service with national coverage, including how the service will reach rural Scotland. (S7O-00078)

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs (Maree Todd): We want people to be able to access thrombectomy treatment across Scotland, no matter where they live. That is why, in our election manifesto, we committed to providing a further £25 million, on top of the more than £51 million that we have already invested, to deliver a 24/7 thrombectomy service with national coverage. We have now commissioned Public Services Delivery Scotland to work with national health service boards to develop detailed resource and cost modelling for a 24/7 thrombectomy service.

Finlay Carson: Each year, more than 11,000 people have a stroke, yet only 2 per cent of them receive a thrombectomy—the very treatment that could prevent lifelong disability. Right now, there is a clear and unacceptable inequality across the service, and my constituents in Galloway and West Dumfries are paying the price. They have no direct access and must rely on transfer to Glasgow, where, in reality, the service is restricted to weekdays for access to referrals, the last procedure is at around 5 pm and there is no service at all on Sundays. The consequence is stark: if someone in Galloway has a stroke in the early evening, they are in effect denied that life-changing treatment. Outcomes for my constituents are being determined not by clinical need but by geography and the clock. That cannot be justified. What will the minister do, and when will she do it, to end that inequality?

Maree Todd: We have already provided funding for thrombectomy nurses in spoke sites to maximise the access to thrombectomy. NHS Dumfries and Galloway received £115,936 in 2025-26. Evidence from stroke services suggests that those hyperacute stroke nursing roles are already having a positive impact on the delivery of acute and hyperacute stroke care. We have funded an education package to help staff in general practices, emergency departments and the Scottish Ambulance Service to recognise stroke symptoms. In 2025, more than 1,600 NHS staff attended those education sessions. We are

also procuring a national artificial intelligence solution for NHS Scotland to help all NHS boards to identify rapidly those patients who would benefit from thrombectomy.

As I said in my earlier answer, we are still committed to having a 24/7 thrombectomy service and Public Services Delivery Scotland is working with NHS boards to establish fully the resource that is required to deliver that. Once that has been established, we will work at pace to develop a delivery plan with timescales for service expansion.

Donald MacKinnon (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): In my constituency of Na h-Eileanan an Iar, patients must travel to the mainland to access thrombectomy services. The procedure is time sensitive, so early intervention is critical. However, weather, the availability of aircraft and other factors can influence how quickly patients can be transferred to mainland hospitals. Does the minister agree that the distances that are involved and the uncontrollable factors for island patients heighten risk and make it even more important that services are available 24/7?

Maree Todd: I recognise the issues that Donald MacKinnon describes, not least because I, too, represent the area that he represents and I come from a rural part of the Highlands.

We are working hard to improve the identification of those patients who would benefit from thrombectomy. The issue then becomes about how we quickly transfer them to areas where the thrombectomy service is available. Thirdly, we must make sure that that service is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. We are working on all those issues to maximise the opportunities for that transformative care to happen all over Scotland.

Planned Housing Growth (Primary Care Service Demand)

2. **Lloyd Melville (Angus South) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to ensure that national health service boards take account of planned housing growth when assessing future demand for general practitioner, dental and other primary care services. (S7O-00079)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care (Angela Constance): Integration authorities, which include representatives of NHS boards and local authorities, are responsible for the strategic planning and investment in the delivery of integrated adult health and social care services in their areas. Therefore, integration authorities and not ministers are responsible for how they take account of planned housing growth when assessing future demand for general practice, dental and other primary care services.

Lloyd Melville: In growing communities such as Monifieth, the issue is often not the approval for the houses but the lag before the health services adjust to the new population. I appreciate what the cabinet secretary said, but will the Scottish Government look at how the data on housing consents could be used more consistently by NHS boards to identify which practices are more likely to come under pressure in relation to GPs, dental services and community health teams?

Angela Constance: Public Health Scotland is currently working on revised guidance and an associated data set to support integration authorities and partners to improve population needs assessment to plan service provision. However, as I stated, it is for integration authorities, using their knowledge of their areas and circumstances, to take account of how data on housing consents can be used more consistently to identify which primary care and community health teams are likely to come under pressure.

Furthermore, under the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997, local development plans must take account of the health needs of the population of the district and the likely effects that the use of land for development will have, and there are underpinning regulations that state that health boards have a duty to co-operate on the preparation of such plans.

Miles Briggs (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con): It has been estimated that, over the past 10 years, NHS Lothian has lost out on more than £200 million of public funding under the Scottish Government's NHS Scotland resource allocation committee funding formula. Given that the area has the fastest-growing population in the country, that is totally unsustainable. Is the cabinet secretary willing to chair a cross-party meeting to discuss how the situation can be addressed during this session of Parliament?

Angela Constance: I am happy to discuss the matter further with Mr Briggs. I believe that we have a meeting arranged in the not-too-distant future. I am aware that a number of factors underpin NRAC funding, just as I am aware of the population growth across the Lothians region, not least in my constituency.

Careful consideration must be given to the fact that any changes would not necessarily have the impact that Mr Briggs desires. There is an underlying complexity when it comes to NRAC funding, but I am happy to discuss the matter further with him.

Irshad Ahmed (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab): Thousands of houses will be built in

Edinburgh and the Lothians over the next decade, which will add to the pressure on health services. Will the Scottish Government listen to doctors and patients and change planning law to require property developers to help to fund and build GP surgeries as part of large developments?

Angela Constance: As I said in my answer to Lloyd Melville, health boards and local authorities have clear responsibilities with regard to planning. However, I will look at the detail of and give further consideration to Mr Ahmed's specific ask.

Orkney Health and Social Care Services (Staff Recruitment and Retention)

3. **Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to address workforce planning challenges in staff recruitment and retention for health and social care services in Orkney. (S7O-00080)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care (Angela Constance): Health and social care workforce planning and service delivery are the responsibility of the health board, the integration joint board and the local authority. However, we remain committed to working with island communities to strengthen the resilience of health and social care services. The service renewal framework highlights the challenges of increasing demand and the opportunities of system and service reform, including new approaches to health workforce planning.

Officials meet relevant partners in Orkney on a regular basis and the most recent meeting, which was on 28 May this year, focused on adult social care. More widely, our national islands plan and the action plan to address depopulation support broader actions to support sustainable rural and island communities, with health and social care being integral to that work.

Liam McArthur: I thank the cabinet secretary for that acknowledgement and commitment. Despite local recruitment initiatives, Orkney health and care still faces long-standing vacancies and significant reliance on agency staff. With an ageing population, demand will only rise, yet it is expected that health and care will bear the brunt of efforts to close the £5 billion gap in Scotland's public finances by 2030.

Does the cabinet secretary accept that Orkney faces particularly acute workforce challenges? What specific measures will the Government take to help Orkney health and care to build a sustainable local workforce for the long term?

Angela Constance: I am very conscious that the differing landscapes of Scotland's communities deepen some of the challenges, not least in and around adult social care. As I intimated, my officials have had discussions with Stephen Brown, the chief officer of the Orkney integration joint board, in which a range of challenges were discussed. I know that the vacancy rate in Orkney is higher than the national average, although the numbers of national health service staff and social care staff have increased and the spend on agency staff has decreased. Nonetheless, there are particular challenges for the area that Mr McArthur represents.

The Government's commitment to the next phase of the adult social care displaced workers scheme, which we have committed to relaunch within the first 100 days of this Government, is also important. That is one of the issues that my officials discussed with Mr Brown when they last met.

Neonatal Care (Reorganisation)

4. **Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will reconsider its plan to reorganise neonatal care across Scotland, in light of reports that it could result in the downgrading of essential units, including the service at Ninewells hospital. (S7O-00081)

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs (Maree Todd): I want to reassure families that we are making that change for the very best reason: to save babies' lives. The evidence is clear that the outcomes for the smallest and sickest babies will be improved by the change. The outcomes for those babies are best in units with a high throughput of cases, where support services such as surgery and cardiac care are co-located.

The change brings Scotland into line with existing neonatal intensive care service models across the UK. It will affect a very small number of babies—those born at less than 27 weeks' gestation, those weighing less than 800g, and the very sickest babies, who need multiple complex life support or surgery.

To put that in context, around 470 babies are admitted to neonatal care in Ninewells every year. The change will affect about 10 of those babies, who will be moved to be cared for in one of the three specialist units until they are fit to return to Ninewells.

I must be absolutely clear: the vast majority of sick babies will continue to be cared for in their local neonatal units.

Murdo Fraser: Last week, I received correspondence from Lauren Bruce, a mum from Blairgowrie, whose daughter, Grace, suffered a rare stroke shortly after birth at Ninewells hospital. Her concern is that, under the current plan to downgrade the neonatal intensive care unit there, a baby with that condition would be moved two

hours away from their family—a journey that Lauren fears that her daughter would not have survived.

This week, Lauren wrote to the First Minister, saying:

"What concerns me most is the number of parents who have shared their stories, pleading with you and the Scottish Government to withdraw this proposal. Families have laid bare some of the most frightening, personal and traumatic moments of their lives in the hope that their voices will finally be heard. Yet there is a growing fear that these experiences will simply be acknowledged and ignored."

What assurance can the minister give to my constituent that her concern will not be realised?

Maree Todd: The first thing to say is that the vast majority of babies who need additional care after birth will continue to get that care in their local area. The intention with the new model of care is that mothers in suspected extreme pre-term labour—those mums who are expected to give birth before 27 weeks—are transferred before they give birth, when the baby is in utero, to maternity units in the hospitals that have neonatal intensive care units.

It is recognised that it will not always be possible to transfer mothers before they give birth. In those cases, our Scottish specialist transport and retrieval service—ScotSTAR—teams will transfer those babies in specialist ambulances that are equipped to care for neonates, as has been the established practice for many years.

Babies who receive care in one of the three intensive care units in Scotland will be transferred back to their local neonatal unit for ongoing care as soon as possible.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): The report "The Best Start—A Five-year Forward Plan for Maternity and Neonatal Care in Scotland" recommended developing three to five neonatal intensive care units, yet the Scottish Government has agreed to reduce the number to three. Aside from the impact at Ninewells, that will result in the downgrading of the award-winning Wishaw neonatal unit. We also know that the lack of capacity in Glasgow means that mums and the very sickest babies may have to travel hundreds of miles to Aberdeen. That simply cannot be right.

Will the minister look at that issue again, in the interests of mothers and babies, rethink the downgrade of the Wishaw neonatal unit and consider whether it is possible to have more than three intensive care units?

Maree Todd: I am more than happy to discuss that issue with Jackie Baillie and other interested representatives. Jackie Baillie will understand that I am new to my role. My understanding is that the initial recommendation was to move to five units, then to three.

The change is already under way. In the east of the country, Fife babies already go to Edinburgh to receive that level of care; in the west, Ayrshire babies go to Glasgow. The next phase will take on board the learning from those initial pathways before we move on. I am more than happy to work with local members on that. However, as I understand it—I must be absolutely clear—the recommendation was for three units nationally, and that is about saving babies' lives.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I ask for succinct questions and answers, if possible.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (Referrals)

5. **Joe Long (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** I refer to my entry in the register of members' interests, which shows that I was employed by Scottish Autism until 8 May.

To ask the Scottish Government for what reason over a third of CAMHS referrals have reportedly not been accepted in the last 12 months. (S7O-00082)

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs (Maree Todd): CAMHS is a specialist service for children and young people who have acute mental health needs, and referrals are based on clinical judgment. Although referrals are sometimes not accepted, that does not mean that support is not available. In line with the national CAMHS specification, if a referral is not accepted, the individual must be sensitively signposted to appropriate services, including community-based provision.

We are working with health boards to understand the causes of the rates of non-accepted referrals, ensuring compliance with the specification and delivering timely access to appropriate alternative support.

Joe Long: A common reason for referral to CAMHS is for neurodevelopmental assessment. Combined neurodevelopmental pathways have been trialled as part of the Scottish strategy for autism, which ended in 2021. Subsequently, there have been pilots of neuroaffirmative diagnosis services in the third sector, and we have had concrete proposals from the Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland on how we can create better capacity in the system. When will families be able to access consistent and effective neurodevelopmental assessment and support, wherever they live in Scotland, without fear of being turned away?

Maree Todd: Joe Long will understand that we are continuing to work with national health service boards, local authorities, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the third sector and other delivery partners to improve access to neurodevelopmental support for children, young people and adults.

CAMHS is not the correct service for children who seek a diagnosis for a neurodevelopmental condition such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, unless they have a co-existing mental health condition. For many young people, it is more likely that placement on to an ND pathway will ensure that the right help and support is provided. That approach is intended to ensure that young people who need support for their mental health from CAMHS are able to receive it in a timely manner and that specialist neurodevelopmental support is available whenever it is needed.

The design and management of those services is for individual health boards to decide, and each health board will have its own arrangements in place, and relationships with local partners. However, I expect those to be designed and addressed to ensure that children receive as quickly as possible the right specialist support for their particular needs.

ME and Long Covid (Specialist Clinics)

6. **Helen McDade (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the number of people diagnosed with ME and long Covid and recognising that early diagnosis and appropriate care can improve outcomes for recovery or long-term disability, whether it will commit to providing ring-fenced funds to set up specialist clinics staffed by either a nurse practitioner or medical staff in each national health service board area. (S7O-00083)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care (Angela Constance): We recognise the significant impact that ME and long Covid can have on the lives of those who are affected. We are providing £4.5 million of recurrent funding to national health service boards to support them to deliver specialist support for long Covid, ME and similar conditions.

For example, in the member's region, the funding is supporting the delivery of NHS Forth Valley's post-acute infection syndrome service and development of the board's regional partnership with NHS Borders, NHS Fife and NHS Lothian, which will provide a comprehensive multidisciplinary team approach to support those with complex needs.

Although the configuration of services and staffing composition is a matter for NHS boards, we have been clear that we expect services to follow relevant clinical guidance, such as the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence's guidance for those with ME and long Covid.

Helen McDade: The ME Association estimates that more than 100,000 people in Scotland have ME or long Covid. Approximately 80 per cent of them are women, and most are of working age.

That £4.5 million, although welcome, equates to £40 per person for conditions that are often lifelong and cost the country huge amounts in revenue and care, but the costs to the individual affected are incalculable. In line with the Scottish Government's wish to move towards prevention or early care, which will lead to better outcomes, will the cabinet secretary meet me and ME Action Scotland to discuss what measures could be taken now to alleviate people's suffering?

Angela Constance: I am always happy to meet stakeholders to discuss specifics. I am also aware that the member spoke of the impact of ME during her first speech in the Parliament.

One of the benefits of providing recurring resource is that it enables health boards to develop sustainable support and also helps with the retention and recruitment of skilled staff.

The former Minister for Public Health and Women's Health wrote to the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee on the subject in October last year. That letter was 40 pages long and spoke about future plans for boards to enhance the support and services that they provide. I am happy to supply that letter to the member for her interest.

Integration Joint Boards (Finances)

7. **David Smith (West Scotland) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the Accounts Commission's report on integration joint boards finances, which highlighted a projected funding gap of £457 million in 2024-25, what urgent action it will take to ensure that health and social care services are protected, and that patients and service users do not experience any reduction in the quality or accessibility of care. (S7O-00084)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care (Angela Constance): The 2026-27 Scottish budget provides almost £22.5 billion of investment in health and social care services, which exceeds consequentials and provides a real-terms uplift to enable more sustainable and resilient services. That includes almost £2.3 billion for social care and integration, which is an increase of more than £1.3 billion since 2021.

We recognise the financial pressures that the health and social care sector faces. Through the service renewal framework, we are taking bold and

ambitious action to reform and renew our health and care system, in line with our vision in which people live longer, healthier and more fulfilling lives.

David Smith: With respect, that does not satisfy the requirements of councils, which have to provide the funding right now.

In 2023, the Scottish Government took a decision to claw back £331 million of ring-fenced Covid-19 reserves from IJBs.

During the past few weeks, the Scottish National Party has been very good at playing the victim with respect to its chief executive's embezzlement of £400,000 of ring-fenced referendum campaign money. Will the cabinet secretary agree with me that the real victims of the financial mismanagement by the Scottish National Party are the unwell, the vulnerable, the elderly and the disabled, who are dependent on services that are provided by health boards? Will the cabinet secretary seek emergency funding to fill the funding gap that the Scottish Government has created?

Angela Constance: Perhaps I should rather diplomatically remind members that Mr Smith and his party have a history of calling for budgets to be cut and for tax to be cut. I also point out to the member that, under this Government, there have been real-terms increases in health and local government funding, which is a significant funding package.

If I recall correctly, the Accounts Commission report acknowledged the increase in funding that integration joint boards receive, but it also pointed to the increase in the cost of delivering services. In my view, the underpinning reason for that is austerity, Brexit and the cost of living crisis. We certainly need to do things differently, but austerity, Brexit and the cost of living crisis demonstrate that Westminster never works for Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): We are very tight for time. I hope to get through all the questions, so it would be helpful if we could have shorter questions and answers.

University Hospital Monklands

8. **Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on NHS Lanarkshire's plans for the new University hospital Monklands. (S7O-00085)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care (Angela Constance): The 2026-27 budget confirmed the Scottish Government's continued support for the development of the business case for the Monklands replacement project. The Scottish Government is clear that a new Monklands hospital will be delivered, but, equally, we must ensure that the various assurance processes and value-for-money conditions are met. I will, of course, keep the member updated on any developments. My officials continue to engage with NHS Lanarkshire and NHS Assure on the NHS Scotland design assessment process and key-stage assurance review.

Fulton MacGregor: I welcomed the news late last year that the board of NHS Lanarkshire had approved the full business case for the new University hospital Monklands. Along with Neil Gray and others, I have been on site to observe the preparatory work and to hear from the team about future construction plans. Will the cabinet secretary provide me and my constituents with any further clarity on when the Government intends to give this vital project the green light, and if there are any difficulties or roadblocks in the way, will she outline what those might be and how they might be overcome?

Angela Constance: I very much appreciate the member's championing of his local hospital and his local communities, and that of course also applies to other Lanarkshire MSPs.

As I intimated in my original answer to Mr MacGregor, a range of assurance processes still have to be completed. The provision of an effective and sustainable health service will be at the heart of decisions about Monklands hospital. It is a commitment that is located in the infrastructure development plan and in the Scottish National Party manifesto. I will keep to my word and keep members updated, because I recognise the importance of the issue.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder Assessments (NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde)

9. **Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government for what reason people on the NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde waiting list for ADHD assessments are reportedly being informed that their expected waiting times have been extended beyond those previously communicated. (S7O-00086)

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs (Maree Todd): NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde has confirmed that it is prioritising diagnostic assessments based on patient safety and risk, due to significant increasing demand for neurodevelopmental diagnosis. That means that some patients are waiting longer than was initially expected for diagnostic assessments, which is being proactively communicated to them.

The Scottish Government continues to work with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities,

health boards, local authorities, the third sector and other delivery partners to improve access to neurodevelopmental support. Last year, we provided more than £2.9 million of additional funding to support several projects, including supplementing health board diagnostic assessment capacity.

Pauline McNeill: This is my third attempt to get an answer—the minister might have given it, but I want to see whether I have understood it. A couple of my constituents were referred for neurodevelopment assessment in July 2023, after completing the questionnaire. They were both told that there would be an 18-month wait. They were not told that they would be triaged in any way, but when they inquired back, they were told that it would be another two years, so at the moment, there is a four-year wait.

Is the minister saying that NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde has told her that it is now prioritising the issue? It has not communicated that to patients. I hope that the minister agrees that that is completely unacceptable, because we have young people aged between 19 and 25 whose lives are on hold because they cannot get proper communication about when they will get an assessment.

Maree Todd: As I understand it, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, in response to increasing demand for neurodevelopmental diagnosis, has introduced a triaging system. That means that it recognises that some people are waiting longer than they were initially told for their assessments and is proactively communicating to them that they are waiting longer. I will go back and check the quality of the board's communications to see whether it is giving an adequate explanation.

NHS Appointments and Procedures

10. **Zen Ghani (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its 2025 pledge to provide 150,000 additional national health service appointments and procedures. (S7O-00087)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care (Angela Constance): Through our operational improvement plan, we committed to delivering an additional 150,000 national health service appointments and procedures, and I am pleased to confirm that we have exceeded that target. Public Health Scotland data shows that more than 168,000 additional appointments and procedures were delivered last year and that, since July 2025, waits of more than a year for new out-patient appointments have fallen by 76 per cent and in-patient and day-case waits of more than a year have almost halved.

Zen Ghani: I welcome the cabinet secretary's response. I am proud that the Scottish National Party Government is committed to renewing and investing in our health service, and it is clear that our NHS is turning a corner. Can the cabinet secretary advise of further work that the Scottish Government is undertaking to build on that progress, in particular within the first 100 days of the current session of Parliament, to ensure that patients are receiving treatment as soon as possible?

Angela Constance: Our first 100 days are focused on removing barriers early in the session, alongside bringing forward a national plan to improve hospital flow, recognising that pressures across the system can impact on planned care delivery.

We will also expand access by opening five more walk-in services to make it easier for people to get timely care when they need it while easing pressure on general practitioner surgeries. Taken together, those actions will reduce delays and ensure that more people receive treatment sooner.

Bus Fares

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The next item of business is a Scottish Government debate on affordable bus fares. I call Stephen Flynn to speak to and move motion S7M-00367.

15:07

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport (Stephen Flynn): Presiding Officer, I—[*Interruption*.] Sorry, Presiding Officer—I forgot to put my card in. I am stuck in my ways from down the road, as I have not been used to putting a card into a machine.

I lodged the motion in my name because the impact of the cost of living crisis on people across Scotland is impossible to ignore. Every MSP in the chamber should know that the rising cost of absolutely everything is having a devastating impact on too many of the people who sent us to this place—an inability to take the kids out, to enjoy some down time with friends or simply to pay the bills. The scale of the crisis demands that we do everything that we can with the powers that are available to this Parliament to make lives easier and better.

Willie Rennie (Fife North East) (LD): Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Stephen Flynn: On that note, I am happy to give way to Mr Rennie.

Willie Rennie: I do not disagree with what the cabinet secretary says. However, does he also recognise that people in my constituency and in many other constituencies complain about the lack of bus services altogether, and they want routes developed into more communities so that they can go to work on time, when they are expected to be there?

Stephen Flynn: I thank Mr Rennie for his intervention; I will come to address those points during my speech.

To return to my speech, that is why, in the election just five short weeks ago, the Scottish National Party put tackling the cost of living crisis at the very front of our renewed pitch to the public. Central to that pitch was saying to the public that the transport on which they rely needs to be affordable, reliable—as Mr Rennie outlined—and enjoyable.

Right now in Scotland, 73 per cent of all public transport journeys are made by bus. Those journeys are people going to work, to school, to college, to university, to the doctor, to visit family, to see friends, to pop down to the shops or maybe even to see the football on a Saturday afternoon. To many, our buses are not just a matter of convenience; they are the only option. That is why we have acted decisively in the past and why we will continue to do so throughout this session of Parliament.

Members do not need me to remind them of this fact, because I am sure that the public have made them very well aware of it over the course of the election campaign, but concessionary bus travel—the bus pass—has been one of the many success stories during my party's time in office. It was a choice that we made and one that the public have chosen to embrace.

Members do not even need to take my word for it—all they have to do is look at the numbers. In 2025, some 113 million journeys were taken by those who qualify for a bus pass due to disability or by virtue of being slightly more senior than others. For our young folk, we have today celebrated 300 million journeys using the free bus pass over the past four years.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): [*Made a request to intervene*.]

Stephen Flynn: I can see that Mr Johnson is very keen to welcome that fact.

Daniel Johnson: I invite the cabinet secretary to welcome the fact that it was the Scottish Labour-Lib Dem coalition Government that introduced the bus pass for the over-60s—I am sure that he was just about to do so.

Stephen Flynn: We are challenging each other now to welcome facts. I notice that he did not do so in respect of the young people's bus pass. I see that he is now correcting himself—he did.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Stephen Flynn: Yes, of course I will take an intervention from Mr Harvie, who I would imagine is about to indicate his role during the course of the previous parliamentary session.

Patrick Harvie: The cabinet secretary has predicted correctly. Just to complete that conversation, I will say that I am sure that the cabinet secretary is proud—and he should be—of the free bus travel for under-22s. I know that he was not here at the time, but does he recognise that that happened only because of Green budget negotiations, first for under-19s and then for under-22s? The Scottish Government allowed itself to be pushed out of its comfort zone, but that did take some work.

Stephen Flynn: I am not sure that we have ever willingly been pushed out of our comfort zone, let alone by Mr Harvie.

We are proud of the commitment that we have made to Scotland's young people. In a Parliament of minorities, it is important that, where we can get consensus and work together in relation to the budget, we seek to do so.

In real terms, more than 3 million journeys are being made every single week with the Scottish Government bus pass. I had the good fortune to visit Buchanan bus station in Glasgow this morning to hear from young folk who have been making the most of it. They told me about the positive impact that free bus travel has had on their lives, saving them money and opening up work, education, leisure, social and even relationship opportunities—

Craig Hoy (Dumfriesshire) (Con): [*Made a request to intervene*.]

Stephen Flynn: —which Mr Hoy seems to have a particular interest in.

Craig Hoy: I rise not in a spirit of self-congratulation, unlike the other members who have intervened so far. I have a question about young people beyond the cities. I recently met young carers of Dumfries and Galloway, who raised with me not the cost of bus travel but the absence of bus travel. Does the cabinet secretary accept that there is a trade-off? With a finite budget, if the Scottish Government is going to continue to expand discounted and concessionary travel, that is likely to be at the expense of lifeline services in areas such as Dumfriesshire.

Stephen Flynn: Mr Hoy tries to drag me into a conversation in relation to the reliability and availability of buses, but he need not do that, because I understand and recognise the importance of access to buses in our rural communities. I would like to think that there would be agreement and consensus on that. Is Mr Hoy doing the "6-7" gesture there? I am not entirely sure what he is doing. Is it a wee dance?

It is important that we all work together to ensure that the public have access to the services that they feel that they require. I will come on to that later in my speech, as I said to Mr Rennie.

For our young people, free bus travel has opened up a sea of opportunities. I think that I speak for us all—indeed, most of us—when I say that we would have loved to have had those chances in our youth. I am proud that it is a Scottish National Party Government, supported during the budget process by others, that has chosen to provide them to that generation.

It is not only about giving our young folk more choice and a better life; it is about the core value of reducing daily costs for families. With 85 per cent of our young people saying that the bus pass has done just that, we can safely say that it has done its job. I make it clear to the Parliament that, although I celebrate the work of those who came before me and the cross-party support that there has been for those actions, I see the policy as only a starting point. It is for us in this parliamentary session to take action to ensure that public transport is affordable for everyone.

Patrick Harvie: I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for being so generous in taking interventions. Does he agree that one of the further steps that needs to be taken is to make free bus travel for asylum seekers permanent, following the pilot of that policy? That would be a way to ensure that asylum seekers in our communities are able to access the services that they have a right to reach.

Stephen Flynn: I understand Mr Harvie's argument and I am more than willing to engage with him on that particular issue.

However, I turn to a different pilot. Earlier this year, the SNP Government launched our £2 bus fare cap pilot in the Highlands and Islands. Backed by £10 million of public money, the pilot was designed to make travel more affordable, accessible and straightforward, the importance of which for our rural and island communities cannot be understated. From the early feedback that I have heard, it is doing just that—it is reducing the cost of everyday journeys and supporting people to take the bus.

As the First Minister has set out, and as per our manifesto commitment, we are now working at pace to expand the benefits of that £2 fare cap beyond the Highlands and Islands. Initially, that means making progress within the first 100 days of this Government to extend the cap to Glasgow, Ayrshire, Dunbartonshire, Renfrewshire, Lanarkshire and Inverclyde. Beyond that, we will introduce the legislation that is needed to deliver a nationwide £2 fare cap by the end of this parliamentary session.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): For several years, my constituents have been frustrated that they are paying the most expensive bus fares in the United Kingdom when other parts of the UK have enjoyed a £2 bus cap for the past three years. They are also frustrated that bus franchising is still not being implemented in Scotland while other parts of the UK have delivered it. Why is the pace so slow?

Stephen Flynn: I am not sure that I can go much quicker, having just been elected to this Parliament, than to give the commitment that I just made in relation to our party's first 100 days in office. I am hopeful, based on what Mr Sweeney said, that he will back our proposals when it comes to the budget, because history dictates that his party has not been as co-operative during the

budget process as it perhaps could have been to move some of those issues forward in the way that he described.

Craig Hoy: Will Mr Flynn take an intervention?

Stephen Flynn: I will make some progress, if that is okay—actually, I see that Craig Hoy is desperate to come in, so I will let him.

Craig Hoy: For clarification, is the cabinet secretary now proposing to extend the pilot scheme to the Strathclyde Partnership for Transport area? In light of the experience of the pilot, will there be any subsequent changes before legislation is introduced, or is that a phased roll-out that will require legislation?

Stephen Flynn: I feel as though I need to repeat myself: we just ran an election campaign with the commitment to extend the £2 bus fare cap to those areas front and centre. We will seek to do that as quickly as is practically possible. We will then seek to legislate on doing that across Scotland, as per the very sentences that I just said in the chamber. However, I appreciate that Mr Hoy is maybe a bit slow on the uptake on the odd occasion.

I assure the chamber that I and my officials are already working with operators, regional partners and stakeholders to make sure that we deliver on the promise that we have made to the people. I know that many members will be keen to learn more, and I hope to be able to share some good news on timings soon.

Our ambitions for a £2 fare are clear but they are only part of the story. We need buses that are affordable, but we also need them to be available. There is much good work taking place across Scotland by operators to ensure that that is the case. I know that only too well, given the service that I use at home every week. However, I recognise and understand that my good experience is not everyone's experience. If we believe that buses should be not just a commercial service but a core local service, we need to continue to work with operators and stakeholders to ensure that everyone has that good experience in their community.

That is why we have already worked to ensure that local transport authorities have more flexibility to respond to their own unique transport challenges. Through legislation, we have given local authorities powers on partnership working, franchising and the ability to run their own services.

Daniel Johnson: That may be true, but why have no such partnerships been brought forward? Why did it take six years for the Government to publish guidelines on bus franchising? Those were published only in March, despite the Transport (Scotland) Bill being agreed to in 2019.

Stephen Flynn: The SPT has come forward with such plans, as I am sure Mr Johnson is aware.

Of those powers, franchising has perhaps been the subject of the greatest attention from members in the chamber, such as Mr Simpson, and from the public outwith it.

Graham Simpson (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform): The cabinet secretary has been extremely generous with interventions. I want him to address the question on franchising. I know that the issue precedes him, but there has been huge frustration about the time that it is taking in Scotland. Will he use the opportunity presented by any legislation that he introduces, or any other means, to speed things up?

Stephen Flynn: I will come to that point in just a second.

It is that interest that led us to work on a cross-party basis during the current budget process and to commit up to £4 million to support local transport authorities in developing business cases for local bus improvements through franchising, using the powers that were created in the legislation to which Mr Johnson referred.

It is essential that, if that is the route for buses that some choose to take, the business case is robust and considers all available evidence.

As the First Minister said in Parliament two weeks ago,

"We want to work with local authorities to advance such propositions, because they would be in the public interest."—[*Official Report*, 4 June 2026; c 28.]

With those words in mind, I advise Parliament that we will build on the work that has already been undertaken to date by developing better buses legislation during this session of Parliament.

The legislation, which will take a considered—I am sure that members will be pleased to hear this—cross-party approach, will aim to help to enhance the delivery of bus services across Scotland. We will engage with operators, local transport authorities and others to inform the development of our proposals. I look forward to working with members across the chamber to put the needs of passengers at the very heart of the process.

Deputy Presiding Officer, I am conscious of the time, given the number of interventions that I have taken. To conclude, I repeat my view that affordable bus fares are essential for helping with the cost of living. For many of my constituents, particularly those who are under 22, older people and disabled people, the bus pass that this Government has delivered is making a huge difference to their lives. For some, it is the thing that breaks down the barriers of isolation and

brings them into the heart of their communities and our society.

We will go further. Our vision for transport is rooted in affordability, accessibility and sustainability. I note for Mr Hoy that, by the end of this session of Parliament, we will introduce legislation to put in place a £2 bus fare cap across Scotland, which will include our pilot in the Highlands and Islands. That step of providing more affordable bus travel will help to change lives and tackle the cost of living. Our action will benefit families, the economy and the environment, and I look forward to working with colleagues across the chamber to deliver that.

However, before we get to that, I give the final word of my opening remarks to the unsung heroes of our buses—the mechanics, the office teams, the route planners and, indeed, the drivers. They are the glue that binds our service together—the friendly face on a dreich morning and the ones who hold the bus when we make that last-minute sprint to catch it. I say to them, the choices that we make in this Parliament will matter to you, and we will work with you and the public to make our bus service the best that it can be.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the importance of affordable bus services connecting people to employment, education and essential services; welcomes the success of the free bus schemes available to 2.4 million people, including all those aged under 22, over 60 and disabled people; believes that more can be done to make it easier and cheaper for everyone to get around and supports, therefore, the phased rollout of a £2 bus fare cap, building on its introduction in the Highlands and Islands; endorses the introduction of the £2 cap in Glasgow, Ayrshire, Dunbartonshire, Renfrewshire, Lanarkshire and Inverclyde as quickly as is practicable as part of the next phase of a national rollout, and welcomes the opportunity to develop Better Buses legislation in the current parliamentary session to support the delivery of affordable fares nationally and foster new routes, not least in rural areas.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I call Graham Simpson to speak to and move amendment S7M-00367.1.

15:24

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform): I congratulate the cabinet secretary on devising a motion that we can support. I am looking forward to working with him—I genuinely am.

I have always been of the view that we need to make public transport easy and cheap to use and that it needs to cover all parts of the country. It is all very well having a bus fare cap, but that is no use if people do not have a bus that they can use.

There are far too many bus deserts in Scotland, and they are not just in rural areas. Franchising, where it is wanted, could help to alleviate that, but there are other models, too. I said during the cabinet secretary's first debate, which was on growth, that his predecessor in the transport brief often listened to me and took my ideas on board, and bus fare caps are an example of that.

Stephen Flynn: No praise like self-praise.

Graham Simpson: Well, everyone else is doing it.

I have been talking about bus fare caps for at least three years, and I have been talking about simpler low fares for longer. At general question time in April 2023, I said:

"If the minister was serious about getting people on to buses, he would take action on bus fares, as he is doing on train fares. Why does he not replicate what England has, which is a fare cap on local bus journeys?"—[*Official Report*, 20 April 2023; c 3.]

I did not get anywhere then.

In a debate on bus services the following month, I said:

"fares can play a big part in getting people on to public transport. We await the introduction of a cross-modal travel card of the type that was given to delegates at the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26. We can only look south with envy at the £2 fare cap".—[*Official Report*, 17 May 2023; c 27.]

I tried again at First Minister's question time in November of that year and, later that month at general question time, I was banging the same drum, when I said to a minister:

"The minister is perhaps missing an opportunity here, because we could have a Scottish bus fare cap if she chose to consider it. Is the minister prepared at least to look at the proposal and what it might cost?"—[*Official Report*, 30 November 2023; c 7.]

I kept on and on, and I was getting quite exasperated, but eventually the Government came round to the idea of a bus fare cap and, naturally, it badged that as a collaboration between it and the Greens, but such is life—it came to the right conclusion.

I want fare capping to succeed, as it has down south and as have similar schemes when tried elsewhere in Europe and indeed in these isles. The evidence is there already. In London, bus and tram travel is capped at £5.25 a day and £24.70 a week. Here in Edinburgh, Lothian's TapTapCap system already caps journeys at £5.70 a day and £26.50 a week.

Paul Sweeney: In the time that it has taken the Government to even consider introducing the equivalent of the Oyster card, the technology has been superseded not only by the tap-in, tap-out technology that Mr Simpson refers to but now contactless technology and even the use of phones in the form of things such as Uber for

public transport, which means that we do not even need the fare-gate infrastructure that we once did. This is so easy to introduce, so why has the Government not done it? Surely that is a missed opportunity.

Graham Simpson: Paul Sweeney is absolutely right. I, too, have been talking about advances in technology, both in public and in private. The Government needs to get on board with that. Why it has not done so is a mystery to me. I cannot answer for the Government, but I wish that it would get on with this.

We have other examples. In Dublin, the fare for Leap card users in zone 1 is capped at €6 a day or €24 a week. Across England, many single bus fares are capped at £3. In North Rhine-Westphalia in Germany, the cap is a monthly spend of €63.

The idea is good, and we want it to work, but making public transport cheaper will work only if it is there for people in the first place and if we make it easy to use. That is where my amendment comes in. Franchising is allowed in Scotland but, so far, only SPT, which covers Strathclyde, is pursuing it. The frustration is that franchising exists in law but, for too long, it has looked easier to legislate for than to deliver. If it takes years of assessments, consultations, audits and approvals before a single new bus appears, passengers will wonder exactly what is going on.

Scotland cannot keep congratulating itself for giving councils powers if using those powers is slow and cumbersome, with the result that communities see no benefit for years. The process here is heavily bureaucratic. A local transport authority has to go through multiple costly hurdles, as SPT is doing.

At the end, if franchising gets that far, there is the added hoop of having to get the whole scheme approved by an independent, unelected panel that is convened by the traffic commissioner for Scotland, who is a United Kingdom Government appointee. After years of effort, the whole thing could fall at that point, which is wrong. Therefore, I support the Get Glasgow Moving campaign's calls to simplify the existing legislation early in this parliamentary session. The cabinet secretary needs to look at that as a matter of urgency.

The Government needs to commit to funding SPT for that work. We also need multimodal ticketing—the national smart ticketing advisory board is taking far too long in its work. The second part of my amendment calls for that work to be sped up, and I am glad that the Government recognises the need for that. Again, parts of England are way ahead on that model. The West Midlands probably provides the best example, but the broader lesson is that parts of England are moving ahead with integrated planning, ticketing and on-demand travel while Scotland is still talking about it. Last week, I suggested that once the cabinet secretary is back from the States, if he indeed goes—I hope that he does—he should use the summer to get out and about to see what is going on elsewhere.

If ministers are serious about affordable public transport, the test is simple—to make it cheaper, make it easier and make sure that it actually turns up.

I move amendment S7M-00367.1, to insert at end:

"; believes that any such legislation should aim to streamline the process of introducing franchising, and calls on the Scottish Government to speed up its work on introducing multi-modal smart ticketing across Scotland."

15:31

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I am sure that the cabinet secretary is thinking exactly what I am thinking, which is that we should bookmark today's *Official Report*, go back in five years' time and look at Graham Simpson's contribution to find out what we should have done back then, given his prescience. In all seriousness, I think that Graham Simpson made a lot of sense.

In these matters, Edinburgh members go forward with a degree of jeopardy if we extol the virtues of the system that we have here and look quizzically at why other parts of Scotland do not have it. However, the Lothian bus model does require some examination.

There are a number of interesting anniversaries this year. In 1926, the Annandale Street bus depot opened, which made possible 12 routes and 43 miles of service spanning the city. In 1986—the anniversary for this is in October—Lothian Region Transport was set up as a publicly owned arm's-length company. There was an attempt to encourage it into the arms of Stagecoach through a management buyout, which was resisted due to the foresight of Labour councillors on Lothian Regional Council. The company's structure was maintained, and it survived local government reorganisation.

I make that point because, although the points that have been made about fare capping are important, we ultimately need a good model that can deliver public services with low fares and good infrastructure, which is what we have in Lothian Buses. It is because of the model—of a publicly owned, arm's-length company that is run in the interests of public service—that we have those benefits.

Craig Hoy: Will the member give way?

Daniel Johnson: I am happy to give way to Craig Hoy, although I think that I will not agree with him.

Craig Hoy: I thank Mr Johnson for taking the intervention and for extolling the virtues of Lothian Buses. My experience as a South Scotland MSP until the election was that, as we go further into the Lothian Buses region and particularly the rural areas beyond Edinburgh, the approval rating drops significantly. Does that speak to the point that we should always look through the lens of rural passengers as well as urban passengers when debating the future of our bus services?

Daniel Johnson: We always need to look at the detail and, critically, I agree with Craig Hoy that we need public transport services that provide a service to all people, wherever they live. I disagree with him on the words that are in the Conservative amendment, because I do not believe that good service is achieved through competition. In the past 40 years, we have seen what competition has delivered: the destruction of services and of availability. Ultimately, it is through public ownership that those things are regained, which is very much the tenor of the amendment that we have lodged.

On the Government's motion, I very much agree with much of what the cabinet secretary said. We have to focus on practical measures that deal with the cost of living, and there is no doubt in my mind that addressing the cost of getting to work and going about daily life is fundamental to that. Labour members will welcome anything, particularly around the bus fares cap, that can contribute to alleviating those pressures.

However, a number of questions need to be answered. First, the cost of the subsidy for long-distance journeys will, inevitably, be higher. For example, in the Highlands and Islands pilot, the £2 fare cap reduced the cost of a fare from Inverness to Wick from £28 to £2. Will all long-distance journeys be covered by the fare cap? If so, what is the projected cost?

Secondly, there is a real risk that the fare cap will benefit operators that charge higher fares. First Bus single fares range from £2.45 to £7.10, whereas publicly owned Lothian Buses, which won awards in both 2024 and 2025, has a flat fare of £2.40. It would be not only ironic but downright unfair if a higher subsidy was provided to bus operators that currently charge the public more, with publicly funded services being disadvantaged. There is also the matter of flexible ticketing, which Graham Simpson mentioned, and multimodal ticketing—bluntly, tickets that span trams and buses. How will they be dealt with?

Thirdly, and most importantly, as Graham Simpson and Willie Rennie have highlighted, it is all well and good capping bus fares, but there need to be buses available for people to use. The reality is that we have since 2007 lost 1,400 bus routes in Scotland. We need to hear from the Scottish Government how that issue will be addressed, because it cannot be addressed in isolation.

A wider point needs to be made. Transport is not just a convenience or a daily function; it is critical to economic growth and a healthy economy. We know that there is a big disparity in productivity across our cities. There is about a 50 per cent difference in output per hour worked between Edinburgh and either Glasgow or Dundee. Data from Centre for Cities shows that the Glasgow city economy is £7.3 billion smaller per year than it would be if it performed comparably with other similarly sized western European cities.

The critical issue is people's ability to get to and from places where they can get better employment and better wages. Buses are absolutely central to that. According to the Resolution Foundation, in small towns, a 30-minute commute by car connects workers to 20 times more job opportunities than would be available using public transport, and, in core cities, such a commute would connect workers to seven times more job opportunities. We need to address the challenge of providing people with the ability to travel to better employment.

That is why Scottish Labour included a number of transport priorities in our manifesto. In that context, we must look at, for example, dualling the A9, delivering a modern metro system for Glasgow, how we link our cities across Scotland and how we fund route development across the world. We are talking not about conveniences but about fundamental economic links.

Franchising, which has been mentioned quite a lot in interventions, is a fundamental and important mechanism for delivering better bus services. It is not an accident that it is used across the world in places such as Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Singapore.

We must face the simple reality that, whereas guidance on the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 was published only in the past few months, franchising was being brought forward in Manchester within a year of the equivalent legislation in England being passed in 2017. Across England, there is now franchising in Manchester, Liverpool and West Yorkshire, and franchising plans in South Yorkshire and the West Midlands are well advanced.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Could the member wind up, please?

Daniel Johnson: That is the critical difference. How are we going to make progress? Frankly, the comparison does not stand up to much scrutiny.

I move amendment S7M-00367.3, to insert at end:

", and calls on the Scottish Government to take active steps to make bus franchising a reality, by providing the funding and support necessary for Regional Transport Partnerships to fully and more rapidly exercise the powers set out in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019, and to advance public control of farebox revenue so that Scotland's passengers, not private operators, benefit from a restored public bus network."

15:39

Craig Hoy (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I join Mr Flynn in paying fulsome tribute to those who work across our bus network. It can be a challenging job with the rise in antisocial behaviour, and we need to recognise that. I will return to that later in my speech.

Today, the Government runs the risk of potentially putting its ambition to deliver cheap headlines and its pursuit of the free ahead of two fundamental propositions: the fairness and the consistency of bus provision for passengers right across Scotland. As Mr Johnson said, the Scottish Conservatives believe that competition between different providers is, in many instances—but, I accept, not all—an effective way to achieve those things.

Until the minister spoke, I was unsure as to whether today's announcement was, in effect, about an expansion of the Highlands pilot into the greater Glasgow and SPT area or a signal of intent that the Government now intends to legislate for a national £2 fare cap. I take it that it is the latter. Regardless of our views on a fare cap, we should be concerned about the possible cost implications and the implications for the wider transport market, given the already significant costs for free bus travel for under-22s and over-60s—which we have supported, but which we now need to recognise is very costly. Costs are also associated with the policy of free travel for asylum seekers, which is still in pilot. I note for the record that the Scottish Conservatives continue to oppose that policy in the new session of Parliament.

This question is not so much for the minister as for the Deputy—

Patrick Harvie: Will the member take an intervention?

Craig Hoy: I will.

Patrick Harvie: The member is focusing on the cost of policies, but he is looking at only half of the equation. He is talking about the shared costs that the public sector funds for policies that we choose to pay for collectively. In the absence of those policies, those costs fall on families, on individuals and on workers. Surely the member agrees that, at the moment, the costs of bus services in much of Scotland that fall on the shoulders of individuals and families are unacceptable.

Craig Hoy: I accept that there is work to do around the fare cap. It was a Conservative Government in the rest of the UK that introduced the pilot scheme in England. As always, the devil will be in the detail, and I will turn to that now.

The Scottish Government faces the tightest of all fiscal corners, and—

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Craig Hoy: I am afraid that I do not have time. Today's announcement potentially serves only to—

Alan Brown: You will get the time back.

Craig Hoy: I will take the intervention if I can have the time back, Deputy Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): You will get the time back.

Alan Brown: The member has expressed his concern about the loss of some services, particularly in rural areas. I think that most members would agree with that point. However, I note that he is changing his wording slightly. His amendment says that there should be

"affordability and reliability and that competition between different providers is the most effective way to achieve"

the provision. Is it not the case that he is arguing for two polar opposites at the same time? He is complaining about the loss of services in the free market, but he is then arguing that only the free market can provide services effectively. Both cannot be true at the same time.

Craig Hoy: I am not saying that. I am saying that, in most instances—probably all instances—effective competition with an element of state subsidy, particularly for rural areas and hard-to-reach parts of the UK, is the sensible approach. Nobody has questioned that in the chamber. We will still need to have supported bus services, now and into the future.

Wherever members stand on concessionary travel, both at the present level and were we, for example, to pursue the Greens' position of universal free bus transport, there is surely sufficient economic literacy in the chamber for us to recognise that it is not free. It has to be paid for by someone—

Patrick Harvie: Collectively.

Craig Hoy: —regardless of whether or not they use bus services.

That brings me to a point that Mr Harvie is perhaps not fully recognising. Services are paid for regardless of whether people have access to bus services in their communities. One of my issues with the SNP's motion is that, although it is very specific on the £2 pledge, it is far less specific about what the fairer and better rural bus service would look like and whether a specific support scheme would be drawn up for rural bus services, as the Scottish Conservatives propose.

Daniel Johnson: Does Mr Hoy not recognise that the deregulation of buses in 1986 was a complete and abject failure? The sort of competition that he is describing is not really possible with these sorts of services. How does he account for that failure, if competition is the guiding principle for success in bus services?

Craig Hoy: There are different models in different parts of the country. Daniel Johnson referred to Lothian Buses, and I have referred to East Lothian, where Lothian Buses has taken over commercial routes from local operators. With its full might, it has been able to go in with a lower bid, but it is delivering poorer services in certain locations and it is putting city buses on rural roads. Some of the issues are as simple as that.

I will give an example of where competition has, in part, worked and the private sector has stepped in. Last year, in Dumfries and Galloway, Stagecoach—which, in my view, behaved appallingly and was a bad actor in that marketplace—simply withdrew, keeping only two services that it believed to be commercial and leaving others to go to the wall. However—

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Craig Hoy: I will not. I want to make progress.

It was not only the council that stepped in. Small providers such as Houstons and other operators stepped in—[*Interruption*.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member is not taking an intervention, and he will be winding up.

Craig Hoy: —to make sure that those services would be kept alive. The one-size-fits-all model that I suspect that Mr Johnson would like to see, which involves using franchising to, in effect, nationalise Scotland's bus services, does not recognise the work of operators such as Borders Buses. Those operators manage their routes very effectively, but I accept that in certain conditions they need state support in rural areas. That principle is established.

I return to the specifics of the £2 policy. There are critical questions that the minister needs to address, which have been asked not only by me but by others. How will additional demand be modelled and funded? What will be in and out of scope? What will we do for long journeys and for journeys for which the subsidy will be far smaller? Why was £2 chosen and not £1 or £3? What implications will there be for existing integrated ticketing schemes? What impacts will there be on other transport modes and their revenues, including the Glasgow subway and ScotRail, which is now under SNP control? What consideration has been given to the operational changes that will be required to implement the scheme across a vast region?

We are holding judgment on whether the £2 pilot fare can be rolled out across the country in an affordable and achievable way.

I draw attention to one other reason why we cannot support the SNP Government's motion, which is that it paints a rosy picture of the introduction of concessionary travel. I accept that it is very popular, but there are problems in relation to, for example, antisocial behaviour. The motion sweeps the problems under the carpet and focuses only on the positives. Before we roll out something as significant and, potentially, as costly as this to all parts of Scotland, we must make sure that a full evaluation—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member must wind up.

Craig Hoy: —has taken place. The minister has not yet given us an assurance that that is the case.

I move amendment S7M-00367.4, to leave out from "believes that" to end and insert:

"considers that a functioning bus network should be centred on affordability and reliability and that competition between different providers is the most effective way to achieve this; notes with concern the deteriorating provision of bus services across Scotland, including the numerous routes, particularly in rural areas, that have had their service levels reduced or removed; warns that the expansion of concessionary bus travel could increase the risk of inequality in access to bus services between urban and rural areas; calls on the Scottish Government to take greater action to protect bus drivers and tackle anti-social behaviour on buses, and agrees with the views that the regulations and code of conduct implemented in the previous parliamentary session to remove passes from passengers who commit anti-social behaviour are not strong enough."

15:47

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I welcome the fact that this debate has been secured and I am glad that the Government is so proud of many policies that the Greens persuaded it to adopt. We have all enjoyed a bit of knockabout with us all

claiming credit, but I genuinely believe that this Parliament is at its best when political parties seek out the common ground between one other and find ways to work together. On bus travel, that has been achieved, and I am glad of it.

The Greens have worked hard to protect local routes in our communities up and down the country. We have worked to give voice to bus users, who are very rarely heard from, in contrast with the likes of the road lobby. We have worked to expand free bus travel, first for under-19s and then for under-22s and asylum seekers. I restate the need to make that scheme for asylum seekers a permanent policy after the pilot scheme, which closed some time ago.

The £2 bus fare cap came up in a budget discussion with the SNP. At the time, we were told that a national £2 bus fare cap was not achievable and all that we could get was a pilot. We were glad to see that as a small step in the right direction; I am even more glad that the Government now acknowledges that we were right in the first place and that a national roll-out of that policy is the right way to go.

All those measures, policies, interventions and subsidies—and those on infrastructure, the provision of information to passengers and the transition to low carbon, on which we have more to do—demonstrate that privatisation and deregulation as a model of bus service provision has comprehensively failed. It has failed for decades. I genuinely think that the most comical aspect of today's debate is in the text of Mr Hoy's amendment, which says that

"competition between different providers is the most effective way to achieve"

affordability and reliability. I invite members to consider the parallel universe in which that statement would be true. In that parallel universe, we would have seen, for the past 40 years, continual improvement in the reliability and affordability of bus services throughout the country. Buses would be as cheap as they are in the most progressive European countries. They would be a ubiquitous, reliable way for people in every community to get about.

However, that is simply not true. In truth, private sector operators cherry pick the routes that they want to run; they cut the services that they do not want to run or restrict the times of day at which they operate; and they hike the fares to meet the commercial needs and interests of the owners, rather than the transport needs of communities. After all that, they still want subsidy. They still want to benefit from public money being put in, whether to cut the fares, to improve the vehicles or to address other aspects of how the system is run. Therefore, we do not have a private sector, market-led, competition-led model that works; frankly, it is a farce.

Paul Sweeney: Does Mr Harvie agree that the most extreme example of how the argument has been polarised is the Conservatives' opposition to the concessionary travel scheme for people seeking asylum, when there was previously consensus on that measure, which included members such as Mr Carlaw? While profit is being extracted from the system, the Conservatives want the weakest members of the community, who are banned from working and banned from social security, to be—in their view—penalised.

Patrick Harvie: Mr Sweeney knows that I agree very strongly with him on that point. The opposition to free travel for asylum seekers is not really about bus services; it is about a desire to punch down against a marginalised and vulnerable minority for populist reasons. It is disgraceful.

We have an opportunity, because the solution is before us—we must shift to franchising. That process needs to be accelerated, made less bureaucratic and given financial support from the Government, because that is how we can protect service standards, including in the rural areas that many members have talked about. We must take away from operators the power to simply scrap routes and abandon communities. At the same time, we must ensure that the public sector, which is paying for the subsidy, sets the service standard. From there, we will be able to move on.

I say unashamedly that we should deliver those franchises to publicly owned operators, whether they are nationally owned or—as I would prefer—locally owned, with their routes in the communities that they serve, because that is how we can provide public transport that is a genuine public service, which is what Scotland deserves.

15:52

Willie Rennie (Fife North East) (LD): When the cabinet secretary described his new bus bill, I was intrigued by what he meant by one little line that he did not expand upon. He indicated that we might require legislation for the bus fare cap, but he also indicated that we could potentially need it in relation to regulation. Was he indicating that new legislation will be required to speed up the process? I am happy to take an intervention from him to hear whether that is what his intention is.

Stephen Flynn: I will come back to the member on that.

Willie Rennie: Okay—that is fine. It is intriguing in itself that the cabinet secretary is not able to answer that question straight away.

For me, the issue is all about routes. In Fife, I experience the almost annual round of bus changes, which radically disrupts people's lives. I will give an example. For people who live in Auchtermuchty and work in Perth, the bus route has been changed twice, and they now have to change bus several times in order to get to work. Many people simply cannot make it work. They have to get up extraordinarily early to make it possible to get to work.

The bus companies just go around cherry picking. I have to say that Stagecoach is the worst, because it just picks the routes that it wants. It tries out routes and gets people to use those bus services, but once people have created new lives and new working patterns, it pulls the rug away from them in the following year. Meanwhile, the council has to come along and fill in the gaps, together with Moffat & Williamson, which is a very effective bus company. Not all the private operators are profiteers. Moffat & Williamson works well for its communities—it works with the council to fill in the gaps in services. That happens almost every year. Meanwhile, Stagecoach just chooses the routes that it wants.

I want to urge a little bit of caution, because it was found from the English pilots on a bus fare cap that it did not represent particularly good value for money. The network support grant has been cut by about 31 per cent in real terms since 2012. I worry about us putting more money into a cap and concessionary fares. The effect of that could be that we shift support from rural areas to urban areas. Of course I am in favour of the cap and concessionary fares, but I want us to think carefully about how we use public funds in a time when public finance is restricted.

I do not know whether the cabinet secretary has an answer yet to the regulation point, but maybe we will keep on waiting. Is the cabinet secretary going to come back to me today or wait until he consults his officials? I am genuinely intrigued. As far as I am aware, we do not need legislation for the bus fare cap, so why are we introducing a bill if it is not for something more substantial? I think that an awful lot of organisations, such as Strathclyde Partnership for Transport, would welcome a simplified process that takes a shorter time than the seven years that it has taken to get to the stage that we are at now. If a simplified process is coming down the track, I would very much welcome that.

Stephen Flynn: I took a little time to respond to the member's point, because I think that he might have misheard me earlier. I was looking at my speech and I am not sure that I used the phrase that he intimated I used.

On the point about legislation regarding the £2 fare cap, that is indeed what we said in our manifesto. The better buses legislation is something that I will seek to work on with Mr Rennie and others to ensure that we can secure better services for people across Scotland. However, I do not think that I used the specific phrase that he mentioned. Maybe we can check the *Official Report* later.

Willie Rennie: I am still not sure that that is very clear, because I am not quite sure what "better services across Scotland" really means. Maybe we will find out more when the cabinet secretary comes before the Transport Committee later this year and he can perhaps explain the position in full.

I will support Graham Simpson's amendment on multimodal ticketing. We should have had smart ticketing some time ago. People, particularly those in rural areas, who move from one bus to the next or even to the train require a much more simplified process.

15:57

Lloyd Melville (Angus South) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, which states that I am a sitting member of Angus Council.

A bus fare is not just the price of a ticket. It can be the difference between a journey made and a journey missed. For the young worker in Arbroath travelling to Dundee, it might decide whether it is practical to take a job. For the mum in Glamis trying to reach an appointment in Kirriemuir, it is one more cost in a week already stretched. For the older person trying to stay connected, it can be the difference between being part of community life and being cut off from it. That is why fares matter. They are not only about the cost of travel; they are about the practical choices that people make.

Scotland has already made important progress: free bus travel for young people has widened access to college, work and training; concessionary travel protects the freedom of older and disabled people; and new powers give councils more tools to shape services around local need. That is a record worth defending, but we must go further. For working-age adults on low incomes, people just outside existing eligibility and families counting every penny, a fare that is too high does not simply make travel dearer—it can make travel impossible. That is why a £2 cap matters. It gives people certainty before they take the job, book the appointment or visit family.

However, price is only half of the promise. A cheaper ticket matters only if there is a bus that people can actually use. The test is not just about what the fare costs but about whether the bus fits

the early shift, whether it connects with the train and whether it gets someone home again. That is especially important in rural and small-town Scotland. In many areas such as mine, people use cars because that is the only practical option. We should not lecture people out of cars when the bus does not meet the shift, the appointment or the last train home. We have to make public transport a real and practical choice. That requires action from Government, and it requires operators to not only consider passenger numbers and profit but properly listen to the views and needs of our communities. I associate myself with the comments of Mr Rennie in that regard. A £2 cap should not stand alone. It should come with buses that meet shifts, timetables that connect with trains and community transport where a fixed route cannot do the job.

As a councillor, I was proud to help to secure a demand-led transport service for some of the smallest rural communities in Angus. I have travelled on that service and spoken to the passengers who use it. The main phrase that stayed with me was that it "wrapped around" their lives. That is the point. Public transport works best when it fits people's lives, instead of people being asked to fit their lives around a timetable that does not work for them. Demand-led transport is not the answer everywhere, but in communities where a traditional fixed route will never meet every need, it can be part of the answer.

That reminds us what the debate is really about. The fare is the price of the journey, but the value of that journey is what it makes possible: a shift accepted; a hospital appointment kept; a grandparent visited. That is why action to make fares more affordable matters. It puts more money back into people's pockets and shows a Government that is on the side of passengers. We should be proud of that. A £2 cap can make the fare fairer, but the next task is bigger: not just lower fares, but services that are built around people's lives.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I remind members that, if they wish to speak in the debate, they should press their request-to-speak buttons.

16:01

Dawn Black (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests: I am a Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency-approved driving instructor and a serving councillor in Aberdeenshire. I should also say that members might have a little bit of déjà vu, as my speech echoes quite a few of the views that have already been stated, especially those of Lloyd Melville.

When we talk about public transport, we are talking about not just buses, timetables and ticket prices, but freedom: the basic fundamental right to connect, get to work, attend school, access healthcare, socialise and see loved ones. We are making immense strides in that respect. Scotland boasts the most generous concessionary travel scheme of anywhere in the UK. Through the SNP Scottish Government's commitment to the future, we are providing entirely free bus travel to everyone over the age of 60, those with eligible disabilities, and all children and young people under 22. That is a total of 2.3 million Scots who can hop on a bus without reaching for a penny, thus saving families money.

However, we cannot stop there. The reality for working adults and families who fall outside those brackets is that, because the daily commute in my area can cost upwards of £15 a day—which often amounts to more than an hour or two of wages—people are forced into their cars. It is cheaper to drive and pay parking fees, especially if family members travel together. That is not just an economic penalty on working families—it is a hurdle to our environmental ambitions.

That is exactly why the push for fairer, capped and affordable fares is critical. We have seen the tangible difference that has been made as a result of the trial of the regional £2 bus fare cap pilot across the Highlands, Argyll and Bute and our island communities. By capping exorbitant rural fares at just £2, we are putting money back into people's pockets, and giving them their time back. We are replacing a prohibitive cost-of-living burden with a simple, practical and accessible transport alternative. The evidence is clear: when public transport works well and is priced fairly, it gives communities a new lease of life.

However, as has been mentioned by others, and as the cabinet secretary has acknowledged, the same right to public transport is not afforded to those who live in small towns and rural areas. Small-town circular services are pretty much a thing of the past, and people connect to the main cities mainly through a hub-and-spoke model—which, as Willie Rennie and others have pointed out, involves routes being cherry picked. People have to go into the hub to connect and make their journey back out to their destination. Because buses between small towns and villages are few and far between, there is a disproportionate amount of transport poverty in rural areas such as my constituency of Angus North and Mearns, where people might have to travel miles before they even get to a bus route. That said, the introduction of Ember buses has had a hugely positive impact in Angus and Aberdeenshire.

The matter is one of equal opportunity, as regular and reliable public transport makes it

possible for those who cannot drive to get about and access town and city centres. It is generally taken for granted that the majority of people are capable of driving, but there are myriad reasons why a good proportion of the population cannot do that. Age is one such reason, with young people relying on their parents for transport, and people losing their ability to drive in older age, with the loss of the independence that comes with that.

There are also medical reasons why people cannot drive, such as loss of sight or blindness, or conditions such as epilepsy—or, indeed, any form of non-epileptic seizure. A person cannot legally drive if they have had a seizure in the previous 12 months. Even if they have a seizure only once every few months, they cannot get behind the wheel. Moreover, neurodivergence can prevent some from learning, or it can take them a longer time to learn, which can be cost prohibitive.

That brings me to the issue of cost. The cost of learning to drive puts it out of reach for many people, and for those who do pass their test, the fact is that cars are expensive to buy and run, given the current skyrocketing of fuel prices, vehicle tax and the exorbitant insurance that so many people cannot afford.

I agree with Lloyd Melville, Willie Rennie and Graham Simpson that we need more accessible public transport—a truly representative network that connects all communities—to make buses a viable option for our rural population as well as those living in our urban areas. Transport Scotland's tier 1 bus infrastructure funding needs to be used by regional transport partnerships and local authorities to increase remote connectivity, which is vital alongside making buses affordable. Those are the prerequisites if we are to achieve the national transport strategy's goals of cutting carbon emissions, reducing our reliance on cars and bringing our rural and urban economies closer together.

Let us commit to creating a Scotland where reliable, affordable bus travel is not only a temporary pilot project, but a permanent reality for everyone.

16:06

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Not to overegg it, but the Greens very constructively negotiated the £2 single bus fare cap pilot in a previous budget. It was an incredible example of constructive negotiations, and an example of how we will seek to work throughout this parliamentary session.

I am proud that the pilot was rolled out in the Highlands and Islands, which is the region that I represent. We know from data from April, provided by Highland Council, that the number of fare-paying passengers increased by 25 per cent during the first month. That is incredible. People are transforming the way that they move around at remarkable speed.

When I was out and about in March and April talking to people, the pilot was one of the things that they wanted to tell me about—and why not? The fare for travelling from Wick to Inverness went from £31 for a single to £2, and the fare from Inverness to Elgin went from £15 to £2. The pilot is incredible, radical and life-changing, and people in the region are embracing it.

I am delighted that the pilot was rolled out in the Highlands and Islands. The Greens have been calling for an island and rural community-first approach, so let us try things out there. I want us, during this parliamentary session, to try things out in our rural and island communities and not leave them as afterthoughts, as has so often been the case in the past.

Having solved the affordability issue in the Highlands and Islands, we are now looking to roll the pilot out across the rest of Scotland. However, as we have already heard in the debate, issues with reliability have not been solved. When the Government chooses to act on something, we get results. The problem, though, is that we might have cheap fares, but in some cases we have no, or infrequent, buses. If there is no bus, people cannot get to work, to hospital or to watch football. People need to feel confident about choosing to use the bus. When they are standing at the bus stop in the pouring rain, they need to know that the bus is going to show up.

We need changes to the system. We need to move away from the private cherry picking that leads to services being cancelled out of the blue, people being stranded and communities having to spend weeks and months fighting to get the service brought back. Even if it does return, it might be less frequent. Along with affordable buses, we need reliable buses. They matter, as they get people to work and create confidence.

We also have an incredible opportunity to reduce car dependency, as that will help meet our climate targets, an issue that we discussed at great length in the previous session. We need to stay on course to meet them.

Addressing this issue will require giving councils real powers of full franchising and municipal ownership. For a start, we must have a minimum service standard. Buses must be an essential part of our public infrastructure; as others have said, they must be a joined-up form of transport. Buses, ferries and trains must all be connected, so that people can start their journey on one mode of transport and work through other modes in order to arrive at their destination.

The Highlands and Islands pilot has been extraordinarily successful, and I welcome its roll-out to other parts of Scotland. It was good to hear the cabinet secretary say in his opening remarks that there will be work on service standards, potential ownership reviews and so on, but we absolutely need to see action on this matter in this parliamentary session. We must see results, and the Greens and I will certainly keep an eye on the issue over the coming months and years.

16:10

Bob Doris (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP): I am a regular bus user; I frequently bus across north Glasgow and beyond with my two young children. Buses are an essential part of my day-to-day life, as they are for many of my constituents. I see what works well, but I am also well aware that improvements must be made, for example in the provision of evening or Sunday services on some routes, in parts of the bus network where there are clear gaps in provision, or in relation to capacity issues, such as when a single-decker bus arrives at peak times when double-deckers are required. Can you get a seat? Can a parent with a pram or a disabled traveller with a power-assisted wheelchair navigate on to a bus? Of course, there are also issues regarding reliability.

For balance, bus passengers, including me, do not tend to highlight when our bus services run well—and they do run well at times. There are occasions when buses are on time and the service is efficient and of high quality. We want to encourage more people to use buses, not fewer. However, we remember the occasions when we feel let down by the bus service.

On a positive note, affordability issues for those who use the bus have been eliminated for those who are under 22, by and large, and for those who are over 60. Our Scottish Government has put in place a substantial financial model under which it is free for those groups to use all services in Scotland—a model that I hope to return to later.

Craig Hoy: Bob Doris has perhaps identified one of the contradictions in the policy. He says that he is a frequent bus user, but he is also on £80,000 a year. By making that cheaper provision available to all—including many people who could afford to pay a marginally higher fare—does he recognise that the potential trade-off is that there is less money to spend on the reliability and punctuality of bus services?

Bob Doris: I thank Mr Hoy for that intervention, but that point is really for the birds. The trade-off is that I should pay higher and more progressive tax for public services in our country, which is something that I support.

Concessionary bus travel has been a significant success, but it is a job that is only partially done. If a person is over 21 and under 60, bus journeys will not feel like good value. A few stops on a First Glasgow bus will cost £2.45, and it is only a few stops; most single journeys are £3.25. I therefore strongly welcome our Scottish Government's commitment to a £2 cap price for bus fares in Glasgow. That will make a real difference in our city, but it needs to be carefully implemented.

Paul Sweeney: Bob Doris is making some good observations about Glasgow. I commend him for his collegiate work on advancing the pilot on free concessionary bus travel for people seeking asylum in the previous parliamentary session. Does he agree that it needs to be a priority for the Government to make that a permanent scheme as soon as possible?

Bob Doris: My views on that have not changed. I want it to be implemented in a sustainable and workable fashion, and I hope that we can deliver on that.

Many bus users cannot take a single bus service to where they wish to go. Often, bus users will be required to change buses to reach their end destination. At times, four, as opposed to two, tickets will be required, with a change in the city centre or elsewhere to make the return journey that passengers require. That would cost £8 under a capped-fare system. Many commuters in our city rely instead on a First day ticket, which costs £6.30, to make such journeys. That would mean that a capped-fare system would cost those whose bus journeys require changes considerably more in comparison with those who have direct end-to-end routes, so there could be an inequality there. I urge that arrangements should be made with bus companies to ensure that those who require to change buses in such circumstances do not lose out.

After all, public money that is pumped into bus operators must be used for the public good. Indeed, it is anticipated that, in the current financial year, the budget to be invested in bus services is £528 million—I will say that again: £528 million—and £472.8 million for concessionary travel. There is a lot of money in the system, but the financial model needs reviewed to see whether it is working as well as it could for the public good. I am sure that SPT, which is continuing to develop its bus franchising model for Strathclyde, would be particularly interested to see how it could use that money in the Strathclyde area.

We also need to look at the relationship between the reimbursement rate for concessionary travel, which is 52.9 per cent of a single journey, and the cost of a single journey. There is an incentive in the system for bus companies to increase the price

of a single journey, because their reimbursement for concessionary travel is directly linked to it.

In closing, I welcome the £2 bus cap, and I look forward to franchising—I hope—in Strathclyde, which will require partnership funding with the Scottish Government. We have to use the massive amount of money that has already been invested by the public in the system in a way that works much better for the public good.

16:16

Pauline Stafford (Bathgate) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, as I am an elected member of West Lothian Council.

Affordable and reliable public transport is not a luxury but an essential public service. If we are serious about tackling the cost of living and encouraging people on to public transport, price really matters, so I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to a £2 fare cap across Scotland. That is the next logical step to enable us to build on the success of schemes such as the under-22s scheme, which—as we have heard today—has reached 300 million journeys since it was introduced.

Earlier this week, when I knew that I would be speaking in the debate today, I mapped out my family's travel patterns for the week and compared the time and costs of the journeys that I have to make both with a car and without one. Between work, school runs and clubs, shopping and evening meetings, I calculated that I would need around nine hours of travel time with a car. Without one, that doubled to more than 18 hours, not to mention missing many of the tighter meetings in the schedule.

For some of those journeys, there was almost no feasible alternative to the car, but not every journey was a clear-cut choice. Where trips could easily be made by bus, cost became crucial. When all other factors are broadly equal but public transport is more expensive, people will understandably choose the car where they are able to do so. If we want people to be able to leave their cars at home, we must therefore make public transport the natural choice: we must ensure that it is faster, more affordable, safe and seamlessly integrated into their lives, as we have heard today. The £2 fare cap is part of that process.

Countries such as the Netherlands and Germany have shown what can be achieved through making sustainable travel the easy choice, but that requires long-term thinking and long-term investment. During the four years that I spent living in the Netherlands, it was the country's transport policies that made the biggest difference to my quality of life. Its integrated transport card allows people to seamlessly combine train, bus or tram in a single affordable journey. The cities are quieter and have better air quality and the safer streets enable young people there to have independence earlier in their lives. That is the prize for us, and it is what we should be working towards.

Sadly, however, that is not the experience of many communities across Scotland. In West Lothian, some bus services have been withdrawn at incredibly short notice, with no consultation of the people they are meant to serve. Villages have been entirely cut off early in the evening, with no Sunday service, and in some of the most deprived parts of my constituency, people are having to use taxis to access medical appointments or do a weekly shop—and that is in the central belt.

In many cases, there is no choice between using car or bus. The most recent census showed that more than 20 per cent of residents in West Lothian had no access to a car, so, without affordable public transport, the risk is that those people become isolated in their communities and lose access to vital public services.

Our fragmented bus network too often fails the passengers it is meant to serve, and it is a result of bus services being run according to commercial profitability rather than public need. That is why the Scottish Government has pursued subsidised travel schemes that help to sustain services and why we continue to explore greater public control through franchising partnerships and public ownership. Where public ownership exists, we can see the benefits, which we have heard about today. Lothian Buses has returned tens of millions of pounds to the public purse over the past decade. That money has been reinvested into services rather than distributed to private shareholders.

The success of removing peak rail fares is evident—it makes the train a more affordable and accessible option and it grows people's use of it. Where public confidence in a service grows, so, too, does its sustainability. If we fail to provide an alternative to car use, we lock families into higher transport costs, increase congestion and the impact on our economy, and make it harder to meet our climate ambitions.

The £2 fare cap is a step towards a system that is fairer, more affordable and more accessible. If we all accept that transport is an essential service, we must ensure that it is delivered for the public good and that it is accessible to everyone who relies on it.

I support the motion, and I look forward to the cap coming to West Lothian as soon as possible.

16:20

Steven Bonnar (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): I was keen to contribute to today's debate on affordable bus fares because public transport is about far more than just getting from one place to another; it is about opportunities, fairness and connection.

For many people across Scotland, particularly in communities such as Uddingston and Bellshill, the bus remains an essential lifeline. As the transport secretary outlined earlier, residents rely on bus services to access their work and education, attend healthcare appointments and stay connected in their local communities. For those without access to a car, there is often no realistic alternative.

I am a non-driver. I rely on buses every week to get around my constituency and, of course, to travel through here to the Parliament. I have done that in my other life, outside of politics. I have always been a bus user, and I know how vital bus services are to people. That gives me a real appreciation of how important affordable, reliable services are.

The Scottish Government's concessionary bus travel scheme has already transformed the lives of many people. We have outlined that the under-22s scheme has helped young people to access education, employment and training opportunities, while free travel for older and disabled people continues to reduce isolation and support independent living.

Those policies are making a real difference. However, many working-age adults continue to face significant transport costs. I recently heard from one of my constituents, Drew, who paid £6.20 for a single journey on the X44 bus between Holytown and Bellshill—places that you know well, Presiding Officer. That journey was not across Scotland or even outside the region; it was a short local trip home after a long night shift.

For many households that are already facing cost of living pressures, transport costs are often another barrier to opportunity. If we are serious about tackling poverty and expanding opportunities, we must be serious about the cost of getting to work, an education facility or community-based activity. That is why the proposed extension of the £2 cap to places such as Lanarkshire will be vitally important for people. For my constituents, it could make a real difference. It could help an apprentice to travel to their placement, support shift workers who are commuting across the region and make it easier for families to access sport and leisure opportunities.

Affordable bus travel is also good for our economy and our local environment. If we want fewer cars on the road—I think that we all do—lower emissions and less congestion, public transport must be an attractive and affordable option. People cannot be expected to make the switch if fares remain too expensive.

Affordability alone is not enough. We must continue to improve reliability, frequency and connectivity, and we have heard about that from across the chamber today. Constituents regularly tell me that they need buses that they can depend on, particularly in the evenings and at weekends. Affordable fares and reliable services must go hand in hand.

Affordable bus fares are not simply a transport policy but a policy of opportunity. They help to connect people to jobs, education, healthcare and community life. They help to reduce inequality and ensure that where someone lives does not determine the opportunities that are available to them. For those reasons, I welcome the Scottish Government—

Michelle Campbell (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Steven Bonnar: Yes, of course.

Michelle Campbell: I find the member's whole-picture perspective very refreshing. When it comes to violence against women and girls, this is an opportunity for us to empower women. Many women—including many in the chamber, I am sure—walk holding a key in their pocket when they cannot get public transport. That is part of the reason why I sometimes choose to travel by car. Does the member see the opportunity that these measures present to empower women and girls?

Steven Bonnar: I whole-heartedly agree with Ms Campbell. The constituency that I represent contains small towns and villages in which, after 6 o'clock in the evening, people find it difficult to get a service to take them home. That causes problems not only for women and girls but for everybody, although I appreciate that women and girls have a different factor that they need to take on board every time that they make those journeys.

I welcome the Scottish Government's focus on affordable bus fares, and I look forward to seeing the benefits of the cap in the communities that I represent in Uddingston and Bellshill and, indeed, all across Scotland.

16:25

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): I congratulate the cabinet secretary, who seems to have brought forward proposals in the motion that have united the entire Parliament—

except for Craig Hoy, who I can see does not want to hear what I have to say, either. He obviously does not see the direction of travel, to use a pun.

What a welcome cost of living measure the proposals will be. I have already had inquiries from constituents about when the fare cap will be introduced. I welcome the fact that Ayrshire will, rightly, be in first tranche, which covers the Strathclyde region. I hope that that will give opportunities for SPT and local authorities to further consider franchising and take advantage of the potential increase in passenger numbers and revenue support.

What a difference the fare cap will make for my constituents who work or study in Glasgow and have a daily commute from Kilmarnock. At the moment, an on-the-day single bus fare is £8.10 and a return fare is just under £15. That will go down to £4 a day, saving people more than £50 a week. The cap will open up new job markets and education opportunities for those who were previously unable to afford the commute. What an incentive that will be to swap the car for bus travel, which is clearly a more sustainable form of transport.

One question that I have for the cabinet secretary is, how do we implement a subsidy that supports the new cap system? We can compare savings for passengers with some of the fares that bus companies advertise, but those are clearly different from the physical cost for the bus operators and the level of support that they actually need, especially if a critical mass of passengers is achieved. We need to make sure that we get best value and do not contribute to excess profits. As other members have said, the issue of excess profits is why we need more franchises under public ownership.

During my travels to watch the Scotland v Haiti game at the weekend, I started by getting the Lothian Buses service to the airport, paying what I thought was a reasonable £8.50 open return fare. In Glasgow, First Bus charges more than double that amount for a similar journey from Glasgow airport to the city centre. That example shows the potential of public ownership and the need to make sure that the £2 cap does not unduly reward a company such as First Bus, which uses its monopoly to charge higher fares.

I turn to a more local example in my constituency. I stay in Galston, which is five miles from Kilmarnock. A single fare into Kilmarnock is currently £5.10 and a return costs £9.20, which is unaffordable for many. Therefore, a £4 return fare will be a great saving. However, it will mean that the five-mile journey from Galston to Kilmarnock will be the same price as the 25-mile journey from Kilmarnock to Glasgow, effectively introducing a financial penalty for those who need to make a change at Kilmarnock bus station.

As Daniel Johnson touched on earlier, when the full service is rolled out, it looks as though, under these proposals, passengers will be able to travel from Glasgow to Inverness for the same £2 capped fare. There is a balance to be reached and a debate to be had on the distance that is allowed for the £2 cap. There should perhaps be a way of buying through tickets—that is the way that it used to be under Western Scottish Motor Traction, as my colleague Bob Doris mentioned earlier.

I have a few further considerations. At the moment, when travelling from Kilmarnock to Glasgow, the bus fare costs only marginally less than travelling by train. However, under the new system, bus travel will cost 50 per cent less than travelling by train. We therefore need to consider what the effects will be on train travel and whether the subsidy for train travel should be revisited.

What thought has been given to the possible requirement for a number of new buses for new park-and-ride facilities? The Kilmarnock and Fenwick areas in my constituency need new park-and-ride buses—there are pressures already in that regard. Also, how do we develop the new services?

There is an opportunity to transform bus services, which I hope will lead to public franchises, with all the money reinvested in those services. However, we must ensure that we get the model right for a fantastic initiative that will support many people across Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): We move to closing speeches.

16:30

Willie Rennie: I was very grateful for Alan Brown's recitation of his bus route. I thought that he was going to go all the way and regale us with the cost of every leg of his trip to Boston. I am grateful that he did not, because those of us who enjoyed the match did not really need to hear about the bus journey.

Craig Hoy, in the last part of his speech, hit on a point that I had hoped that the cabinet secretary would include in his remarks. We must be honest about behaviour on some buses, as it is an issue. We know that there have been violent attacks, but there are also issues about groups of young people congregating around bus stations.

There are certain hot spots, particularly in Fife—around Kirkcaldy and Glenrothes—but I hear that that is also true of Kilmarnock and other places across Scotland. We should be honest about it. This is a good policy, but that aspect is part of what

is happening and we must try to mitigate it. I hope that the cabinet secretary will address that in his summing up, because I thought that Craig Hoy made a fair point.

I especially welcomed three contributions. One was from Lloyd Melville, who was appointed deputy convener of the Transport Committee this morning; another was from Dawn Black; and the final one was from Pauline Stafford. They all spoke about how certain communities and groups are cut off from society due to a lack of appropriate bus services. That is not just the case in very rural parts of the country—sometimes that is the case in isolated communities in the central belt. When looking at the use of public funds, we must consider how best to ensure that those routes and those people have the freedom that Dawn Black mentioned.

As I alluded to in my opening remarks, I sometimes worry that, in the race towards the bus fare cap, we are not giving sufficient consideration to the pot of money that we have available to ensure a rounded service across all parts of the country. There is no point in having cheap fares if we do not have a bus service.

The demand-responsive transport that Lloyd Melville talked about is a good way of ensuring that we plug particular gaps, often for elderly people who do not want to go on a general bus service and who want to know that the bus will come to their area when they need it. We should look at expanding that service.

We will, I hope, have the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport before the Transport Committee later this year, when we will be considering bus issues, which might be through his new bus bill, which will include provisions on the bus fare cap. That includes mysterious elements that we do not quite know about yet—he is still not telling us about them. I am looking forward to those evidence sessions when he will reveal all about what will be in the bus bill.

I want to consider the cost of all this, because at no point in the debate have we talked about the £5 billion financial hole that will exist in our public finances towards the end of the decade.

Sometimes, when we are talking about nationalisation and expanding the bus fare cap, we did not really think about the cost of all those things. Every member of this Parliament has a responsibility to think—

Bob Doris: Will the member take an intervention?

Willie Rennie: A brief one, yes.

Bob Doris: It is a brief intervention, Mr Rennie. I will be convening the Public Service Reform Committee in this Parliament. I note that we are spending £528 million on bus services this year alone. Do you think that we can achieve better value for money from that and drive efficiencies?

Willie Rennie: That is what I am asking us to consider. Rather than just thinking about the headline policy, we need to think about value for money and the impact that we get from the policy. I would sometimes like us to take a step back and look at everything in the round, rather than take a siloed approach to policy. We need to consider the overall cost and how we can best use the public finances.

We also need to consider that the costs for bus companies have gone up. The price of buying new buses is considerable, the cost of fuel has gone up and the cost of providing bus services in some parts of the country is higher than in others. We need to consider everything in the round to make sure that we have a bus service that is available for everybody in every part of our communities.

16:35

Craig Hoy: I will take up the point that Mr Rennie just made. In the round, the policy looks good but, in four years' time, once we have had the pilot throughout the SPT area, including in the densely populated city of Glasgow, we might suddenly find that the costs are simply not affordable, or we might end up borrowing from Peter to pay Paul.

That could happen in one of two ways. First, will the expenditure on bus travel mean less for supported services in rural areas, which certainly seems to have been the trend to date? Secondly, as Mr Brown referred to, what impact will the policy potentially have on rail travel? The cabinet secretary is responsible for Scottish Rail Holdings. If I were to go on the 5.06 train from Dumfries to Annan, it would cost £6.40. Under the fare cap policy, if I went by bus, which takes about 20 minutes longer, it would be a flat £2. Will that have ramifications for ScotRail, or will the Government have to extend the subsidy scheme to rail services in Scotland, which would make the policy yet more expensive?

I will refer to a few of the contributions that have been made. I seem to remember that, when Graham Simpson was in the Conservative Party, he persuaded me that we should have a fringe event on through-ticketing, and he made that fringe event very interesting. Today, he managed to make an international comparison of fare caps around Europe and the rest of the world equally interesting.

I have some sympathy with the concept of a fare cap, but the devil lies in the detail. My problem—and my party's problem—with the motion is that it glosses over some of the deficiencies, such as

those relating to antisocial behaviour, which Mr Rennie just made clear. The motion also fails to explain what the better bus service provision will be, whereas it is very specific on the headline-grabbing £2 fare, even though many of the questions that I raised earlier, which have also been raised by industry bodies and others, have not yet been addressed.

Graham Simpson: I thank Craig Hoy for lavishing praise on me, which I certainly was not expecting. I was a bit baffled by his first speech in the debate. Is there anything about the current bus system that he would like to change?

Craig Hoy: Yes, there absolutely is. The member will have looked closely at the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party's manifesto, which included a clear commitment to a rural bus fund so that the very fragile supported services in areas such as Langholm, Closeburn, Sanquhar and Thornhill in my constituency continue. Those are lifeline services, and if the cost of concessionary travel continues to rise inexorably, my fear is that those services will become even more vulnerable.

I will close by repeating a couple of questions to the minister, but I will first read a quote from the Confederation of Passenger Transport, which said:

"Ambitious transport policy only succeeds if government works through the practical realities of delivery from the outset. Without careful consideration of deliverability in the short and longer term it could risk disappointing passengers, communities, and industry alike.

What impact will the £2 cap have on other forms of transport and their revenue, and specifically on train services? What impact might it have on the funds that are available for supported and rural services? How much will the policy cost, and will that be achievable after Ivan McKee and the Deputy First Minister have run their slide rule over Scotland's finances in the coming years? How will it be paid for? Which taxes will rise and by how much, or which services will be cut?

Unless those fundamental questions are answered, I am afraid that this policy, like so many other SNP policies of the giveaway variety, is likely to fall short or to fall apart entirely.

16:39

Laura Moodie (South Scotland) (Green): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, which shows that I am the outgoing volunteer chair of Dumfries and Galloway bus users group.

Along with my Scottish Green colleagues, I broadly welcome the intent of today's motion. Affordable bus travel is not a nice-to-have; it is fundamental to how people access work, education, healthcare and community life, particularly in large rural and post-industrial areas such as the one that I represent.

The expansion of free bus travel for under-22s has been genuinely transformative, and that policy—as we have heard, it was secured by the Scottish Greens through budget negotiations—has opened up opportunities across communities such as East Kilbride, Galashiels and Dumfries for young people to reach college, apprenticeships and work. It has also freed up household income to be spent in local economies instead of on bus fares, which is real progress that deserves recognition.

I thank Paul Sweeney and Patrick Harvie for raising how crucial it is to maintain free bus travel for asylum seekers.

The scale of Government intervention that is now required in our bus services—through free travel schemes, emergency support for operators and fare cap proposals—tells us something really important about the state of our bus system. It tells us that the current deregulated, profit-led model is struggling to deliver affordable, reliable services, particularly outside our biggest cities and urban centres.

In South Scotland, the reality of bus fares is stark: a single ticket from Selkirk to Galashiels can cost £4.90 for a 15-minute journey; a return from Stranraer to Dumfries is £14; and even excellent community-run services, such as the 3C service from Strathaven to Glasgow, still cost £6.50 for a single journey. For families, low-paid workers and people in insecure employment, those costs quickly become prohibitive—and that is assuming that there is a service at all.

Although a £2 fare cap will undoubtedly make a difference—as Ariane Burgess pointed out, it has increased passenger numbers by 25 per cent in only a few months—it should prompt us to ask why such intervention is needed in the first place. Fare caps are not a substitute for a system that works by design rather than by rescue.

That matters not only for affordability but for our climate responsibilities. Transport remains Scotland's largest source of greenhouse gas emissions. In rural and semi-rural areas, people are often forced into car dependency by the absence of affordable, reliable public transport. I thank Dawn Black for raising the issues of those who do not have a choice. If we are serious about cutting emissions while protecting household budgets, strong bus networks are not optional but essential.

That is why better buses legislation is so important. We must reshape how bus services are

planned and delivered, particularly in areas where the market has consistently failed. The legislation must be practical, accessible and properly resourced.

A few hours ago, I received an email from Alex, a constituent who lives on a bus route and would like to use buses that connect to train services. He pointed out that consumer protection is lacking when buses fail and that there is no safeguard when someone cannot get the next service because their bus has not turned up. That goes back to the point that Ariane Burgess made about confidence in services and the point that Bob Doris made about the challenges of linking up different service providers.

If the new powers that come are weighed down by bureaucracy, or if local authorities and regional transport partnerships are given responsibility without funding, progress will be slow and rural communities will lose out. In South Scotland, we do not have time for reforms that take years to materialise. We need services that work now, integrated timetables, new routes and fares that people can afford. Although I welcome the motion's ambition and the progress that has already been made, I urge the Government to treat better buses legislation as a moment for real change that puts public need, climate action and regional fairness at the heart of our transport system.

16:44

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I am pleased to close the debate on behalf of Labour and to formally second the amendment in the name of my friend, the member for Edinburgh Southern.

Today's debate goes to the heart of what our communities need: connection, opportunity and economic equity. We all recognise the immense value of concessionary travel. The original Labour and Liberal Democrat Government scheme, which delivered for the over-60s, and the more recent expansions for young people and disabled people have been genuinely transformative.

It is precisely because of that success that I was proud, in the previous parliamentary session, to lead a cross-party campaign to extend the concessionary bus travel scheme to people seeking asylum. It is a vital measure to ensure that the most vulnerable in our society are not cut off from essential services, legal support and their local communities, so it is important that the Government makes that provision permanent. It was one of the best things to be achieved in the previous session, and it involved working with Mr Ruskell from the Greens, Mr Doris from the SNP and Mr Carlaw, the former Conservative member. It demonstrates the Parliament at its best when we can look after the weakest in our society and ensure that social justice prevails.

Although we welcome such vital social interventions, alongside the roll-out of the £2 bus fare cap—albeit three years behind other parts of the UK—we must confront the basic reality that a concessionary pass or a £2 fare cap is completely useless if the bus simply never turns up or if the route has been scrapped altogether by a private bus company that has pruned its network to push up profits.

That is exactly the situation that my mum, as a bank worker, faced when her branch was closed. She was offered alternative employment in another part of Glasgow, but she found that she could not get to her shifts on time because the bus service would not deliver for her. She had to buy a car and commute by car, even though she had previously used the bus and qualified for an over-60 bus pass. That added an extra cost to accessing work and reduced her take-home pay. Many workers across Scotland face that dilemma, and it is a clear example of how changes could materially affect the cost of living and improve things for working people across Scotland. I am sure that that example is just one of many.

I am keen to get reassurance from the cabinet secretary on one issue. I understand that the commitment is to roll out the £2 bus fare cap in Strathclyde by 16 August, but that date is not in the motion, so it would be good if he could confirm that that is, indeed, the target date.

As the Conservative amendment says, bus provision across Scotland is deteriorating, but the solution is surely not more deregulated market competition. That Tory legacy has been an unmitigated disaster for Scotland, and the solution now is public control. I am afraid that the perspective that Mr Hoy offered was one of narrow accountancy, rather than showing a wider understanding of the economic value to our nation of a public transport system.

This is not just a matter of passenger inconvenience; it is a profound economic failure for our country. As my friend Mr Johnson said, analysis from Centre for Cities lays bare the true cost of our fragmented public transport system. Given that the network is currently so unreliable, it artificially sinks the effective size of greater Glasgow's labour market. That connectivity gap stifles agglomeration, limits productivity and creates an economic loss equivalent to 4.5 per cent of the greater Glasgow economy's gross domestic product, which is equivalent to that of the entire oil and gas industry in Scotland.

That staggering self-inflicted wound is holding back the Glasgow city region. That is before we even consider the multiplier effects of supporting

our manufacturing sector in Scotland and of public procurement reform, with increased public demand for bus manufacturing supporting wider Scottish manufacturing supply chains. In a city with below-average rates of car ownership and above-average rates of deprivation, that level of self-inflicted economic damage is simply unacceptable.

I have been involved in this fight for a long time. A decade ago, I helped to set up the Get Glasgow Moving campaign. For 10 years, passengers across Strathclyde have campaigned to wrestle control of our vital public transport arteries back from private monopolies that have spent decades prioritising shareholder dividends over passenger service and economic growth.

We do not have to look far or too deep into our history to see what is possible in our country. In the early 20th century, Glasgow was a global pioneer in municipal transport. We built the most extensive electric tramway system anywhere in Britain. Recently, we marked the centenary of the Glasgow Corporation motor bus service, which was launched in 1924 specifically to coincide with the introduction of the landmark Wheatley housing act by the first Labour Government. Ensuring that the new suburbs of municipal housing that were being developed were fully connected to the rest of the city showed a level of joined-up, integrated municipal socialist policy that we rarely see in Scotland today.

Michelle Campbell: The member made a point about greater Glasgow. Being from Renfrewshire, I point out that, while it is important to have connectivity into our cities, it is also important that our identities in neighbouring sisterhoods and brotherhoods are protected, too, so that we do not lose out by default because of the need for intercity links. Does the member agree?

Paul Sweeney: I absolutely agree. The greater Glasgow city region's development of those policies and its attempts to improve interregional connectivity are welcome. That presents a huge opportunity to grow the whole city region economy. We have certainly seen such examples elsewhere in the UK.

It is important to recognise that public transport should be a system run entirely for the common good, as it was a century ago. It was so efficient and well managed that the surplus that was generated from the public transport network did not disappear into the offshore bank accounts of private operators; it was reinvested directly into the city economy by the Glasgow Corporation to fund other essential public services.

Our city understood at that time that public transport is a vital and fundamental civic asset—and it should be again. The loss of that civic inheritance, driven by the chaotic, ideologically driven deregulation of bus services 40 years ago, has been a disaster for our communities. We need only look along the M8 to see what Strathclyde lost. We must give immense credit to the leaders of the former Lothian Region, who had the foresight and the political courage to resist the deregulation that was pushed by the Tory Scottish Office and to keep their bus network in public hands. The initial management and employee buyout of Strathclyde Buses culminated in a takeover by First 30 years ago. Today, Lothian Buses remains a shining example of what a publicly owned, integrated municipal transport company can achieve.

While Edinburgh protected its public bus network, other cities are now fighting to win theirs back. At the weekend I was in Greater Manchester, and what I saw there was an inspiration. Through the Bee network, Greater Manchester has taken back control of its buses; it is delivering franchising, integrating fares and putting passengers first. Why is it succeeding where we are stalling? It is because its legislative framework actually works.

Contrast Greater Manchester's rapid progress with the sluggish, agonising pace in greater Glasgow. The Scottish Government routinely praises the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019, but the reality is that the legislation is needlessly complex and riddled with hurdles, and it has left regional transport partnerships bogged down in bureaucratic regulation. While Manchester accelerates ahead, Glasgow is being left behind.

That is why Labour's amendment is so critical. We cannot accept more warm words about future legislation. We need the Scottish Government to take active steps now to make bus franchising a reality. That means providing the necessary funding and structural support for Strathclyde Partnership for Transport to exercise its powers rapidly. Crucially, it means advancing public control of fare-box revenue, so that the wealth that is generated by our transport network is reinvested in fostering new routes and keeping fares permanently low, just as was done a century ago.

It is time to unwind the damage of deregulation, to reclaim civic ambition and to build an integrated, world-class public transport network for our future needs. I urge members to back passengers over profit and support the Labour amendment.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): The penultimate closing speech is from David Kirkwood.

16:52

David Kirkwood (South Scotland) (Reform): Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer. I hope that

you and the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport will accept my congratulations on your appointments.

As this is my first speech here, I have some people to thank. First, I thank the people of South Scotland for placing sufficient trust in our party to allow me to take up a place here. I will do my best to ensure that that trust is not misplaced. Secondly, I thank all the staff here, in Holyrood, who have made my introduction to a fairly unique working environment as painless as possible. Thirdly, I thank the other members here, who have, by and large, been welcoming of an interloper in their midst. Lastly and most importantly, I thank my own family, who have had to put up with a lot over the five and a half years since Reform UK Scotland was founded. It has sometimes seemed a lot longer.

Now, the customary brief travelogue. South Scotland, like all other constituencies and regions, is the most beautiful part of Scotland. It has been my home for nearly all of my life. It is composed mainly of gently rolling and fertile land. It has long coastlines, but it reaches up to the two highest villages in all of Scotland. Although it has been inhabited for 14,000 years, the people are spread quite thinly over the land. We are relatively few but very friendly. Please do come and see us.

The fact that a boy from a single end in New Stevenston can find himself here, among the intellectual elite of Scotland, is a tribute to three main factors: a loving, hard-working family in which my mum was a nurse and my dad was a toolmaker—[*Laughter*.]—that is absolutely true; a traditional Scottish education gained in small-town schools and in Glaswegian colleges and universities; and the social and professional mobility gained as a result of that education. I want other kids to have the same advantages I had. I cannot do anything about their families, but I can help to ensure that the affordable, high-quality further and higher education that helped me is available to them.

For an engineer, handling a shadow portfolio that combines innovation, technology and education is rather like a dozen Christmases arriving at once. The fact that that is happening in Scotland—a tiny wee country on the edge of Europe that has dominated global innovation for well over two centuries—just makes it more exciting. It may seem as though Scotland is an unlikely nation to hold the title of global innovator, but, considering that a Scottish monk invented the electric motor in 1740, a mining engineer from the second-highest village in Scotland built the world's first practical steamboat and a native of our wet and chilly country invented refrigeration, you realise that we do unlikely things. Scots seem to have a knack for imagining things that others do not and to have the smeddum to make them happen. That is an enormous asset for our nation and it must be nourished.

Innovation is not only about making new things. Sometimes, it is about making new ways of thinking. Among other things, the concepts of human rights, economics, modern philosophy, geology, environmentalism and even humour were first described by Scots. We need to move away from the prescriptive type of teaching that many of our students experience in our schools, colleges and universities and help them to understand how to think, not what to think.

Our university sector has a long and distinguished history, and, for many years, Scotland had four universities while England had only two. However, we need to review the purpose of our tertiary education institutions. My old college, where I gained a Scottish higher national diploma in engineering, is now a university. Is it serving Scotland any better? Tony Blair's insistence that an arbitrary 50 per cent of all young people should go to university has led to more than a generation of students with life-limiting student loans, many of which funded degrees of dubious worth. The 50 per cent target must be abandoned, and technical and vocational education and training need to come out of the shadow of academic tuition. Instead of the much-vaunted STEM education, I want Scotland to go full STEAM ahead—that is, science, technology, engineering, arts and maths. A grounding in visual, musical or performing arts produces a more rounded education and encourages diverse modes of thinking and greater creativity.

My personal aims in this parliamentary session include using my own technical capabilities to bring some engineering rigour to the sometimes fanciful and imprecise outputs of the Parliament. That includes scrapping the nonsensical and destructive net zero targets, encouraging more people into good technical careers at all levels, extending vocational training into the secondary school sphere and fostering the technical and philosophical innovations that will shape our society in the next few decades. I expect to introduce some innovations of my own, including a scheme to alleviate the problems of access to cash in rural areas and a way to allow all Scots to see exactly where their tax money goes. I want to help to maximise the creativity of Scotland, which is the best part of the best country in the world, and I look forward to working with members of all parties to do that.

In my experience in the Parliament, this has been the most collegiate debate, with the highest degree of unanimity—and I am not gonnae spoil that now. A healthy economy is characterised by activity and movement. People, goods and money

move around quickly and efficiently, and creating wealth is the goal. When anything hinders that movement, the economy suffers and, by extension, so do the people. In our rural areas, that activity has been hindered by two main factors: a lack of money in people's pockets for bus fares and a lack of frequent and reliable buses. Wages in countryside areas are often lower than those in urban areas, and journeys are longer, with higher fares.

The commercial bus operators have a problem when passenger numbers drop. They may need to reduce frequencies to maintain profitability. However, that can lead to a further drop in numbers, further reducing profitability and spiralling down into a total service collapse. In such a situation, there may be a good case for a temporary external stimulus to restore passenger numbers to viability. That would lead to local economic growth and a self-sustaining route. When people can reliably and affordably travel to work—or to shop, or for leisure—they will do so. A cheap fare and a reliable bus will permit that.

On reliability, I note that, in the next few weeks, the entire X74 fleet will be replaced with rather more reliable buses.

The fare cap is of greater benefit in the countryside than it is in the towns, where interurban fares are generally little higher than the £2 cap. Saving £5 or more per day on bus fares can make the difference when it comes to whether a job is worth while. The £2 cap trial in the Highland area seems to be successful, with passenger numbers having increased by 30 per cent or so. That makes the scheme economically sensible for the operators, who are more than compensated for the discounted fares that they receive from the Scottish Government. It will be interesting to see the report on the trial and the analysis of any economic benefit that it has brought to the area.

Franchising is another way of providing a public transport service, and it offers greater economic certainty and less administration cost over the period of the contract. However, the legislation surrounding franchising needs to be greatly simplified before it can become widespread. That may well allow the establishment of the community-led bus companies that Patrick Harvie talked about, which would not be a bad thing at all.

One way to simplify operations and thereby reduce costs is through the use of intermodal ticketing, but intermodal ticketing is still not universally available across all our transport systems, even though it has been around for a long time. I was involved in the first ITSO ferry ticket trial when I worked for CalMac Ferries, more than 10 years ago, and although the company has made a lot of progress, its current delivery plan still shows 2027 as the year when it will accept all ITSO tickets.

The simplest and most economical way of running a transport system is to have people with good jobs and money in their pockets paying their own way with their own money to buy their own services. At the moment, that is not possible, but a stimulus to the economy may make it so in the future, and we need to strive for that.

As long as rigorous cost benefit analysis of capped routes is done, trials are carefully monitored, trial budgets are capped and efforts are made to rationalise and simplify the legislation around franchising, I can see no reason why we will not support this effort.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I invite the cabinet secretary, Stephen Flynn, to respond to the debate.

17:01

Stephen Flynn: I have spoken in two debates since I came north from Westminster and returned to this wonderful Parliament and, on both occasions, I appear to have found an ability to gain consensus across the chamber. It is a wonderful thing. [*Interruption*.]

Ms Baillie is shaking her head, but she missed the collegiate debate that we have had, in which everyone agreed that the Government is taking positive steps to ensure that people can deal with the cost of living crisis that is in front of them and that they have a Scottish Government that is delivering for them on their priorities. I will come back to that point. Mr Rennie looks less than impressed by my approach. That may well be how the Transport Committee looks in a few short months' time, but I will try to push it as far as I can.

Important points were made about the availability of services. I understand the need for services to be available. I get it—we all do. Each and every one of us recognises the desire of our constituents to have access to bus services that meet their needs. Quite frankly, access to such services is not being delivered in Scotland in the way that any of us would want it to be delivered. However, in order for that to change, we cannot do as Mr Hoy seems to think that we should do, which is to continue doing the same thing over and over again, hoping that we will get a different outcome.

In response to the points that Mr Hoy made, I say to him that he seems to know the price of absolutely everything—and rightly so—but he does not know the value of anything, because he refuses to accept the benefit that the changes that we are seeking to introduce through the fare cap will bring for individuals and their families. Indeed, I am not even sure that he could bring himself to

accept the benefits that have been brought by the bus pass as it stands. In one year alone, 113 million journeys were made by our older people and our disabled people. How many of those journeys would have been made without that bus pass being in place? How many of Mr Hoy's constituents would have been socially isolated as a result of him being a curmudgeon? Far too many. We would do well to ignore Mr Hoy's advances on the issue.

That point applies not only to older people and disabled people; it applies to young people, too. I was at Buchanan Street bus station today and heard directly from young people about the benefit to their lives that has been brought about by this Parliament's decision to pass a budget that gave them free bus passes. It has changed their lives and has opened up a world of opportunities that we never had but which they now do. That is why, in the space of just four years, they have taken 300 million journeys.

Members ask me how sustainable that is in terms of finances. However, only some of them seem to want to commit to full discussions through the budget process to make sure that it is sustainable. We have a responsibility to balance our budget, and that is exactly what we have done and will continue to do when we deliver the £2 fare cap, as set out in our manifesto.

Paul Sweeney: My constituents are keen to see the cap rolled out quickly. Will it be delivered by 16 August, as was indicated previously?

Stephen Flynn: I am grateful to Mr Sweeney for reminding me of his comments in that regard, because I am not entirely sure that that date has been given by anyone on these benches, and I am not entirely sure where he got it from. What I have been very clear about is that we will stick to what we said in our manifesto in relation to the 100-day commitments, and will move the issue forward as quickly as we possibly can. I give him that commitment.

I want to work closely with Mr Sweeney in relation to bus transport, because I know that he is passionate about it and he has done some tremendous work on it, which I have watched from afar. However, he has made some comments in relation to a £2 fare cap in England—I see him nodding his head. What he does not seem to take into account is that, if I recall correctly, as I was sitting in Westminster, Keir Starmer raised that cap by 50 per cent to £3. Further, what Mr Sweeney has also not taken into account is that, under the Labour Party, no young people in England get access to a free bus pass. Similarly, with regard to older and disabled people, a vast number of people have to wait until they are 67 to get a bus pass. The comparison that he seeks to draw is neither fair nor reasonable.

Paul Sweeney: I thank the cabinet secretary for being generous with his interventions. It is one of the virtues of devolution that we can do things differently in Scotland. That is exactly what has happened—[*Interruption*.]

If I may complete the point, it is exactly what we did with regard to the concessionary travel scheme for over-60s, which was a Labour innovation in Scotland.

The point is that the cap policy has been devolved to city-region transport authorities in England. Therefore, for example, in Liverpool and Manchester, the £2 cap continues.

Stephen Flynn: I was struggling to hear Mr Sweeney over other members, but I thought that I heard him say, correctly, that devolution allows us to do things better. I certainly agree with him in that regard.

On the £2 fare cap, we have a pilot that is under way in the Highlands and Islands, which was rightly mentioned by Ariane Burgess. To build on what she was saying, if I recall the numbers correctly, around 300,000 journeys have been taken using the price cap. What a change and transformation. That is exactly what we want to see and build on.

That goes to the heart of everything that we are seeking to do in Government. We are seeking to ensure that people have the opportunity to get on in life and to take part in society and in their communities. We know that there is no functioning, strong economy without a transport system that works. I hope that all of us can agree, as we did during the debate earlier, that the important and tough decisions that we have made are the right thing for the people who have elected us to represent them in the chamber during a cost of living crisis, when pressures far outwith the control of this Parliament—primarily driven, of course, by the decisions of Westminster—are impacting our constituents directly.

We are using the levers that we can to help people in their daily lives, and that is incredibly important to me.

Patrick Harvie: [*Made a request to intervene*.]

Daniel Johnson: [*Made a request to intervene*.]

Stephen Flynn: I will give way to Daniel Johnson.

Daniel Johnson: I am grateful to the minister for giving way and apologise to Mr Harvie. The cabinet secretary says that the Government will get on with it, yet we have seen very slow progress on bus franchising. Can he address why we have

seen so little progress in six years, and say how he intends to accelerate that?

Stephen Flynn: For members who were not in the chamber at the time, I say that Daniel Johnson made that point earlier and I had to remind him that SPT, which is the biggest player right now, is making progress in that regard. That is a positive thing. Daniel Johnson and the Government seem to be in agreement on a lot—we will, of course, support his amendment. However, in his opening remarks, he listed a whole host of projects that he wants to happen. If he wants those things to happen and progress to be made, he should engage with us and have discussions with us in the run-up to the budget. I am sure that the Deputy First Minister would be delighted to do that, so that we can have progress.

Graham Simpson: Will the member take an intervention?

Stephen Flynn: I will make some progress, because I am conscious that my time is drawing to a close and I want to address an important point that was raised by Craig Hoy and, rightly, by Willie Rennie. I said that I would address the issue of antisocial behaviour.

None of us in the chamber can accept the treatment of any individual who works on our buses in the fashion that we have seen, including terrible instances that have occurred in parts of Scotland—in particular, the Moray constituency—with which we are all very familiar. Members from the previous parliamentary session will be conscious of the fact that, in March, a statutory instrument was passed that creates a framework for addressing antisocial behaviour, whether by a young person or an older person—I do not think that we should be explicit in that regard. We need to ensure that that code of conduct is put in place, and I expect that to come back across my desk in the coming months so that we can put the issue to bed and make sure that our bus drivers are safe at work.

In Glasgow today, I met a wonderful bus driver—a chap called Tahir—who is very proud of the work that he does. On this day of all days, given that there has been a bit of interest in my travel plans, it is right for me to take part in this debate, to move the motion in my name and to thank Tahir and all his colleagues for the work that they do every day in serving the people of Scotland.

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): That concludes the debate on affordable bus fares.

Law Officers

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is a debate on motion S7M-00380, in the name of John Swinney, on the appointment of law officers. Before the First Minister speaks, I remind members that, under rule 11.3 of standing orders, the question on the motion will be put immediately after the debate.

17:12

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am pleased to nominate to the Parliament a new Lord Advocate and a new Solicitor General for Scotland, to welcome them to the chamber at my side and to welcome their families to the gallery.

I pay tribute to the outgoing Lord Advocate, the Rt Hon Dorothy Bain KC, and I thank her for her outstanding service to Scotland—first, in her previous role, in which she was widely recognised and praised as an exceptional prosecutor, and, secondly, over the past five years, as Scotland's Lord Advocate.

Dorothy Bain has delivered many outstanding achievements during her time as Lord Advocate. Her commitment to more effectively prosecuting those who commit violence against women and girls has ensured that those who carry out such crimes are more likely to be held to account.

Dorothy Bain is not just an outstanding lawyer—she has led by example. She has taken a personal interest when engaging with victims before a trial takes place, and has acted at all times with grace and with empathy for those involved. As a result, she has successfully argued for changes in the law of evidence in Scotland's courts, which have allowed more accused to be prosecuted. She has challenged unduly lenient sentences in the appeal court, so helping to ensure that Scotland's sentencing practice truly reflects the harm that is caused by sexual offending.

Dorothy Bain is an outstanding lawyer with 40 years of unimpeachable service to the public interest in Scotland. She is responsible for bringing to justice more cases of sexual violence by men against women than any other person has done. I thank Dorothy Bain very much for her exceptional service and wish her well for the future.

When I was sworn in as First Minister at the Court of Session last month, the Lord President referenced the importance of the rule of law to the operation of our democratic society. I am going to dwell on the importance of the rule of law in making these appointments today.

The Lord Advocate and the Solicitor General play a vital role in Scotland in the upholding of the

rule of law, in the administration of justice, and as guardians of the public interest.

The appointment of the Lord Advocate and the Solicitor General is important to how we uphold the law in Scotland. My proposed appointments of the law officers are based on the substantial experience of the nominees in both criminal and civil law matters.

Since 2021, Ruth Charteris KC has served as Scotland's Solicitor General. She brings a wealth of experience, having demonstrated outstanding legal expertise and leadership throughout her career. In that capacity, she has earned widespread respect across the legal profession and beyond, making her exceptionally well qualified to serve as Scotland's Lord Advocate.

Before her appointment as Solicitor General, Ruth Charteris was standing junior counsel to the Scottish Government and a full-time advocate depute at the Crown Office. She has also chaired the fitness to practise panel of the Scottish Social Services Council.

During her time in post as Solicitor General, Ruth Charteris has successfully contributed to the conduct of major cases, including recently before the United Kingdom Supreme Court when she argued for the importance of the independence of the judiciary. Her advice as a legal adviser to me and to the Cabinet in recent years has been invaluable.

Since 2021, together with the outgoing Lord Advocate, Ruth Charteris has taken forward work on reform and putting the interests of victims and witnesses at the centre of our justice system. She has driven that work forward successfully and has demonstrated a strong personal interest in prosecuting human trafficking and modern slavery much more effectively. I have asked her to continue that work as Lord Advocate.

I am in no doubt whatsoever that Ruth Charteris has the ability and integrity to take on the role of Lord Advocate, and I am grateful to her for her commitment to public service in agreeing to take on this important task.

It is important for any Lord Advocate to have a strong Solicitor General by their side, and, having consulted Ruth Charteris, I recommend that BJ Gill KC be appointed as Solicitor General. Mr Gill is a highly experienced advocate and prosecutor, and a candidate of outstanding calibre. He is currently a full-time advocate depute, which is a role that he has held since 2021.

Mr Gill has acted in many judicial reviews and statutory appeals to the Court of Session and the United Kingdom Supreme Court, and was previously standing junior counsel to the Advocate General for Scotland and the Home Office. He is also chair of the Government's independent review of the valuation of licensed hospitality properties.

Ruth Charteris and BJ Gill share my Government's overarching aim to make a difference to the lives of the people of Scotland. I have every confidence that they will continue to reform and improve our criminal justice services. They will do so by leading prosecutors in the establishment of a new sexual offences court, bringing jury trials to a conclusion at the earliest opportunity and concluding complex death investigations as quickly as possible.

Our new law officers will provide honest and consistent legal advice to the Cabinet and ministers. That is the case now, and—as some of my predecessors have said on several occasions— it will continue to be the case even when ministers do not like that advice or do not want to hear it. It is clear that, under the current system, the law officers can, and do, carry out their roles with independence and integrity. They always have done so, and they will continue to do so. That is necessary to uphold the rule of law.

Ruth Charteris and BJ Gill will be a formidable team as Lord Advocate and Solicitor General, and they will serve Scotland well. I commend their nominations to Parliament.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that it be recommended to His Majesty that Ruth Charteris KC be appointed as the Lord Advocate and that Brian (BJ) Gill KC be appointed as Solicitor General for Scotland.

17:18

Amanda Bland (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform): The First Minister seeks Parliament's agreement to recommend to His Majesty the King the appointment of Ruth Charteris KC to the role of Lord Advocate and BJ Gill KC to the role of Solicitor General.

The Lord Advocate has a unique position as both the chief legal adviser to the Government and the head of the prosecution system, which has understandably led to ongoing speculation and concerns about potential conflicts of interest and accountability.

Some serious doubts were raised about the dual role of the Lord Advocate when it emerged that the First Minister was informed of criminal charges against Peter Murrell nearly a year before they were made public. That raises concerns. The public need to know that all criminal cases are handled impartially and without political interference. Public concerns should be addressed, and a parliamentary inquiry into the Murrell embezzlement scandal would address

them. However, I understand that the Scottish Government has ruled out splitting the Lord Advocate's dual role, and has ruled out a parliamentary inquiry into the Peter Murrell embezzlement scandal. In England, the role of attorney general and the post of director of public prosecutions are held by two different people, which seems logical and avoids any conflict of interest.

Subject to Parliament's agreeing to the motion at decision time, will the Scottish Government confirm what criteria were used when selecting a candidate for the position of Lord Advocate? Were alternative governance models considered before recommending Ruth Charteris KC for the role? Finally, Reform UK Scotland seeks to separate the Lord Advocate's responsibilities as chief adviser to the Government and head of the prosecution service, therefore we do not support the motion.

17:20

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): I put on the record my thanks, and the thanks of the Scottish Labour Party, for the work done by Dorothy Bain KC as Lord Advocate over the past five years. Dorothy Bain is a highly regarded professional who has given dedicated service to her country and her profession, and we thank her for that service.

The office of Lord Advocate is one of the most serious and sensitive roles in public life. It requires independence, judgment and a clear sense of public duty. During Dorothy Bain's tenure, there have been major challenges and changes, including several First Ministers, high-profile police investigations and a change of monarch, all of which situations have required Ms Bain's expertise.

In that time, serious political questions around the dual role of the Lord Advocate and their duties, remit and responsibilities have emerged. Those are legitimate questions on issues of conflict and compromise, but none—and I stress none—questioned the ability, character or integrity of the individual. However, those are legitimate questions for this Parliament and for the Government, and the Scottish National Party Government's refusal to properly face up to those questions has left the Parliament dealing with a role that still requires reform.

I emphasise that, in some ways, the failure to address that issue itself is unfair on the occupant of the office of Lord Advocate. Let me stress again that this debate is not about the ability or character of Ruth Charteris or anyone who has held that office before her. Ruth Charteris is someone whom I like, respect and hold in high regard, as I do her predecessor, and I have no doubt that she will do the job to the best of her ability and to the standard that the people in this country expect.

Today's choice is about deciding who is best placed to occupy an office that remains flawed but central to the rule of law in Scotland. As she has been Solicitor General since 2021, and given her an illustrious career as an advocate and a KC, it is clear that Ruth Charteris is more than qualified for the important role that she is now set to occupy. As she is a highly respected legal professional, I am sure that Ruth Charteris KC will bring her extensive and well-honed experience to the role of Lord Advocate.

Similarly, BJ Gill KC, who is one of Scotland's most senior advocates, and who has acted in cases on important legislation such as that on the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union, will bring a great amount of knowledge and insight to the role of Solicitor General.

Both Ruth Charteris KC and BJ Gill KC are highly respected and commended legal professionals, and I am sure that they will do all that they can to serve the Government and, by extension, the people of this great country.

As this new Parliament continues to find its feet following the election, few MSPs would not agree that the need for senior law officers who are committed to the highest standards of public service is clear. In only the past few years, we have seen the need for the people of Scotland to have a clear voice to challenge and engage with the machinery of the justice system, whether it be in relation to the Emma Caldwell case, the Sheku Bayoh case, the scandal at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital, the infected blood scandal, the Post Office Horizon scandal or the ongoing Scottish Covid inquiry.

Behind each of those cases are people, families and communities who have had to fight for answers, and all those issues and more demand the highest quality of legal advice at the heart of Government and a serious understanding of the duty underpinning the law that must serve the people of this country. The law must serve the public; it must not serve the convenience of institutions, the comfort of ministers or the interests of those who are already in positions of power. That is what the country expects from its new Lord Advocate and Solicitor General, and I am sure that Ruth Charteris KC and BJ Gill KC will do to their utmost to fulfil those roles.

Today, Scottish Labour supports the appointments that have been put before the Parliament, but we call again for a serious debate, a plan and a timeline for reforming the role of the Lord Advocate. That should be a serious, constructive debate that is rooted in the public interest.

I take the opportunity again to congratulate both Ruth Charteris KC and BJ Gill KC, and I look forward to engaging with them positively. I thank them for the service that they have already given to our country, which I am sure they will continue to give in the coming years.

17:25

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I am pleased to speak in support of the motion recommending the appointment of Ruth Charteris KC as Lord Advocate and BJ Gill KC as Solicitor General for Scotland.

Before I turn to the appointments before us, however, I will take a moment to recognise, as other members have, the significant contribution of Dorothy Bain KC during her time as Lord Advocate. The role carries immense responsibility, and it is often undertaken under intense public and political scrutiny. Throughout her tenure, Dorothy Bain demonstrated a deep commitment to the rule of law, to the independence of the prosecution service and to ensuring that our justice system works for those who too often find themselves excluded from it. In particular, I acknowledge her efforts to help rebalance justice in favour of the marginalised and of victims/survivors of crimes of abuse of power, such as sexual violence.

Whether in relation to victims of crime, survivors of abuse or people whose voices have historically been overlooked within legal processes, she showed a clear understanding that justice is not simply about procedure, but about fairness, dignity and—importantly—humanity. For that service, she deserves our recognition and our thanks.

I also want to recognise the work of Ruth Charteris KC as Solicitor General. Over recent years, she has built a reputation for diligence, professionalism and the deepest integrity. She has brought considerable legal expertise to the office and has played an important role in supporting the work of Scotland's law officers during a period that has been marked by significant constitutional, social and legal challenges.

The office of Lord Advocate occupies a unique position in Scotland's constitutional arrangements. It requires not only legal excellence but judgment, independence and a commitment to the public interest. Ruth Charteris brings those qualities to the role, and I wish her every success as she takes on those new responsibilities.

Likewise, I welcome BJ Gill KC as Solicitor General. He takes up office at a time when public confidence in our institutions, access to justice and the protection of fundamental rights remain of vital importance, and all of those are at risk, so I look forward to seeing the contribution that he will make in that role.

I wish both appointees well, and I hope that they will continue the work of building a justice system that is fair, compassionate, accountable and accessible to all. They have my support now and I look forward to working with them over the coming session of Parliament.

17:28

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh North Western) (LD): Before I come to the appointments before the Parliament today, I, too, on behalf of the Scottish Liberal Democrats, pay tribute to Dorothy Bain KC—the second woman to hold the post of Lord Advocate in our country. She was very generous with her time with me, and forgiving of my lack of understanding of the law at times. She also brought forward groundbreaking guidance, in particular as regards safe consumption rooms such as the Thistle centre, which I was fortunate enough to visit at the start of this year. That facility has saved nearly 100 lives since it opened, and I think that a lot of that is thanks to her visionary application of the guidance.

I welcome Ruth Charteris KC and BJ Gill KC to their appointments, and assure them of Liberal Democrats' support this afternoon. These are the highest law offices in the land—it is important that we have people of calibre and respect, and both the nominees before us have those in spades.

However, I say respectfully to the Government that it is perfectly acceptable to respect the legal competence and experience of the nominees before us but to recognise that the case for reform of these offices is now unanswerable. When Dorothy Bain was appointed five years ago, the SNP recognised at the time of the election just preceding that—when it had promised to consult on reform of these offices—that having a Lord Advocate acting both as chief prosecutor and as principal legal adviser to the Government, as a full and active member of the Cabinet, presented many risks.

Those are very different skill sets, and I think that the intervening period has only reinforced and underscored the case for reform. As we have heard, England has an Attorney General to advise the Government, but a separate Director of Public Prosecutions. Similar reform has been emulated in the Republic of Ireland and, recently, in Northern Ireland.

However, I recognise that we need law officers, and we will support the appointment of the nominees before us today. There are big challenges before them both in relation to drug policy enforcement and fixing our broken fatal accident inquiry system. I congratulate them on ascending to these offices today, and we will support the motion before us.

17:30

The First Minister: I thank colleagues for their contributions to the debate. On the specific point that Amanda Bland raised about the conduct of criminal cases, I confirm on the record, as has been confirmed on many occasions in the past, that wherever there is a legal issue in connection with a politician, the law officers are not involved in the scrutiny of that case. That is done independently by representatives of the Crown and it never involves the Lord Advocate or the Solicitor General.

I thank colleagues for the comments that have been made in relation to the service of Dorothy Bain as Lord Advocate. Dorothy Bain has much to be proud of in exercising the role and responsibilities of Lord Advocate, and I welcome the comments that have been made.

I am also grateful for the support that has been expressed for the nominations that I bring to the Parliament. Mr Sarwar made an important contribution when he indicated his confidence in the professional approach and capabilities of the two nominees who I have brought forward for appointment, and I am grateful to him for his comments.

Mr Sarwar and Mr Cole-Hamilton made the point that, while supporting the nominations and recognising the calibre of the individuals whose nominations to serve in these roles I have brought forward, it is also entirely legitimate to consider the nature of the roles and whether there is the potential for reform. I accept that point, and it is important that the Parliament conducts discussions substantially on those questions, because there are big issues involved.

The Government has started work on the issue and, shortly before the election, we published the report that was prepared by the former Scottish Law Commission chief executive, Malcolm McMillan, on the role of the Lord Advocate, which was designed to inform and structure debate on these questions. I am happy to confirm to the Parliament that the Government is willing to engage with parties across the chamber in considering the case for reform, and to ensure that we do that in an open and considered fashion, to ensure that all the relevant issues—there are significant issues involved—are properly aired before the Parliament considers any further change. I should point out, of course, that in order to take forward any reform, we would require Westminster legislation, but that is for some time down the road.

I appreciate Maggie Chapman's comments. She talked about the importance of the law officers being at the heart of ensuring that our justice system is accountable and accessible. That is the approach that drives the law officers who are being nominated. Obviously, the law officers operate within a legal system in which the independence of the judiciary is sacrosanct, and the roles of Parliament and the Government are clear in those relationships. Fundamentally, ensuring that there is open access to the justice system and that the justice system meets the needs of the public is central to the role that will be taken forward by the law officers.

I am grateful to the Parliament for its consideration of the nominations for appointment today and for the recognition that, in Ruth Charteris and BJ Gill, I have brought forward for nomination as Lord Advocate and Solicitor General two outstanding representatives of our legal profession, who I know will continue to build on the formidable records that they have amassed in protecting the public interest of Scotland. They will do so in new and significant roles as the Lord Advocate and the Solicitor General. I look forward to receiving parliamentary support for their appointments.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. That concludes the debate on the appointment of law officers.

The question is, that motion S7M-00380, in the name of John Swinney, on the appointment of law officers, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

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

17:34

Meeting suspended.

17:38

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We come to the vote on motion S7M-00380, in the name of John Swinney, on the appointment of law officers. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I was unable to connect; I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Your vote has been recorded.

The Minister for Public Finance (Hannah Mary Goodlad): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted yes as well, but I was not able to.

The Presiding Officer: Your vote has been recorded.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Ahmed, Irshad (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley) (SNP)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Baxter, Andrew (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)
Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)
Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Campbell, Kate (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP)
Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Chou Turvey, Yi-pei (North East Scotland) (LD)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh North Western) (LD)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Day, Martyn (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP)
Dijkstra-Downie, Sanne (Edinburgh Northern) (LD)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)
Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Dunlop, Duncan (South Scotland) (LD)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Flynn, Stephen (Aberdeen Deeside and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)
Gethins, Stephen (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)
Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Goodlad, Hannah Mary (Shetland Islands) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)
Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Harley, Adam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hoy, Craig (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)
Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)
Long, Joe (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)
MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)
Manivannan, Q (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)
Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)
Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)
Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
Rennie, Willie (Fife North East) (LD)
Roddick, Emma (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)
Smith, Alyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Young, Jenny (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)

Against

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

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S7M-00380, in the name of John Swinney, on the appointment of law officers, is: For 102, Against 16, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that it be recommended to His Majesty that Ruth Charteris KC be appointed as the Lord Advocate and that Brian (BJ) Gill KC be appointed as Solicitor General for Scotland.

Business Motion

17:40

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S7M-00377, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 23 June 2026	
2.00 pm	Time for Reflection
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by	General Questions
followed by	First Minister's Questions (Backbench Members)
followed by	Ministerial Statement: Non-Domestic Rates Reform
followed by	Scottish Government Debate: Meeting the Challenge of Climate Change
followed by	Committee Announcements
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.30 pm	Decision Time
followed by	Members' Business
Wednesday 24 June 2026	
2.00 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.00 pm	Portfolio Questions: Climate Action and Rural Affairs; Education, Culture and Gaelic
followed by	Reform UK Business
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.30 pm	Decision Time
followed by	Members' Business
Thursday 25 June 2026	
1.30 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
1.30 pm	General Questions
2.00 pm	First Minister's Questions (Party Leaders)
followed by	Scottish Government Debate: Achieving a Sustainable Prison Population
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time
followed by	Members' Business

Tuesday 1 September 2026	
2.00 pm	Time for Reflection
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by	General Questions
followed by	First Minister's Questions (Backbench Members)
followed by	Scottish Government Business
followed by	Committee Announcements
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.30 pm	Decision Time
followed by	Members' Business
Wednesday 2 September 2026	
2.00 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.00 pm	Portfolio Questions: Social Justice and Housing; Economy, Tourism and Transport
followed by	Scottish Government Business
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.30 pm	Decision Time
followed by	Members' Business
Thursday 3 September 2026	
1.30 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
1.30 pm	General Questions
2.00 pm	First Minister's Questions (Party Leaders)
followed by	Scottish Government Business
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time
followed by	Members' Business

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 22 June 2026, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:40

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is consideration of two Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motion S7M-00378, on suspension and variation of standing orders, and motion S7M-00379, on designation of lead committee.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) under Rule 17.2.1(b) to suspend and vary Standing Orders as follows for the purpose of Decision Time (or any other item of business which involves decisions being taken other than at Decision Time)—

for Rule 11.5.1 substitute:

"1. Subject to paragraph 1A, only members have a right to vote at a meeting of the Parliament. A member is not obliged to vote.

1A. A member who is participating in the meeting remotely (on a platform provided by the Parliamentary corporation) from outside the United Kingdom has the right to vote only if the member has, prior to the beginning of the meeting, obtained the permission of the Presiding Officer to do so."

(b) that the suspension and variation set out in paragraph (a) shall have effect from 22 June 2026 and remain in effect until 31 January 2027 or such earlier date as the Parliament may decide, on a motion by the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that the Economy, Tourism and Energy Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the legislative consent memorandum on the Sporting Events Bill.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

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

The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S7M-00397, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on suspension of standing orders. I ask Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that, for the purposes of consideration of the legislative consent memorandum on the Steel Industry (Nationalisation) Bill, Rule 9B.3.5 of Standing Orders is suspended.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

17:41

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): First, I acknowledge that the Scottish Government requested that the United Kingdom legislation be amended to require consent for the exercise of powers in relation to

steel undertakings in Scotland, where those powers are exercised for a devolved purpose. That request was not accepted, and the Scottish Government has said that it cannot recommend legislative consent for the bill.

Suspending standing order rule 9B.3.5 would disapply the usual requirement for a lead committee to be designated to consider any legislative consent memorandum and report to Parliament. Therefore, Parliament is being asked to decide a legislative consent motion without that committee stage. In this case, that role would ordinarily fall to the Economy, Tourism and Energy Committee, on which I sit and which will convene next Tuesday.

Although we understand that the bill is being fast-tracked at Westminster for obvious reasons—the need to safeguard the steel industry—we are being asked to take a view without the fuller scrutiny that committee consideration would provide.

The Scottish Conservatives disagree with the decision to proceed without committee consideration and instead ask Parliament to make a determination on the LCM directly. No equivalent scrutiny process has been offered. A chamber debate is much less robust—that form of scrutiny is not as good as committee consideration here. Clearly, the best route to that scrutiny is through the lead committee, the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee, which sits next week, as I said.

I understand that the timetable is tight, but time can be found for more focused evidence taking. Committee consideration of such an important sector would allow people to give evidence and members to ask focused questions and to gather and analyse evidence. That would be much more robust than the suggested alternative that is before us today.

Urgency without care dilutes the scrutiny, especially in areas that cut across devolved and reserved matters. It is with good faith that we raise those concerns—it is based on public interest.

17:44

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Jamie Hepburn): I recognise that it is regrettable that I must stand before Parliament today and ask that it suspend standing orders to allow the first motion on legislative consent in this parliamentary session to come straight to the chamber.

By way of background, the UK Government introduced the Steel Industry (Nationalisation) Bill on 14 May 2026. It had been announced in the King's speech the previous day. There was no substantive engagement from the UK Government on the bill prior to its introduction—the Secretary of State for Business and Trade wrote to the First Minister only on 13 May, setting out the intent to introduce the bill the following day.

The timing of the bill's introduction—it was after the Scottish Parliament elections and during the period of Government formation—was always going to be challenging, but that has been compounded by the lack of prior engagement from the UK Government, despite its intent to expedite the passage of the Steel Industry (Nationalisation) Bill through the UK Parliament.

There will be no opportunity for the Scottish Parliament to consider whether to grant legislative consent to the bill after our summer recess—it is important to press that point. On the UK Government and UK Parliament timescale, we will not have the opportunity to consider whether to grant consent after our summer recess.

Rachael Hamilton: We are a powerful Parliament. The Parliamentary Bureau should consider that the committee can request to sit on another day. We have a full week left next week. The committee could request that witnesses give evidence on a day when it does not normally sit—that is entirely possible.

Jamie Hepburn: I was going to come on to that. I recognise that point, and it was considered, given Ms Hamilton's concerns. There was engagement with the Economy, Tourism and Energy Committee, and the convener of that committee indicated that he was content for the committee not to consider the LCM in this case. With the greatest will in the world and the greatest respect, the Government can do only so much—indeed, the Parliamentary Bureau collectively can do only so much. The Government engaged with the committee to offer it that opportunity, recognising that it would not be an ideal timescale or ideal circumstances, but the committee said that it did not want to do that.

The member will appreciate that the Government cannot compel a committee to undertake scrutiny that it does not want to undertake, and I do not think that Parliament would want the Government to do that. That is why the Parliamentary Bureau has agreed to seek to expedite the vote on the motion on legislative consent to ensure that Parliament can take its collective view next week.

Rachael Hamilton: The minister will know that the committee has not yet met and that the committee members were not aware that the convener had rejected the possibility that we could bring in witnesses next week.

Jamie Hepburn: I believe that that was communicated to all business managers—that is my understanding—and it was certainly communicated to me. With the best will in the world, I can do only so much to try to facilitate committee consideration. At every opportunity that I have, I will seek to do so. However, the fundamental fact is that the timescale for the consideration of this UK bill is not in the hands of the Scottish Parliament.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): The only consideration operationally in Scotland in relation to the bill would be the Dalzell steelworks in Motherwell, which is a critical industrial facility. Does the minister have an indication of whether the bill will have a direct impact on the operation of and efforts to restart the steelworks in Motherwell or of what the implications might be of the Parliament meeting extraordinarily to ensure that the facility is not affected?

Jamie Hepburn: With the best will in the world, I say to Mr Sweeney that that sounds very much like a matter for the substantive debate on the LCM next week, when Parliament decides to grant or withhold consent. The Scottish Government has taken a position and is presenting that to Parliament, and it will be incumbent on Parliament to consider that position. My fundamental point—this is inescapable—is that, if we do not agree to the variation in standing orders today, Parliament will not have that opportunity.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh North Western) (LD): The minister will forgive me, because Liberal Democrats are not represented on the Economy, Tourism and Energy Committee, so we are unclear as to the process that has been followed on this occasion. Is he clear that, when he asked the convener of the committee, the convener had sought representations from each member and each party represented on that committee?

Jamie Hepburn: Again, I say with respect that it is not the Government's place to handhold a committee and talk through the entire process of how it might want to consider such matters. There is a limit to how far I can undertake that exercise. The point is that the Government has engaged with the committee, we have had the feedback from the convener, and I have now lodged the motion to vary standing orders.

The Parliament should go into this with its eyes wide open and be aware that, if we do not agree to the motion, the Parliament will not have the opportunity to determine whether to grant or withhold consent. With the best will in the world, we all have to recognise, based on experience, that, if we do not take that opportunity, the UK Government will not halt its processes and will not withdraw its bill—it will go ahead whether or not we have had the chance to determine that. That is not in the spirit of the devolution settlement, so I ask Parliament to back the motion.

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

Decision Time

17:49

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): There are seven questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that amendment S7M-00367.1, in the name of Graham Simpson, which seeks to amend motion S7M-00367, in the name of Stephen Flynn, on affordable bus fares, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Bannerman, Max (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Baxter, Andrew (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD)
Beresford, Senga (South Scotland) (Reform)
Bland, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh North Western) (LD)
Currie, Victor (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Dijkstra-Downie, Sanne (Edinburgh Northern) (LD)
Dunlop, Duncan (South Scotland) (LD)
Harley, Adam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD)
Kerr, Thomas (Glasgow) (Reform)
Kirkwood, David (South Scotland) (Reform)
Langan, Jamie (South Scotland) (Reform)
Lindsay, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)
MacDougall, Julie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McDade, Helen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
Rennie, Willie (Fife North East) (LD)
Ross, Angela (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform)
Schmulian, Kim (Glasgow) (Reform)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Simpson, Mark (North East Scotland) (Reform)
Smith, David (West Scotland) (Reform)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley) (SNP)
Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)
Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)
Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)
Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Campbell, Kate (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP)
Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Day, Martyn (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)
Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Flynn, Stephen (Aberdeen Deeside and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)
Gethins, Stephen (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)
Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Goodlad, Hannah Mary (Shetland Islands) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hoy, Craig (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)
Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)
Manivannan, Q (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)
Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)
Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)
Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
Roddick, Emma (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)
Smith, Alyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

Abstentions

Ahmed, Irshad (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Long, Joe (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Young, Jenny (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S7M-00367.1, in the name of Graham Simpson, is: For 23, Against 78, Abstentions 15.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S7M-00367.3, in the name of Daniel Johnson, which seeks to amend motion S7M-00367, in the name of Stephen Flynn, on affordable bus fares, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Kate Nevens (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My technology did not work. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Your vote has been recorded.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Ahmed, Irshad (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley) (SNP)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)
Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Campbell, Kate (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP)
Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Day, Martyn (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)
Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
Flynn, Stephen (Aberdeen Deeside and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Gethins, Stephen (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)
Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Goodlad, Hannah Mary (Shetland Islands) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)
Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)
Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)
Long, Joe (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)
MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)
Manivannan, Q (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)
Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)
Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)
Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
Roddick, Emma (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)
Smith, Alyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Young, Jenny (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)

Against

Bannerman, Max (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Beresford, Senga (South Scotland) (Reform)
Bland, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Currie, Victor (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Hoy, Craig (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Kerr, Thomas (Glasgow) (Reform)
Kirkwood, David (South Scotland) (Reform)
Langan, Jamie (South Scotland) (Reform)
Lindsay, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
MacDougall, Julie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
Massey, Duncan (North East Scotland) (Reform)
McDade, Helen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
Ross, Angela (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform)
Schmulian, Kim (Glasgow) (Reform)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Simpson, Mark (North East Scotland) (Reform)
Smith, David (West Scotland) (Reform)

Abstentions

Baxter, Andrew (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD)
Chou Turvey, Yi-pei (North East Scotland) (LD)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh North Western) (LD)
Dijkstra-Downie, Sanne (Edinburgh Northern) (LD)
Dunlop, Duncan (South Scotland) (LD)
Harley, Adam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD)
MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
Rennie, Willie (Fife North East) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S7M-00367.3, in the name of Daniel Johnson, is: For 84, Against 26, Abstentions 9.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S7M-00367.4, in the name of Craig Hoy, which seeks to amend motion S7M-00367, in the name of Stephen Flynn, on affordable bus fares, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Rural Affairs (Gillian Martin): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I could not connect. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Your vote has been recorded.

For

Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Hoy, Craig (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Ahmed, Irshad (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley) (SNP)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Bannerman, Max (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Baxter, Andrew (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)
Beresford, Senga (South Scotland) (Reform)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Bland, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)
Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Campbell, Kate (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP)
Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Chou Turvey, Yi-pei (North East Scotland) (LD)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh North Western) (LD)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Currie, Victor (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Day, Martyn (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP)
Dijkstra-Downie, Sanne (Edinburgh Northern) (LD)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)
Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Dunlop, Duncan (South Scotland) (LD)
Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
Flynn, Stephen (Aberdeen Deeside and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Gethins, Stephen (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)
Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Goodlad, Hannah Mary (Shetland Islands) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)
Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Harley, Adam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)

Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Kerr, Thomas (Glasgow) (Reform)
Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Kirkwood, David (South Scotland) (Reform)
Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)
Langan, Jamie (South Scotland) (Reform)
Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)
Lindsay, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Long, Joe (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)
MacDougall, Julie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)
MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
Massey, Duncan (North East Scotland) (Reform)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McDade, Helen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)
Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)
Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)
Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
Rennie, Willie (Fife North East) (LD)
Roddick, Emma (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
Ross, Angela (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Schmulian, Kim (Glasgow) (Reform)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Simpson, Mark (North East Scotland) (Reform)
Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)
Smith, Alyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Smith, David (West Scotland) (Reform)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Young, Jenny (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S7M-00367.4, in the name of Craig Hoy, is: For 10, Against 107, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S7M-00367, in the name of Stephen Flynn, on affordable bus fares, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Katherine Sangster (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I could not connect to the digital voting platform. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Your vote will be recorded.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Ahmed, Irshad (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley) (SNP)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Baxter, Andrew (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)
Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Campbell, Kate (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP)
Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Chou Turvey, Yi-pei (North East Scotland) (LD)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh North Western) (LD)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Day, Martyn (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP)
Dijkstra-Downie, Sanne (Edinburgh Northern) (LD)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)
Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Dunlop, Duncan (South Scotland) (LD)
Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
Flynn, Stephen (Aberdeen Deeside and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Gethins, Stephen (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)
Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Goodlad, Hannah Mary (Shetland Islands) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)
Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Harley, Adam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)

Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)
Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)
Long, Joe (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)
MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)
Manivannan, Q (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)
Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)
Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)
Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
Rennie, Willie (Fife North East) (LD)
Roddick, Emma (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)
Smith, Alyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Young, Jenny (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)

Against

Bannerman, Max (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Beresford, Senga (South Scotland) (Reform)
Bland, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Currie, Victor (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Hoy, Craig (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Kerr, Thomas (Glasgow) (Reform)
Kirkwood, David (South Scotland) (Reform)
Langan, Jamie (South Scotland) (Reform)
Lindsay, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
MacDougall, Julie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
Massey, Duncan (North East Scotland) (Reform)
McDade, Helen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
Ross, Angela (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform)
Schmulian, Kim (Glasgow) (Reform)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Simpson, Mark (North East Scotland) (Reform)
Smith, David (West Scotland) (Reform)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S7M-00367, in the name of Stephen Flynn, on affordable bus fares, as amended, is: For 93, Against 26, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises the importance of affordable bus services connecting people to employment, education and essential services; welcomes the success of the free bus schemes available to 2.4 million people, including all those aged under 22, over 60 and disabled people; believes that more can be done to make it easier and cheaper for everyone to get around and supports, therefore, the phased rollout of a £2 bus fare cap, building on its introduction in the Highlands and Islands; endorses the introduction of the £2 cap in Glasgow, Ayrshire, Dunbartonshire, Renfrewshire, Lanarkshire and Inverclyde as quickly as is practicable as part of the next phase of a national rollout; welcomes the opportunity to develop Better Buses legislation in the current parliamentary session to support the delivery of affordable fares nationally and foster new routes, not least in rural areas, and calls on the Scottish Government to take active steps to make bus franchising a reality, by providing the funding and support necessary for Regional Transport Partnerships to fully and more rapidly exercise the powers set out in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019, and to advance public control of farebox revenue so that Scotland's passengers, not private operators, benefit from a restored public bus network.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S7M-00378, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on the suspension and variation of standing orders, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) under Rule 17.2.1(b) to suspend and vary Standing Orders as follows for the purpose of Decision Time (or any other item of business which involves decisions being taken other than at Decision Time)—

for Rule 11.5.1 substitute:

"1. Subject to paragraph 1A, only members have a right to vote at a meeting of the Parliament. A member is not obliged to vote.

1A. A member who is participating in the meeting remotely (on a platform provided by the Parliamentary corporation) from outside the United Kingdom has the right to vote only if the member has, prior to the beginning of the meeting, obtained the permission of the Presiding Officer to do so."

(b) that the suspension and variation set out in paragraph (a) shall have effect from 22 June 2026 and remain in effect until 31 January 2027 or such earlier date as the Parliament may decide, on a motion by the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S7M-00379, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on the designation of a lead committee, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Economy, Tourism and Energy Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the legislative consent memorandum on the Sporting Events Bill.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S7M-00397, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on the suspension of standing orders, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Ahmed, Irshad (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley) (SNP)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Bannerman, Max (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Baxter, Andrew (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)
Beresford, Senga (South Scotland) (Reform)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Bland, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)
Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Campbell, Kate (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP)
Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Chou Turvey, Yi-pei (North East Scotland) (LD)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh North Western) (LD)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Currie, Victor (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Day, Martyn (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP)
Dijkstra-Downie, Sanne (Edinburgh Northern) (LD)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)
Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Dunlop, Duncan (South Scotland) (LD)
Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
Flynn, Stephen (Aberdeen Deeside and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Gethins, Stephen (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)
Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Goodlad, Hannah Mary (Shetland Islands) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)
Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Harley, Adam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Kerr, Thomas (Glasgow) (Reform)
Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Kirkwood, David (South Scotland) (Reform)
Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)
Langan, Jamie (South Scotland) (Reform)
Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)
Lindsay, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Long, Joe (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)
MacDougall, Julie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)
MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)
Manivannan, Q (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
Massey, Duncan (North East Scotland) (Reform)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)
Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)
Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)
Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
Rennie, Willie (Fife North East) (LD)
Roddick, Emma (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
Ross, Angela (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Schmulian, Kim (Glasgow) (Reform)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Simpson, Mark (North East Scotland) (Reform)
Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)
Smith, Alyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Smith, David (West Scotland) (Reform)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)

Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Young, Jenny (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)

Against

Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Hoy, Craig (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S7M-00397, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on the suspension of standing orders, is: For 108, Against 10, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that, for the purposes of consideration of the legislative consent memorandum on the Steel Industry (Nationalisation) Bill, Rule 9B.3.5 of Standing Orders is suspended.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time. I would just like to say that, in about one and a half minutes, a reception, which I am to chair, for the consular corps, who have been invited to the Parliament, will begin. If we had not changed our standing orders, we would have had to wait for about an hour outside while the members' business debate took place, so I am glad that the Parliament agreed to that change.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and Autism (Diagnosis)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S7M-00314, in the name of Helen McDade, on the cost of undiagnosed attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism in outcomes and life chances. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I call Helen McDade to open the debate.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises the increasing demand for ADHD and autism assessments among both children and adults across Scotland, including in Mid Scotland and Fife; acknowledges that over 50% of individuals with ADHD are also autistic; notes that previous diagnostic criteria prevented dual diagnoses, contributing to the historic and systemic under-diagnosis of adults; further notes that the most up-to-date Scottish ADHD prescription data shows that only 0.17% of adults are currently receiving treatment compared with the diagnosed expectancy of 4%; highlights that neurodivergent people comprise 25% of the Scottish prison population and up to 20% of mental health inpatients, and notes the view that early identification, assessment and support can lead to better life outcomes.

18:00

Helen McDade (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): Apologies—it is getting late in the day for everybody. I thank all those who have stayed for this very important debate.

The motion gives some frightening statistics about the prevalence of autistic spectrum disorders and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. In some ways, it is a pity that we are having the debate so late this evening, as there may not be as many people here with a special interest in the subject, and what we are talking about is really important. It is now estimated that one in 31 children in the US will have autistic spectrum disorders. I will come back to that, as it is something that can be argued about.

The motion highlights the importance of early diagnosis of both autistic spectrum disorders and ADHD to allow much-needed advice and help to be given to those who are affected, and to their families, in order to improve life chances. The comorbidity of both conditions is rightly highlighted, but it is important medically that the conditions are also considered separately. I was a veterinary surgeon, and so I like accurate diagnosis as an important way to ensure that the correct treatment, where possible, and targeted assistance can be given.

I will consider ADHD first. People with ADHD can be offered medical treatment where appropriate, although if it can be addressed without treatment, with coping mechanisms, that is

preferable. Either way, early diagnosis is important.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh North Western) (LD): I am grateful to Helen McDade for taking my intervention—I offer my apologies for having to leave early, but I am very grateful that she has brought the debate to the chamber.

Does she recognise that, in particular health board areas such as NHS Lothian, young people are being asked to wait for as long as eight years for a diagnosis? I have a constituent called Abigail who is 16 years old; she has been told to wait eight years for diagnosis, by which time she will have left child and adolescent mental health services and transited into adult services. She worries—quite rightly—that she may be at the back of the queue for an adult services diagnosis. Does the member recognise that that is a particular problem in Scotland right now?

Helen McDade: I thank Alex Cole-Hamilton for that intervention, and I absolutely recognise that that story is, unfortunately, common everywhere. We probably all have similar stories of meeting people in that age bracket who are going to transition to adult services without ever getting a diagnosis, having been told years ago that they would get one. I will come back in a minute to discuss what might help with that, but the situation absolutely cannot go on like that.

The CAMHS situation demonstrates that we are in crisis. The low percentage of affected adults who have a diagnosis is worrying; some of those adults will have been the young people who have waited for a diagnosis and then transitioned—that might not be the right word; rather, they disappeared and then came back for help as adults.

I have spoken to an adult I am close to, who recently had a private diagnosis of attention deficit disorder, which she has found very helpful in understanding various difficulties that she has experienced and in enabling her to be directed to ways of managing situations. I am sure that there are others who are taking that route if it is possible and where they can afford it. The diagnosis has made a significant difference to her life, and we need to look at that aspect.

Yesterday, I spoke to the Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland, which has published a report entitled “Multi-system solutions for meeting the needs of autistic people and people with ADHD in Scotland”. The RCP recommends a layered approach with a pyramid of care whereby the least affected would perhaps be able to self-diagnose and then be pointed to resources and ways to self-manage.

There are a lot of issues to be discussed around that, but we need to do something. Is the RCP report the equivalent, perhaps, of sticking a finger in a hole in the dam? It is necessary crisis management, but the report itself recognises that it is a way of trying to ensure that the psychiatrists who are dealing with the most severe cases do not have a long list of others to see. However, where are those others? They still need help. This epidemic, which causes untold misery, needs to be not only acknowledged but investigated.

I will take a slight diversion here. I have been told by my family that, as a vet with experience in the environment, I sometimes go off on the wrong analogy. This time, I will try an environmental one.

There is a concept in ecology called the shifting baseline syndrome. It is a gradual generational amnesia whereby each new generation sees a progressively degraded environment, which they accept as normal. I suggest that it could be applied medically in this context. Is there really not a change, and a drastic increase, in the numbers of children who are affected in this way? Here, I differentiate myself from the psychiatrists, who have said that the unprecedented rise is due to increased public awareness, unmet historical need, population growth, evolving diagnostic criteria and the impact of Covid-19. I am sure that those things all have a part to play. However, I would ask people to consider that, if something is happening that is causing a massive increase—not a pretend thing or something that has not been diagnosed before—that means that there is a tragedy happening, and we have a duty to look at that.

Others, like the psychiatrists, can give an alternative view. They might suggest that autism has always been here and that the increase is down to better diagnosis and relabelling. They might say that such children were in special schools or that their father is an engineer. However, if there is the slightest chance that that is not what is happening, we have a duty to look at it.

Putting to one side those who are less affected by autism and those with ADHD, the evidence in our communities and the burden of care that we see might suggest that something is very different from the child population of 50 years ago. Some of us might say, “Well, I spoke to teachers and asked what happened in the past.” I come from a town up north—Thurso—which is 100 miles from the nearest big place that those children might have been taken, for instance. I think that those of us who have been around for long enough can say that there is something different going on here. It is therefore essential that, as well as looking at the crisis here and now in social care, as the Royal

College of Psychiatrists has usefully suggested, we take a more strategic view.

An increasing number of professionals, as well as families, are clamouring for an investigation into possible contributing factors. Risks that might be considered include genetic traits, which are then affected by environmental, pollution, iatrogenic and nutritional factors and factors in pregnancy and in the first years of life. It is not possible to have an epidemic of a genetic condition. That is simply the case—we cannot have an epidemic of something that is purely genetic, and we have an epidemic, whatever its causes, so research should be an absolute priority. We have a crisis in care, but we must say what we are going to do to look at this. We need to dam the flow and not just stick our finger in the dyke.

I thank everyone for taking part in the debate and I ask the Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs to seriously consider what kind of research should be undertaken on this subject.

18:08

Dawn Black (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): I thank Helen McDade for bringing this members' business debate to the chamber. It is such an important subject, and I applaud her for putting it forward, considering the negative and derogatory views of neurodiversity that have been expressed by some of those higher up in her party.

The true cost of undiagnosed ADHD and autism in Scotland is not merely a line on a national health service budget sheet; it is a compounding mental health and economic crisis. The cost of failing our neurodivergent community is not only a personal tragedy for the individuals and families who are affected, but a monumental failure of our societal infrastructure and a drain on our economy.

That is not helped by local health and social care partnerships, including the Aberdeenshire health and social care partnership in my constituency, completely stopping adult diagnosis pathways to make budget savings. Children, adults and working professionals are having to wait months and, in some cases, years just to understand how their brains work.

What happens when people are left without a diagnosis? Navigating a world that is built for neurotypical people without proper tools and coping mechanisms causes deep psychological strain, frequently leading to mental breakdowns and, in some cases, thoughts of suicide. Without early intervention, neurodivergent individuals are frequently misdiagnosed with general mental health issues and end up receiving treatments that fail to address their core needs. It should not be necessary to have an existing mental health diagnosis to even be able to access the pathway for an ADHD or autism diagnosis—that is fuelling the unmanageable waiting lists.

With diagnosis, coping mechanisms and strategies can be put in place and catered for, including sound-cancelling headphones to prevent overwhelm or stimming devices to occupy hands. The recent review by the Royal College of Psychiatrists, which has already been referred to, warns that, without dedicated neurodevelopmental diagnostic pathways that cover ADHD and autism together, individuals will be pushed into overstretched mental health and justice systems, showing up only when they have already reached a crisis state.

I know that all too well, because two of my adult children have experienced it. During their 20s, they both found themselves in crisis and it was only at the suggestion of their respective counsellors that they realised that autism might be the root cause of their issues with coping in their environments. For one of them, it explained so much about the struggles that they had during high school and it even explained their challenging behaviour as a toddler and young child.

Girls are frequently misdiagnosed due to their presenting differently from boys, which is because they are so good at masking, and they are typically diagnosed much later and into their 20s—I could go off on a tangent about how that is discriminatory towards women.

The cost to the mental health of those individuals and their families should not be underestimated. They need support through the whole process of diagnosis, from realising that there might be something to investigate to the waiting time for the investigation and the post-diagnosis period. Support is needed even if the threshold for diagnosis is not met, because there was clearly something that made the person take that route of investigation in the first place.

I have heard from people whose children are diagnosed that they recognise traits in themselves and then seek diagnosis as an older adult. When they get that diagnosis, they discover that there is little support out there for older adults, because most support services concentrate on family support for children, which leaves older adults floundering.

We are locking away immense talent, creativity and potential as undiagnosed and post-diagnosis neurodivergent people are left without the support that they need, leading to lost productivity and preventable unemployment. We are choosing a reactive, crisis-driven system instead of investing in a proactive and preventative support-based system. That status quo is counterproductive and cruel.

We must standardise multifaceted diagnostic support pathways across all NHS health boards and health and social care partnerships so that a person's geography does not dictate their access to the care that they need. We must also elevate neurodivergence out of the shadows, because it is not an illness to be cured but a spectrum of human difference that requires targeted and timely support. When interventions are timely, we create stronger families, calmer classrooms and a more productive society.

It is time for Scotland to commit to a comprehensive whole-system approach, and it is time to invest in our neurodivergent citizens, unlocking their potential and saving their lives.

18:14

Joe Long (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I refer to my entry in the register of members' interests, which shows that, until 8 May, I was employed at Scottish Autism.

I welcome the opportunity to debate this topic and I am grateful to Helen McDade for bringing the motion to the chamber. The motion notes that, historically, autism and ADHD were mutually exclusive diagnoses, whereas we now understand that a great many neurodivergent people are likely to have traits that relate to both neurotypes and profiles. That is sometimes known in the neurodivergent community as auDHD.

There is a growing consensus among the community, academics, clinicians and support professionals that neurodevelopmental assessments should be holistic and combine consideration of different traits and neurotypes rather than simply giving a binary answer to the question of whether someone fits a particular profile such as autism, which means that the person must start the process of referral and assessment once again for a different profile, such as ADHD, if different needs or traits become evident.

It is important to state that holistic pathways should result not just in achievement or refusal of diagnosis but in an assessment or profile of need that can then be used in relation to meaningful accommodations and support, whether those are in education, social care settings or employment, or in accessing other services and activities. Such a profile can be a useful tool in parental or self-advocacy to have those needs met.

A true pathway should be one of assessment, diagnosis and support for neurodivergent people. That last step is really important. It could include peer support, parental education programmes and support provided by the third sector in the community, as last year's report by the Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland recognises.

None of that is breaking news, and it is worth considering where we are with regard to neurodevelopmental pathways and access to them in Scotland. During the final years of the Scottish autism strategy, which ended in 2021, combined neurodevelopmental pathways were explored by the national autism implementation team that is based at Queen Margaret University. The approach has been adopted in parts of Scotland, including Fife, the region that I represent, but is by no means available across the board. Adult autism diagnosis pathways were withdrawn by NHS Forth Valley at the start of last year, for example. That inconsistency of assessment across Scotland remains an issue, as last year's report by the Scottish Parliament information centre found.

At the end of the autism strategy, stakeholders were assured that assessment and diagnosis were a priority in the post-Covid recovery and transformation planning. As such, they were not included in consultations on the proposed learning disabilities, autism and neurodivergence bill. However, we have some way to go in delivering that consistent support.

We have seen the successful pilot of a neuroaffirmative diagnosis service delivered by the third sector in Edinburgh—the number 6 service that is run by Autism Initiatives, which was evaluated highly by those who accessed it—but I understand that that pilot has now ended. Last year, while I was working at Scottish Autism, I was co-author of a report on experiences of autism assessment and diagnosis, along with colleagues from autistic-led disabled persons organisations: Autistic Mutual Aid Society Edinburgh, Scottish Ethnic Minority Autistics and Autism Rights Group Highland. The research laid bare the frustrations and feelings of abandonment felt by people who are left waiting for months and years on end, often with little communication about the process of assessment and who they might see or when, and who frequently find little in the way of support after diagnosis. That is exactly the story that we heard Dawn Black recounting. However, it was also recorded that, for some, diagnosis was life changing and was about more than just meeting clinical need, as it brought clarity, self-understanding, identity and a community of peers.

When we talk, as the motion does, about the cost of undiagnosed autism and ADHD, our main focus must be the human cost of failure. We should be clear that, when we talk about the prevalence of neurodivergent people in the criminal justice system or in mental health services, we are not talking about a temperamental predisposition but about the consequences of unmet need.

I therefore welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to take forward the recommendations of the Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland on combined neurodevelopmental pathways for assessment, diagnosis and support across Scotland. However, let us be clear that those who require support cannot and should not wait any longer.

18:18

Emma Roddick (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): I congratulate and thank Helen McDade for securing this important debate. I am glad to see that there are cross-party contributions this evening.

I am also glad that we are getting a better understanding of how widespread neurodivergence is, that we are seeing parents get help after realising that their child's neurodivergence is not a first for the family, and that children in schools are getting support that can help them to thrive in education rather than just scrape by, with folk assuming that they are difficult or stupid. I am glad, too, that people who were previously stigmatised are learning that their brain simply works differently and that, with a bit of help, they do not need to struggle.

When someone feels like they do not fit in and they do not know why, they can start to resent the world and their peers, who think that the person is difficult and unfriendly instead of just quiet and busy thinking about 12 things at once. They can also resent the rules and expectations that nobody will write down for them but that people will quickly use as an opportunity to humiliate them if they get them wrong. I am not surprised that many neurodivergent people are in prison, that many develop unnecessary mental health or behavioural issues or that many withdraw from those social spaces that were quietly excluding them anyway.

Knowing all that I know about the high rate of comorbidity of ADHD and hypermobility, it did not come as a surprise when I was told in January this year that my mental health diagnosis, which came with a great deal of difficulty, stigma and, as it turns out, the wrong treatment over years and years, was misdiagnosed neurodivergence.

I have ADHD and I am likely autistic. I am lucky that, because, over the years, I have become very aware of what works for me, that has not changed my view of myself or how I manage my symptoms. My brain just works differently and that lets me get through volumes of correspondence, long briefings and arguments quickly. However, I now know that I should have been taking advice from those who understand ADHD, not from those who were looking at me through the lens of a condition that I do not have. I can now access the right people and I can read about my condition, not a label. What I cannot do is get help from the NHS. I have been advised to go private, which is something I hate seeing in a letter that is headed "NHS".

NHS Highland is taking only adult ADHD referrals that meet level 3 criteria, which I and many people in my caseload do not meet. Some people I am supporting are on the edge of becoming acute. They are struggling to work and get about their daily lives. They are feeling worse with each week that passes without intervention. Looking at the burden that is placed on NHS boards, it is not surprising that we have ended up here.

Having ADHD or autism does not necessarily mean that someone needs to be on a psychiatrist's books for life. A child with ADHD who can be managed with some changes to their school day should just have those changes made. Not dealing with those people creates urgent cases that never needed to become urgent. People who are forced to manage on their own and are referred to websites for support without a diagnosis end up with serious mental health issues and the loss of employment and relationships. They then cost the NHS more time and money than if they had just been dealt with when they first presented. We need to rethink how we manage patient lists, rethink what neurodivergence means and move away from the assumption that any patient will be a lot of work. Instead, we should just check what that person needs.

Many people with neurodivergence will be able to manage with primary care. It might be that no one beyond the person's GP is needed to manage the post-diagnosis situation. All that might be needed is guided self-management and the awareness of what their diagnosis is, which will give them the necessary confidence to ask for adjustments at school or the workplace. They might need a prescription and some oversight, and they might need someone to go to in a crisis, but a regular appointment with a psychiatrist, once they are stable, might add little to their lives.

We cannot expect NHS boards to make those changes on their own. If we want GPs to take more of an active role, which I hope we do, they must be given clarity about what they should do and the confidence to do it. That requires a review of national pathways and expectations when it comes to the long-term treatment of neurodivergent people. I hope that the Government is willing to be bold and not just keep doing what we have always done.

We must support and resource the NHS and primary care to look at the person, not the waiting list, not how busy the diary is, and not whether

someone meets level 3 criteria. Primary care must simply see that there is a person who needs help and ask how it can best offer that help.

18:23

Katie Hagmann (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to add to this important members' business debate. I want those who are directly affected by the issue that we are discussing to know that their experiences will be listened to in the Parliament.

The issue affects not only our young people and adults in our communities, but everyone around them—their families, siblings, parents, children, partners and even their friends and colleagues. I suspect that no one is left untouched by it.

I am an optimist, so, rather than focusing on the challenges that we face, I want to look at some potential solutions. In my first speech, I spoke about serving with vision, bravery, compassion and integrity, and all those traits must be brought into the debate. Having a bold vision of how we can improve the current situation is vital. I was proud to stand on a Scottish National Party manifesto that set out that vision, making it clear that we need to take action by adopting the four-tier national pathway that was set out by the Royal College of Psychiatrists.

We need to be brave and acknowledge that the current system is not working. We need to be brave by exploring other ways to support our young people and adults, especially those in tier 1, at which level people can be offered support with or, importantly, without a diagnosis.

Can we be brave—or even radical—and consider reforming our education system? Can we incorporate outdoor, nature-based learning into our core curriculum on a daily basis? Can we ensure that sport and movement—both of which have been shown to be beneficial to us all—become part of everyone's daily habits? How can we value creativity more in order to harness the complex and wonderful minds of those with neurodevelopmental conditions while simultaneously better equipping our young learners with the tools to navigate this increasingly artificial intelligence-powered world?

Compassion and integrity remain at the core of the challenge that we face. When young people are struggling without support, at times, judgment and frustration might be felt by those around them, families might be flung into crisis and school systems might fail. We must remember that this is not a choice for the individual. They are not being difficult; they are simply trying to navigate a life and a world that has not been built for them.

Adults who might have coped their entire lives might find themselves in crisis or slowly drowning in circumstances in which they had never expected to find themselves. Their normal coping methods might suddenly no longer work, and they might be unable to navigate their life with the certainty that they once had. That is a terrifying prospect for anyone.

Whether it is for our young people or our adults, let us ensure that we remember those core values. Let us remember to have vision, to be brave and to serve with compassion and integrity.

18:26

Kayleigh Kinross-O'Neill (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green): I sincerely thank Helen McDade for lodging the motion for debate.

I have close lived experience of autism and ADHD, and I know from my inbox that there is a widespread issue with waiting times for assessments. In East Lothian, for example, the number of adults waiting for an ADHD assessment from NHS Lothian is in the thousands, but only 120 assessments were completed between January and August 2025. That is not a dig at the exceptional people who deliver the service and those who advocate for better treatment, but it is a sign that the work has not been mainstreamed enough. Strategies have been bold but are not as tangible as they could be, and practice can vary depending on age, gender and geography, as we have heard from other speakers.

As Dawn Black mentioned, there has been an increase in the number of women with an ADHD diagnosis, due to testing and assessment having historically been geared towards young boys. ADHD might not be picked up among girls, because girls are less likely to have symptoms of hyperactivity. As the member said, they mask for a longer period and their conditions can be ignored or misdiagnosed, which can have an impact for the rest of their lives. Symptoms not only differ between the genders but can be worsened by puberty, menopause and the other societal barriers and stigma that women already face.

This morning, I met Scottish Autism, a great organisation, and learned about the fantastic work that it does through its outreach services and its evolving approach to education. We discussed the increased demand, which Helen McDade's motion mentions, but I do not think that that means solely that more people are coming out as autistic these days. After all, we must remember that, 40 or 50 years ago, people—not all, but some—were probably institutionalised or left to suffer in silence, whereas more people are now able to notice the symptoms and reach out for support as a start. We all know that diagnosis can be a powerful tool, but

it is not the be-all and end-all. Many people seek a diagnosis to confirm what they have always known and believed in themselves, to enable them to access local support services or to allow them to be the best advocate for themselves in the workplace.

I also want to touch on employment. In Scotland, the disability employment gap is about 50 per cent, which is a startling and harrowing statistic, and the gap for autistic folks is closer to 30 per cent. That shows that they are further marginalised through a lack of clear avenues of support in the community.

Before my meander into politics, I worked at Inclusion Scotland, the nation's leading voice on disability rights. I helped to set up internships in the public and third sectors for disabled people and autistic people who might not otherwise be able to engage with or enter the job market through traditional means, and I worked equally with individuals and employers to ensure that accessibility and inclusion were key at all stages.

I mention that, because I believe that employers have a duty to include everyone. Moreover, as decision makers in the Parliament, all members play a part in inclusion, too, whether that be advocating for our most vulnerable in every area in which the Parliament holds a remit or fighting against far-right nonsense that paracetamol or vaccines cause autism, which is just eugenics wrapped in—quote, unquote—"efficiencies".

It is positive that we are now acknowledging these existences. As a society, as parliamentarians and as people, we have a duty to provide the basic support that everyone needs. Autistic people and people with ADHD have always been around and always will be. With decency and humanity, they can live their best lives, and that is the best life outcome.

18:30

Victor Currie (Highlands and Islands) (Reform): I declare an interest as an employee of NHS Lothian.

The truest measure of a society is how it supports its citizens to fulfil their potential. By that metric, Scotland's approach to neurodiversity is costing us our future. We are looking not at a simple administrative backlog in NHS diagnostic clinics but at a catastrophic drain on Scottish potential, public finances and human life chances. The price of undiagnosed and unmanaged ADHD and autism is paid daily in ruined school careers, broken employment, relationship breakdowns and tragic mental health crises. When we leave people in limbo, the cost does not vanish; it merely shifts to more expensive parts of our state. We see it in schools, where bright children are excluded because their dysregulated behaviour is mislabelled as defiance, and in our economy, where capable adults cycle through unemployment because they lack workplace accommodations.

However, there is an equally damaging factor that we rarely talk about: the agony of the unknown. Our waiting lists are swollen with thousands of people who are left to languish for years. Let us be entirely honest: not everyone on those waiting lists has ADHD or autism—some are experiencing modern burnout, trauma or other misaligned mental health conditions—but the prolonged uncertainty is just as damaging to our economy and lived experience as being undiagnosed. People put their lives on hold; they delay career moves, pause education and suffer psychological paralysis while waiting for a clinical rubber stamp that might never come or might eventually tell them that they do not qualify.

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs (Maree Todd): I agree with Victor Currie that it is damaging for a person to wait for a long time without a diagnosis if all their support hangs on it. I agree, too, that a number of people on the waiting lists will not meet the diagnostic thresholds. However, does he not agree that the appropriate way forward is to ensure that people get the right support at the right time in the right place when they first ask for it?

Victor Currie: Absolutely. I thank the minister for her intervention. I will answer her question more fully in the rest of my speech.

We cannot move through this crisis by funnelling every potential patient through a highly specialised illness pathway. We must stop treating neurodevelopmental differences like acute medical emergencies and start treating them through a modern public health framework. Let us look at how Scotland tackles obesity: we do not send every person who gains weight straight to a bariatric surgeon or we would have a massive waiting list, as we do for neurodevelopmental conditions. Neither do we place them on a five-year waiting list for clinical consultation before they are allowed to change their diets. Instead, we use a public health structure that prioritises preventative action, public education and community initiatives.

We must try to apply that framework to neurodiversity and mental health. The core of our strategy must move out of our hospitals and into our neighbourhoods for that first tier of treatment, because a significant proportion of cases on our current waiting lists are subclinical. Those individuals face genuine executive dysfunction, sensory overload and emotional regulation challenges, but they do not require highly

specialised medical intervention or prescription medication.

We need to give people the tools to help themselves immediately. That means funding open-access community-led support groups. It also means rolling out digital coaching platforms supported by the Royal College of Psychiatrists, that are co-ordinated so that we have a single, solid standard on which we can rely and that teach time management, emotional regulation and organisational strategies.

If we shift our focus to immediate community-level empowerment, a person who is struggling with focus will be able to access help that day and will not need to wait three years for a consultant appointment at which they are told how to structure their day. That immediate support would resolve the damaging uncertainty and give subclinical individuals the belief that they need without ever touching an NHS waiting list.

Where such community-led strategies are not enough, our existing local infrastructure—GPs, school counsellors and workplace occupational therapists—must be empowered to step in. Instead of waiting for a formal diagnostic passport, local professionals should implement targeted adjustments. A school can adapt a child's environment or an employer can adjust an adult's working hours based on the traits that they present with, rather than a clinical label.

By filtering out and managing subclinical and mild cases in the community, we will clear the runway for our specialists. In that way, it will finally be possible for highly specialised psychiatric care, multidisciplinary diagnostic teams and complex medication management to be reserved strictly for the most complex acute cases and for those who genuinely require specialist medical care to be seen in weeks rather than years.

The current strategy of building ever longer waiting lists and relying on a consultant-led appointment as some sort of silver bullet while human potential rots is a failure of statecraft and imagination. The economic cost of doing nothing is a luxury that Scotland cannot afford. Let us democratise support and eliminate the toxic damage of clinical uncertainty by giving people answers and tools on day 1. We need to fund the community, restructure our pathways and treat the crisis like a public health challenge.

18:36

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs (Maree Todd): Tapadh leibh, Oifigeir Riaghlaidh. I welcome the opportunity to respond to Helen McDade's important motion, and I thank her for raising an issue that affects so many individuals, families and communities across Scotland.

The Scottish Government recognises the increasing demand for ADHD and autism assessments among children and adults and the pressure that that is placing on services across the country. We also recognise the importance of the recent neurodevelopmental summits that brought together members from across the Parliament and beyond and established a clear cross-party consensus on the scale of the challenge and the need to make meaningful progress.

I acknowledge the historical context that is highlighted by the motion, which is that the diagnostic criteria have not always accounted for the high levels of co-occurrence in neurodevelopmental conditions such as ADHD and autism. That, alongside factors such as a lack of awareness and stigma, has contributed to underdiagnosis of adults. As a result, many people have gone without support for far too long.

On the question of prevalence that Helen McDade raised, so far, the consensus on the scientific evidence is as described by the Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland. What we are seeing is not a sudden increase in neurodevelopmental conditions but the result of historical underdiagnosis, particularly for adults and some specific groups, as well as much greater awareness and reduced stigma.

The Scottish Government is not currently funding any research on cause and prevalence, but an independent review of mental health conditions, ADHD and autism is under way in England. Although the review is focused on England, we will undoubtedly consider any findings and learnings from it. The interim report notes that there is limited evidence that there has been any increase in prevalence and that the epidemiological evidence suggests that the numbers are broadly stable.

I recognise that awareness of needs has increased and that an increasing number of people are seeking help and support. Collectively, we must meet that need, because the impact of going without support reaches beyond the individual and affects the workplace, the criminal justice system and the wider health infrastructure. The overrepresentation of neurodivergent people in prisons and mental health settings highlights the consequences of unmet need. We have a collective responsibility to work together to make Scotland a place where neurodivergent people are welcomed, valued and supported.

I note the statistics that Helen McDade referred to with regard to ADHD medication. However, it is important to recognise that medication is not the right intervention for everyone with ADHD.

Although we must ensure that those who want and would benefit from medication can access it, caution is required when interpreting the statistics.

Improving access to medication for people with ADHD is only one element of the holistic support that is needed for neurodivergent people. To achieve that vision of holistic support, we committed in our manifesto to implementing a stepped care approach for adults with neurodevelopmental conditions, as proposed by the Royal College of Psychiatrists. That will reshape how support is accessed, ensuring that people can access support at the right time and close to home, without having to wait for a diagnosis before they receive help. The support will include improved information for people and their families, self-help resources, an increased third sector support offer and a reshaped clinical offer to make access to diagnostic assessment easier when that is the right step for the individual.

Within the first 100 days of this parliamentary session, we will engage with stakeholders to agree a route map for delivering that new model for adults. That work will build on the shared understanding from the summits that progress must be collective, sustained and focused on delivering practical change.

The work on neurodevelopmental support for adults complements our ongoing implementation of the national neurodevelopmental specification for children and young people, which sets clear expectations that children and young people should receive support that meets their needs as early as possible. Recognising the challenges that are involved in meeting rising demand, we partnered with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities last year to review the specification's implementation in order to identify what is working well and where further action is needed. That highlighted the significant pressures that services are facing and the need for clearer national direction and practical support to deliver timely, neuro-affirming care across Scotland.

We have acted on that learning by committing to a programme of action that is supported by a cross-sector task force, bringing together expertise from health and education bodies, local government and the third sector. That is strengthening national leadership, improving shared understanding and supporting tangible improvements for children, young people and their families.

Progress is already being made. We have strengthened national communications on neurodevelopment and are in the final stages of improving information for families through Parent Club. We are also working with partners to develop a shared national picture of what support around a child should look like and how services should work together to deliver that, which is underpinning ongoing system improvement. Alongside that, we have backed delivery with additional investment. Last year, we provided more than £2.9 million to support projects that improve access to neurodevelopmental support, which includes family support, transition pathways and new assessment tools.

Let me be clear: the issues that are raised in the motion are complex but not insurmountable. There is now clear consensus across Parliament on the scale of the challenge and the need to act. Our shared task is to turn that consensus into delivery. By focusing on the right interventions for individuals and community-based support, we can build a Scotland in which neurodivergent individuals are understood, supported and empowered.

I am grateful for colleagues' interest in and focus on the issue across the Parliament, as well as for the lived and professional experience that we collectively bring. This Government remains committed to working in partnership to turn our ambition into reality.

Meeting closed at 18:43.

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