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DRAFT

Meeting of the Parliament Coinneamh na Pàrlamaid

Tuesday 1 September 2026

Session 7



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 1 September 2026

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson):

Welcome back, everyone. The first item of business is time for reflection, which will be led by the Rev Dr Graeme R Wilson, minister of Bearsden Cross church.

Rev Dr Graeme R Wilson (Bearsden Cross Church): Presiding Officer, members of the Scottish Parliament, I thank you for the opportunity of addressing you this afternoon.

I wonder where you were on the afternoon of Saturday 18 July. If you are anything like me, you were in front of the television, cheering as Josh Kerr broke the 1 mile world record. The previous record had stood for some 27 years, and Josh Kerr added himself to the list of the greats who have held that illustrious record.

Of course, Scotland has a proud tradition in distance running. Last year, I had the honour of conducting the funeral of the legendary Lachie Stewart. He famously won the gold medal in the 10,000 metres on the opening day of the 1970 Edinburgh Commonwealth games—beating the then world record holder, Ron Clarke of Australia, into second place in front of a vocal and passionate Meadowbank crowd.

In preparing for Lachie's funeral, I had the privilege of having access to his unpublished memories of that race and of that day. I will share a few of his words with you now.

"With two laps to go I realized I could win this ... but, never having beaten Clarke before, I decided to sit in and make sure somewhere on the last lap. I made my move just before we hit the final straight and passed Clarke with about 80 yards to go. Clarke told me later that he was amazed at the speed that I passed him at ... and I had a big grin thinking, 'My God, I've done it!'. For the next week, I was the king of Edinburgh! It was the same when I went back to running to and from my work on Sauchiehall Street ... people would shout 'Great run!', or 'Congratulations!'"

The author of the letter to the Hebrews, speaking about faith, writes:

"With this great cloud of witnesses around us ... we must run with endurance the race that is set before us."

You stand on the starting line of a new legislative session, and you, too, are called to run with endurance the race set before you: to serve the people of Scotland, your great cloud of witnesses. There will be hurdles and obstacles along the way, and the temptations of short cuts and quick fixes,

but the common good of our country requires something more: going the full distance.

So, be like Josh, be like Lachie, and run with endurance the race set before you—for the prize of a more just and a more equitable Scotland is the finishing line that we all strive for.

Business Motion

14:04

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S7M-00983, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on a revision to the business programme. Members who wish to speak to the motion should press their request-to-speak button now.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revisions to the programme of business for—

(a) Tuesday 1 September 2026—

after

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

insert

followed by Oaths and Affirmations

after

First Minister's Questions (Backbench Members)

insert

followed by First Minister's Statement: Programme for Government 2026-31

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Programme for Government 2026-31

(b) Wednesday 2 September 2026—

after

Portfolio Questions: Social Justice and Housing; Economy, Tourism and Transport

insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Raising Standards and Delivering Excellence for Every Child

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Programme for Government - Improving Lives Through Delivering for Scotland

(c) Thursday 3 September 2026—

after

First Minister's Questions (Party Leaders)

insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Cairngorms Wildfire

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Programme for Government - Eradicating Child Poverty – the Scottish Government's Defining Mission—[*Jamie Hepburn.*]

Motion agreed to.

Oaths and Affirmations

14:05

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is the taking of an oath by our new member. I invite Monica Lennon to take the oath.

Monica Lennon (Glasgow) (Lab): I, Monica Lennon, do swear that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to His Majesty King Charles, his heirs and successors, according to law. So help me God.

The Presiding Officer: Monica Lennon is the new regional member for Glasgow.

General Question Time

14:06

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is general question time. To accommodate as many questions as possible, I ask for concise questions and answers.

Draft Curriculum Improvement Cycle

1. Angela Ross (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform): To ask the Scottish Government whether the publication of the draft curriculum improvement cycle, which introduces new concepts, big ideas and a know-do-understand framework, reflects an assessment that the existing skills-focused approach within curriculum for excellence has not achieved its intended outcomes for pupils. (S7O-00136)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): In 2021, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development endorsed curriculum for excellence as the right approach for Scotland, while noting that it would benefit from a systematic approach to curriculum review, which is exactly what we are undertaking, seeking to clarify the position of knowledge and create clearer progression between the broad general education and the senior phase.

The curriculum improvement cycle represents the most significant reform to our curriculum in a decade. It will ensure that learners can continue to achieve positive destinations in record numbers and the strong vocational and academic excellence that was shown in this year's exam results.

Angela Ross: At this time, teachers are delivering results through a knowledge-based senior phase that contradicts the existing curriculum for excellence skills-based focus. The curriculum improvement cycle adds yet another layer to the Government's Jenga education system, and the non-contact focus in the Scottish National Party manifesto admits that workload is already too high. Is it not the truth that teachers are expected to hold the system up while the Government keeps piling on the weight?

Màiri McAllan: I disagree with that characterisation. As I mentioned in my initial answer, what we are doing is part of a recommendation from the OECD, which endorsed curriculum for excellence but was clear that systematic periodic review would benefit the system. As I said, that is exactly what we are undertaking just now.

Angela Ross is right to mention teacher workload, which is always an ongoing concern for the Government. However, the work of the curriculum improvement cycle in clarifying the roles of knowledge and progression through the curriculum will, I hope, aid teachers in relation to their workload, as will our work on reducing class contact time, which we continue to take forward with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities.

Alex Kerr (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): The cabinet secretary will be aware that thousands of pupils across Scotland received their exam results last month. What is her assessment of how pupils have handled this year and how curriculum for excellence has supported that?

Màiri McAllan: There is much to celebrate in this year's exam results, which were released over the summer. Pass rates at national 5 and higher improved on last year, which had itself involved increases, and are above the pre-pandemic levels of 2019, and the advanced higher pass rate also increased, demonstrating academic excellence. Alongside that, there was a further surge in young people gaining qualifications in vocational subjects—great subjects such as journalism, personal finance, childcare and construction. That demonstrates the breadth and strength of Scotland's education system. Those results having been released over the summer, I take the opportunity to thank the teaching workforce, supportive parents and carers, and the young people who did us very proud.

Recorded Hate Crime Charges

2. Kayleigh Kinross-O'Neill (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to address the reported 17 per cent increase in recorded hate crime charges in 2025-26, including rises in race, sexual orientation and disability-aggravated charges, alongside providing appropriate support to victims and affected communities. (S7O-00137)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Kirsten Oswald): Hatred, prejudice and intolerance are unacceptable. We know that a minority of people will seek to divide communities and stoke division through their actions and words, and we must stand against that. While increases in recorded hate crime are certainly concerning, they may reflect greater awareness of what constitutes hate crime and increased confidence in reporting, which we encourage. We will continue to encourage reporting and will support all those who are affected.

Kayleigh Kinross-O'Neill: In my region alone, NHS Lothian had 147 racially motivated incidents over the past year, and data obtained through freedom of information reveals that at least 1,000

racially-motivated incidents were recorded. What reassurances can the Scottish Government give our hard-working health workers and organisations such as the Royal College of Nursing to ensure that that does not continue to happen and get worse, as it is currently on track to do?

Kirsten Oswald: I appreciate the member's question and her focus on the people who work hard in our national health service. They absolutely do not deserve to be the focus of hate crime. Indeed, nobody in Scotland deserves to be the focus of hate crime.

The Scottish Government has a clear hate crime strategy that is focused on raising awareness and on preventing hate crime, and it works through education, community engagement and targeted interventions. I reassure the member that that is an ongoing piece of work that we will continue to pursue with vigour.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): The rise in race-aggravated crime is worrying, along with the recent far-right mobilisation on the streets. More than 3,500 incidents of racism in schools have been reported. What more does the minister believe can be done with young people and, indeed, in schools to address those issues?

Kirsten Oswald: I am grateful to Katy Clark for her focus on the importance of all young people in our education system having a safe place to learn, where they are not impacted by that really detrimental behaviour. I point out to her that significant work is going on in education, as well as more broadly, and it is important that we retain that focus. Part of that is the work that we all do here in Parliament, where we have an influence on people of all ages, including our young people, through our behaviours. We should reflect on that.

Abortion Law Reform

3. Paul McLennan (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to reform abortion law in 2026-27. (S7O-00138)

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs (Maree Todd): The Scottish Government remains committed to ensuring that abortion services are, first and foremost, a healthcare matter. However, we have no plans to reform abortion law in 2026-27. Law reform is a complex process and we must engage with a wide range of stakeholders and weigh up a considerable volume of evidence, including the recommendations of the expert group on abortion law reform. That will include delivering on the 2026 manifesto commitment to consult on the expert group's recommendations. This work inevitably takes time, but it is essential

to ensure that future decisions are driven by evidence and to avoid unintended consequences.

Paul McLennan: Can the minister set out what action is being taken to ensure that women who require later-stage abortions do not have to travel long distances to England to receive the care that they need?

Maree Todd: We are firmly committed to establishing a later-stage abortion service and to improving access to abortion at all gestations, so that women can receive care locally. A task-and-finish group that was set up in 2025 has set out a clear and clinically supported model for a nationally commissioned service, and we are working urgently with Public Services Delivery Scotland to implement that model. The chief medical officer has written to all health boards, setting out clear expectations regarding local abortion service provision at all gestations, and we have funded specialist training for clinicians to enable sustainable delivery of later-stage abortion care.

Sky Lanterns and Helium Balloons

4. David Barratt (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what measures it is taking to prevent the release of sky lanterns and helium balloons into the environment, including whether it supports legislation prohibiting their sale, supply and release to reduce litter and protect wildlife, livestock and marine animals. (S7O-00139)

The Minister for Agriculture, Marine and the Islands (Jim Fairlie): The Scottish Government has no plans to bring in legislation to prevent the release of sky lanterns and helium balloons. There is not currently enough evidence to support such an outright ban. However, the Government is aware of the risks that those items can pose, and it will continue to work with Keep Scotland Beautiful and other partners through the delivery of the national litter and fly-tipping strategy to prevent all sources of litter, raise awareness of their environmental impacts and encourage responsible behaviours that will help to protect Scotland's natural environment.

David Barratt: My question follows the death of a calf in my constituency, which choked to death on a helium balloon. I have since discussed the issue with Keep Scotland Beautiful, the Marine Conservation Society, the charity Animal Concern and NFU Scotland, and all those organisations are united around the principle of a ban on the deliberate release of helium balloons and sky lanterns. Will the minister outline whether the Government will focus only on awareness-raising measures? Will the minister meet me and stakeholders to discuss how legislation could form part of the solution?

Jim Fairlie: I very much understand the principle behind David Barratt's question, and I absolutely sympathise with people who have lost livestock, because it is a very distressing thing to happen. I have also said that the Scottish Government is committed to monitoring and considering all options that are available to us. So, yes, I am happy to meet Mr Barratt and his colleagues to have a conversation about what else can be done.

Recorded Crime Statistics

5. Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the reason for the reported 13 per cent increase in recorded crime since 2022. (S7O-00140)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Neil Gray): I am, of course, concerned by the rise in recorded sexual and Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018 crimes. Although I welcome the fact that more women are reporting those crimes and I know that they will be treated with the seriousness that they deserve, ultimately we need to tackle such crime in the first place by men addressing their behaviours and attitudes.

Overall, the biggest driver of the increase in recorded crime is the rise in shoplifting, as seen across the United Kingdom. Our 2026-27 budget provides an additional £3 million to Police Scotland to tackle retail crime, as part of record funding of more than £1.7 billion, including continued support for the retail crime task force.

Stephen Kerr: The level of every category of crime is up, including sexual violence, rape and attempted rape. During the recess, I accompanied Danielle MacDonald to Bute house to see the First Minister, who said that he would do more to combat violence against women and girls. Yet, a year on from the passage of the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Act 2025, what are we to make of the Government's attitude towards victims when the Crown Office reports that there is still no funding for the sexual offences court? Why not?

Neil Gray: The First Minister's leadership in tackling violence against women and girls has been there for all to see over the summer. I am very pleased to have been part of the round-table discussions that he has led, which have helped to inform the programme for government that we will discuss shortly.

In recent weeks I have met Crown Office representatives, the Crown Agent, the Lord Advocate and others to discuss how we can take forward the proposal for a sexual offences court. There has been no ask for financial support to progress that in the 2026-27 budget.

It is a complex area that we must make sure that we get right for victims and for those justice processes. I remain committed to doing so, and I will continue to work with partners across the justice system to ensure that we do just that.

Inverclyde Royal Hospital

6. Stuart McMillan (Inverclyde) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what discussions it has had with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde regarding the scheduled replacement of the exterior façade and windows of Inverclyde royal hospital. (S7O-00141)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care (Angela Constance): I very much recognise the importance of Inverclyde royal hospital to local patients, staff and the wider community, and I understand concerns about the condition of the building.

The Scottish Government continues to engage closely with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde regarding Inverclyde royal hospital, including proposals for the replacement of the external façade and windows. NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde submitted a strategic assessment for the proposed overcladding project, which the capital investment group considered on 26 August.

All strategic assessments submitted through that process are considered against agreed criteria and in line with established governance arrangements. We will continue to work closely with the board as the process progresses.

Stuart McMillan: I welcome the investment that has already been put into the IRH in recent years, but further upgrades are required to increase the longevity of the building, and the work on the façade and windows must be undertaken as soon as possible. Given my engagement with the health secretary on the issue in the chamber in June, can she give me an assurance that the Scottish Government will work with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde to get the plans over the line, including having funding agreed before the end of the year?

Angela Constance: I thank Mr McMillan for raising that important issue; he has always been a strong advocate for his local hospital. We absolutely recognise the importance of Inverclyde royal hospital to patients, staff and the local community, and the strong case for engagement for investment in the hospital estate. As I said, the proposed external-envelope works have recently been considered through the strategic assessment process, and there is a clear recognition of the need to address the issues with water ingress and conditions that affect the hospital.

As with all NHS capital projects, the proposal must be considered alongside other infrastructure priorities across Scotland and within the capital

funding that is available. However, I can assure Mr McMillan that Scottish Government officials will continue to engage closely with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde as that work progresses.

Reading and Literacy (Promotion)

7. Katie Hagmann (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what work it is doing across the country to support and promote reading and literacy by ensuring that books and libraries are adequately resourced and available for everyone, including in rural areas such as Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley. (S7O-00142)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): Libraries are at the heart of our communities, which is why, on top of our funding for local authorities, we provide more than £1 million annually to the Scottish Library and Information Council. That funding includes more than £0.5 million towards the public library improvement fund, which supports libraries across Scotland, including in rural areas such as Ms Hagmann's constituency.

We know that libraries play a vital role in the development of our children and young people, which is why, since 2017, we have invested more than £2 million in the school library improvement fund, alongside initiatives such as bookbug, read write count with the First Minister, Dolly Parton's Imagination Library and the reading schools programme.

Katie Hagmann: Given the sad passing of the wonderful Dolly Parton, following which members have lodged various motions in Parliament celebrating her international work on literacy, I note the previous pledge to work with the Dollywood Foundation to deliver a nationwide Imagination Library. Can the cabinet secretary outline how that might be delivered?

Màiri McAllan: I was deeply saddened to hear the news of Dolly Parton's death just a day after I visited an Imagination Library day in Carstairs Junction in my constituency and saw how much it meant to the children and their parents there. However, she leaves an absolutely incredible legacy not only of music and kindness, but of supporting children to find a love of reading, and we want to ensure that that legacy continues. We want to build on the excellent programme that we already have, whereby our youngest care-experienced children in Scotland are supported through the Imagination Library as well as through the bookbug programme. We have commenced discussions with the Dollywood Foundation to expand the Imagination Library over the current session of Parliament so that the offer will include all children up to the age of five, thereby

strengthening the existing support for our care-experienced young people.

Wildfire Strategy

8. Laura Mitchell (Moray) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its plans to review the wildfire strategy following the recent such incident in the Cairngorms national park. (S7O-00143)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Neil Gray): The Scottish Government's wildfire strategy sets out a co-ordinated approach to preventing, preparing for and responding to wildfires. I want to ensure that the strategy is able to respond to what is an increasing risk to our natural environment, which is why I have commissioned a review of it. Aerial firefighting support and actions to raise public awareness of risk, enhance danger assessments and ensuring a co-ordinated multi-agency response are key areas of focus as part of the review, which is the subject of ongoing engagement.

Laura Mitchell: Last week, I met retained firefighters in Moray who were part of the huge effort to fight the Cairngorms fire over several weeks. They shared with me their experience of what worked well and where things needed to improve, including around personal protective equipment and training. I will, of course, share their feedback formally with the Government.

Can the cabinet secretary assure firefighters, gamekeepers, land workers and all the first responders that their views will be heard as part of the review?

Neil Gray: Yes, I can. I encourage all the stakeholders that Laura Mitchell mentioned to ensure that they are providing their input into the review.

I take the opportunity that Laura Mitchell gives me to thank again all those who worked so hard to fight the Cairngorms fire and other wildfires that we have seen across Scotland this summer, including all the retained firefighters who support that effort. I assure her that the review will involve listening to and engaging with them, especially on the points that she has raised around access to PPE, which I have already raised with the chief fire officer and discussed with the Fire Brigades Union, among others.

David Green (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD): The Cairngorms blaze was horrific, and it was one of many this year, including near Lochinver in my constituency. However, Lochinver and Durness fire stations have fewer than half their intended personnel. Tongue has two of an intended 12, while Scourie has one. Across the far north, crewing rules are preventing capable volunteers from responding. As part of a review of

the wildfire strategy, will the cabinet secretary look again at those recruitment challenges and test why the current model is not working for rural communities?

Neil Gray: That point was raised with me when I was in Mr McArthur's constituency in Orkney during the summer, where a question was posed to me about the recruitment of retained firefighters and the training requirements.

It is important that we maintain rigorous standards for those who serve our communities for the fire brigade. However, we continue to discuss that area with the chief fire officer in order to ensure that we provide as much support as possible for participants, because we know that, in the communities that he represents, as well as in others represented by members across the Parliament, many of those individuals are wearing many hats in order to keep communities running.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes general question time.

First Minister's Question Time

Back-bench Members

14:27

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is First Minister's question time for back-bench members. I ask members to keep questions short and answers concise.

Constitution

Alex Kerr (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): Off limits and "off the table"—those words were Andy Burnham's attempt to deny democracy to Scotland and the island of Ireland. Nothing can be off limits when it comes to self-determination, so when will the First Minister next meet the Prime Minister and, when he does, will he ensure that our independence is firmly on the table?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I thought that what the Prime Minister said the other day—in relation to the international treaty obligations that the United Kingdom shared and the question of the exercise of decision-making power by the people of Northern Ireland on their constitutional future—was a very significant error. His comments disrespected an international treaty agreed between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland—not least the terms of an agreement that has enabled there to be peace in the north of Ireland for a number of decades.

In all of this, it is important that the democratic rights of people are respected. I believe in the democratic right of the people of Scotland to decide their own constitutional future. It is not for the Prime Minister to take that issue off the table. It is an issue that, in May, resulted in the election to this Parliament of the largest number of MSPs who support a referendum on independence. I will make sure that the views and aspirations of the people of Scotland and the majority will of this Parliament are enacted in due course.

Proposed Learning Disabilities, Autism and Neurodivergence Bill

Joe Long (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the First Minister when the long-promised learning disabilities, autism and neurodivergence bill will be brought before Parliament.

The First Minister (John Swinney): A variety of issues will be covered in the programme for government. I suspect that I may be addressing some of those issues in the course of the afternoon, but the Government is committed to ensuring that we have in place the support that is necessary for individuals who have additional support needs and for those needs to be

recognised in the delivery of our public services. That will be reflected in the Government's programme.

Bluetongue Virus Outbreak

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): When will the Scottish Government provide a ministerial statement on the bluetongue outbreak in the south-west of Scotland?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I think that it was actually bluetongue the last time I heard about it—[*Laughter.*—]but we can all get such things wrong.

From what I heard at the Cabinet meeting this morning, I am not aware of a request having been made to the Government for a statement on the bluetongue outbreak. If one has been made and I have missed it, Mr Hepburn will advise me—I understand that a request has not come forward.

I note Mr Carson's request. Mr Hepburn will be happy to engage with his business manager to schedule a statement on the issue. The outbreak in the south-west of Scotland has been concerning. Mr Fairlie has been addressing the implications of that and has provided advice to the public and members of the farming community, based on the advice of the chief veterinary officer. We will be happy to share details of that with the Parliament in due course.

Rape and Attempted Rape

Amanda Bland (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform): Can the First Minister explain why, despite his claims of generous funding for the police under his Government, the number of recorded rapes and attempted rapes has risen by 32 per cent in four years? What specifically is the First Minister going to change to deliver safer streets?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The first thing to say is that it is not the fault of the police that there are sexual assaults and rapes in our society; it is the fault of the perpetrators of those acts. In the programme for government this afternoon, I will set out some steps that I intend to lead on in relation to tackling violence against women and girls in our society.

The fact that the number of reported incidents of alleged rape and sexual assault—and, thereafter, successful prosecutions—is rising indicates to me that the measures that we as a Government are putting in place equip the police with the resources to undertake investigations, equip the Crown with the resources to pursue prosecutions, and respect the courage of those who have suffered such awful experiences to come forward and be confident that they will be supported by the police and the Crown

to advance their cases, so that we can bring the perpetrators to justice.

I will always make sure that the police are well resourced. The police's resources have increased in each of the past number of years. The fact that the police are now successful in apprehending men who have perpetrated violence against women and girls is something that we should commend the police for. They will have my full support in undertaking that work.

The Presiding Officer: Before I call the next question, I ask members to please press their buttons if they want to speak—because some people are not doing that.

Child Poverty Eradication Measures

Holly Bruce (Glasgow Southside) (Green): Today, children, children's charities and anti-poverty organisations have come to their Parliament to tell us what poverty and debt mean for them. They are asking us to act faster and go further. Can the First Minister say how he will, in his words, eradicate child poverty in this parliamentary session, and will he commit to putting more money in our poorest families' pockets by increasing the Scottish child payment?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The group that came to the Parliament was met by the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing. Through the proposals in the Government's child poverty delivery plan, in this financial year, we have committed £100 million of new, extra resources to tackle the issue of child poverty—on top of the support already delivered in relation to the implementation of the Scottish child payment. That is an illustration of how the Government is taking steps to fulfil my objective of eradicating child poverty.

Just prior to the election, the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice introduced the updated child poverty delivery plan, which contained a substantial commitment to whole-family support. The Government believes that that is the best way to provide assistance to families around issues such as housing and childcare, addiction issues in some circumstances, and a variety of other factors to complement the provisions that we have made in relation to the Scottish child payment.

Other than through the budgetary reviews of the Scottish child payment, we have no plans to increase the level of that payment. We can see the effect of that payment because it is contributing to delivering a lower level of child poverty in Scotland than the level in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Stracathro Hospital

Dawn Black (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): Stracathro hospital is a much-loved and appreciated hospital in my Angus North and Mearns constituency. The site offers huge potential for increasing the capacity of NHS Tayside and NHS Grampian, as it sits on the border of those two authorities. Does the First Minister agree that Stracathro hospital is a vital resource that NHS Tayside and NHS Grampian should consider using for more treatment delivery, as it is in the perfect location to accelerate the treatment times for patients waiting for elective surgery and, potentially, other types of surgery in the north-east of Scotland?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am very familiar with Stracathro hospital, because it bordered the parliamentary constituency that I originally represented, North Tayside, and my late parliamentary colleague Andrew Welsh, the member for Angus East, and I campaigned vociferously to secure the hospital's future when it was under threat many years ago.

Dawn Black correctly indicates that Stracathro hospital's location and suitability as a site are significant assets for the delivery of treatment for elective care in the north-east of Scotland, and the Government recognises the advantages of its location. I assure her that we appreciate the work that is undertaken at the hospital and can see its potential for the future delivery of the model that we have developed of national treatment centres around the country.

Sally's Law (Faster Cancer Diagnosis and Treatment)

Joe Fagan (South Scotland) (Lab): My constituent Sally Rae received a late diagnosis for bladder cancer. It has since reached an advanced stage and she is now receiving palliative care. She was on the operating table to have her bladder removed when surgeons realised that her cancer had spread so far that the operation was no longer safe. Opportunities to detect the cancer earlier had been missed. Her family is campaigning for what they call Sally's law, which would guarantee faster diagnosis and treatment for the most aggressive forms of cancer. Will the First Minister support that?

The First Minister (John Swinney): First, I express my sympathy to Sally Rae and her family for the difficulties that they are facing because of the diagnosis that she has received. I am sorry that there was not an approach that enabled an earlier intervention.

The concept of faster diagnosis lies at the heart of the Government's cancer strategy. We want to ensure that suspicions of cancer are addressed

early, and the 31-day and 62-day timescales for examinations are fundamental to the delivery of those commitments.

Rapid cancer diagnostic services have been delivered in a number of areas in the country, which has significantly reduced the times that individuals wait for treatment. I would be happy to explore the application of such services in relation to the case that Mr Fagan has put to me. If he furnishes me with the details, I will follow that up. I assure him that the Government wants to ensure the earliest possible diagnosis when there is any suspicion of cancer, and our services are designed to do exactly that.

Dalzell Steel Mill

Willie Rennie (Fife North East) (LD): Is it the First Minister's intention to visit the Dalzell steel mill in Lanarkshire to discover why there has been no production for the past two years; why the company is only now planning to buy steel from a Kazakhstan plant, backed by the Chinese; why no accounts have been published for the past four years; and when the company intends to repay the Government loan of £7 million?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I do not have any immediate plans to visit the Dalzell plant, but Mr Rennie has put the issue to me and I will consider it.

I am familiar with the issues relating to the Dalzell plant and I am briefed on the issues that are being confronted. Fundamentally, those issues are for the plant's owners.

The Government intervened to try to safeguard the plant's continuation and to maintain employment. I make no apology for that—that is what the Government should do when it can. However, we rely on the actions of individual companies, and companies must be held to account for the commitments that they make to the Government. That is the case in all circumstances in which the Government has intervened to support companies. If companies have made commitments to the Government, we will hold them to those commitments, because that is essential to the nature of the relationship where we intervene.

As I said, most of those issues are for the company to explain, but if there is any interaction or interrelationship with the obligations and commitments that the company has given to the Government, then the Government will hold the company to those obligations.

Scottish Association for Marine Science

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): The First Minister will recall his recent visit to the Scottish Association for Marine Science in Oban. I

understand that SAMS has an immediate cash flow problem, which is impacting its short-term sustainability. Given the significance of SAMS to Scotland's research, innovation and marine sectors, and its importance to the economy of Argyll and Bute, there is an urgent need for collaborative engagement between Highlands and Islands Enterprise, the University of the Highlands and Islands and the Scottish Government to secure long-term sustainability for SAMS. Will the First Minister direct ministers to swiftly engage with SAMS to identify how best to support that vital organisation?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I will do that. I am sorry to hear about the difficulties faced by SAMS. I fondly remember visiting SAMS a number of times during my ministerial involvement, and I very well remember the visit with Jenni Minto. I will ask ministers to engage directly with Highlands and Islands Enterprise, with SAMS and with the Scottish Funding Council to see what steps can be taken to ensure that we safeguard the future of SAMS and address any issues that it faces at present.

The Presiding Officer: It is purely a coincidence that I am wearing a SAMS tie this afternoon.

Legal Aid

Donald MacKinnon (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): The First Minister will be aware of the civil legal action being supported by the Scottish Legal Aid Board against Bernera Community Association in my constituency. Does the First Minister share my concerns about the award of legal aid in that case? Has it prompted any discussions within his Government about the legal aid process?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I will have to look at the specific case that Mr MacKinnon raises, because I am not directly familiar with it, but decisions about legal aid are taken independently by the Scottish Legal Aid Board, within the legislative framework. Parliament legislates for the framework within which the Scottish Legal Aid Board works, and if issues arise from particular cases, such as the one that Mr MacKinnon has raised, Parliament has the opportunity to reflect on that. If Mr MacKinnon would care to write to me with details of his concerns, I will have those explored to satisfy myself that the Scottish Legal Aid Board has properly pursued the correct approach in awarding legal aid in that case.

Cancer Treatment (Workforce)

David Green (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD): The First Minister will be aware that NHS Highland is facing a staffing crisis in oncology, risking delays to treatment and forcing

patients to travel further for care. At a public meeting that I held at the North Highland Cancer Information and Support Centre, one constituent told me that they feel like forgotten people.

The Government has described the crisis as an operational matter, but it is also the consequence of a national shortage of oncologists. What steps will the First Minister take to ensure that NHS Highland can deliver cancer treatment as close to home as possible? Will he also commit to bringing forward a rolling 10-year national health service workforce plan that will finally be fit for purpose?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The issues that Mr Green raises about the oncology workforce are issues that affect several parts of the country, although we do have strong levels of staffing in a number of areas, which is enabling the delivery of strong performance on the 31-day and 62-day standards.

The issues that Mr Green raises are relevant to some of the issues that I will talk about in the programme for government. I agree entirely with Mr Green that it is best for care to be delivered as close to home as possible, and I want to entrench that view within our approach to the health service. However, there are often obstacles to doing that, and those can often be caused by the boundaries between health boards and the employment obligations on individual oncologists in different parts of the country. I would like to provide Mr Green with the assurance that I could directly address the oncology issue in NHS Highland that he rightly raises with me, but having the ability to do that across health board boundaries is challenging. That is why I am going to set out some of the reforms that I will set out today.

I answer Mr Green in that fashion because it is important that Parliament engages constructively with the Government in trying to solve the issue that he raises, which is an entirely legitimate individual circumstance that my wider reforms are trying to address. I look forward to engaging with him and his colleagues on that important point.

City of Edinburgh Council (Housing Standards Compliance)

Kate Campbell (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP): Recently, the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman took the Labour-run City of Edinburgh Council to task over two cases in which the council placed vulnerable, disabled residents in flats that were unfit to let. What action can the First Minister and the Scottish Government take to ensure that the council adheres to the ombudsman's decisions and improves its processes so that my constituents do not have to move into unfit or unsafe homes?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Obviously, it is for the City of Edinburgh Council to properly address the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman's report. I am concerned to note that the property in question did not meet the required standard before it was let and that problems have remained.

The Government has introduced measures that, from 6 October, will require landlords to properly investigate and ensure that damp and mould are addressed as quickly as possible. As part of that response, I urge the City of Edinburgh Council to act on the ombudsman's recommendations.

I will ask my officials to liaise with the landlord and the Scottish Housing Regulator to monitor landlords' compliance with the standards and outcomes that are set out in the Scottish social housing charter.

Inverclyde Economy

Stuart McMillan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I thank the First Minister for visiting Inverclyde last week. Will he indicate what support the Scottish Government can offer Inverclyde to stimulate the local economy and house building?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am grateful to Mr McMillan and to Councillor Stephen McCabe, the leader of Inverclyde Council, for hosting my visit to Inverclyde last Monday. It provided me with valuable insight into the challenges that Inverclyde faces, including the loss of employment and the importance of public sector investment in the locality.

On that occasion, I committed to considering some of the proposals and to ensuring that the Government works collaboratively with the Inverclyde socioeconomic task force to provide a better economic series of opportunities in the area. I commit to updating Mr McMillan on the Government's response to those issues as part of the ongoing dialogue that we will have with the task force.

I point out that we have made a very strong commitment to Inverclyde in relation to regeneration, including investment of more than £43 million through the affordable housing supply programme. I look forward to further discussions with Mr McMillan and his colleagues in Inverclyde.

Paediatric Surgery in Moray

Max Bannerman (Highlands and Islands) (Reform): The First Minister will be aware that paediatric surgery has abruptly ceased at Dr Gray's hospital in Elgin. Does he think that it is fair to people in Moray to be stuck in a cycle of vital medical services restarting only for them to abruptly stop again? If he does think that that is unfair, why has that been a consistent theme of

healthcare in Moray for the past decade, on the Scottish National Party's watch?

The First Minister (John Swinney): It is important that members appreciate—I certainly cannot escape the obligation—that healthcare services must be delivered with patient safety at their heart. That is an absolutely fundamental commitment. I totally understand the concern in the Moray community—indeed, I have heard directly from Laura Mitchell, on behalf of the people of Moray, about the circumstances at Dr Gray's—but, where there are patient safety concerns, the Government must respond to them. The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care has done exactly that through her dialogue with the leadership of NHS Grampian.

Again, I come back to my answer to Mr Green on some of these points. There are challenges in delivering healthcare services close to home in localities such as Dr Gray's hospital in Elgin for the people of Moray. Those services can be challenging to sustain due to the presence and prevalence of health board boundaries.

The proposals that I am about to set out to Parliament this afternoon will be of assistance as we try to address those issues and provide continuity of care as close to home as possible for the community of Moray. I look forward to Mr Bannerman engaging constructively with the proposals that I am about to set out.

North Sea Oil and Gas

Duncan Massey (North East Scotland) (Reform): Does the First Minister agree that the North Sea oil and gas industry is hanging by a thread? If so, will he now show leadership and come out and support our oil and gas industry by unambiguously supporting Jackdaw and Rosebank and new exploration drilling?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I have been very open with the Parliament about my view on oil and gas developments in the North Sea. Legal obligations have to be fulfilled in the consideration of any applications for oil and gas developments in the North Sea. Any development must be compatible with the legal obligations that we have on our journey to net zero. As part of that decision-making process—in which I am not a player because the issues are decided entirely by the United Kingdom Government—the UK Government is entitled to consider the comparison between the emissions that will come from domestic developments of oil and gas and those that will come from the importation of oil and gas from other jurisdictions, given that, for years to come, we will continue to use oil and gas as part of our domestic activities.

The issues of energy security and security of supply also have to be considered by the United Kingdom Government to ensure that, while we have a continued reliance on oil and gas, we have access to supplies. Some of the issues that we are wrestling with about security of supply and aviation fuel, which are areas in which we have vulnerabilities arising from the conflict in the middle east, have been exacerbated by the closure of the Grangemouth refinery at the hands of the United Kingdom Government, which promised to save Grangemouth and failed to do so.

The final thing that I need to say is that, although we will be reliant on oil and gas as part of our energy mix for years to come, we have to make the transition to renewable energy. Again, it is the United Kingdom Government that controls the pace of developments in renewable energy, and it has to get a move on to accelerate the timescale for their delivery, because the economic damage to Scotland of our energy policy being handled by the United Kingdom Government is now visible for every one of us to see.

Knife Crime

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Why did the First Minister cut funding to the no knives, better lives programme when knife crime is at epidemic levels?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Knife crime in Scotland is significantly reduced compared with when this Government came to office. The number of hospital admissions for cases in which individuals have been injured by the use of knives has also significantly reduced. I am very aware of the tragedies that have taken place in our country. The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and I met the parents of Kayden Moy, who tragically lost his life on Irvine beach in a savage attack, for which individuals have been prosecuted.

The Government is sustaining its commitment to no knives, better lives.

Stephen Kerr: Why did you cut the funding then?

The First Minister: I do not need Mr Kerr to shout at me. I will go away and check all the numbers for myself. I will look at them and see what needs to be done.

I say to Mr Kerr that there are some issues on which perhaps we should all put our shoulder to the wheel and work together to tackle youth violence, knife crime and violence against women and girls, rather than posturing about it in the Parliament.

MV Glenachulish (Annual Service Charge)

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I am interested in hearing the First Minister's response to comments reported in *The National* that the community-run MV Glenachulish ferry—the world's only manually operated turntable ferry, which was taken on by the community to keep it running and provide local jobs—faces an uncertain future due to a landowner's enforcement of a fixed £10,000 annual charge for their ancient "rights to ferry", regardless of the service's income.

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am very familiar with the ferry service that Ariane Burgess mentions. The service, which I have used, is an absolute joy and a great asset to the communities of Skye and Glenelg. I have seen the news media reports and have asked for advice on the issues that are involved to determine whether there is any legitimate intervention that the Government can make. I would be happy to write to Ariane Burgess once that information has come to me and we have a clear understanding of whether there is any scope for the Government to act.

Stagecoach Bus Services

Lloyd Melville (Angus South) (SNP): Stagecoach has announced cuts to commercial bus services in Monifieth, in my Angus South constituency, affecting links to the medical practice and Ninewells hospital. People are rightly concerned about accessing healthcare, so can the First Minister set out how the Scottish Government is working to improve bus connectivity and to ensure that communities such as Monifieth stay connected to vital services?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I sympathise with Mr Melville on the issues that he is wrestling with in the Monifieth area. I represent the adjoining constituency to Mr Melville and I have wrestled with some of those issues in the Carse of Gowrie in relation to changes to services that affect the access of my constituents to Ninewells hospital, so I am very sympathetic to the points that Mr Melville raises.

The better buses legislation that is being brought forward by the Government is part of the means of ensuring that we can exercise greater control and scrutiny to ensure that bus services meet the demands of people in Scotland.

There is the opportunity for initial engagement about those questions to ensure that the companies that provide bus services, which are now increasingly financially supported by the Government, are able to act always in the interests of the public.

Diageo Workers (Speyside)

Laura Mitchell (Moray) (SNP): Over the summer, it emerged that 172 Diageo distillery workers across Scotland were at risk of redundancy. Still workers in Speyside are disproportionately affected. Diageo has been clear that both global and domestic pressures have led to those job losses, including duty increases by successive Tory and Labour United Kingdom Governments.

Ahead of the UK budget next month, will the First Minister make the case to the Chancellor of the Exchequer for a cut to duty for Scotch to support growth, jobs and investment in Speyside?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I understand the significance of the points raised by Laura Mitchell. We have been in contact with Diageo about the announcements that it has made. Tom Arthur, the Minister for Business and Fair Work, met the company in July to raise his concerns. He received assurances that there would be no Scottish site closures and that the distilleries would all remain operational.

Laura Mitchell is absolutely right that alcohol duty puts huge pressure on the sector. It is disappointing that our calls for the disparity in duty to be addressed in the most recent budget went unheard. The Deputy First Minister will be preparing submissions from the Government to the UK Government in advance of the budget in late October and we will urge the new chancellor to end that unfairness during the budget process.

I have been pleased to engage with the whisky sector over the summer—indeed, I was in discussions with the whisky industry just last week—about the positive effect of the Scottish Government's work on ensuring that the tariffs on Scotch whisky applied by the United States have been lifted. That obviously helps to reduce the competitive pressures on companies such as Diageo.

I assure Laura Mitchell, who has a very close interest in the health of the Scotch whisky sector, given her constituency responsibilities, of the Government's continued focus on ensuring that the sector is protected and that it is able to continue contributing so substantially to the Scottish economy and to tax revenue in the United Kingdom.

Running Events (Female Categories)

Amanda Lindsay (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform): What action will the First Minister take to ensure that community running events held on publicly owned land in Scotland, including parkrun, operate female categories based on biological sex, as is required by the Equality Act 2010, following the Supreme Court ruling.

The First Minister (John Swinney): I know that I am responsible for a lot of things, but I am not responsible for running parkruns. I take part in some of them occasionally, but not at high speed.

Those issues are set out clearly in the guidance that is available and in the legal judgments of the Supreme Court. They are clear for all who have a relevant governance responsibility to follow those guidelines.

Monklands Hospital Replacement

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): What reassurance can the First Minister provide to constituents in my area and in North Lanarkshire generally that, following the Government's decision not to proceed with the current full business case for the Monklands replacement project, it remains fully committed to delivering a new Monklands hospital, including the retention of core services such as accident and emergency? What specific steps will the Government take to ensure that the reset process results in a deliverable replacement hospital within the agreed timescales?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I recognise Fulton MacGregor's keen interest in that issue. Alongside Neil Gray, he has campaigned hard for a new hospital.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care has made it clear that we will deliver a new hospital for Monklands at Wester Moffat and that the decision not to approve the current full business case reflected affordability concerns. It would not have been value for money for the public purse to approve designs that would cost £5 million per hospital bed.

NHS Lanarkshire is already working with the Scottish Government through a formal reset process to ensure that a revised proposal is clinically safe, affordable, sustainable and deliverable. The new hospital at Wester Moffat will have core acute services, including A and E, and it is my clear expectation that the work will be done as quickly as possible, with the aim of a refreshed plan being delivered to the health secretary in 2027.

Inverurie General Practitioner Walk-in Clinic

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Less than 24 hours after healthcare professionals raised concerns that the expansion of the Scottish National Party's GP walk-in centre pilot could lead to service duplication, health inequalities and destabilisation of existing local services, it was announced that Inverurie's new clinic cannot open due to recruitment difficulties. We then heard that, even if the centre opens, it could be open for only a few days. How will the Government get enough doctors to open Inverurie's walk-in centre without

taking them from already stretched local services, and when will it do so?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am very pleased that the Government has fulfilled its 100 days commitment to the expansion of the GP walk-in clinics. Indeed, the Government has exceeded what we told the public we would deliver. That is just another example of the Scottish Government delivering more than we committed to delivering for the people of our country.

Obviously, there will be practical issues in individual locations around the country. With the Government's relentless focus on delivery, we will ensure that, where developments need to be supported by additional recruitment, we undertake that to ensure that members of the public—this is the absolutely key point—can get access to healthcare services at a time when it is convenient for them to do so. That is happening in increasing numbers and in increasing locations right across the country.

Glasgow School of Art (Mackintosh Building)

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): In July, the Glasgow School of Art published its latest business case, which confirmed a gap in excess of £200 million in the funding to save Charles Rennie Mackintosh's masterpiece. The school's leadership has stated that a project of such scale is beyond its institutional capacity. The Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland and the Royal Institute of British Architects have now backed my long-standing call for the state to step in.

After eight years of limbo, will the Government now treat the Mack as the national project that it is and, as the French Government did with Notre-Dame, lead the establishment of a special-purpose vehicle with world-class project management expertise and step up to underwrite the full and faithful reinstatement of Glasgow's and Scotland's most globally significant architectural achievement?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic, Màiri McAllan, has met the Glasgow School of Art, and we are obviously very familiar with the conclusions that it has arrived at and the proposals that it has set out. The cabinet secretary has given the assurance that the Government will work closely with the Glasgow School of Art in taking forward the project. We recognise the enormous significance of the Mackintosh building, and we all share the aspiration that Mr Sweeney has set out to Parliament. The Government will work constructively to bring that about.

On Mr Sweeney's specific proposals about governance, I will have those considered to

determine whether they represent the most appropriate way of proceeding with such a development. However, I assure Mr Sweeney of the importance that the Government attaches to this particular building and to its reconstruction and development. We will focus on trying to ensure a positive outcome for the city of Glasgow as a consequence.

Youth Football Matches (Safety)

Pauline Stafford (Bathgate) (SNP): Will the First Minister say whether, following a successful summer of sport, he is concerned about reports of poor behaviour at youth football matches? Does he agree that football should be a safe and welcoming environment for our young people? What actions does the Scottish Government plan to take to support clubs to ensure a safe and positive environment for participants, officials and supporters?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I agree with Pauline Stafford that Scotland has experienced a vibrant summer of sport. As this is the first formal opportunity that I have had since the Commonwealth games to do so, I publicly record my deep appreciation to Commonwealth Games Scotland, the delivery company that delivered the Commonwealth games, the city of Glasgow, the people of Glasgow and team Scotland for the outstanding performance of the Commonwealth games. They were all a credit to our country and we should be very proud of them. *[Applause.]*

In relation to the questions on youth football, it is vital that youth football is carried out in a safe and respectful environment, and behaviour around the touchline of football fields is an important part of that. The safety of all should be prioritised, particularly where children and young people are involved in good sporting activity—they should not be exposed to any unacceptable behaviour around football fields. I would support all measures to ensure that a safe environment exists for all to participate in Scottish football.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes back-bench FMQs for this week. I apologise to the members whom I was unable to call.

Programme for Government 2026 to 2031

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is a statement by John Swinney on the programme for government 2026-2031. The First Minister's statement will be followed by a debate, so there should be no interventions or interruptions during it.

15:06

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Scottish Government that I have the privilege to lead is optimistic and hopeful for Scotland. We are inspired by the potential for our country to be ever more successful. That view is the foundation of the first programme for government in the seventh session of the Scottish Parliament. We are here to improve the lives of the people of Scotland and to create new opportunities for all to succeed.

This Government is ambitious for Scotland. We will act to eradicate child poverty, make Scotland the best place to do business, tackle the climate and nature crises and improve Scotland's public services. As we build on the enormous strengths of our country, we will confront the difficult challenges that people in Scotland face and the malevolent forces that seek to divide our country. We will address the cost of living crisis and we will work to create community cohesion. I will give the personal leadership that is required to tackle the epidemic of male violence against women and girls in our society. We will give the leadership for Scotland to decide her own future and set out our case that Scotland will be better off with independence.

To succeed, we will need to embrace change. We will undertake radical and widespread public service reform, putting the individual at the heart of the changes that we make. We will require all public services to make a decisive shift to prevention and early intervention. We will simplify government, remove barriers to progress and ensure that every pound of investment is focused on front-line service delivery.

In pursuing this programme, we recognise that, if we are to make progress, we will need to reach agreement with other parties in the Parliament and partners across the country. I commit my Government to working to create common ground, and I invite those who share the values that underpin our country to work with me to achieve those aims.

I believe that there is agreement across the Parliament that we need to change the way that government works in Scotland. It needs to be more joined up, simpler and citizen centred. It needs to

be focused on the realities that people face in their everyday lives and better able to target resources in a way that maximises impact on individuals. That is what this programme for government will deliver.

The vision that I set out today will mean more modern, flexible and person-centred public services delivered by a Scottish state that is rewired and reimagined. We will build on what is already the most generous cost of living package anywhere in the United Kingdom.

We will deliver more, and more flexible, childcare, which will be available from nine months until the end of primary school. We will ensure that, by the end of 2031, nobody in Scotland is waiting more than 26 weeks for national health service treatment. We will deliver more new homes for families, more help for growing businesses, a stronger economy and a fairer society, and meaningful support to help people boost their incomes and get back into work. We will also protect our beautiful natural environment, alongside taking climate actions that create jobs and reduce costs. That is the promise of this programme for government.

So many of the most immediate challenges that we face as a country are rooted in levels of economic growth that have been too low for too long. That is, in part, the consequence of Scotland being tied too closely to the stagnating economy of the United Kingdom—an economy that is designed to serve the few while leaving the many short-changed. It is an economy ravaged by the disastrous pursuit of austerity and by the folly of Brexit. We see it in the cost of living crisis, which, in turn, has fed discontent with politics and a loss of hope and trust among too many of our citizens. People are angry, but that anger must be a call to action, not a reason for despair.

Economic inequality exacerbates inequality throughout society. It undermines cohesion. It runs the risk of spreading disillusion among too many young Scots. It is one factor that fuels growing violence against women and girls in our society. Those challenges are all different, but they are also interconnected. We must drive the change needed in attitudes and behaviours, confronting the sexism and misogyny that continue to harm women and girls, and tackling head-on the racism and prejudice that too many people in our society face.

I will provide the personal leadership to tackle violence against women and girls. However, I am clear that the actions that we take are not the responsibility of any one minister; they cut right across the work of Government. Although the Government has a vital role to play, lasting change requires all of society to play its part, which is why

campaigns such as *The Sunday Post's* "It's Time" campaign are so vital.

Through legislation, we will seek to make early progress on the serious issue of violence against women and girls through a misogyny bill. We will end the postcode lottery of service provision to ensure that every woman and girl, regardless of where she lives, has access to safe and sustainable services. That includes developing a new multiyear fund for specialist third sector organisations, responding to what organisations need to sustain vital services and deliver critical preventative work. We will enhance protections for women by recognising pregnancy as an aggravating factor in domestic abuse cases, and we will provide support for those leaving abusive partners through our fund to leave. We will also invest in targeted interventions, including a multiyear public health campaign to challenge and change problematic, misogynistic attitudes in boys and young men, so that they understand harmful influences and behaviour before it escalates and women and girls are harmed.

The increasing frequency of intimidating protests, alongside experiences of discrimination, prejudice and hate, has caused faith, minority and migrant communities, in particular, to feel less safe and more fearful. There has been extensive engagement with communities across the summer, both proactively and to provide immediate reassurance in response to events that have left communities concerned for their safety. I have welcomed the opportunity to engage with communities directly, but I believe that we must do more.

This programme for government sets out a range of actions towards building strong, inclusive and safe communities, including addressing the root causes of hate crime, strengthening reporting and support for victims, and addressing racism in education through the anti-racism in education programme. We will increase investment in the community cohesion fund to £500,000 to support grassroots community initiatives. We will also bring forward a human rights bill, aiming for introduction in year 2 of this session of Parliament.

This programme for government represents my priorities and the mandate that I secured from the public in May. More than that, however, it reflects the experience that I have gained and the lessons that I have learned from almost 20 years in government. There is much to be proud of and much that we do well. We are blessed with public servants who go above and beyond to deliver for people day in and day out. Those things that we do well, we must do more of. However, those things that are not delivering as we need them to—and as people rightly expect them to—must change.

As a starting point, and at the heart of our plans, is the very clear expectation that the public sector in Scotland will fundamentally shift its focus, asking first and foremost what the needs of our citizens are, rather than the needs of the existing structures and systems.

That will mean, over the next five years, the most radical reshaping of public services since the establishment of the Scottish Parliament. It will mean the more effective use of technology. Staff who work on the front line should be encouraged and enabled to break through silos between organisations in order to respond to the real-life needs and experiences of the people that they serve. Our communities should be empowered in new and effective ways. Services should be delivered at the most appropriate level to meet the needs of the public. Those aspirations—which, I believe, are widely shared across Scotland—must be turned into reality, and the Government will lead that process.

I will start with local government. Scotland is fortunate. Because of our size, some priorities are best delivered at a national level; because of our diversity, others are best delivered at a regional or more local level. Getting the balance right between national, regional and local is essential in enabling us to deliver more responsive and more effective government that meets the needs of our people and our communities.

In Scotland today, we are faced with the reality that some of our councils are too small to be strategic and some are too big to be local. The Government believes that that should change. We propose a rebalancing of power within Scotland, with our regions strengthened and our communities empowered to bring new life and new opportunities into the places that they love. Today begins a three-month period of intense engagement with our local government partners and with other parties—in this chamber and beyond—on a new structure for local government in Scotland.

Although I enter those discussions with an open mind and do not wish to be overprescriptive at this stage, I also have a very clear sense of what is needed. There is not a blank sheet but, equally, our ideas are not delivered today as though they were on tablets of stone.

A starting point is that changes must not create another layer of administration or a new group of politicians. As an end point, reform must mean stronger and more strategic regions with the powers, permission and flexibility that they need to drive economic growth and investment in all parts of Scotland—so that we can, in turn, improve people's lives in all parts of Scotland. I am open to devolving powers over a broad range of economic

levers to those stronger, more strategic regions, including, where relevant, new powers that are devolved to Scotland from the United Kingdom.

Emphatically, however, within those regions, local communities must be empowered. Reform must deliver councils that are big enough to be strategic but that contain localities that are small enough and strong enough to enable genuine local decision making. That process must involve the freeing of resources that are currently caught up in a cluttered and complex landscape, to be spent on improving the lives of our citizens.

Within any programme of reform and renewal, the needs of our island communities must be distinctively recognised, including through our ongoing commitment to advancing the single authority model where that is desired.

Our actions are about improving public services. At the heart of that approach is the need for simpler and more coherent decision-making structures. Right now, the arrangements that we have in place to manage social care in Scotland are overcomplex, with competing lines of accountability. No one understands that more than those on the front line of delivering those services. Decisions on social care at a council level impact on the health service and the NHS's ability to deal with problems such as delayed discharge. That means that money is being spent in ways that do not deliver the best results for citizens. That, too, must change.

Reform to social care will therefore also be a part of our engagement over the next three months with partners in local government, trade unions, the third sector and our communities, and with parties in the Parliament. Again, I do not seek to be prescriptive, but I cannot see us resolving the fundamental challenges that social care faces without a single line of decision making, accountability and funding—with the NHS taking the lead.

For the NHS itself, in order to ensure more joined-up delivery, improve access to care and reduce inequality for some patients due to health board boundaries, we will replace the current 14 territorial health boards with two strategic health boards. That will be the most significant structural reform of the NHS in the era of devolution. Alongside targeted investment and our national flow plan, it will enable us to deliver the additional capacity to ensure that, by the end of 2031, no one will wait more than 26 weeks for the treatment that they need. That is change for a very clear purpose and change that will improve quality of life for thousands of Scots each and every year.

Work is already well under way to deliver a "tell us once" approach so that citizens' engagement with a range of government services becomes

simpler, easier and more joined up. As the programme for government details, action will be taken to rationalise and simplify how we make payments, collect revenues, undertake inspections, share services, manage inquiries and share data.

More broadly, during the current session of Parliament, we will also substantially reduce the number of public bodies. That will include, among other steps, bringing Transport Scotland into the core Government, bringing our environment bodies into a single national environmental body to make our interventions more impactful, and exploring the establishment of a single ferries body for the Clyde and Western Isles routes.

As a result of those actions, at the end of the five years, people in Scotland will notice clear improvements in their lives and in their experience of public services delivered by the Scottish Government and our partners. Change will be structural, but also cultural. We will be more open and flexible, acting as an enabler of positive change, with an attitude rooted more in, "Yes, if", rather than in, "No, because". We will have citizen-centred delivery, a prevention-first approach, public service reform and a decluttered public sector landscape. This ambitious programme of public service reform is designed to transform Scotland. It will make our nation a better place in which to live, work and bring up a family, and it will deliver strong, sustainable and effective public services for the future.

We are changing the way that we do government because we are determined also to change Scotland and to deliver tangible improvements that will directly impact on people's lives. It is our ambition and intention to put more money in families' pockets, building on what is already the most generous cost-of-living support package anywhere in the United Kingdom.

The national roll-out of our £2 bus cap has already begun. It is in place right now in the Highlands and Islands. We promised to extend it, first to Glasgow and the west of Scotland, and we will keep that promise. I confirm today that bus fares in the west of Scotland—be that Glasgow, Renfrewshire, Ayrshire, Dunbartonshire, Lanarkshire or Inverclyde—will be capped at £2 and that the £2 bus fare will start this coming Monday morning.

Today, we have also begun formal consultation on the legislation that will introduce a legal price ceiling on a basket of essential food items, giving families greater peace of mind at a time of rising prices. We will continue to deliver support on energy costs, with 100,000 people over the next five years saving an average of £450 a year on energy bills, and we will deliver financial support

for energy costs for people with life-saving equipment in their homes and those who are terminally ill. We can lower energy costs for some with the powers of devolution, but we can lower energy costs for all only with the full powers of independence, with Scotland's vast energy resources finally in Scotland's hands.

Our ambition and our intention is that more people in Scotland get a home that they can afford. That includes investment to deliver 111,000 affordable homes by 2032, with at least 70 per cent available for social rent. Our first homes fund has been launched and it will continue throughout the current session of Parliament. It will give much-needed help worth up to £10,000 to thousands of first-time buyers.

We will ensure fair access to safe housing, including through the roll-out of our new £50 million homelessness prevention fund, with the first awards made this year. We will support innovation activity to tackle homelessness and we will work with partners such as Social Bite, providing £2 million to expand its village project, and support their efforts to address homelessness and provide wraparound support for some of the most vulnerable in our society. We will end the use of unsafe and harmful temporary accommodation for children.

This programme for government will get more people into good, secure work. We will expand apprenticeships by funding at least 150,000 apprenticeships and we will grow the opportunities provided by graduate apprenticeships. We will develop a new apprenticeship accelerator grant that focuses on supporting businesses.

We will make it easier for parents to find work or increase their hours, with a generational expansion of childcare support. That means breakfast clubs in all primary schools by the start of the next school year, and after-school and holiday provision available for all primary children by August 2029. That will ease the pressure on family budgets for thousands of young parents across Scotland, as well as creating new opportunities for work and a boost to productivity and growth.

Underpinning that investment in a stronger and fairer society is our commitment to supporting Scotland's wealth and job creators as we work to dramatically improve Scotland's economic performance. Our ambition and intention is to pursue, enable, promote and secure both home-grown and international investment. Put simply, we will take the steps that are necessary to make Scotland the best place to do business. To assist in that effort, we will create a major projects office, which will accelerate progress on nationally and strategically significant investment and private

capital projects. The major projects office will unlock barriers and investment, with a particular focus on strategic sectors, including housing and energy.

That is a central part of the enabling Government that I seek—a Government that is active in finding solutions, that will remove barriers and obstacles to speed up economic decision making, and that is laser focused on attracting high-quality projects that can deliver well-paid, high-quality jobs. For the same purpose, we will establish a Scottish high-growth unit, which will work with senior industry leaders to identify and accelerate delivery of the right support for high-potential businesses so that they can grow to scale in Scotland and—just as important—stay here, in Scotland.

Scotland is rich in resources and rich in innovators. I am determined to see the many advantages that we enjoy deliver real benefits to our economy and to our people. Our ambition and our intention, guided by the expertise of my national council for economic growth, is growth that is generated and felt the length and breadth of Scotland. That also means investment in our nation's infrastructure, improving digital connectivity, support for local regeneration, including town centre regeneration, and projects to build community wealth and resilience. It means ongoing investment in our transport network, including delivering on our commitments to dual the A9 and the A96, find solutions for the A83 Rest and Be Thankful and support progress on the Clyde metro.

Because a flourishing rural economy is a fundamental part of a flourishing Scotland, we will start work on a rural renewal bill that is designed to support rural businesses, from farms to food producers, and the rural way of life.

Scotland's culture sector is at the beating heart of our national identity, but it is also close to our economy. I want to make sure that it goes from strength to strength. We will deliver an extra £100 million annually for culture by 2028-29. By the end of this Parliament, we will add a further £50 million to our annual culture investment while expanding opportunities for cultural participation, such as a youth culture pass.

We are working with the sector to design and deliver a national performing company for traditional music, ensuring that traditional music has the same status as our other highly respected performing companies. We will also pilot a Scottish artists minimum income.

As the MSP for large swathes of rural Perthshire, I know how important the local pub or shop can be, which is why we will establish a last-provider fund to support the sustainability of the

last-remaining shops and pubs in our rural and island communities.

The programme for government will ensure that our economy, climate and communities all benefit from the green industrial transition and are resilient to the impacts of climate change. We will introduce a heat in buildings bill, enable the scale-up of heat networks and support clean heating and energy efficiency measures, with the aim of lowering emissions and costs for 100,000 properties. We will support the expansion of community renewables schemes, which will provide some communities with vital assets and a source of income, and others with lower energy and heating costs, making community buildings and other local projects more resilient and more viable.

We will continue to invest in workers and businesses in Moray and the north-east through our £500 million just transition fund, and we will continue to call on the UK Government to match our investment. A clear commitment was made to the people of the north-east. They were told that, as opportunities in the oil and gas sector declined, those would be replaced by opportunities in green energy, whether in offshore wind, hydrogen or carbon capture and storage. However, UK Government policies have seen the decline in the oil and gas sector accelerated and green energy projects hampered or held back. That is a shocking failure of the UK Government.

If we are to keep the promise made to the north-east, getting control of energy policy for this Parliament is vital. That promise is why we will press the case for the energy profits levy to be replaced and continue to invest in the green industrial opportunities that are so important to our nation's economic future and success. The Scottish Government, using the powers that we have, will play our part for Scotland's energy.

It is with a stronger economy that Scotland will enjoy the highest-quality public services. Our ambition, and our intention, is to deliver shorter waiting times for treatment in the NHS. Over the past year, we have been able to increase capacity and activity in our NHS and, as a result, bring down long waits. Building on that progress, we will ensure that, by the end of 2031, no one waits more than 26 weeks for treatment. There will be at least £10 billion of capital spending over the next decade, which will fund, among other things, new community health and care hubs across Scotland, starting in Fife, West Lothian and Inverclyde, and a new university hospital Monklands, with the aim of construction starting in 2028. We will continue to expand the network of general practitioner walk-in centres—a service that is built around the realities of family and work life—which will make it easier for thousands of Scots to access a GP at a time that works for them.

Our ambition and intention is to deliver a sustained reduction in delayed discharge from our hospitals. We will create one connected system with one simple route to care, ensuring that people receive the care that they need as quickly as possible and in the right setting. That includes more care in the community, with the hospital at home service expanding so that, over the winter, 10,000 people can receive hospital-level care in their own home. In recognition of the campaigning efforts of the family of the late Anthony Bundy, we will deliver 24/7 thrombectomy cover, regardless of geography.

We will treat drug use as a public health emergency. An additional investment of £250 million through our national mission on drugs will mean more residential rehabilitation beds. Recognising the complex interplay of issues that can lead to drug abuse and addiction, we will provide additional mental health support, including new walk-in mental health hubs and expanded 24/7 support with the roll-out of mental health triage cars to every region in Scotland.

We are ambitious for the next generation of Scots and will create positive futures for children and young people. We want our children and young people to get the most out of their school experience, learning so that they can achieve academic and vocational excellence. That means reform of our school curriculum; further work with local government partners to empower headteachers; ongoing investment of up to £200 million to reduce the poverty-related attainment gap; and legislation on a mobile phone ban in Scotland's classrooms.

We will expand the bookbug programme to reach an additional 20,000 families, expand the opportunity for young people to learn a new language, including Gaelic and Scots, and ensure that every child with additional support needs has access to appropriate—including specialist—support. We will also continue our work to keep the Promise by 2030.

In our criminal justice system, we will be strong on punishment and effective on prevention and rehabilitation. I want communities in Scotland to be safe and, just as important, to feel safe.

Of particular concern is the fact that Scotland has seen several high-profile and heart-breaking examples of youth violence, including deaths from knife crime, which have a profound impact on families and communities. We will continue to work with partners to tackle and prevent youth violence, particularly knife crime, through education programmes on the danger and the unacceptability of carrying a knife and taking part in violence. We will do this by supporting organisations and initiatives such as no knives,

better lives; the youth navigators project; and the mentors in violence prevention programme.

In recognition of the inspirational campaigning of Lisa Petrie, whose son John died in September last year, we will roll out bleed kits to community settings across Scotland.

We will also build on our landmark victims and witnesses legislation, to ensure victims are heard, supported, protected and treated with compassion—including through the appointment of Scotland's first victims and witnesses commissioner and the establishment of a trauma-informed sexual offences court.

This is a Scottish Government that works for Scotland and wants the very best for Scotland. That means giving our citizens a greater sense of control over their lives and demonstrating that, once again, they can, by studying, training or working hard, make their lives better.

It is about empowering our communities and our regions, but also about empowering Scotland as a whole. It is about demonstrating to people that we, the politicians, get it and that we are acting to make their lives better. That requires a new way of doing government and also a new way of doing politics in this place. In my heart, I believe in self-government for Scotland. Self-government has been good for our nation, and we need more of it.

The Prime Minister has opened the door to new powers for this Parliament, and I will work constructively—with people inside this chamber and partners outside it—to identify the new powers that can be quickly devolved if we are to maximise economic growth, reduce inequality and do even more to put money in people's pockets.

Ultimately, Scotland's constitutional future should be a matter only for the people of Scotland. That is why I will continue to make the case for Scotland's right to decide on a fresh start with independence—the change that will make the biggest positive difference.

This is a Government that believes in Scotland and in our people. We see a nation brimming with potential but held back because, too often, decisions taken elsewhere get in the way. We have deep-seated challenges but we have the wealth, resources and ingenuity to overcome them. I have no doubt that the more powers we have and the more policy levers we control in Scotland, the more we can achieve.

My commitment to the people of Scotland is clear: you come first. Government works for you and will always be alive to the realities of your day-to-day experience. That is the starting point for this programme for government, which will deliver more money in people's pockets; shorter waiting lists; more new homes; easier access to GPs;

action on the climate; public services fit for the future; and decisive action on violence against women and girls.

Those are the aims of a Government that is ambitious for Scotland. The people of Scotland have put their trust in this Government, and we will deliver what we have promised.

Programme for Government 2026 to 2031

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is a debate without motion on the programme for government 2026-31. Members who wish to speak should press their request-to-speak buttons now.

I call Malcolm Offord to speak for seven minutes. Before you speak, Malcolm, I am pleased to see you hale and hearty and back in the chamber. [Applause.]

15:39

Malcolm Offord (West Scotland) (Reform): Thank you, Presiding Officer, for those kind words. It is good to be back in Holyrood.

This is where the rubber hits the road. The Scottish National Party has had its first 100 days in government and today is when the Scottish people ask when its fine words will turn into meaningful improvement to their lives. We, in the chamber, should remind ourselves that 2 million Scots did not vote in the May election—yes, 47 per cent of the electorate did not vote, because they have given up on the idea of politicians turning words into action. The question is, can John Swinney change the habit of a lifetime?

We just heard the First Minister set out his ambitions to improve our economy, help with the cost of living, improve our national health service, reform public services and, of course, deliver independence for Scotland. Welcome back to groundhog day—the same old empty promises, just rebranded, but still a medley of sticking plasters and gimmicks instead of practical, long-term solutions for the benefit of the Scottish people. It is rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

What is new? General practitioner walk-in centres, he cries—an idea that was developed in England by Tony Blair 25 years ago. It is a clever idea except that it diverts GPs away from their regular practices and undermines the very concept that we, the patients, should develop a long-term relationship with our local GP, locally. Why not just make all our local GPs more accessible to us, the patients?

Food price caps, he cries—an idea that failed spectacularly in Hungary three years ago. It is a clever idea except that 23 industry trade associations, including the Scottish Retail Consortium, the Food and Drink Federation Scotland and the Scottish Bakers, said yesterday that a price cap would be

“unnecessary, ineffective, and likely to deliver significant

adverse consequences”

for retailers, store staff and suppliers. They pointed out that food prices in Scotland are already among the lowest in Europe.

What about a new school bag for every child in primary 1—foreign made, of course? That is ignoring the sad fact that one in four Scottish schoolchildren leaving primary school in 2025 failed to achieve the level of literacy that is required for high school.

Is it any wonder that 2 million Scots have given up on Holyrood? Those are gimmicks and sticking plasters, and the Scots are not fooled. That is why 385,000 Scots voted for Reform UK. The clue is in the name: we want reform, not gimmicks.

Last week, I was back in Inverclyde to talk about depopulation and deprivation. I set out a positive message of hope that we can turn around the fortunes of Inverclyde because people there are so talented, innovative and kind. I said that Inverclyde is a microcosm of Scotland, such that, if we fix Inverclyde, we can fix Scotland. The key to that turnaround is encapsulated in one simple word: jobs—a word that was mentioned only three times by the First Minister in his 30-minute speech. Gone are the days of mass employment in Scotland—just like in Inverclyde, where 16,000 jobs in shipbuilding were replaced by 8,000 jobs in electronics, which were replaced by 2,000 jobs in call centres, in ever-decreasing circles.

We need to rebuild Inverclyde and Scotland one job at a time and one small or medium-sized enterprise at a time. Why SMEs? They employ more than half of private sector workers in Scotland, they are local and they care about their communities. What message of hope did the First Minister just give to our 380,000 SMEs, which are struggling with rising energy costs, employment costs, rent, business rates and taxes? Where was the urgency in his voice, recognising that one third of the top 500 SMEs in Scotland reported that, in the past year, their revenues went down? Where was his package of measures to reduce their costs of employing people while increasing the skills in our workforce, as was called for by the Scottish Chambers of Commerce?

That is why our country needs Reform UK: to get a joined-up approach across Westminster, Holyrood and councils, with one common goal to increase employment and get our own folk back to work. With work comes better health, family prosperity, less child poverty and the best way to afford the rising costs of living. Work remains the best route out of poverty, and the best form of welfare that we can give any friend is a good job.

That is why a Reform Government at Westminster would maximise our own North Sea

gas, to give us cheap domestic energy, which would allow Scotland to reindustrialise—more jobs. We would make employment affordable again by reducing employer national insurance and diluting the flawed workers' rights bill—more jobs. We would rebalance the benefits system to make sure that work always pays more than welfare—more jobs.

A Reform Government at Holyrood would stop wasting time and money on ideological projects such as net zero, anti-nuclear policies, transgender culture wars, virtue signalling on Gaza and prioritising asylum seekers, not to mention the neverendum. Instead, we would focus on helping our own inactive Scottish adults back to work by repositioning welfare Scotland to give a hand-up, not a hand-out, and providing social housing as a reward for local workers—more jobs.

We would abolish the cumbersome six-band income tax regime, which has been proved to reduce productivity and collect less tax. That would result in more jobs.

Reform-led councils would be laser focused on their local SMEs by providing suitable business premises and blasting through planning delays in order to get businesses operational and expanding rapidly, which would provide more jobs.

We would get innovative in relation to the redevelopment of brownfield sites in our town centres to allow housing and health solutions, business premises and transport to be rapid, local and pro-SME, which would provide more jobs.

Councils would crack the code on helping adults back to work with local solutions, backed by the Department for Work and Pensions and welfare Scotland, which would mean more jobs.

That is what a real programme for government would look like, not the thin gruel that the First Minister served up today.

"Auld Scotland wants nae skinking ware
That jaups in luggies".

Let me finish where I started. I remind members that 2 million Scots did not vote in the May election—double the 1 million Scots who voted for the Scottish National Party. They are fed up with performative politics. Instead, they want good government. The days of fine words are over. Scots want delivery. Scots want Reform.

15:46

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I thank the First Minister for his statement. John Swinney and I are long-standing members of this Parliament, so, in the spirit of co-operation, I wish him and his Government well in the implementation of his agenda. We will support his Government when it

gets it right, but, as he would expect, we will hold the Government to account every step of the way in calling out failure, challenging error and insisting on changes for the good of the people of Scotland. We will engage in good faith, but we will also challenge when we think that the Government can do more.

Let us be honest: this is not really a new Government. We are now in our 19th year of SNP government at Holyrood, and that was, by my count, the 20th SNP programme for government. John Swinney has been at the heart of all of this—he was the education secretary, the Deputy First Minister, the finance secretary and the Covid recovery minister, and now he is the First Minister. After almost 20 years, there is no one else to blame for the state of public services today. It is the result of this SNP Government, and it is this Parliament's duty to hold it to account.

Let me turn to the statement that we have just heard from the First Minister. I welcome lots of the policies and initiatives in the statement—on tackling poverty, on providing help for people who are struggling, on protecting women and reducing violent crime, and on introducing measures to improve our NHS. The cap on bus fares is welcome, too—of course, it was Andy Burnham who first delivered a price cap on buses—but we need buses in the first place, and many constituencies do not have them.

There were warm words for issues that the majority of members care about, but warm words are no substitute for action, and I have heard lots of the promises before. We need delivery, not just debates, and the Government's rhetoric must be matched by reform. That is the real test for any Government.

What I must say about some of the First Minister's statement is this: if imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, I consider myself flattered. Let me say to members that it is worth being patient. If you wait long enough, things that you said more than a decade ago will suddenly be in vogue, because the Government does not have many good ideas of its own.

For years, John Swinney and a succession of SNP health ministers told us that the NHS did not need any reform. They said that everything was fine, that waiting lists could grow and that delayed discharge could get worse—all while chief executive pay soared. They said that there was no need to restructure the service and no need to put patients and front-line staff first. They said that everything was okay and there was no need for change, but—lo and behold—now the SNP agrees that the NHS needs reform.

Seriously, the change of heart is welcome, but I am concerned that good ideas from Scottish

Labour rarely survive contact with the SNP. We should remember that the SNP adopted the idea of a national care service but bungled the legislation, with years wasted, millions of pounds lost and not a single extra hour of care delivered.

The message was that local care was important, but the SNP appears to want another go at centralising responsibility and removing it from councils altogether.

I am not sure that having only two mainland health boards will be adequate. Scottish Labour's proposals were for three, with one specifically to cover the Highlands and the north-east, and I urge ministers to consider that again in the interests of patient care. That reorganisation of health boards must be accompanied by a shift in the balance of care so that we prioritise primary and preventive care, which also means prioritising and resourcing social care to the level that is needed.

I will reserve judgment on the SNP's new plans until we see the full extent of the detail of what the Government intends to do, but I make a genuine offer to work with them to ensure that we get that detail right, support our NHS staff to deliver and improve services for patients.

The First Minister (John Swinney): I welcome what Jackie Baillie has just said, because the manner in which I have set out the arguments on public service reform today recognises the fact that I do not command a majority in this Parliament and that there is a need for us to reach agreement with others. There are some factors that we cannot escape in reforming public services and that will require that engagement, so I give Jackie Baillie a commitment that the Government is willing to engage in dialogue, and, on the basis of what she has said, I look forward to Labour participating in that dialogue.

Jackie Baillie: I look forward to having that dialogue with the First Minister and his ministers. I hope that it will take a form that has not hitherto been seen and that it will not ignore the issues that we have brought forward. I look forward to that change.

That is not the only big idea that the SNP has U-turned on. From scrapping peak rail fares to banning phones from school classrooms, there is plenty in the statement has been lifted straight out of Scottish Labour's plans.

I welcome that, but the SNP's record is not so welcome. History is always instructive. Our NHS remains in deep disarray, with waiting lists rising again and almost 700,000 people waiting for an NHS appointment while thousands have waited months or years. Delayed discharge continues costing the Scottish taxpayer millions of pounds every year and patients are stuck in hospital when

they should be at home. This summer, waiting times in accident and emergency were the worst on record.

Most depressing and cynical of all, the long-promised flagship Monklands hospital was, in effect, shelved, but today I see an exciting new announcement, with John Swinney pretending that everything is fine and there is nothing to see here. Constituency member, and then health secretary, Neil Gray made the delivery of the new Monklands hospital a central part of his election pitch. He and John Swinney posed for photographs at the site, all while knowing before the election that Government plans would dramatically change. He deliberately misled the people of Scotland—and his own constituents—by promising a hospital that he knew would not be delivered as planned.

That is shameful, but it is symbolic of the SNP's approach to our NHS. They promise the world but deliver nothing but more failure. Their big idea is to have more walk-in GP clinics, which is a plan that has been robustly criticised by health professionals as a gimmick that does nothing to fix the fundamental issues in primary care. Today we have a shiny new waiting times target, which is a pitiful ambition that, given the Government's track record, it may never even meet. Scotland's patients deserve so much better and I will make no apology for fighting for their cause in Parliament at every opportunity.

The failure to get to grips with the crisis in Scotland's NHS may be one of the most serious examples of Government failure, but it is far from unique. On the issue of crime, the latest statistics show that crime is on the rise across Scotland, with violent crime up by 7 per cent in a single year, sexual crime up by 9 per cent, domestic abuse by 19 per cent and fewer police officers on our streets. The programme for government's commitments to tackling crime and keeping women and children safe are, of course, welcome, but people want and need action, not warm words.

A misogyny bill is absolutely welcome, but that was promised previously. In fact, this is the third session of Parliament since it was first proposed and it has still not been delivered. Also, we know that the SNP's track record on crime is weak.

Our schools are in desperate need of support. It has been a decade since John Swinney himself was tasked with closing the poverty-related attainment gap. The gap is even wider now and is holding back thousands of young Scots. If he failed at that, how can we trust him to succeed as First Minister a decade later?

I waited with bated breath to hear John Swinney's new plan to fix education in Scotland, to close the attainment gap, to fund our universities and to support our colleges. What is the plan? It is

to provide a free school bag for every primary 1 pupil who wants one. If a free school bag was the answer, what on earth was the question? It will take more than a school bag to fix the mess that the SNP has made of our education system.

One of the fundamental duties of the Scottish Government is to make life easier for Scots. With many struggling to make ends meet, it is incumbent on the Government to do what it can to help with the urgency that is needed. John Swinney has already outlined his flagship idea to ease the squeeze on family budgets, price caps on food and essential items. He talked a lot about that during the election, but there was very little reference to it in his programme for government speech today.

However, I welcome the consultation launch. We need to do all that we can to help people who are struggling. There are, however, reservations about whether the measure will work in practice. Industry is not convinced. More important to me, a constituent who relies on low-cost items told me that she was worried that the measure would have the reverse effect and push up prices even higher. We will hold off on making a judgment for now until we see the detail, but we need a policy that is workable and does not wait for a lengthy legislative process that might be open to legal challenges.

Over the coming week, other Labour members will raise our ambitions to tackle child poverty, to grow the economy, to boost jobs, to build homes for people, to end rough sleeping and to invest in infrastructure.

As consideration turns to the budget, we must absolutely talk about the mismatch between the programme for government's ambitions and the £5 billion black hole in the finances coming down the track. The stakes are too high for old, broken SNP promises. We need to work better together, and Scottish Labour is committed to doing just that. At the same time, we will hold the Government to account.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I remind all members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak button, please.

15:57

Gillian Mackay (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green): The Scottish Greens fought the recent election on policies that would deliver for people and for planet, tackling both the climate crisis and the cost of living emergencies. Our record results show that people are ready for those radical ideas that make lives better for current and future generations.

The SNP used to share that vision. This time, five years ago, we were working with it on a progressive plan for Scotland whereby we worked collectively to use every power of this Parliament to create positive change.

I try very hard to be collaborative and to work with the Government where and when I can, as does my party, and we will continue to do that this session. However, there are a huge number of disappointments in this programme for government.

The proposal to cap bus fares at £2 has been kicked into the long grass for most of Scotland. There is no plan to implement rent controls. The promised ban on conversion practices has been shelved. There is nothing on how to implement the boycott, divestment and sanction of Israel that this Parliament voted for a year ago. The only proposal for hyperscale data centres is to produce a plan to attract more.

That is not a programme for government that Nicola Sturgeon would have signed off. Five years ago, the Scottish Greens delivered free bus travel for under-22s, saving thousands of young people money and making work and studying opportunities more accessible. We believe that free bus travel should be expanded to everyone, which would cut emissions while saving people money at a time when the cost of living crisis seems to be ever deepening.

Last year, Green MSPs secured the £2 bus cap pilot in the Highlands and Islands as a step towards the final goal of having universally free bus travel. John Swinney promised to roll that out to more areas of the country, but this programme for government kicks the fare cap into the long grass across most of Scotland.

The £2 cap has been a game changer for thousands of people across the Highlands and Islands, helping families and regular travellers to cut the cost of getting around, reducing emissions and keeping more money in people's pockets. It has shown what is possible when we put affordable, accessible public transport at the heart of our policies. We welcome the roll-out across the Strathclyde Partnership for Transport area from Monday morning, but the programme for government also says that it will take five years to roll the cap out to the rest of the country. A five-year wait, when there is already a national cap in England that will be reduced to £2 in January, lets down Scottish bus users. Why should people in the rest of the country have to wait five more years? The cost of living crisis is not waiting five years.

The programme for government says that the Scottish Government will continue to work with the United Kingdom Government to end conversion therapy, which involves trying to "cure" people of

their sexuality and pushing them to stop being trans. In the programme for government, it says:

“Should the UK Government fail to deliver we will not hesitate to bring forward Scottish legislation.”

Has the First Minister not seen that the UK Government has published its plan but that it applies only to England and Wales? What more information does the First Minister need? This Government needs to get off the fence, stop hesitating and decide whether it stands with LGBT people or not. Protecting LGBTQ Scots from abuse is the Scottish Government’s job, and we need to see it act.

We are a year on from the Parliament’s historic vote to boycott the apartheid state of Israel and the companies that are complicit in its occupation of Palestine, but the Scottish Government has failed to turn words into action. In most respects, it has done the bare minimum and offered little evidence of meaningful change. We welcome the Government’s commitment to explore a scholarship for students from Gaza, but that does not do anything to end the occupation or prevent companies from profiting from it. If a company is profiting from apartheid and genocide, the Scottish Government must use every power that it has to ensure that that company does not also profit from public money here, in Scotland. That requires more than statements of concern or gestures that change nothing; it requires real, measurable action. We hoped that this programme for government would be the moment that that changes, but it does not seem to be coming.

Action means reviewing existing contracts, ending relationships with companies that are identified as complicit in illegal settlement activity and giving councils the powers that they need to make ethical procurement decisions. The Scottish Government has shown that it can act when it chooses to. When ministers issued guidance to Scottish businesses following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, they made it clear that the private sector had a responsibility to respond. Palestinians deserve no less.

The programme for government should have been the moment that everything changed. It should have set out a clear timetable, concrete measures and a mechanism for accountability so that the Parliament’s vote is finally translated into action. We cannot have a boycott in name only. The Parliament did not vote for empty gestures, and it is hugely disappointing that the Scottish Government has not used this opportunity to set out how it will support the people of Palestine.

One of the most genuinely baffling parts of the document is that the Government is looking to attract “responsible green data” centres. Given that the Government cannot define a “green data

centre”, a responsible green data centre seems even more ridiculous. Such proposals, such as the one at Larbert in my region, have caused huge concern for local communities. Noise, diesel generators and light pollution are concerning not only for Larbert residents but for local businesses and the care home that is next door to the development. The care home is concerned that it will be unable to use its garden and provide the end-of-life care that it currently can.

We need a moratorium on such applications while guidance is developed, otherwise councils will have already made decisions by the time that guidance appears. Some local authorities have said that they do not have the expertise to take a decision on the applications. They also do not have the ability to look at them at a national level and assess what they mean for our national energy needs. The Scottish Government needs to take the issue seriously and support communities rather than private profit.

Families across Scotland are feeling the strain on their budgets and have been promised free childcare when their little ones turn three. We welcome movement on any form of free childcare in the programme for government but are disappointed that there is no movement on supporting local authorities to truly deliver free at three, which would make hundreds of pounds of difference to families’ budgets. We have also seen issues with cross-boundary placements. Constituents of mine in Falkirk have had to move their children twice at short notice due to the removal of funding, all because they live in one local authority and their children go to a childcare setting in another local authority.

This funding is part of a national scheme, so parents cannot understand why they are being excluded because of their postcode. I hope that, as part of the childcare review, the Government will look at this issue and work with local authorities to solve it. This is a programme for government that will be a huge disappointment to those who need cheaper bus travel, those who need a watertight ban on conversion practices and those who care about the environment. It is clear that the Scottish Greens are now the only party that will speak up for current and future generations who care about equality for all, economic justice and a habitable planet. We will spend the next five years speaking up for those people.

16:05

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): I am very pleased to see Malcolm Offord back here, fighting fit—although maybe not in that particular seat, of course.

We have just heard John Swinney's five-year plan for Scotland. Two words sum up this programme for government—"meddling" and "gimmicks". John Swinney went into the election saying that he would give a free school bag to every primary 1 pupil, but his manifesto gimmick does not even appear in his programme for government. I wonder whether he is too embarrassed to include it or whether it has just gone the same way as the SNP's broken promises on free bikes and laptops.

What is in the programme for government is John Swinney's Soviet-style supermarket price-fixing plan. Business groups warn that it is unnecessary and will be ineffective—a "potty gimmick", says the Scottish Retail Consortium. John Swinney does not listen to experts, but maybe he will listen when his own Government lawyers repeatedly say to him that this is a non-starter.

Then there is John Swinney's independence bill, which is nearly identical to Nicola Sturgeon's independence bill—zombie legislation back from the dead. However, this is no joke, because the "Government Expenditure and Revenue Scotland" figures published over recess confirm what we all know—that if the SNP ever gets its way, the people of Scotland will suffer tax rises and public spending cuts on a scale never seen before. As we heard from John Swinney today, he continues to be a fiscal flat-earther.

This is all a dangerous distraction when Parliament should be focusing on what really matters—cutting taxes, reducing the SNP's benefits bill, backing vital new oil and gas, fixing broken business rates, ensuring that criminals do their time, upgrading lifeline roads, building ferries and, of course, tackling NHS waiting lists.

The SNP is entirely responsible for plunging Scotland's NHS into a near-permanent state of crisis. Hundreds of thousands of Scots are waiting for treatment, yet the SNP now reckons that it is able to fix the problem of its own making. It will apparently do that by cutting the number of NHS boards from 14 to two. We welcome any serious effort to improve patient care and to curb the SNP's bloated state and we will carefully consider John Swinney's plan, but we will not allow him to destroy critical local services, which are already being cut. Our NHS must serve all communities equally across all of Scotland, and people will be understandably suspicious, because they have heard it all before. Look at the pre-election gimmick of walk-in GP clinics, which were not about delivering appointments but about delivering a cheap headline for John Swinney.

The SNP's record of large-scale public sector meddling is dire. Look at the mess that it made of

Police Scotland, which lurches from one crisis to another. With fewer officers on our streets, some crimes are not even being investigated, while violent and sexual crimes surge.

Then there is the millions squandered on the SNP's abandoned national care service—big ideas but abysmal delivery.

All of that is a distraction—a giant distraction—from the SNP's £5 billion black hole in Scotland's public finances, which has been caused by two decades of reckless spending, serial incompetence and scandalous waste, epitomised by two ferries costing almost half a billion pounds. John Swinney has bowed to every single inflation-busting public service pay deal and he has allowed a work-from-home culture in the civil service that kills productivity and fails the paying public. Throughout that time, the SNP has kept turning the thumbscrews on Scotland's hard-working taxpayers.

I am delighted that John Swinney finally agrees with the Scottish Conservatives that, under his party, the public sector has become bloated and inefficient and that cuts are necessary—that is common sense. However, I have very little faith in his ability to deliver. John Swinney assures us that Ivan McKee will tackle waste and cut costs. Ivan McKee has even been called the axeman. The problem is that John Swinney expects Ivan McKee to fell a forest while handing him a pair of garden pruners.

The SNP will not demand true value for taxpayers or cut taxes, it will not order public sector workers back to the office, it will not cull its bloated quangos and it refuses to even accept that its state benefits are out of control. We will have a lot more to say about John Swinney's programme for government, but we know from the SNP's record of meddling and gimmicks, and from John Swinney's record, that there is a massive gulf between their rhetoric and their delivery.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I remind members that I cannot call them to speak if they do not press their request-to-speak button. So, if you intend to speak in the debate, please press the button.

16:11

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh North Western) (LD): Occasions such as this are usually characterised by speeches of disagreement and rancour, as we have just heard, but let me begin with a moment of profound consensus on the eradication of male violence against women and girls. In July, this country saw three women murdered by partners or former partners. They will not be defined by the manner of their death or the people who took them from us, but I think that their

passing measures out the challenge that exists for our generation of parliamentarians in that eradication. That is one challenge on which Liberal Democrats will proudly join the Government.

In the previous session of Parliament, Liberal Democrats demonstrated that we are here to get things done. On such issues, we are prepared to hunt for agreement wherever we can find it, and we were rewarded at the ballot box for so doing.

Our newly expanded group of parliamentarians has not rested over the summer. When it emerged that some GP walk-in centres had seen just three or four patients in a day, Adam Harley rightly asked why, on that evidence, the Government thinks that it is right to now open 20 more.

Morven-May MacCallum argued that the law should automatically prevent convicted rapists from keeping their taxi operator licence, which is surely something that we should all agree on.

We have just learned that, last year, the Scottish Government's water company dumped sewage into our rivers, lochs and beaches more than 100,000 times, which is why Sanna Dykstra-Downie is rightly asking why bosses took home hundreds of thousands of pounds in bonuses and why Parliament is not modernising our laws on that.

When wildfires devastated the Cairngorms, Andrew Baxter was there asking, "Where are the helicopters? Where are the extra resources for the fire service? Why did it take nine days for ministers to meet in the Scottish Government's resilience room, by which time the blaze had consumed hundreds of square miles of the Cairngorms?" The Government's inertia is frustrating and it is symptomatic of its approach to many things. Although we will always hunt for agreement, we will always call out the shortcomings as well.

The backdrop to my remarks is sobering. It is a reminder of the failure of the party of government to grow our economy. As such, this will be a difficult session for the Administration. Everyone knows the trouble that public services and public finances are in, because none of us is insulated from it. Everybody feels the impact in some shape or form—they might be patients marooned in hospital waiting for a care package, islanders waiting for ferries or pupils with additional support needs missing out on support.

The SNP Government is now, with a black hole in the public finances to the tune of £5 billion, facing the business end of its failure to grow our economy. That is not inevitable; it took decades of political choices. If members flick through years of reports from the likes of the Scottish Fiscal Commission, they will read about how decisions routinely got deferred or dodged, how spending

has consistently been preferred to reform and how fiscal drag and record funding from the United Kingdom Government have been used to paper over the cracks. The result is a £5 billion chasm at a time when the NHS is still on its knees and people are desperate for more help with the cost of living.

We recognise that the need for reform is abundant, but the measures that were outlined in this statement speak to the political instincts of the SNP in relation to centralisation rather than any empirically led path to change that can empower communities to take matters into their own hands.

The statement hinted at the effective reintroduction of the national care service, which was so derided by our nation's stakeholders. It also referenced moving away from 14 territorial health boards to just two. However, that will not deliver improvements to patient experience. It will not free up social care to receive the 2,000 patients who are stuck in our hospitals, nor will it push down neurodiversity waiting times. It will not allow ambulances to discharge their patients into hospitals and it will not even save a great deal of money.

When we cautioned against the merger of Police Scotland, we did so because we knew that it would asset-strip control from local communities.

We are not a one-size-fits-all country. Can we really expect the needs of Portree hospital on Skye to receive particular attention from a health board that is based in the central belt? As liberals, we fundamentally believe that power works better when it is devolved closer to the communities that it serves.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care (Angela Constance): I wonder whether Mr Cole-Hamilton and his colleagues would consider the fact that they have often, very rightly and valiantly, raised the issue of how services that are delivered in, for example, rural Scotland—such as in Wick and Caithness—have been inconsistent in comparison to elsewhere in the country. Does he not think that public service reform is an opportunity to ensure that decision making and service delivery sit at a level that is best placed to understand and improve people's lives? Does he agree that we should work together to determine what is local, regional and national?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I agree with that point, but that is not the Government's policy; the Government's policy is to strip power away from decision making in our local communities.

Two health boards would be much more centralised than 14. Local control matters—that is what Liberals will always stand for. As we move into this parliamentary session, we will hunt for

agreement where we can, but we will also offer fierce opposition to the centralising instincts of this SNP Administration.

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

16:18

Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I thank the First Minister for setting out his programme for government and for its ambitious vision for Scotland. Despite current constitutional limitations, I am delighted that the First Minister is continuing to drive Scotland forward by delivering for the people of Scotland.

During the election, the SNP vowed to do even more to tackle the cost of living. Today, we have heard a range of measures that will have a real impact on people's lives. Those include boosting people's incomes, helping people back into work—which is the best route out of poverty—and a strong focus on economic growth, which will build Scotland's wealth in an inclusive way in order to tackle poverty.

I am particularly pleased to hear about the proposals regarding local authorities, which is especially important for Ayrshire. I have long supported the merger of Ayrshire's councils. That proposal has the backing not only of Ayrshire's three chief executives and the SNP—after speaking to Alan Gemmell MP only 10 days ago, I know that it also has the backing of all four Labour MPs in Ayrshire. Such a merger would save millions of pounds by slimming down bureaucracy and freeing up resources to sustain and boost front-line public services.

I would have liked the Scottish Government to go even further by incorporating local health boards into the new democratic structure. For example, in NHS Ayrshire and Arran, that would obviate the need for three integration joint boards and ensure better and more effective decision making, which would allow the board to share resource and provide more local control as opposed to greater centralisation. However, I am very interested in hearing more details about what the First Minister proposes as the debate progresses, including around the logic and the implications for front-line services and building capacity.

A stronger, one-Ayrshire council would also would also boost economic development and investment with Scottish Enterprise, Ayrshire College and local businesses interacting with only one local authority. I trust that the First Minister and the Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform, Ivan McKee, will work to deliver that new one-Ayrshire council by completing a consultation

on such changes by the end of this year. Three months of engagement, as outlined by the First Minister, demonstrate that clear ambition to implement the necessary reforms by 1 April 2028. That is a realistic timetable if it is pursued with determination and vigour and differentiates between vested interests and the imperative to deliver better public services to those we serve.

I declare an interest as chair of North Ayrshire Women's Aid. I welcome the First Minister's renewed commitment to tackling violence against women and girls. However, fundamental to that is the need to ensure that victims of violence and domestic abuse are not repeatedly re-traumatised. The First Minister will be aware that, too often, the reality is that those who are convicted of serious sexual violence and domestic abuse are released on bail and go on to break bail conditions and non-harassment orders. They hunt down their original victims and, once again, victims feel that the system does not properly listen to or protect them.

As a result, sometimes, women pay for that with their lives. Recently, we have seen high-profile cases of that, but the tragedy is that those cases are all too common. Prevention is really important, but if women are to be protected from sexual violence and domestic abuse, the foundation of that protection is in how robustly the criminal justice system deals with offenders.

Statistics tell us that, every year, eight women in Scotland are murdered by their partners or former partners. However, the real number is undoubtedly much higher, given the hidden homicides and suicides to be factored in. I urge the First Minister to consider some of the groundbreaking work that is going on in France and I also urge him to meet Professor Jane Monckton-Smith, an expert in the field, in order to better inform progress and work in that area.

Today, we see the ambitious, radical and innovative outlook of this new Scottish Government. I continue to urge the First Minister to push at the boundaries of the constraints of the devolved settlement, which limits our powers but which cannot, and will not ever, limit the SNP's vision of what we know is Scotland's boundless potential. I know that the First Minister's ambition for Scotland knows no limits, and I hope that he will continue to be radical and innovative to drive forward the ambitions that we all have for a healthier, fairer, more prosperous and, importantly, more confident Scotland.

16:23

Paul McLennan (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP): In May this year, we all stood for election on our party manifesto and ambitions for Scotland. The SNP won an

overwhelming victory, with a record margin over the second-place parties. The SNP has a mandate to progress the manifesto that I and other colleagues stood on.

We all have a part to play in delivering change, whether in government or not. We all have a responsibility to ensure that reform delivers for those we serve.

I will touch on a few points that were raised in the First Minister's speech. He set out main themes that we can all agree on: we will act to eradicate child poverty, make Scotland the best place to do business, tackle the climate and nature crises and improve Scotland's public services. All of those issues impact my constituents in East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs.

The First Minister talked about the need for public sector reform. I remember the Christie commission. Collectively, did Scotland do enough to progress that agenda? I do not think so. The First Minister stated that we must undertake radical and widespread public service reform, putting the individual at the heart of the changes we make. That is what we are all here for—to serve our constituents. Of course, the First Minister was correct—we can all agree that all public services need to make a decisive shift towards prevention and early intervention. We all talk about that, but now is the time for action.

It is about removing barriers to progress and making sure that every pound of investment is focused on front-line delivery. It is about achieving consensus—in the chamber, as we have heard today, and with our trade unions, other stakeholders and, of course, our constituents. We all have a role to engage with our constituents on the programme for government. It must be about focusing on the needs of our citizens rather than those of the existing structures and systems. The First Minister stated that he is open to discussing that across parties.

He also stated that we are faced with the reality that some of our councils are too small to be strategic and some are too big to be local. East Lothian is the fastest-growing area in Scotland, with our population due to increase by a third in around 10 to 15 years. Opportunities for economic growth need to be supported by the Scottish Government. I will continue to ensure that we maximise those opportunities in East Lothian. Our regions need to be strengthened and empowered to maximise growth opportunities, so I look forward to taking part in those discussions.

The First Minister stated that we will begin a three-month period of intense engagement with our local government partners about a new structure for local government. Many members

have local government experience. I will engage thoroughly with my local council on the issue.

The First Minister also stated that the starting point is that changes must not create another layer of administration or a new group of politicians, and that reform must mean stronger and more strategic regions with the powers, the permission and the flexibility—that is key—that they need to drive economic growth and investment in all parts of Scotland, so that we can, in turn, improve people's lives in all parts of Scotland and all our constituencies.

Giving strong economic levers to regions, where relevant, must be at the forefront of our thoughts, alongside new powers possibly being devolved to Scotland by the UK Government, which is part of the debate that we need to have.

Reforms to social care must also be part of the engagement over the next three months with partners in local government, trade unions, the third sector and our communities. I pledge to constituents and stakeholders in East Lothian that I will do that.

For the NHS itself, as the First Minister stated, it is key to have more joined-up delivery, improve patient access to care and reduce the inequality for some patients that is due to health board boundaries. I am a member of the Health, Care and Sport Committee, and I look forward to engaging with that committee and others on the issue. Currently, there are 14 territorial boards, which will now move to being two strategic health boards. The devil will be in the detail, but it is up to us to engage with local health boards and constituents on how we deliver those changes. That will enable us to deliver the additional capacity to ensure that, by the end of 2031, no one waits more than 26 weeks for the treatment that they need. That is a key pledge by the First Minister. I pledge that I will work very closely with NHS Lothian colleagues over the next three months.

This is a radical programme for government. We all have our part to play in ensuring public sector reform and in having mature and responsible debate.

I welcome the announcements on how we tackle violence against women. That issue requires action, as well as a cultural change involving all men in Scotland.

I also welcome the announcements about the major projects office, encouraging investment with a focus on housing and energy, alongside a Scottish high-growth unit, working with business, that can accelerate the delivery of the right support for high-potential businesses, so that they can

grow to scale in Scotland, and—just as importantly—stay in Scotland.

This is a radical change. We all have a part to play in engaging with our communities.

16:28

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP):

Just a few short months on from the election, in which a record number of pro-independence MSPs were elected, I want to say how pleased I am that we now have a referendum bill out for consultation. People had their voices heard at that election and gave the Parliament a clear 73-to-56-seat mandate to hold a referendum.

Perhaps the new Prime Minister could have heard that himself from folk up here if he had bothered to take his listening tour to Scotland. Instead, he is sitting hundreds of miles away in 10 Downing Street, denying folk in Scotland a say on their own futures, or possibly he is sitting hundreds of miles away in Number 10 North, denying people in Scotland a say on their own futures.

Until we get our independence, though, we still need to do all that we can to make Scotland the best possible place for the folk who live here. That means using the powers that we have, which, far too often, means mitigating decisions that are taken in Westminster and do not work for Scotland. It means working to improve people's lives, eradicate child poverty, create jobs and bring in investment. It means driving up living standards and putting more money into families' pockets.

When times are tough, I am proud to support a Scottish Government that is listening, helping folk and showing leadership.

I want to focus on a particular aspect of the programme for government. Over the last wee while, we have heard a lot about protecting women and girls, but, more often than not, we have heard about that from men, far too many of whom do not actually listen to women. They have just decided that we need protecting from something that they do not like, and some of those with the loudest voices, who seem to use them to shout at hotels, have some pretty horrendous backgrounds when it comes to their own treatment of women.

I therefore commend the First Minister for showing what protecting women and girls actually looks like. He started by actually listening to women, including women who have suffered domestic abuse. It is not just the First Minister who has done that but his whole Government. Simita Kumar, our Minister for Equalities and International Development, met Grampian Women's Aid in my constituency during the recess. I told the Parliament last year that Grampian Women's Aid is a fantastic organisation,

and I will say it again. Grampian Women's Aid is amazing, and I encourage all my fellow north-east MSPs to visit it and listen to it. As we never know who is watching our debates, I will repeat something that I said last year: if you are a woman in the north-east who needs help, Grampian Women's Aid will help you, so please do not be afraid to reach out.

Right now, Scotland has a problem with violence against women and girls, and I am thankful that we have a First Minister who not only recognises that but has set out today steps to tackle it.

Russell Findlay: Every party agrees about the importance of tackling violence against women and girls, but I wonder whether the member regrets the passing of the legislation three years ago that made it even more difficult to remand in custody men who harm women.

Jackie Dunbar: We are talking about the here and now. I am not going to listen to another speech that could have been read out last year. I am going to concentrate on the programme for government for the next five years.

I am thankful that MSPs from across the chamber have signed up to back the *Sunday Post's* "It's Time" campaign—a campaign that has now been reflected in the programme for government.

Today, we have heard plans for a misogyny bill, which will outlaw misogyny in Scotland; plans to ban not just the creation but the possession of deepfake intimate images; and plans to make pregnancy an aggravating factor in domestic abuse cases. There is more to do and more to fix, but a lot of that does not need legislation but funding and leadership, including from all of us. It needs men to start listening to women rather than just proclaiming themselves our defenders; once they have listened and understood, it needs them to play their part in standing up to unacceptable behaviour, including from those that they consider friends, which I know is sometimes the hardest thing to do. It also needs us to change attitudes across the country.

However, on what we can make better with legislation, what we have heard today is a very good start, not just for women and girls but across the board. I trust this programme for government to make people's lives better.

Presiding Officer, the words

"Work as if you live in the early days of a better nation"

are carved into the walls of this very building, and are at the foundations of this Government and its plans for Scotland's future.

16:33

Stuart McMillan (Inverclyde) (SNP): Although I welcome the fact that Malcolm Offord's health is a lot better and he is back in the chamber, I want to touch on two brief points. First, I remind Mr Offord that it was his former party that demolished the shipbuilding industry in the west of Scotland, particularly in Inverclyde, which he referenced earlier. Secondly, it was his former party's emphasis on the free market economy that ensured that the electronics industry also left Inverclyde to go to cheaper countries.

Today's programme for government sets the scene for the new session of Parliament. This SNP Government is focused on delivering progress on its priorities within the first 100 days. That includes commencing the roll-out of the expanded 10-year £50 million homelessness prevention fund; the opening of the first round of applications for the first homes fund, which will provide first-time buyers with a £10,000 contribution towards the deposit on their first home; opening GP walk-in centres, with 24 more areas in Scotland set to benefit, including Inverclyde; and reopening the adult social care displaced worker scheme to new applications to help to expand the number of care workers in Scotland. Those are just some of the things that have happened over the past 100 days, but I believe that we need to consolidate that work, so I welcome the First Minister's comments about reforming our public services.

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the need to do things differently and better, so I agree that restructuring the way that we deliver services is crucial. It is important that we focus on prevention, drive public sector reform where it is needed and ensure that investment is directed towards front-line services to improve outcomes for people and communities. As the First Minister touched on earlier, we are here for the people. We are not here for ourselves; we are here to deliver a better Scotland for the people.

The First Minister touched on the importance of health services being delivered closer to home. I know that that will be welcomed by my constituents in Inverclyde who have had to travel elsewhere for routine health services.

The first programme for government of any party for any new session of Parliament must set out all its different stalls for the next five years. The document from the SNP Scottish Government is brimming with the SNP's ambitious plans to deliver for the people of Scotland. For parents, there is a massive expansion in childcare. For students, there is a guarantee that the SNP will always protect free higher education. For commuters, there is a guarantee that the SNP will not bring back peak rail fares, and the new £2 bus fare cap will be introduced across Scotland, with the cap in

Inverclyde starting on Monday, which is great news for people there. For anyone struggling to afford nutritious food, there is a price cap on a basket of essential food items. For our health service, there are plans to protect, renew and invest so that we can drive down waiting times.

I again welcome the First Minister's comments on the community healthcare hub in Port Glasgow and on the GP walk-in centres for Inverclyde. In my Inverclyde constituency, house building is urgently required. Too many families live in overcrowded conditions, and many older people live in homes that require significant repair and are too costly for them to heat. Registered social landlords that acquire larger, older properties can assist, but we need new, high-quality housing stock. I therefore welcome the £4.9 billion of investment that is earmarked for building thousands more affordable homes. That will go some way to helping to get people back into work, training and education related to the construction sector.

The £2 bus fare cap will help more people to travel around Inverclyde and will get more people out of their cars and using public transport.

As the convener of the Climate Action Committee this session, I am even more aware of the challenges that we face in ensuring that Scotland is resilient to more extreme weather events. The £15 million funding for flood support for communities across Scotland is really important. That will certainly help many more communities across the country. I know that from my constituency, where flooding has put people out of their homes. However, with a team approach to making improvements, those houses are back in use, which is great. I welcome the engagement of Scottish Water and Inverclyde Council in that regard.

As colleagues have mentioned, the acute need to address violence against women and girls in Scotland remains. It is not a new issue. We are not immune to those challenges in Scotland, but we can show the leadership and willingness to do more. I welcome the plans to introduce a misogyny bill, which was touched on earlier.

Those are all things that we have done, are doing and want to do even more, and that is within the constraints of devolution. However, with the full powers of independence and without Westminster's mismanagement—which we have seen in terms of Brexit, which we did not vote for, the austerity measures that have been put in place, the failed Truss-Kwarteng budget and the failed Keir Starmer Labour Government—we can do much more. That is why I absolutely welcome the draft referendum bill that was published by the Scottish Government last week, and I know that it

will be supported by many people in my constituency.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): We now move on to the winding-up speeches.

16:39

Willie Rennie (Fife North East) (LD): I start by thanking the First Minister, as he took the time over the summer, following the tragic death of Stacy Hunter, to meet with Ann, her mother, and their family. Stacy was originally from Falkland in my constituency, and I know that the community there has been utterly devastated by what happened to her. I attended the funeral and there were people in tears all around me.

I know that, following Stacy's death, campaigners are keen to see changes to ensure that we fully utilise available tagging technology and new global positioning system technologies for tracking. It is clear from Stacy's death that, even though her estranged husband was ordered to stay away from her, that was not sufficient to protect her. I hope that we can work together to try to make progress and better understand what more we can do, not only with technology but perhaps through changes in regulation and law, to ensure that Stacy did not die in vain and is remembered forever.

The First Minister: I am grateful to Mr Rennie for giving way, and I give him an assurance that I am happy to engage on these questions to identify what further steps we can take. I very much appreciated the dialogue that I had with Stacy Hunter's mum, and I give Mr Rennie a commitment to follow up the issues that were raised in that dialogue and to identify the further steps that we can take to maximise the use of technology to support some of the decisions that are taken in relation to bail and other matters.

Willie Rennie: I appreciate the First Minister's remarks. As always, we will work together where we can to ensure that we make a difference, because the proposed Stacy's law that campaigners are calling for needs to be thoroughly investigated.

That goes back to the central point of my contribution, which is that we must deliver. As I have rehearsed previously in other contributions, there is a great degree of anger and frustration, and a belief that this place does not work for people: that it talks a lot but does not deliver any changes. We are talking about people who have endured perhaps 20 years of stagnant wages and cold homes, so we must deliver, and it is therefore incumbent on us all—as Alex Cole-Hamilton set out—to hunt for agreement.

That is why I liked the First Minister's emphasis, in his statement, on a number of different areas. All of it—the emphasis on work, business and growth; on the use of technology for public sector workers; on breaking down silos between different parts of the public sector; on the introduction of the high-growth unit, following his discussion with the business community; on funding for more homes, which I know has been announced previously; and on the major projects office—is a good indication that there is a focus on delivery. Sometimes a focus on delivery can be incredibly tedious and boring, but that work can be some of the most fruitful, because it is about meaningful change.

What we need in public sector reform is behavioural change and leadership by those who are responsible for different parts of the public sector, not only between but inside bodies, because sometimes the barriers exist within. That is why I am rather nervous about the rest of the First Minister's speech, in which he talked about the big changes to the NHS and the care service, and looking at local government reform. I am not against reform of bodies, but I am not absolutely sure what will be resolved by changing the structures and the boundaries of those organisations. As the First Minister knows, the Scottish Liberal Democrats were strong critics of the establishment of a national police service. I think that we were right to be critical, certainly in the early years, because the pace of reform risked people's lives—in fact, with the introduction of central control centres, people did lose their lives as a result of the rushed reform.

We are nervous about those things. Instinctively, we are in favour of local power and communities being in charge, and I hear that from the First Minister. However, we are rushing towards structural reform when I believe we need behavioural change and real leadership to drive and force that collaboration between different parts of the public sector. For instance, we can look at care. The relationships between care and housing and care and education are just as important as its relationship to the NHS, but we are not proposing to create one big national public service. We will still require leaders to collaborate between the different parts of the public sector, so I urge the First Minister to act with caution as he progresses those changes, because I do not believe that big upheaval that lasts years—and potentially distracts people, who will be looking over their shoulders and worrying about whether they will keep their jobs—is necessarily the answer to doing the sometimes boring, detailed work that delivers the change that this country deserves.

I had much more to contribute, but I will conclude on that point.

16:45

Craig Hoy (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Today's programme for government sets out what this Government hopes to achieve over the next five years, but, sadly, because Scots have heard it all before, it looks less like a five-year plan and more like a five-year excuse to dodge scrutiny.

The proposed food price caps, which have been rejected by producers and retailers, would most likely be illegal and would lead to higher prices and, no doubt, a confected constitutional power row.

Local government reform and empowerment are proposed by a Government that has spent years cutting council budgets, centralising services and ring fencing its own budgets.

There will be more GP walk-in centres, despite the dismal attendance numbers at those that have launched already and the mounting criticism from front-line clinicians.

Instead, this programme for government could have been about growing our economy, lowering people's bills and fixing public services, which John Swinney has singularly failed to do. He failed to do so as Scotland's finance secretary, as Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, as Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery and as Deputy First Minister, and now he is failing to do it as First Minister—for however long he hangs around.

The message from stakeholders across Scotland was clear. For example, the Scottish Chambers of Commerce says that the SNP must reduce the cost of doing business, accelerate infrastructure delivery—something that is particularly poor in this SNP Government—and address skills shortages.

I welcome one of the announcements in the First Minister's programme for government: that there will be additional support for the last pub or shop in any town or village. How has it come to a position that far too many of our towns and villages are down to their last pub or shop because of the SNP's repeated failure to pass on the money for rates relief that the UK Government readily provided?

This uninspiring five-year programme for government stems from a manifesto that lacked ambition and that one commentator, Nicola Sturgeon, said had a lack of "vision or big-picture thinking". From her vantage point in lower-tax London, Nicola Sturgeon described John Swinney's campaign as being

"detached from the big issues bearing down on people's lives."

For the first time—and for the *Official Report*—I agree whole-heartedly with the former First Minister when she points out that this SNP Government is fundamentally failing to address the real concerns of ordinary Scots, failing to meaningfully support Scotland's oil and gas sector, failing to ensure that dangerous prisoners serve their sentences in full, and failing to reduce the size of the bloated civil service—something that Ivan McKee will continue to fail to do unless he is willing to face down Scotland's public sector unions.

Today's statement proves that this SNP Government is out of step with Scottish people. It contains very little on how this SNP Government, led by John Swinney, will tackle the £5 billion deficit that it has created and appears to be ill prepared to tackle.

It is Scottish taxpayers who, by the end of this decade, will pay a heavy price for John Swinney's failure. At a time of mounting concerns about the cost of living, businesses and households want to see their bills come down, but the biggest bill that many of them face is their tax bill. As we saw over the course of the summer, and as was confirmed by the Scottish Fiscal Commission, the SNP's fiscal financial mismanagement has not just made Scotland the highest-taxed part of the UK. Those higher taxes are failing to deliver the revenues that are needed to meet the SNP's present spending obligations, particularly the soaring bill for social security and, within that, the SNP's soft-touch approach to the adult disability payment.

I turn to public sector reform. I see that Mr McKee is not sitting in his place. I do not doubt that he will come forward with a plan—the SNP is very good at developing plans. However, it had a plan to get civil servants back into the office and it has failed to do so. It had a plan to reduce the size and head count of the civil service, and it has failed to do so. So, when it introduces yet another plan—for example, to reduce the number of health boards—is that not simply shifting deck chairs on the Titanic?

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen Deeside and North Kincardine) (SNP): When it comes to reducing head counts, should we perhaps take advice from the Conservative Party whose numbers were massively reduced as a result of the election?

Craig Hoy: I seem to recall that Mr Flynn was a member of the House of Commons when the SNP's numbers there were absolutely slashed. This is a smaller Parliament, and Mr Flynn likes to try to make as much mischief as he can, but he cannot evade the facts: the SNP's approach is high on tax and low on delivery. It puts benefits over work and criminals over victims. It is gimmick

after gimmick from the man whose job Mr Flynn wants.

Last week, we saw the publication of a draft bill on independence. The SNP Government is still obsessed with constitutional politics at the expense of delivering better outcomes for the people of Scotland. It spends more and taxes more but delivers less. It sets ambitious targets but fails miserably to meet them.

In the words of its former leader, this SNP Government is “detached” from the concerns of the people that it says it serves.

It is a sad truth that Scotland simply cannot afford this five-year plan and it cannot afford five more years of John Swinney and the SNP.

16:51

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I have said before, in previous PFG debates, that any fair reading of a programme for government is likely to find a mix of the good, the bad and the missing. That is true once again this year.

I want to pick out a couple of the elements that there should be strong agreement on and that we can welcome. Action on the cost of living is a theme that clearly remains important to the Government and the First Minister; it should be important to all of us. On some of the most high-profile measures that the Government wants to take on the cost of living, we will need to see the detail—there are some questions that will need to be answered. However, we should all strongly share that aim.

We should also share the aims that the First Minister set out when he spoke about gender-based violence. We should welcome serious action being taken on that issue; it would stand in stark contrast with those who use that issue cynically, as a pretext to attack minorities in our society. I welcome the First Minister’s emphasis on taking action on it.

I also welcome his willingness to consider meaningful change to local government. The First Minister is correct in his analysis that some councils are too small to be strategic and others are too big to be genuinely locally accountable. However, there is a concern that some obvious options—such as the balance that we used to have between district and regional councils—have been ruled out before the dialogue begins. I am also concerned that in the programme for government there seem to be no serious proposals to reform how we pay for local government. There is no commitment to replace council tax. A bill is coming in year 1 that will be on council tax, but its purpose will be only to tweak the bands. Does the First Minister intend to reinvent the structure of local

government but leave councils still dependent on a tax system that, by the end of this parliamentary session, will be 40 years out of date? That would not be good enough.

I will move on to some proposed measures of which I am more directly critical. My colleague Gillian Mackay was right to highlight the issue of data centres. We know that, on their own, the proposals that are already in the pipeline for hyperscale data centres would use far more than Scotland’s existing peak electricity consumption, and 24,000 people who know that have signed the Scottish Greens’ petition to the Scottish Government. Even the SNP’s own national council has called for a moratorium, yet, looking at the scale of the problem as it already stands, the Scottish Government seems to want even more data centres to be attracted to Scotland. A problem that is already too big to handle under current planning rules would become even bigger following the Scottish Government’s aspiration.

As for the bus fare cap, I agree that we should welcome the rapid progress in Glasgow and the west of Scotland, but the truth is that the national roll-out is on a far longer timescale than was implied from any fair reading of the SNP’s commitments during the election campaign. We also need the details on the better buses legislation. That will not come in year 1 of the programme for government, but urgency is needed on the issue, including a quick solution to remove the panel stage in the franchising process so that we can speed up the change that is needed. Scotland is already years behind much of England on the issue, so we need to accelerate.

On the proposal for a heat in buildings bill, I wish that I could have confidence that the bill will end up being a positive element of the programme for government. However, given the decisions that were taken at the end of the previous parliamentary session, it looks far more likely that we will end up with a target, with no delivery mechanism attached, no clean heating standard and no plan to decarbonise heat at the pace that is required. We would miss a massive opportunity to cut not just emissions but our energy bills and to decouple ourselves from overdependence on expensive fossil fuels.

As for the proposed merger of environmental bodies, the challenges and consequences remain entirely unclear. Understandably, ministers might well see them as working under a common portfolio, but, in reality, the bodies perform distinct and important functions that cannot be sacrificed.

I will mention a few more measures that are missing from the programme for government. There is nothing at all to implement and put serious substance behind last year’s vote on a programme

to boycott, divest from and sanction the state of Israel and companies that are profiting from the illegal occupation, the genocide and the illegal settlements. The Government knows that if it is going to take seriously the commitment that the Parliament voted for, far more substantive action needs to be taken.

There is also nothing on integrated ticketing. We have heard the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport say clearly that he wants to make progress on that issue by the end of this parliamentary session, but it simply will not happen without a plan, and that plan does not seem to be under way.

Finally, on what is missing, we are deeply disappointed that there is no commitment yet to legislate in this Parliament to take action on the horrific practices that are known as conversion practices. The Scottish Government is still using the phrase

“Should the UK Government fail to deliver”.

We already know that the UK Government’s bill will not apply in Scotland, and, even if it did, it is riddled with loopholes—so much so that TransActual described that bill as reading like

“an instruction manual for abuse”.

That is how it described the bill that has been introduced by the UK Government. We cannot merely copy that agenda and follow in lockstep. We need legislation in Scotland.

The First Minister said that he wants a Scottish state that is “rewired and reimagined”. That rhetoric matches Andy Burnham saying that he wants to reverse 40 years of neoliberalism. If we recognise the need for a new economic model and the need to turn that kind of grand rhetoric into a reality, the Scottish Government’s programme for government should have set out how to turn that into a reality by reversing deregulation and expanding public and community ownership in our economy. There are devolved opportunities, with existing powers, to make the progress that is necessary. The Greens will continue to push for that progress and will bring forward substantive proposals that will allow the Scottish Government to make that happen.

16:59

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):

The programme for government must be about seizing our opportunities and facing up to the big challenges that Scotland faces. The clearest example of that is child poverty—the loss of potential in our country and the affront of great need among our young people. That is the First Minister’s declared number 1 priority.

The Parliament set a legal target that fewer than one in 10 children should be living in relative poverty by 2030. However, the latest Scottish Government figures tell us that the figure stands at 21 per cent today. That means that 210,000 children in Scotland are growing up in poverty, and three quarters of those children live in households in which somebody is in work.

There is a significant distance that we must all travel. The Government’s own modelling suggests that, if we keep to the current trajectory, the proportion of children living in relative poverty will still be at around 18 per cent in 2030-31, which is almost twice the number in the statutory target that was unanimously agreed by Parliament. The question for all of us is what we are going to do about that. I believe that the Government should establish a cross-party commission to bring together the evidence and agree on proposals to get us back on track towards meeting the target. I hope that that is something that the First Minister might consider.

In his statement, the First Minister did not address the black hole in the public finances that we all know will dominate the next five years of this session of Parliament. Ministers, including the First Minister, may say that that is a matter for the budget—we will hear plenty more about that from the Deputy First Minister—but it is the policy agenda that has led to that black hole, and only the policy agenda can fix it.

We need honesty from the Government about the state of Scotland’s public finances, because only honesty will do. The issue of the black hole will define, and will either drive or destroy, the programme that the First Minister has set out today. The £5 billion figure is the gap between what the Government plans to spend and the resources that will be available to it by the end of the decade; it is a figure that predates the additional spending commitments that the SNP made during the election. We still have not had clarity about the status of the additional £1.4 billion of spending commitments made in the party’s election manifesto.

Ministers will inevitably seek to blame others, but the evidence simply does not support that argument, because the crisis is one of the SNP’s own making. The Scottish budget has increased by billions of pounds in recent years. Last week, amid a blizzard of panicked independent analysis, the Auditor General set out absolutely clearly how we have arrived here and said that those decisions “are all political choices.”

That is the reality that the Government must confront. For years, ministers have relied on short-term fixes and one-off allocations to balance budgets instead of delivering meaningful reform of

our public services, and that is the approach that Audit Scotland has repeatedly warned the Government about. Public service reform is necessary, but it cannot become an exercise in making front-line workers and communities pay the price for the Government's chronic failure to sustainably manage Scotland's finances.

Jackie Baillie was absolutely right to say that there is merit in the headlines of some of the proposals that the First Minister set out today, but we will reserve judgment until we have far more detail. I believe that the First Minister and his Government have started big and really serious conversations today.

Regarding NHS boards, it is worrying that the Highlands and Islands and the north-east are not being protected with individual capacity, given the specific circumstances that those communities face because of both geography and need. We must see that being addressed. [*Interruption.*] The cabinet secretary is saying from her seat that they are being protected, but we have not seen that provision. I know for a fact that two chief executives—one in Glasgow and one in Edinburgh—have been being paid more than those in the rest of Scotland for the past year, which means that there will be extreme worry across the country. We know that there is a question about whether there will be east and west boards; we still do not have that detail. If the cabinet secretary is able to provide that, I would be glad to hear it.

Angela Constance: Mr Marra has been a regular advocate for his community and for the north-east being better served. The point that I wish to make to him is that public sector reform is necessary not only for financial sustainability but to ensure that there is equity of access across all of Scotland.

Michael Marra: The cabinet secretary makes a fair point, but we need to see the plans and proposals in order to understand how equity will be provided. We are absolutely concerned about democratic oversight and accountability in those plans, because, when those are absent, we end up with scandals such as that at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital or the Eljamel scandal. We must be clear that proper oversight and proper accountability are required in order to ensure that citizens get the protection that they need in their health service. We must see the detail of that; I am sure that there is an awful lot more to come.

On local authorities, we have scant details of what I think it is fair to say is the First Minister's decade-long attack on local government in this country. Budgets have been decimated under this Government, and a further £0.5 billion of cuts are slated in the Scottish spending review.

We know that the First Minister believes that responsibility for education should be extracted from local authorities. Now we have proposals to extract responsibility for social care as well, alongside the transfer of economic development functions.

There is a very strong case for some of those issues—economic development in particular—being addressed on a regional basis, but, again, we need to see the detail of how that will work and, crucially, what power this Government will give up and hand to local regions to drive economic growth where it is absolutely needed.

These are big discussions, and the question is whether this is about doing government better or about achieving greater efficiency, because there appear to be few up-front savings in the proposals that have been brought forward today. We know that the £5 billion black hole is not just looming but is already present.

All the changes, including those that the Government claims will reduce management costs, will require up-front investment, and it is not obvious where any savings will be realised. We should look carefully at the example of the national care service. In the previous session of Parliament, we were told from the outset that that would be a mission of the then Government and the most fundamental reform of public services that this country had ever seen. However, there was a total and abject failure by the Government either to plan properly or to do the finances properly, to the point where the Finance and Public Administration Committee had to reject the proposals that were before it.

That is a salient lesson for this Government about the challenges. The most important thing is that we have clarity on intent. What is it that the Government intends to achieve? What is driving the plans? If the First Minister can tell us, we will be constructive partners in those discussions, including in the chamber. Greater clarity on that will give us a better chance of success.

17:07

Kim Schmulian (Glasgow) (Reform): I thank the First Minister for his statement. All of us in the chamber are acutely aware of the financial challenges that we, as a nation, face. We should be focused on facing up to those and on doing our utmost to implement available solutions.

We are presented with an almost unique set of challenges, some of which are within our control and some are not. What are the options for fulfilling this programme of government? We could raise what are already the highest income taxes on the wealthy, although the evidence from the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland suggests

that the yield from doing so might be lower than a simple calculation suggests, because taxpayers can change how, when and where they receive income, or we could focus on something that might get support across the chamber.

We already have high taxes, but we could use the money from those high taxes on things that raise the economic growth rate, including education, infrastructure projects and innovative business research and development that delivers.

At the same time, we must be up front with the public in the way that past Governments have not been at times. I do not point the finger at the SNP alone. Successive UK Governments have been guilty of hiding the truth and papering over the cracks. We have more going out than is coming in, and the UK has a major debt to service.

Where do we start? It must be with our skills gap. I am presenting not political views but verifiable statistics. We have a skills gap in many sectors, and we do not have enough workers in the profitable sectors that we need to grow. We must promote science, technology, engineering and mathematics programmes in schools so that students have the qualifications that they need to gain entry to our centres of excellence in those crucial fields.

We need schools to be able to inform pupils who are applying for university and college about where jobs are located and what skills are required by the marketplace. We need fewer of our valuable arts graduates to end up in jobs that they are overqualified to do academically, when they are perhaps less qualified in practical terms. They end up on low incomes and are saddled with student debt, which prevents them getting on to the housing ladder. They need more help and practical support with pathways that reinforce their chosen degree.

The number of fee-paying students that we are having to enrol in Scottish universities is increasing, because the funding gap has been rising. Predominantly from the far east, those students are attracted by degree courses in engineering and biochemistry. The data here speaks for itself: on some degree courses, nearly 20 per cent of graduates are taking what they have learned here back to their own countries to grow their economies, and that is definitely not helping us.

I am encouraged by the work that the Scottish Funding Council has done since 2020 on its review of coherent provision and sustainability. The aim has been to align funding of further education with high-paying jobs and pathways to profitable careers. However, not enough has been done by schools to highlight the initiative, and more focus on beneficial options is required.

When the widening access programme is added into the mix, which was developed from the Scottish Government's blueprint for fairness recommendations, the situation is compounded. Many students who have five As at higher level will not get a place if there is another student from a disadvantaged area with four As and a B who has an otherwise similar application. The result is that someone will end up doing a degree that they do not really want to do, or they will go south, get into debt and, critically, they will not return to Scotland because more opportunities are available down south. I do not want to attack the programme, because I would likely have benefited from it in the 1980s, but Scottish Funding Council data shows that there is a 4 per cent gap in retaining students on the programme into their second year, which is a waste of potential. We also do not have essential long-term data on how the graduates fare when they enter the workplace, and we need that information to make improvements and get the best from the system.

Here is a sample of what some of our foremost institutions have said on the skills gap topic: that Scotland risks producing brilliant ideas that ultimately produce jobs and revenue elsewhere; that education, business, investment and economic policy must work together; and that the right skills may start at an innovative company, but to grow to global level, investment is required. That is all very indicative. It is such a shame, therefore, that the Scottish National Investment Bank has not fared better with start-ups.

Regrettably, it is not only the skills gap that is holding us back. Managers report that some recruits often turn up for work unprepared, and statistics from an employer skills survey in 2024 indicate that that is the position whether the recruit is a university or college graduate or a school leaver. Many have no concept of appropriate respect for their colleagues who lead, support and appraise them, and they often show no adherence to timekeeping as part of a supportive team. Unfortunately, that occurs across all workplace sectors, whether in the private, public or third sector. However, as is often the case, none of that is new when it comes to what we need.

In March 2022, the then Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy launched a national strategy for economic transformation and said that the next 10 years would be a "decisive decade". Well, how is that faring? We are now almost halfway and I cannot see much transformation. That strategy talked about five key policy programmes, but, by my reckoning, we have not seen much progress. That does not mean that there has been systematic failure, because that is not true, but the scale of the challenge was

underestimated. The document stated that Scotland will be regarded as

“a great place to live and work with high living standards.”

Well, that is not the case if you live in Glasgow. Susan Aitken has asked for an urgent meeting with the finance secretary because “community cohesion” in Glasgow is at risk, primarily due to “refugee homelessness”. She will be joining Reform next.

The strategy also said that Scotland will be

“an international benchmark for how an economy can transform itself”,

but we seem to be going backwards. In the last quarter of 2025, we had 0.1 per cent growth.

The strategy said that Scotland will be

“a country where economic power and opportunity are distributed fairly”.

I think that people in many parts of Scotland, such as the Borders and Clackmannanshire, would disagree with that.

Finally, the strategy said that Scotland will be

“an outward-looking nation ... exerting meaningful influence”

around the world. If we count selling our excellent education system off to the highest bidder, that claim might be true, but we are going backwards.

Last week, Alex Massie wrote in *The Times* that we are about to be visited by the

“Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse”.

Well, I can report that the Finance and Public Administration Committee met them yesterday. Perhaps we needed the Scottish high-growth unit at the start of the sixth parliamentary session, and not today, as the First Minister has announced, but I certainly wish the project well.

Although I have the greatest respect for Kate Forbes, her strategy reads like a public relations trailer pitch for a Hollywood movie, as so many such papers do. Today, we have heard much the same with the First Minister’s bold plans. The problem is that we have heard it before.

Whether to centralise or decentralise, we want plans with measurable results of success that make life better for people, not more and more plans to keep civil servants busy, such as the health reform that we have just heard about.

In short, we need to get real here because many people in Scotland have disengaged from politics. They did not bother to vote and, frankly, they expect more. Only when all citizens of Scotland feel that they are getting something from this Parliament will things improve and the vision of a team Scotland—an approach that I support—will

be realised, but we must make progress this session.

The Presiding Officer: I call the First Minister to wind up the debate. You have a generous 10 minutes, First Minister.

17:15

The First Minister (John Swinney): Let me begin by saying that I welcome Malcolm Offord’s presence here and I am glad to hear that he is in a stronger position over his health. I wish him well. Let me also say that it is a pleasure to welcome Monica Lennon to Parliament—not for the first time, of course. There is a rather ungallant term that describes members of Parliament who return after a gap as a “retread”. It was used very unforgivingly to describe my dear friend the late Margaret Ewing, which she took, of course, with good grace. I think that Monica Lennon’s very minor gap in attendance does not qualify her for that term, but I wish her well. When I met her at the back of the chamber earlier, she asked whether I had missed her, and of course I have missed her, and I welcome her back to Parliament today.

It would also be remiss of me not to comment on the fact that Monica Lennon takes the place of Anas Sarwar, who has been—I am not sure whether I should use the word “elevated”, but he has certainly joined the House of Lords. Some of us found that a rather unusual strategy to engineer its destruction, which, of course, was the long-term commitment of Anas Sarwar. Just as I am delivering on my commitments to the people of Scotland, I look forward to Anas Sarwar delivering on his commitment to the country to abolish the House of Lords, but I think that there is more chance of me delivering than there is of Anas Sarwar delivering on that question. I will come to that in a moment. However, in all sincerity, I wish Anas Sarwar well. I always enjoyed our encounters here, and I wish him well in the work that he is undertaking on behalf of the United Kingdom Government.

This has been an interesting and helpful debate, with a lot of contributions reflecting on the contents of the Government’s programme. I think that some of the dilemmas that are always faced in a programme of this type were displayed by the comments of my colleague Patricia Gibson, who felt that I was not going far enough on public service reform, and of course there will be those who think that I am going too far on public service reform.

The contribution from Patricia Gibson illustrated some of the tangible and substantial issues that have to be wrestled with. On the comment from Kim Schmulian a second ago about the economy, I am glad that she has recognised the importance

that we attach to stimulating economic growth in Scotland and I assure her of our determination to fulfil our commitments on that. Michael Marra reinforced the importance of the agenda that is being pursued on child poverty, which is central to the Government's programme and is central to everything that I have done since I became First Minister. Michael Marra's comment about there being space for cross-party dialogue is a welcome comment and it is one that I am going to come back to in relation to how Parliament proceeds in taking forward the Government's programme.

There are, of course, other measures that I am glad have commanded support around the chamber. For example, Alex Cole-Hamilton, Jackie Dunbar and Patricia Gibson spoke about tackling violence against women and girls. I appreciate that support and the recognition across the chamber of the necessity for the Government to act in that respect and I look forward to calling on the support of Parliament to reinforce the steps that I intend to take.

Russell Findlay: On the issue of violence against women and girls, I just wonder whether the First Minister now regrets defying Scottish Women's Aid and Victim Support Scotland and passing the legislation that made remanding men who harm women even more difficult.

The First Minister: Remand involves a judgment that is applied by the courts, and I will certainly not start interfering in decisions about remand that are taken by the courts. The courts have to make judgments in difficult circumstances. In talking about situations where remand is not given and bail is allocated, Willie Rennie said that further constraints could perhaps be applied in relation to bail. All of those issues merit examination and, in my intervention on Mr Rennie, I committed to doing exactly that.

Gillian Mackay and Patrick Harvie talked about conversion practices. The wording on that in the programme for government sets out the Government's position, but I can provide more detail, and I would be happy to share that with members of Parliament. The Minister for Equalities and International Development, Simita Kumar, has been actively engaged with the United Kingdom Government on the issue of legislative co-operation.

On that issue, we have made it clear that we would like to make headway on a UK-wide basis, and we will endeavour to do that. However, I reiterate the point in the programme for government document that, if we are not satisfied with the progress that can be made, we reserve the right to pursue our own legislation.

Patrick Harvie: I would be grateful to the First Minister for the opportunity to have further

dialogue, if he wants to offer that. His Government has seen the UK Government's draft bill. Does he think that it is a good bill? No one who has been campaigning for action on the issue seems to be praising it. Is it a good bill, or is it flawed?

The First Minister: Obviously, dialogue is going on with the UK Government about the contents of its bill. We have to be satisfied by the contents of the bill, which is why we are engaging. Members would expect us, in good faith, to engage on that question with the UK Government.

Paul McLennan made an important observation, which I think puts a couple of the other contributions into context. Mr McLennan said that, after the election, parties are entitled to come in here and advance their arguments. Having won the election, I certainly feel that I am entitled to come in here and set out the Government's agenda. It was interesting that Craig Hoy and Russell Findlay both seemed to have missed the fact that there has been an election and that they did really badly in it. It might be an idea to think about changing the contents of their speeches after an election defeat and to think about things in a different fashion.

Craig Hoy: [*Made a request to intervene.*]

The First Minister: No doubt we are going to hear more about that, but I mentioned Craig Hoy's name so, as a generous Parliamentarian, I will give way to him.

Craig Hoy: If the First Minister will not accept my criticism, what is his comment on Nicola Sturgeon's criticism of his Government?

The First Minister: The absolute obsession goes on from Mr Hoy. I am delighted to have won the election and to have won it in a commanding fashion—that is all that I am going to say on that.

I am going to mention Mr Hoy again, which tempts fate, but here goes. Mr Hoy complains about the Government not delivering and, when the Government delivers, Mr Hoy complains about the Government delivering. One of my 100 days commitments—by the way, the Government has delivered the 100 days commitments—was to publish an independence referendum bill. Mr Hoy complained about the fact that I have delivered on my solemn commitment to the people of Scotland, but I am very pleased that I have done exactly that.

I think that the important part of the debate has been the question of political co-operation and how we use this parliamentary session. The comments of Jackie Baillie, Willie Rennie and Michael Marra have created some space within the debate for members to, in good faith—I think that Jackie Baillie used those words—hear the contents of the programme for government, and that is how they are offered.

I have learned about some issues and how we handle particular questions. There are substantial issues about public service reform that must be confronted, and I have my views about that, but I have not come in here and said, "This is it—this is what has to be done." There is space for dialogue and engagement about important questions and how we tackle some of the points of principle that I set out in the programme for government statement earlier. Those are about the level at which it is appropriate for responsibility to rest and whether things can be structured differently to deliver different outcomes.

Michael Marra: On a point of clarity, will the First Minister set out the role that making savings towards the £5 billion black hole is contributing to his motivation for public service reform? That was not set out in the statement and I do not think that it is in the documentation. Is public service reform about making a contribution to those savings, is it about outcomes, or is it about both?

The First Minister: It is about both. I have heard Mr Marra speak on this ground a few times over the years; sustainable public services are what I am interested in delivering. We have delivered sustainable services all the way through my long and extended career in Government—all those 19 years that Jackie Baillie thinks about fondly. *[Laughter.]* Time progresses and I am just about to move into another year. We have always succeeded in balancing our budget. We live within our means and we have run sustainable public services, but I must future proof public services for generations to come, which is what my plans are all about.

However, my plans are also about improving outcomes. Earlier on, during First Minister's questions, I responded to a completely legitimate question from Mr Green—I see that he is over there—in which he, on behalf of his constituents, pressed me to strengthen the availability of certain services for people in the Highlands and in his constituency. I recognise that some of the impediments to addressing Mr Green's concern are the obstructions that are placed in the way by health board boundaries.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Will the First Minister take an intervention?

The First Minister: If Mr Cole-Hamilton allows me to develop my point, I will let him intervene in a second.

That is not to say that people are not trying or working hard enough, but they have lines of accountability and financial accountability that make it difficult to provide solutions that might address Mr Green's concerns, and that is because of the structural arrangements of health boards. If I want to address the issues that Mr Green raises

in the Parliament, I need to find a means to do that, which is why I have opened up this conversation.

David Green (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD): *[Made a request to intervene.]*

The First Minister: I had better give way to Mr Cole-Hamilton, and then I will be happy to give way to Mr Green as well.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: The First Minister's point speaks to the remarks that the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care made in her intervention on me. It is not clear whether this is the point that he is trying to make to the Parliament, but the concerns that people in the far north have about their healthcare services is not due to their proximity to where decisions are made by their health service. Stripping power away from that community will make it harder to deliver adequate decision making and to provide a particular focus on health needs in the Highlands.

The First Minister: That misses the point that I am making, which is that I want to properly address Mr Green's concerns but there are obstacles and obstructions in the way of doing that. I do not want to diminish local control, input or decision making; I want to find practical solutions that will address the legitimate concerns that have been put to me.

I am happy to give way to Mr Green if he wishes to intervene.

David Green: I hear what the First Minister is saying. However, all too often, the Scottish Government wants to take credit when things go right but, when things go wrong, it is the responsibility of a local authority or an NHS board somewhere else. My party leader, Alex Cole-Hamilton, is absolutely spot on: stripping decision making away from communities in Caithness—who, incidentally, already think that Inverness is too far afield—is not the right approach.

The First Minister: That is not the way in which I am framing the discussion. I am framing it as a way to improve outcomes for members of the public, in their communities and as close to home as I can possibly manage, while delivering fiscal sustainability, which is the point that Mr Marra put to me. That is the space that I want to open up.

A pathway to addressing that point was provided in the helpful speech that Mr Rennie made in the debate. Since the election, Mr Rennie has made multiple contributions. I have quoted him to several people around the country, because his contributions have been so important—I say that because I do not want to convey any ill will to Mr Rennie whatsoever. Mr Rennie pressed us to focus on improving and making a difference to people's lives, and my programme for government is designed to do exactly that. Finding ways in

which we can do some difficult things but with the objective of improving people's lives will be at the heart of the programme for government that we take forward.

Willie Rennie: For fear of incurring more praise, I encourage the First Minister to fully explain that it is important that we break down silos within organisations as well as between organisations. Surely public sector reform is more about culture, behaviour and leadership than it is about structures. He is in danger of entering a pathway that leads only to debate, anger and frustration when we should be focusing on the detail.

John Swinney: It does not need to be about anger and frustration. It can be a reasoned debate. That is where we are in an interesting space as a Parliament.

I know that I can be a combative parliamentary contributor—

Jackie Baillie: Never!

John Swinney: I know—it does not happen often. [*Laughter.*] However, I have structured a programme in a different way. I have not said that it is a take-it-or-leave-it approach. Instead, I have given Parliament space to engage in a conversation, so that members of Parliament—respecting their political outlooks, the geographies that they represent and all the diversity of the country—can contribute to a discussion that will make Scotland a better country as a result.

I believe that some of the issues that we have to confront are structural impediments; I have just rehearsed that at length with regard to the issue in relation to Mr Green's constituents. However, there are also cultural impediments, and those cultural impediments can be addressed. That is why I have done what I have done in relation to violence against women and girls, because it starts at the top. I can set the culture for the country: on the question of violence against women and girls, as a male First Minister, I am saying to all the men and the boys in the country that behaviours and conduct have to improve. I will make that point loud and clear, wherever I can. However, that also applies to the culture within organisations.

The issues of individuals who have addiction issues in relation to drugs, for example, will also not be solved by being put in one neat little compartment. It will take housing interventions, education interventions, mental wellbeing interventions and all sorts of things. That is why we have to put individuals right at the heart of our public services, and that is what the programme for government is designed to do.

Having thought about those issues over the summer, and over the election campaign, I intend to embark on this Parliament in a way that tries to

bring people in this country together, in order to make Scotland a more successful country. I look forward to engaging with Parliament in that respect.

Decision Time

17:33

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): There are no questions to be put as a result of today's business.

I ask members who are not staying for the members' business debate to please leave the chamber quietly.

Wildfires in Scotland

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Our final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S7M-00878, in the name of Andrew Baxter, on the growing risk of wildfires in Scotland. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I ask members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak button now. The debate is very highly subscribed and it is likely that we will have to extend it.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament shares its deep concern for the growing number of wildfires taking place, which, it considers is a result of both climate change and land management practices, and the increasingly significant threat that these fires pose for communities across rural Scotland, such as those in Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch; understands that the Cairngorms wildfire in particular has had a devastating impact within the Cairngorms National Park, both on its natural environment and the businesses that were forced to close; further understands that more than 100 firefighters were required to tackle the blaze; commends the work of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, and retained duty firefighters for all that they have done to tackle the wildfire in the Cairngorms, as well as other fires in Holyrood Park in Edinburgh and Hill of Tarvit in Fife; further commends communities in the Cairngorms and across the wider Highlands region for the support that they have provided alongside hard working firefighters as well as for the residents of Nethy Bridge when they were forced to evacuate; understands that the Scottish Government has published a Strategic Action Plan on Wildfires and the announcement of a £3 million fund to help those businesses which have been impacted; notes the belief that despite this action plan and fund, the Scottish Government response to the wildfire in the Cairngorms has fallen short; further notes the calls for a cross-party summit to be held to learn the lessons of the response to the Cairngorms wildfire, ensuring that there is a concrete action plan for any future wildfires, and notes the calls for better funding of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service as well so that it is better equipped to deal with these major incidents going forward.

17:34

Andrew Baxter (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD): The smoke has not yet cleared from the Cairngorms wildfire, but already it feels to a certain extent as though the Scottish Government would rather dampen down questions about its response.

For years, when we heard the word "wildfire" we pictured California, Australia or Southern Europe—hillsides glowing orange, communities evacuated, aircraft overhead and firefighters facing walls of flame. A hillside burning above communities, smoke stretching across the horizon, roads being affected, businesses closing, residents leaving their homes—that was not California but the Cairngorms.

That distance has disappeared and, this summer, not once but twice, flames have been seen on Arthur's Seat, within sight of the Parliament. Serious wildfire is no longer something that happens somewhere else; it is here and it is happening now. The question is whether Scotland is ready.

In this debate, I will concentrate on three key issues: response, resources and responsibility.

More than 100 firefighters were involved in tackling the Cairngorms fire. Many were retained crew. Alongside them were land managers, estate workers, rangers and volunteers. Volunteers in Nethy Bridge assisted with the evacuation of residents, transport and feeding those on the ground who were tackling the fire. It is a scandal that it fell on the community, through crowdfunding of more than £130,000, to provide that welfare support. Surely it is the duty of the Government and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. Community spirit is one of the great strengths of our country, but we cannot assume that good people will simply step in and somehow make things work.

A Scottish Land & Estates survey found that more than 40 businesses or organisations were involved and that more than 50 employees and contractors volunteered or were made available.

Morven-May MacCallum (Highlands and Islands) (LD): The member mentioned the good will of the community. I recently had the pleasure of meeting the volunteers at Balintore fire station. Does the member agree that such remarkable volunteers are strongly dependent on the generosity of their employers to attend fires, at the sacrifice of those businesses? Moreover, does he agree that more should be done to recognise the strain that that puts on employers as wildfires become more common?

Andrew Baxter: I absolutely agree, and we rely on the good will of not just the employers of our retained fire crews but land managers in releasing from their jobs the staff who have tackled wildfires at not just the Cairngorms but Dava moor, last year, and other places around the country.

That response demonstrated extraordinary good will. However, good will is not a resilient strategy. The question is not whether people responded but whether the system was ready to make the best use of them. The survey identified more than 250 pieces of specialist equipment and heavy plant worth nearly £6.4 million, yet there were recurring weaknesses in tasking, communications, welfare and command and control, with capable volunteers and contractors left unused, turned away or sent home. The problem was not simply whether resources

existed; in some cases, they existed but the system was not ready to absorb them.

Nobody is suggesting replacing professional firefighters, but, when the next fire comes, local knowledge, equipment, training and minutes will matter. We need to examine whether properly trained, equipped and insured local capability can work alongside the fire service under a clear command structure, just as voluntary mountain rescue has complemented our emergency services for generations.

What would have happened if another major wildfire had broken out at the same time? What if, while resources were concentrated in the Cairngorms, another major fire had taken hold somewhere on the west coast? Where would the firefighters, specialist equipment and aircraft come from?

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Neil Gray): The member will be aware that, far from seeking to dodge scrutiny or questions about wildfires, I will give a statement on Thursday on the review of the wildfire strategy that we are undertaking.

On the question of what we would have done had there been other wildfires at the same time, there were other wildfires, of course. Does the member agree that the strength of having a national fire service is that it is able to deploy resources on a national basis? Does he agree that ensuring that we review our wildfire strategy off the back of that experience, with input from local members and from the land managers and volunteers of whom he spoke, is about getting it right so that we can prevent the situation from happening again?

Andrew Baxter: My point is that, in a Highland context, having a national fire service has exposed the strains on the system. We saw examples of crews being moved from the west coast to backfill stations on the east coast. If we had had another major wildfire on the west coast, I am sure that we would have struggled with the level of response that could have been provided.

Fires do not politely wait their turn and emergencies do not check whether our resources are already committed elsewhere. The real resilience test is not whether we can fight one major wildfire; it is what happens when the second major wildfire starts. That is why addressing our aerial capability is vital. Current arrangements rely heavily on private contractors, who may be committed elsewhere, which creates uncertainty and delays. We need a contractual mechanism that guarantees access to appropriate helicopter assets during periods of very high and extreme wildfire risk. Preparedness means no delay to convening the Scottish Government resilience

room or requesting military help where it is appropriate.

The third R in my list of key issues is perhaps the most important: responsibility. A responsibility that is shared between half a dozen organisations must never become a responsibility that is owned by nobody. I am not asking who commands firefighters on the ground—that responsibility is clear. I am asking who in Government owns Scotland's national readiness for wildfire: who ensures that the resources are sufficient, who joins up the various agencies and who checks that lessons learned are actually carried through. That is why I believe that we need a director-led wildfire resilience response working across Government. Government leadership does not mean that the cabinet secretary fights the fire; it means ministers ensuring that Scotland is ready before firefighters are asked to fight those fires.

I welcome much of the Government's strategic action plan. However, the Cairngorms fire was its first real-world test, and the evidence suggests that there is still a gulf between policy on paper and our capability on the ground. A strategy does not drive a fire engine or fly a helicopter. The test of a strategy is not whether it has been published but whether it works when the emergency comes.

That is why I am asking the Scottish Government to agree to my call for a cross-party wildfire summit. In addition, will the cabinet secretary commit to attending the public meeting that has been organised by farmers and crofters in my constituency to answer questions about the Government's response and how it is preparing for the future? There should be nothing party political about ensuring that Scotland is ready for the next wildfire.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): We move to the open debate and four-minute speeches, please.

17:43

Laura Mitchell (Moray) (SNP): I commend Andrew Baxter, as the Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch constituency MSP, on securing the debate. After a summer of wildfires across the United Kingdom, it is appropriate that the first members' business debate on our return to Parliament is to consider and reflect on the response to the fire in the Cairngorms national park and to the fires in other parts of the country.

First, I echo Andrew Baxter's comments and put on record my own sincere thanks to our firefighters, emergency services and land workers who fought the fire over many weeks, in circumstances that were made all the tougher by the terrain and the weather conditions changing quickly. Although the fire was not in my

constituency, I, like Andrew Baxter, am lucky to represent part of the Cairngorms national park, and many of my constituents, including firefighters and land workers, were part of the response. Throughout the fire, responders were supported and cared for by the local community, whose efforts were outstanding.

As our climate changes, with hotter and drier periods, the risk of wildfires in Scotland and across these islands rises, so it is crucial that the Government, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, the national parks and the landowners take the opportunity to reflect on the latest large fire and ensure that lessons are learned. I therefore welcome the cabinet secretary's decision to review Scotland's wildfire strategy, and I look forward to his statement later this week. I also welcome the commitment that he gave in the chamber earlier today that front-line responders—those who bravely go towards danger—will be heard in the review.

Having met with some of Moray's retained crews, I believe that we must focus on three key themes: prevention, preparedness and personal protective equipment. While we cannot remove all risk of wildfires in Scotland, it is important that we look at what we can do to make such incidents less likely and less severe. There should be an evidence-based approach to fuel management and land breaks, and I hope that the review will also consider what more can be done to reduce the use of disposable barbecues over the spring and summer months.

On being prepared across Scotland, we must ensure that local response plans are in place long before a fire begins. Those plans should ensure that agencies set out which areas are high risk; communication and engagement arrangements; and equipment and resources that are available locally. Communication must be a key consideration in the review. Social media is a great tool, but we cannot rely on social media alone to communicate with everyone in a community in an emergency situation such as a wildfire. Again on preparedness, we need to have discussions with the UK Government on the lack of military capability to support firefighting efforts in such incidents.

On PPE, it is vital that retained and full-time crews who are expected to respond to these fires can access the correct wildfire clothing and equipment. Again, I welcome the cabinet secretary's comments in the chamber earlier today confirming that he has already raised the issues of PPE and training with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. I am doing likewise on behalf of firefighters in my constituency.

In closing, I once again thank all those who responded to the fire. The review of the wildfire strategy is hugely important and we must get it right for the communities that will be affected by fires in the future and for those whom we call upon to respond to keep people and our communities safe. I look forward to engaging constructively with the Scottish Government on those issues in the coming weeks.

17:47

Max Bannerman (Highlands and Islands) (Reform): I thank Andrew Baxter for securing the debate. Like him, I had many constituents contacting me when the fire was at its zenith with real questions that they were looking to have answered, and I know that he, like me, met constituents on the ground and engaged directly with them, so I thank him for bringing the debate to the chamber.

Rather than relitigating the narrative and the points that Andrew Baxter has made, I will focus on what should happen from here. I know that the cabinet secretary is making a statement on Thursday—I do not want to pre-empt that statement, but I would like to focus his mind on some of the things that I think it should contain and the things that he should, in his role, take forward and look at in response to these events.

An important point is that this debate is long overdue for those of us in the north, who have seen the increasing frequency and scale of wildfires for years. We need a firm commitment and action from the Government to supply new equipment. Simply reviewing the wildfire categorisation policy will not resolve the obvious: we lack dedicated aerial firefighting resources.

I encourage the cabinet secretary, if he has not done so already, to read the report for the Scottish Government that Scottish Land & Estates published this morning, which was based on evidence from 40 businesses and organisations. It recorded that there were 300 days of volunteering by local volunteers on the ground, including local land managers, estate workers and gamekeepers. I spoke to some of them myself at the agricultural shows in the Highlands over the summer. I felt that it was important for me, as a regional member, to hear what they had to say, and other members will have done likewise.

On the issue of aerial firefighting, there are private sector firms in Scotland with helicopters that are equipped to be able to flex into the role in the way that we would like to have seen more of during recent events, but none are safeguarded for a wildfire response. That was the main reason why the Dava moor wildfire last year grew so large. When a helicopter was called to tackle the blaze,

none were available—in fact, all the helicopters that were equipped to carry the firefighting buckets had long-term bookings for a film studio and were mounted with cameras at the time. By contrast, European nations combined have 70 of the largest type of firefighting aircraft, with around 600 dedicated aircraft in total. Scotland has only six of the smallest firefighting aircraft, none of which can be guaranteed to respond in an emergency. I ask the cabinet secretary to look at that before he gives his statement on Thursday.

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice: I appreciate the point that Max Bannerman makes. He will also appreciate that aerial firefighting capability is not always the silver bullet. The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is absolutely clear that it has a plan based on whether that capability is available, but it has been incredibly helpful in tackling parts of the Cairngorms wildfire.

I am particularly interested in looking at our aerial capability, not just in Scotland in isolation but across the UK, and working collectively. The wildfires across the UK this summer have exposed the current capability as a weakness, and I am keen to work on a four-nations basis to look at not only our resilience but a four-nations response.

Max Bannerman: I thank the cabinet secretary for the intervention. I do not really disagree with that—he should go away and look at the response across the four nations, and I certainly encourage him to talk to his counterparts across all the devolved Governments and the UK Government.

He should also look abroad—as I mentioned, there are examples of such capability being used in European countries, and I believe that Australia is a specific example of where there is a register of aircraft that can be used to combat wildfires. I encourage the cabinet secretary to look at those examples.

In closing, I support Andrew Baxter's call for a cross-party summit on the issue, and I look forward to working with him and others as we take the matter forward. Without pre-empting the cabinet secretary's statement on Thursday, I hope that he will go away and listen to the points that I and other members have made and come to Parliament with some answers.

17:52

Donald MacKinnon (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests: I am a member of the Fire Brigades Union.

I thank Andrew Baxter for securing this members' business debate on such an important topic. The events of this summer must be a wake-up call. Our climate is changing, and how we

respond to that change will be critical. How we manage the land and how we resource our fire service are both crucial to that.

On land management, there is no one-size-fits-all option. The area that burned this summer was diverse, with different habitat types. The way in which land has been managed has changed over time. That has not happened in a vacuum, and policy has played a role, but we need now to understand how those changes are impacting the resilience of the landscapes to fire and, importantly, how we can make those landscapes more resilient.

Less grazing and changes in moorland management have increased fuel loads, thereby increasing risk. While more broad-leaved trees and peatland restoration can improve resilience, it is clear that a full range of tools must be available to land managers to tackle the scale of the challenge, and that includes controlled burning.

The events of the summer have shown that the biggest resource in our rural areas, and perhaps the most important, is the workforce on the land: the gamekeepers, foresters, crofters, farmers and conservation workers, who all worked with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to bring the fires under control. Their skills and knowledge of the land proved invaluable, and every effort must be made to ensure that their expertise is retained,

Before I was elected to Parliament, I served my community as an on-call firefighter, responding to a pager. I have attended wildfires, although—thankfully—none on the scale of what we are considering today. On-call firefighters serving in the retained duty system are on the front line of dealing with the challenge of wildfires, and they were to the forefront in tackling the Cairngorms fire. Too often, however, the ask of them is increasing, and the resources with which they are being provided do not match the demands of the job.

We will all have seen pictures of firefighters in structural firefighting kits rather than the dedicated wildfire gear that is being rolled out across the service, which Laura Mitchell mentioned earlier. That roll-out must be accelerated. The safety of our firefighters should always be the priority, and they need to have the necessary kit for the job that they are being tasked with.

The location of dedicated wildfire units and the training of crews in wildfire techniques also need to be reviewed, and the roll-out of that needs to be sped up. Further, there is a need for a review of aerial firefighting capabilities, as has been discussed by other members.

It is beyond time that the SFRS had access to dedicated aerial support. Anecdotal evidence

suggests that, had aerial support been available early on day 1 of the Cairngorms fire, the situation could have been brought under control much earlier. The financial cost of that delay is enormous. So, too, is the cost to the communities and the environment.

More broadly, we still have far too many fire stations across the country that do not have the facilities for effective decontamination, and stations that do not even have showers. The Fire Brigades Union has done excellent work through its DECON campaign to raise the serious issue of decontamination and the risks to firefighter health, yet we still have firefighters who are unable to follow the established protocol due to a lack of facilities. Those issues need to be resolved if recruitment problems are to be addressed across the retained duty system.

I welcome the wildfire strategy and look forward to hearing the cabinet secretary's statement later this week. However, that must be backed by action to reverse the cuts to our fire service and invest in front-line services.

17:56

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands (Green)): I thank Andrew Baxter for securing this important debate. I will not rehearse things that have already been said. I want to cover a few areas this evening, focusing on people, planet and place.

We saw an incredible response from the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, land managers, volunteers and conservation workers. That has been acknowledged, and it has been great to see that happen and be supported by the community. However, I want to back up the calls from the FBU. I have spoken with firefighters who were on the ground wearing their conventional, regular kit rather than dedicated wildfire gear. What I heard was that the jackets and helmets were so heavy and hot that they were taking them off, meaning that they were fighting the fire in extreme heat without any proper protection. The correct equipment needs to be rolled out as fast as possible and, in particular, made available to all firefighters in Highland as a priority.

In addition, the FBU is calling for level 2 equipment to be provided to firefighters. Every firefighter in Highland should be equipped with leaf blowers, cutters and adequate backburning training. Some of them arrive on site feeling ill-prepared and have to sit in their pump, not being able to actually do anything.

I also want to pick up on Donald MacKinnon's point about decontamination. That is a huge piece of my motivation for calling for fixed-wing aerial support. We are talking about people who are

going into long-lasting fires and areas with toxic air for protracted periods of time. That is a very different situation from putting out a house fire. These people will be in that environment for days. We need decontamination units, but we also need to seriously consider fixed-wing aerial support, because fixed-wing aircraft can get a lot more water on the ground faster than helicopters can.

Neil Gray: Will the member give way?

Ariane Burgess: I will take an intervention, but I heard the cabinet secretary say to Max Bannerman that he is looking for a four-nations approach. I agree that that is the way that we need to be going. We need that four-nations approach, because that is what makes the most sense.

Neil Gray: I want to give Ariane Burgess and colleagues who have corresponded with me on the issue some reassurance, which I hope came through when I responded in writing to colleagues during the wildfire. The issues that Ariane Burgess and Laura Mitchell raised about PPE were raised directly with the SFRS. Similarly, the points about decontamination and other issues have been discussed with the FBU and the chief fire officer. That is all feeding into the review of the wildfire strategy that I have asked for to ensure that we have the best possible position, informed by the perspectives and experiences of everyone involved, both in Parliament and on the ground.

Ariane Burgess: I appreciate that there is going to be a review of the wildfire strategy, but I am a bit concerned about the fact that we are reviewing a strategy that was published only in March this year. I am concerned about the level and depth that we will get to in that review.

Something that I heard from firefighters, which Andrew Baxter mentioned, is that the community had to raise more than £100,000 to feed them. A person who was running a community centre and feeding people asked me what normally happens, and I had to tell them that the model that we have for fighting fires is really based around urban settings, where firefighters are normally given meal deals.

There are many points that need to be covered and I do not have enough time to do so, but I want to touch on planet and place. We absolutely need a resilient landscape, and I know that work is being done on that. Rewetting the land absolutely needs to happen. We are restoring peatland, but that needs to happen faster. We need to think differently about our ancient woodland as well. We need to protect that mature broadleaf woodland, because it provides a huge amount of carbon sequestration. We also need to recognise that beavers play a role. What we saw from the Cairngorms wildfire is that the fire stopped where

the beavers had built dams, and there was still green growth around those areas.

We need to know as fast as possible who is doing controlled burning of our land and for what purpose. I look forward to the roll-out of licensing of that activity, and there should be no Government hesitation on that.

Briefly, on place, we need to involve the whole community in this discussion. The community council at Nethy Bridge had an emergency plan, but it was shut out of action on the ground. That emergency plan detailed locally available equipment that could have been deployed. We need to build trust in communities at a local level so that, before we get into the heat of the fire, there is a feeling that people can work together.

There is a need to train the SFRS leadership and anyone who is going to be working in that kind of space in collaboration skills. There were some great examples of collaboration. For example, the Cairngorms National Park Authority offered its thermal drone unit, which enabled SFRS to know where the fire was hottest. However, even though the SFRS had that information, it could not go to fight the fire in those areas, because the firefighters did not have the necessary training, although it paid for helicopter cover. That raises a question. There is a public body that owns a lot of land and it cannot put the fire out.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): You must close.

Ariane Burgess: Finally, let us call for a UK climate shock fund, and I look forward to a summit on Scottish landscape resilience.

18:03

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I feel for Ariane Burgess, because I have lots that I would like to say as well, and we could all use 10 minutes to do that.

I thank Andrew Baxter for bringing this debate to the chamber. It is very welcome, although I think that Emma Roddick and I are experiencing déjà vu, because we were standing here on 18 September 2025—nearly a year ago to the day—discussing exactly this issue of wildfires. There had just been one of the largest ever wildfires—in fact, the largest wildfire in the UK—in Dava, and we were saying to the Scottish Government, “Do you think we need to do something about this, because it is pretty serious and at some point communities are going to burn down?”

This is not a new debate for those of us who were here before. I realise that we have some new members, and it is great to hear some of those new MSPs discussing the issue, but it was

acknowledged to be a serious issue before, when it was brought to the chamber by Emma Roddick. I am slightly missing Fergus Ewing, who would be trembling with annoyance, I imagine, if he was still sitting at the back of this chamber, listening to what is going on.

I happened to be travelling back from Glencoe on 15 July and I came across—

Neil Gray: Will the member give way?

Tim Eagle: I am happy to take an intervention.

Neil Gray: I appreciate the fact that Tim Eagle, Emma Roddick, Jim Fairlie and others have fed in quite a bit of work to this process. To answer Tim Eagle's question about what is happening and what has happened, and to respond to the point that Ariane Burgess made about the fact that the wildfire strategy was published only in March, I say that I am not necessarily looking to entirely reinvent the wheel. What I am looking to do is review the pace at which the actions that were set out in that strategy in March have been taken and whether there are other areas that we need to touch on to ensure that we are as responsive as possible, for the very reasons that Tim Eagle is setting out.

Tim Eagle: That is actually quite a welcome statement. I did not entirely disagree with the strategy put forward by the Scottish Government, but I was concerned about the pace of change and about action. There can be a lot of talk and writing, but what is the action on the ground?

This year's Cairngorms wildfire was a very dangerous one. I have been down to Nethy Bridge twice to speak to people, and several people have told me that, but for the sheer luck of the wind changing, Nethy Bridge could have burned down. We do not want to go there, but, in years to come, we could end up in a situation where houses are burning, as we saw in England earlier this year. There is great concern. We need change at pace. We have spoken about area support and PPE, all of which will come out in the wash over the next few months.

I come to a point that Andrew Baxter raised. Cairngorms crofters and farmers have organised a meeting, which I believe will take place on 18 September at 6 pm. They have asked the cabinet secretary to come along to give a speech and answer questions, so I am happy to take another intervention if he can come back in to confirm whether he will do that. It would be really welcome if he could be there. I have double checked and Aberdeen are not playing that day, so he should free to come along. It would be really good if he could be there to listen to and answer questions from people who have really serious concerns about what happened.

I will pick up on today's report from Scottish Land & Estates, which talks at the very end about the fact that we, in Scotland, can no longer rely on the good will of volunteers but need a planned response to these events. There were circumstances in which volunteers were bringing very heavy equipment down to Nethy Bridge to try to help but too much was unknown. They did not know whom to talk to. There were good machines that could have helped to create more of the firebreaks that were needed or that could have done other work, but they were not utilised because the structure just was not there. All that I am asking the cabinet secretary and the Scottish Government to do is ensure that that structure is there and is planned and co-ordinated so that communities do not face risks in the future.

18:07

Dawn Black (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): I, too, thank Andrew Baxter for bringing this members' business debate to the chamber. Like others here, I am deeply concerned about the growing number and severity of wildfires that Scotland has experienced in recent years. Others have highlighted the response to the devastating Cairngorms wildfire this summer, which demonstrated the immense damage that such incidents can cause to communities, businesses and natural habitats and the challenges for our fire service.

It is therefore vital that we do all that we can to reduce the risk of wildfires occurring in the first place. As someone who focuses on solutions, recognises that there are many causes of wildfires and sees the need for a culture change regarding responsible access to the countryside, I will focus on one source of ignition risk: disposable barbecues.

Fire prevention starts long before the first emergency call is even made, and these items present a significant risk to the public because of the potential for the ignition of wildfires during periods of warm and dry weather. Although many people use them responsibly, it takes just one act of carelessness to spark a significant wildfire. These barbecues also inflict damage on the surfaces that they are placed on, scarring the ground and melting or charring picnic tables in our parks.

In 2025, wildfires on the cliffs at Dunnottar castle, in my constituency, and in the Glen Finglas area of the Trossachs were caused by disposable barbecues. This year, another barbecue caused a fire on Yellowcraig beach. Such incidents are happening too often. As members are aware, under the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, local authorities already have the powers to introduce byelaws restricting the use of

barbecues, including the disposable kind, in connection with preventing the risk of wildfire. Scotland's park authorities can also introduce such byelaws, and both the Cairngorms national park and the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park have taken advantage of that provision.

Neil Gray: Dawn Black is making a really helpful point about the byelaws that are in place. Although we are here to talk about a serious wildfire in the Cairngorms, we have seen, as a result of local byelaws, a significant reduction in the use of disposable barbecues in the national park and in the risk of wildfires occurring there.

Andrew Baxter, Tim Eagle and Dawn Black have talked about the need for a review, and that sort of preventative action must be part of it, to ensure that humans behave responsibly during the kind of extreme weather that we have seen this summer.

Dawn Black: I welcome the cabinet secretary's remarks. Two national parks have taken advantage of the ability to introduce byelaws, but I have engaged with Angus and Aberdeenshire councils, in my constituency, and they have raised the challenge of actually enforcing any byelaw, particularly given limited local authority resources.

Andrew Baxter: Dawn Black makes a really important point about byelaws and extending them away from the national parks. One of the most difficult challenges for our local authorities is the cost and time involved in introducing a byelaw in the first place.

Does Ms Black think that there is a case for the cabinet secretary reviewing that process to make it easier for our local authorities to tackle that issue?

Dawn Black: Absolutely I do. Cost is one of the points I was going to come on to, but I also think that we could take that approach.

Byelaws take a significant amount of time and resource to develop and implement—generally about four years from inception to implementation—and there are tens of thousands of pounds in costs to our local authorities, which is why the introduction of byelaws is so prohibitive. Angus and Aberdeenshire councils told me that, as a result, their focus is on working with landowners to discourage the use of fire in high-risk areas and on promoting wildfire awareness through signage and on social media.

Although those local efforts are important, they also highlight the limitations of relying solely on local action. If enforcement is difficult at a local level, there is a strong case for a national approach that provides consistency across the whole of Scotland, removes uncertainty for the public and businesses on where and when these items can

and cannot be used and reduces the burden on individual local authorities and, indeed, the emergency services. In my view, given the risk, a piecemeal approach is no longer satisfactory.

It is notable that, this summer, some retailers have voluntarily stopped selling disposable barbecues, but recent events have demonstrated that voluntary action alone is not enough and we cannot rely on the good will of individual businesses to protect communities from wildfire risk. A consistent national approach would provide clarity for retailers, certainty for consumers and greater protection for the public and the environment.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): The member must bring her remarks to a conclusion.

Dawn Black: I also believe that the case for a permanent ban extends beyond just wildfire prevention, because those disposable barbecues are not recyclable.

I recently submitted a motion on this subject and I was glad to see cross-party support for it. That is something that we really do want to take ahead, even though I recognise that this matter is not within the remit of the Scottish Government, so work needs to be done with the UK Government to bring a ban to pass.

Banning disposable barbecues is not a silver bullet, because a holistic approach to prevention is needed, but a ban would send a clear message that we, as a nation, recognise the escalating nature of the risk. If we can act to show leadership, we should do so.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Due to the number of members who wish to speak in the debate, I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 8.14.3 of standing orders, to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes. I invite Andrew Baxter to move such a motion.

Motion moved,

That, under rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[*Andrew Baxter*]

Motion agreed to.

18:13

Victor Currie (Highlands and Islands) (Reform): I thank the cabinet secretary for remaining in the chamber for this debate and Andrew Baxter for bringing the debate to the chamber.

I rise today to address the increasing risk of wildfires in Scotland—a matter of grave concern to me and many of my constituents, given recent

events. I will largely supplement but sometimes complement the points raised by Andrew Baxter, my colleague Max Bannerman, Donald MacKinnon and other members in their contributions, as well as those raised in Morven-May MacCallum's intervention.

Our country witnessed a cataclysmic blaze that scorched more than 30 square kilometres of moorland, ancient Caledonian pine forest and precious ecosystem. Before addressing the failures that allowed this crisis to compound, I must pay tribute to the extraordinary bravery of our front-line responders. Scores of firefighters put their lives on the line to battle the inferno, and alongside them stood an army of local volunteers, land managers and gamekeepers. Those rural workers used their own specialist machinery and their intimate knowledge of the landscape to bulldoze emergency firebreaks, saving centuries-old trees from complete destruction. They showed rural Scotland at its absolute best. However, while local communities and emergency services displayed unparalleled resolve, the political response from the Scottish Government exposed a dangerous bureaucratic weakness.

The fire broke out near Glenmore on 15 July, and it was about nine days before the relevant cabinet secretaries gathered at the Scottish Government's resilience room, at which point residents in Nethy Bridge were already being evacuated from their homes. To the people on the ground, that delay felt less like a co-ordinated strategy and more like closing the stable door after the horse had bolted.

Worse still was the unjustifiable refusal of additional help. When the UK Government offered military assistance to bolster the exhausted crews on the ground, the justice secretary rejected it. The Administration claimed that the military lacked the specific water-bombing capabilities but, thinking a little more laterally, the logistical support, ground transport and manpower—

Neil Gray: Will the member give way?

Victor Currie: Yes.

Neil Gray: I want to reassure Victor Currie that I was receiving daily—in fact, more than daily—updates from the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. The local resilience partnership has the primary responsibility for responding to such incidents.

On the point about military aid, the ask was made because of a very specific request at that weekend from the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. The UK Government's response was that it could not meet that ask. That is why the offer that was made was turned down. It was because the very specific ask from the Scottish Fire and

Rescue Service—not the Government—could not be met by the UK Government. I cannot remember who made the intervention earlier about having a UK-wide look at our resilience, but a question needs to be posed on a four-nations basis about why we do not have UK-based water-bombing capability in our UK military.

Victor Currie: I completely accept the cabinet secretary's point on lines of operational responsibility and the request feeding up to the Scottish Government and then on to the military. However, the offer was there from the military for logistical support, ground transport and manpower. Although the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service did not specifically request that, it is a question of statecraft for the Scottish Government to get ahead of such problems. More manpower and logistical support would be exactly what an exhausted fire service would need during a prolonged multiweek fire. Turning away that valuable resource during a national emergency—

Neil Gray: [*Made a request to intervene.*]

Victor Currie: I will take the intervention.

Neil Gray: I just want to be clear that that is not the ask that was made by the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. That is not what was requested.

Victor Currie: I accept that. Again, I make the point that perhaps taking an offer of help when offered would have been better in that situation to ensure that we had spare capacity should the situation have got any worse. Turning away that valuable resource during a national emergency, simply because of where the offer originated from, created an image of political posturing above public safety.

We are told by Government ministers that we must simply adapt to a changing climate as if such blazes are inevitable, but that is an evasion of responsibility. They are an annual threat in Scotland, yet our response mechanisms remain completely ad hoc.

To supplement Max Bannerman's statement on the report by SLE, the private sector and local volunteers contributed not only 300 days of voluntary work but £6.4 million-worth of their own equipment. We can see that Scotland is relying on the good will and improvisation of rural communities because the Government has failed to build a formal exercised resilience system.

At the same time, the Administration's ideological crusade against traditional land management is actively disarming the people who know how to fight these fires. By restricting muirburn licences—

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

Victor Currie: Okay.

By restricting muirburn licences, we are discouraging investment in the very rural workers who understand the behaviour and possess the skills.

Jim Fairlie: Will the member give way?

Victor Currie: Yes, I will take an intervention.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I am sorry, minister, but the member is making his closing remarks.

Victor Currie: To put the minister at ease, I say that my party is not here to indulge in empty rhetoric or assign blame for the sake of grievance. We are here to help furnish some commonsense solutions for working people in rural communities.

I would conclude by arguing that, when it comes to the formulation of the ministerial statement, we need a dedicated helicopter and pilot framework with guaranteed availability and mobilisation standards, be it a four-nations solution or something unilateral—whatever works best for our communities. We also need an integrated wildlife management plan that treats gamekeepers, farmers and land managers as official partners and not inconveniences, as well as proper funding and staffing for our rural fire stations, so that our communities are never left vulnerable again.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): The member must conclude now.

Victor Currie: I look forward to the cabinet secretary's statement and hope that the points that have been made across this chamber are drawn on when a long-term strategy is being formulated for our country.

18:20

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I congratulate Andrew Baxter on bringing this timely debate to the chamber.

Official figures show an alarming increase in wildfires across Scotland, with a recorded 238 in 2025 compared to just 55 the previous year—a rise of 330 per cent. One of the most devastating recent wildfires occurred in Galloway when a blaze burned an area almost six times the size of the town of Dumfries, and it took four days just to bring it under control. The damage to wildlife, forestry and local habitats was immense.

Of course, that was mirrored this summer in the Cairngorms national park, with local businesses disrupted and a huge firefighting effort required to

contain it. The Scottish Government rightly provided financial support to businesses affected by the Cairngorms fire, although I am not aware of similar assistance being made available to affected communities in my part of the country. We have even seen fires in Holyrood park in Edinburgh, so it is clear that this threat extends right across Scotland. These wildfires should serve as a wake-up call in demonstrating the far-reaching consequences of uncontrolled fire for communities, businesses, wildlife and emergency services.

Of course, prevention starts long before the first emergency call is made. Those who manage Scotland's landscapes every day must have the tools and flexibility needed to reduce risk before fire takes hold. Farmers, crofters, gamekeepers, estate staff and other land managers play a vital role in maintaining resilient landscapes. They manage vegetation, understand the local terrain and access routes, and are often among the first to identify fire incidents. During the recent wildfire, many worked alongside our firefighters, providing local expertise, equipment and manpower. Ministers, therefore, must ensure that those who live in rural areas are fully involved in developing the wildfire policy.

Indeed, that is why many stakeholders have raised concerns about the Scottish Government's muirburn licensing regime. Responsible muirburn, carried out by skilled practitioners in appropriate conditions, remains an important tool for managing vegetation, reducing fuel loads and helping to prevent the spread of uncontrolled fires. NFU Scotland and others have warned that the new licensing requirements could create unnecessary barriers to effective land management at a time when wildfire prevention is becoming increasingly important.

The Minister for Agriculture, Marine and the Islands (Jim Fairlie): I am in absolutely no doubt that no one in this chamber is doing anything other than trying to find the right solutions, but there must be clarity here. There is no muirburn licensing scheme in play right now, so the fires that we have seen over the past couple of years have nothing to do with such a scheme. That said, would the member accept that well-trained local people who know the ground and have a muirburn licence will be a far greater asset to community resilience than having nothing at all?

I will make one more point. When I delayed the muirburn licensing scheme last year, the very next day somebody set a fire with no license and no training—nothing—and it got out of control. So, the value in the muirburn licensing scheme is in having properly trained people on the ground to do it. That is not to diminish what keepers and farmers currently do, which we are taking into account, but

the implementation of the scheme will allow us to ensure that there is resilience in the communities that we are trying to protect.

Finlay Carson: With regard to prevention, I have to say that that was not the point that I was driving at. We have to ensure that any licensing scheme leads to a safer landscape instead of being some bureaucratic hurdle that needs to be jumped over and that undermines the real practical prevention measures that we know land managers can put in place. My point is that stakeholders have concerns. The Scottish Conservatives have consistently advocated for a balanced, evidence-led approach that recognises the contribution of responsible muirburn, alongside grazing, habitat management and other measures that reduce wildfire risk, while supporting biodiversity and rural livelihoods.

I recently visited Carrifran woodlands, near Moffat. The restoration of the environment there has created a wet and green landscape, which is a natural firebreak, and I commend the volunteers who have created that new woodland.

During the passage of the land reform and natural environment legislation, we proposed amendments designed to strengthen Scotland's ability to prevent and respond to wildfires. Unfortunately, those measures were not supported by the Scottish Government. I therefore call for a renewed, continued pause to the licensing scheme, to ensure that everybody is on board and that the scheme is practical and proportionate and does not inadvertently increase wildfire risk.

We recognise that wildfire risk is driven by multiple factors. Environmental organisations have highlighted the impact of the prolonged dry weather, while many fires are caused by avoidable human actions, such as the discarding of cigarettes and disposable barbecues.

Prevention requires active land management, strong partnership, public awareness and properly equipped emergency services. Ministers must now work with all relevant organisations and rural communities to deliver a co-ordinated national wildfire strategy that puts prevention, preparedness and partnership at its heart.

18:26

Yi-pei Chou Turvey (North East Scotland) (LD): I thank my colleague Andrew Baxter for his brilliant efforts in bringing this critical issue to the table directly after our return to Parliament. After a summer recess filled with the risk and the reality of wildfire across my region and across Scotland in general, there has never been a more important time to bring order and reason to a system that, for too long, has relied on luck, good fortune and fate.

Outside the central belt there exists a different type of Scotland, which many of my colleagues across the chamber know well: our island communities, rural communities in the Borders and communities such as those where I live, in rural Aberdeenshire, just 30 minutes' drive to the Cairngorms national park. We are no strangers to driving in snow and ice. We know that heating our homes does not always mean turning a dial on a wall. We face shortages in our supermarkets when the weather is poor. We know which roads to avoid in bad weather. We never take it for granted that mother nature will be kind. We therefore learn to be self-reliant, and we are resilient.

That does not mean "Every man for himself", but it does mean that we often have to create infrastructure within our own communities if we are to do our best to protect the success and safety of our families, businesses and homes. This summer, that network of self-reliance was tested. The wildfires were met and extinguished by our fantastic Scottish Fire and Rescue Service—but not without the support of a network of machinery and the man hours, skills and knowledge of those who live and work in those rural communities. Side by side with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, they fought to protect their homes and livelihoods and the land that we all value as a natural and economic resource.

As my colleague Andrew Baxter has stated, wildfires are not polite and they wait for no one. When the wind carried the smoke and dust throughout Aberdeenshire, all the way to Aberdeen, people were shocked and many felt unwell. For us it was just one day, yet the fire had already been raging in Glenmore and Strath Nethy for more than nine days. As one local resident said to me, looking at the blurred sky and the orange sun, it looked apocalyptic. I said to her that Andrew Baxter's constituents and the people fighting the fire had been enduring it for way too long.

Be in no doubt: further dry summers await us. I repeat my colleague's call for a round table. We need to listen to the experiences of those who met the challenge on the ground to help us prepare for the future. I agree with the recommendation of Scottish Land & Estates to build and maintain a live wildfire capability register via the community asset register, which should cover estates, farms, contractors, plant hire businesses, forestry operators, wildfire consultants and conservation bodies, recording equipment type, operator availability, training, insurance, transport requirements and mobilisation constraints. There is an informal network of good will that has not always been used to its potential, as was seen during this summer's wildfires. Recognising the unique situation that is faced by rural Scotland when it comes to fighting wildfires is critical for an

improved response the next time that we face these issues.

I also stand by local voices who question the revised muirburn code. Does it serve to protect the communities that it affects? As I have learned from meeting with a few people in farming communities, we might be failing to listen to the voices of those on the ground who hold expertise in managing the land for the combined benefit of the environment, the local economy and our safety. Without the right preventative measures, there will be no biodiversity left to protect.

Time and again, I hear that valuing lived experience is central to the Scottish Government's vision of a Scotland that is fit for all. I call on the Scottish Government not to forget the voices of those who stood to press back against the raging fires this summer. It must listen when they tell it to provide joined-up leadership in the face of crisis that unites our established fire and rescue services alongside the existing network of private and third sector emergency response, and to properly—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Sorry, but I am afraid that you are over time—you will need to come to a conclusion.

Yi-pei Chou Turvey: The Scottish Government must properly fund the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service so that it is fit for purpose. That is the only way that we can prevent future disaster from which nature may not be able to recover.

18:31

Emma Roddick (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): I join other colleagues in thanking Andrew Baxter for introducing this motion and for recently supporting my efforts to bring forward a debate on Raigmore hospital—which I am glad to see he is no longer in. I am glad that he is able to lead this debate. I also take this opportunity to put on the record that I look forward to working with him on issues of shared importance to our neighbouring constituencies and that we can agree on, of which I think that there are already a fair few.

Many of my friends, family members and constituents shared my absolute heartbreak at the sight of the Cairngorms on fire this summer, just as we felt last year when fire took hold in Dava. I saw hourly updates on social media of how businesses were being impacted, biodiversity threatened and residents affected. It is hard to describe the grief that folk in the Highlands feel when we see the land on fire, even for those of us who live further up the road—it is deeply personal and devastating.

There were many questions from the families of those who fought the fire, which have already been covered in this debate. I hope that we will hear

more detailed answers to those questions this week in relation to protection, resources and equipment. I am keen that we, in this Parliament, explore every option to make that sight and all the damage that it causes far less common and such incidents shorter and less severe.

What was most clearly and repeatedly asked for and needed was further air support. I was glad to see that the Scottish Government explored options for that, particularly through its request for support from UK ministers. Now that we have the answer that those resources do not exist, it is time to kit ourselves out. Reactive specialist air resource is necessary to fight fires such as the one in the Cairngorms as quickly as possible.

There is also a role for prevention. In the previous session, I successfully amended the now Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2026 to allow local authorities to implement local byelaws to prevent fires from occurring in the first place. I am keen to see those provisions enacted and that opportunity taken by councils, which I made clear to Highland Council last week.

Last year, as Tim Eagle hinted at, I also took part in cross-party meetings. There was a lot of discussion about taking a holistic approach and the need to look at everything all at once and take our time. I understand that position, but there are things that we can all agree on and just get on with now while we take our time on those long-term strategies, so that we do not have this exact debate again next autumn.

We must use every tool at our disposal to prevent—as well as effectively tackle—what is likely to be a regular occurrence. It should be obvious to visitors and locals that setting fires and barbecues in the height of summer when you are surrounded by vegetation is not a great idea, but, sadly, that is not the case. There is an important role for messaging that makes that clear and for penalty schemes that support local rangers to travel around high-risk areas and put a stop to risky behaviour.

When it comes to events like this that threaten lives, livelihoods and health, it is also incredibly important that public messaging is clear, consistent across different agencies and considered trustworthy. Although I appreciated the very regular updates from the cabinet secretary throughout the fire, there was widespread confusion about some media lines that suggested that the fire had been dealt with while volunteers and partners continued to fight it, days before an increase in its severity and a change in direction caused evacuations. That messaging also merits some review.

It is clear that we cannot immediately put a stop to extreme weather events on our own. Plans to

tackle wildfires are required regardless of the strength of our climate commitments, but that does not mean that there is a case for reducing any of those efforts. The link is clear and we must continue playing our part in that particular battle while also looking at on-the-ground efforts to prevent and tackle wildfires and flooding in our communities.

I look forward to continuing the work with colleagues across parties, through the Rural Affairs Committee and any other opportunities that we have in the next five years, to make progress on the issue.

18:35

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): I congratulate Andrew Baxter on securing this debate.

Last year, the UK experienced its worst year of wildfires on record, and three of the five largest wildfires ever to occur in the UK have happened here, in Scotland, in recent years. I pay tribute to firefighters here, in Scotland, across the UK and in Europe who risked their lives this summer in the face of significant wildfires. A number of firefighters lost their lives fighting those fires in Europe this summer.

Those wildfires were not isolated incidents but a clear sign of a growing risk that is driven primarily by climate change. As Emma Roddick said, it is likely that such fires will become a regular occurrence. There are those who will seek to deny climate change or to minimise the risks that it poses, but the need for action to tackle climate change is greater than ever, and that includes doing all that we can to ensure that the risk of wildfires is reduced and that we deal with them better when they do occur.

Back in May, the Climate Change Committee warned that the UK is hugely underprepared for the impact of climate change. I welcome the review that the Scottish Government has spoken about in relation to how we deal with wildfires in Scotland, but we must recognise that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is not properly funded or resourced to tackle such fires. The recent Cairngorms wildfire required a huge operational response, spanning weeks, with more than 500 firefighters and appliances being deployed from across Scotland. Despite the tireless dedication and efforts of those firefighters in trying to get wildfires under control, the fire exposed the impact of more than a decade of cuts on the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service.

Jim Fairlie: Does the member also recognise that fuel load is a significant contributor to wildfires and that land management must be done to reduce fuel load across all landscapes?

Katy Clark: There is no doubt that there are many factors, many of which have been referred to in today's debate, but this is not just a Scottish problem. It is a problem across Europe and far more widely. We all know what has happened across the world, particularly in Europe, this summer as a result of climate change and the increased temperatures that we are all experiencing.

We know that 1,239 firefighter jobs have been lost since 2012-13, representing almost one sixth of the total uniformed workforce. Firefighters were deployed from across Scotland to deal with the Cairngorms wildfire, which obviously had an impact on other parts of Scotland. Other members have already spoken about how we would deal with multiple wildfires taking place in different parts of the country. We know that fire appliances have been withdrawn over the past decade and that many appliances remain unavailable due to crew shortages. We also know that there has been a failure to acquire vital appliances such as firefighting helicopters, which might have helped in the Cairngorms.

Collectively agreed safe crewing levels are regularly breached, putting firefighters at greater risk in situations such as wildfires. We also know that other wildfires—including the one on Arthur's Seat, right on our doorstep—are far from being one-off incidents for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to respond to. As part of this debate, we need to look at the service delivery review, which should have reflected the growing threat from climate change, including the risk of wildfires. However, the review instead—

Jim Fairlie: Will the member give way?

Katy Clark: Of course I will take an intervention.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I am sorry, but I must again point out that you are over time. You must conclude.

Katy Clark: I will do so, and I apologise to the minister.

The point that I am trying to make is that we need to look at not only the cuts that have taken place but the proposed cuts and the 166 firefighter jobs that would be lost, the multiple front-line appliances that would be withdrawn and the stations that would be closed if the proposals on the table now went ahead. Both the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and the Fire Brigades Union are calling for a national conversation; I hope that they are included in the conversation that takes place and that the minister refers to that when he winds up. However, I urge that we look again at some of the proposals that are on the table now, in the light of this summer's events, because this is the wrong direction of travel.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): We are now very tight for time and, having already extended the debate, we cannot do so again. Any interventions will have to be absorbed in the four minutes allocated to the final speakers, but I hope that we will get everyone in.

18:41

Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): The Cairngorms wildfire caused great disruption and concern among local communities, and I give Andrew Baxter credit for bringing this debate to the chamber. Our fire service and volunteers bravely tackled the fire, and I want to say a huge thank you to our firefighters, volunteers, land managers and communities, all of whom played a role in extinguishing it. The delay in the Scottish National Party declaring a national incident, and then being forced to do so by the Fire and Rescue Service, is clearly a matter for separate discussion, and I note the cabinet secretary's earlier comments.

Although the fire itself stopped just short of Aberdeenshire West, the smoke still covered the area. It even reached Aberdeen itself, impacting local businesses and events across the north-east. I hope that the Scottish Government rethinks its financial support and provides it outwith the currently allotted area.

There are, however, several issues that need to be addressed, and I hope that the minister will look into them. The first is insurance. The fact is that volunteers and equipment from estates are not insured, meaning that people are having to take risks that the Government is not prepared to underwrite. Unless that issue is resolved, the army of volunteers and equipment will not always be available.

Secondly, firefighters are angry at being ill-equipped to deal with hill fires—a point raised by other members tonight. Specialist equipment is lightweight, and many firefighters had to wear full gear, which is wholly unsuited to the terrain.

Thirdly, although the changing climate is certainly producing the conditions that have to be dealt with, these fires are not the product of spontaneous combustion. Further education is required on reasonable access as well as on disposable barbecues, which have already been mentioned.

The biggest point that I wish to make this evening is about the ever-increasing fuel load, which is a direct result of the SNP's poorly thought-out muirburn regulations. Restrictions on muirburn are leading to higher fuel loads—

Jim Fairlie: Will the member give way?

Alexander Burnett: No. We have had enough interventions.

They are leading to higher fuel loads, with more surface vegetation available to feed wildfires.

Jim Fairlie: Will the member—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Thank you, minister.

Alexander Burnett: I have heard the minister's interventions already, and his points are wholly wrong. If he continues with his ploy of opposing all grouse moor management, there will be nobody left to apply for his muirburn licences.

Allowing biomass to increase and encouraging rewilding while the climate is getting hotter and drier is dangerous. This is a problem that is only getting worse. SLE's excellent report states that

"Much of the estate-based equipment, trained personnel and fire-behaviour knowledge recorded in the response exists because estates undertake and prepare for planned muirburn."

However, the briefings for this debate from RSPB Scotland and Scottish Environment LINK fail to mention the importance of keeping fuel load at safe levels. This avoidance of the issue is a huge concern, and it is one based in ideology, not fact. One person affected wrote:

"When my husband arrived on site with another local land manager, FLS personnel were horrified at the suggestion of bulldozing swathes of trees and vegetation to create a firebreak.

They appeared more concerned about the regen than about the prospect of people's homes and businesses being destroyed, even though that regen was likely to burn anyway."

If those who have caused this problem cannot accept accountability, rural communities will continue to be at risk.

Another aspect that has become evident is the policy of these bodies of not just preventing new mountain tracks but spending money filling in old tracks. If the fire had crossed over into the National Trust estate at Mar Lodge, it would have been impossible to get fire engines and crews to the scene. Taxpayers have a right to know the full cost of the fire and how public money is being allocated to charities and public bodies that are failing wildfire prevention.

The sentiment among local communities is that the Government is not taking wildfire risks seriously and not listening to landowners and managers who have the local knowledge and expertise to prevent and prepare for wildfires. The Government must rethink its muirburn policy and allow responsible muirburn, to prevent the threat of further wildfires to homes, businesses and communities.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I remind members that the only person speaking should be the person with their microphone on.

I am afraid that I will be able to call only one more member to speak.

18:45

Duncan Dunlop (South Scotland) (LD): My colleague Andrew Baxter is absolutely right to highlight that our resilience to wildfires is not good enough, and I hope that the Government and the cabinet secretary have listened carefully to the points that have been made.

I am not sure that I will do this formally, but I should maybe note my interest in that my first ever paid job was heather burning—not controlled burning, but burning to improve grazing, mainly for sheep. How times have changed, because fires never got out of control in March in the late 1980s.

I want to focus on our peatlands. Scotland's peatlands are one of our greatest natural assets. They store enormous amounts of carbon and help to regulate our water and support biodiversity, and they play a crucial role in tackling climate change. I recently was lucky enough to meet scientists from the world-leading UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology at their site in a peatland outside Penicuik. They explained how damaged peatlands release carbon that has been stored for centuries back into the atmosphere and how the main component of peatland restoration, sphagnum moss, recovers at the rate of only 1mm per year.

In other words, it takes a millennium to reconstitute 1m of peat. The Scottish Government clearly recognises that, because in 2020 it committed more than £250 million to peatland restoration. That year, the programme restored 5,658 hectares of peat, but, strikingly, roughly the same amount was destroyed in one single fire—the 2019 wildfire in Caithness in Sutherland, which affected around 5,700 hectares of blanket bog in the flow country. The impact was significant: while the fire raged, Scotland's carbon emissions doubled.

The comparison shows how quickly years of restoration work in one area can be undone in another, and we must look at how our efforts complement each other. I was witness to a farcical sight when I was out with the UKCEH scientists, where, on the peatland that they are restoring and where they are monitoring air pollution on the peatland bog, you could see a peat hag being harvested for compost for garden use. Although that does not have a massive implication over the piece in relation to how much we are doing to destroy our peatlands, it is really bad optics. Why have we not brought out the contracts and

reclassified the land, as has happened elsewhere in the UK, so that that practice does not happen? That would give a really strong signal to the public, who can see that it should not happen here. We should also be really conscious of Sitka spruce planting in peatlands, as it releases more carbon than it sequesters. We must really join up our responses.

I have been alluding to the real cause of the issue: I am disappointed that, in the debate, we have not talked about climate change. I was really frustrated by the SNP's and the UK Government's responses over this very hot summer. Andy Burnham was literally asking people not to use a disposable barbecue. Really? That is not good enough. The UK this year has had more heatwaves than it has had in the entire last century, and I would really like us to spend time considering that issue during this parliamentary session.

I would like to offer some hope, however. I want to recognise the excellent work of groups such as the Leadburn community woodland, which is restoring the peatland, and Forth Resource Management Ltd, which is helping to reduce our reliance on peat in horticulture by recycling our garden waste. Moreover, as Finlay Carson mentioned, proper woodland management also has a significant role to play, and I commend the Woodland Trust Scotland, the Borders Forest Trust and Dumfries and Galloway Woodlands for educating me on the matter over the recess. I look forward to continuing that work.

The wildfires are quite literally a burning reminder that climate change is no longer a warning for the future. We must see that it is a crisis on which we can have an impact, and we must lead with that. It is a wake-up call, and it is happening right now.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I call the cabinet secretary to respond to the debate.

18:49

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Neil Gray): I appreciate this opportunity to discuss our wildfire position on the back of Mr Baxter's motion and ahead of my planned statement on Thursday.

I begin by thanking every single person and organisation who worked tirelessly in tackling and extinguishing the Cairngorms wildfire. I am hugely appreciative of their work, commitment and efforts in demanding, challenging and changing circumstances. I commend and am incredibly grateful for the outstanding efforts of the more than 500 firefighters and staff of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, Police Scotland, other emergency responders, landowners,

gamekeepers, volunteers, Forestry and Land Scotland, the Cairngorms National Park Authority, NatureScot and RSPB Scotland. There has been a plethora of intervention across the board.

I make special mention of the volunteers who gave up their time to help to fight the fire or to support those who were doing so. I also thank the people and communities in and around the Abernethy area who supported the response effort and those on the front line, and the residents of Nethy Bridge, who supported one other during evacuation. I know that the Cairngorms wildfire was not the only wildfire to have been dealt with this year, but it was the most serious.

As everyone here is aware, there has been extreme weather around the world this year, and wildfires were a feature across Britain and many other European countries this summer, with devastating impacts—a point that, refreshingly, has been acknowledged by Katy Clark and others.

The damage that the Cairngorms fire caused was widespread, with more than 3,300 hectares of moorland and forest—about 10 square miles—destroyed. The wildfire area is home to some of Scotland's most important biodiversity, including native woodland such as ancient Scots pine trees. Undoubtedly, the wildlife, the woodland and the flora and fauna that it supports will have been affected by the fire—a point that Emma Roddick made powerfully. Ecological assessments on habitats and species that have been affected by the fire will, of course, be carried out.

We know that the duration of the fire meant that people and businesses were affected. That is why the Scottish Government made £3 million available to directly support affected businesses and support the longer-term economic recovery. That support will be delivered through Highland Council, which will also lead on the longer-term wider recovery with partners, including the Scottish Government. We all want to see this region of our country recover and flourish.

Last year, Scotland experienced its most severe wildfire season in recent memory. Unfortunately, we have again seen wildfires across Scotland, with the one in the Cairngorms that we are discussing today highlighting that trend. Wildfires are no longer a seasonal hazard; they are a direct impact of climate change, which is fuelling an increase in the frequency and severity of wildfires—a point made by Donald MacKinnon and Duncan Dunlop.

The changing climate that countries around the world are having to deal with will continue to increase the risk of significant wildfires, with the devastating impact that they have on our communities, local ecology and businesses and livelihoods. That is why we are taking action to adapt to a changing climate and minimise the risk

of wildfires through delivery of the “Scottish National Adaptation Plan 2024-2029” and the climate change plan.

The Cairngorms fire was taken with the utmost seriousness by ministers and Scottish Government officials from the outset. There was more than daily communication with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service throughout the incident. I fundamentally disagree with anyone's assertion that the response was otherwise. Indeed, on the basis of those updates from the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, I was able to do what I could to provide updates to local constituency and regional MSPs throughout the duration of the fire.

Katy Clark: I hear what the cabinet secretary says about feeling that there were adequate resources to respond to what happened this summer. However, he will be very aware of the concerns about the service delivery review and the lack of resources of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. Will the experiences of this summer be considered when looking at the proposals that are due to be put into effect?

Neil Gray: It is not my view that the fire service was adequately resourced on the ground; it is the view of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, which said that it was adequately resourced when I tested that point with the chief fire officer and the incident commander on a near-daily basis. The service review is being carried out to ensure that capability is in the right place to meet modern firefighting needs.

As our fire service, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service—

Andrew Baxter: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Neil Gray: I will give way once more, if I can, shortly.

As our fire service, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has the statutory and legal responsibility to deal with fires wherever they occur, and it continues to strengthen its capabilities. The SFRS provided reassurance that its response was resourced appropriately and proportionately, and that operational activity was continually reviewed to ensure that the response remained suitable for the scale and nature of the incident. There was, however, no doubt that it was a difficult fire to contend with. The people tackling the fire had to face the challenges of changing weather conditions, difficult and inaccessible terrain and incredibly difficult circumstances. Operational commanders also continually assessed the hazards, including fire behaviour, fatigue, access and egress arrangements and the availability of suitable supervision and welfare provision. Those decisions and tactics on resource deployment and

relief arrangements had the dual aim of achieving operational outcomes while keeping all those who were contributing to the response as safe as possible.

Andrew Baxter: I want to go back to the cabinet secretary's comments about resourcing. Does he accept that, despite what SFRS senior officers may have told him about adequate resourcing, the view from whole-time and retained firefighters who were involved with the response is very different? They are telling both constituency and regional MSPs that they feel that the resourcing was inadequate? In fact, one firefighter told me last night that they feel that the national fire service is behind what the former Highlands and Islands fire brigade was 20 years ago.

Neil Gray: I remind members that incident commanders in the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service have a personal legal responsibility for responding to the fires that they contend with. I accept that there will be differences of opinion, but they have a legal responsibility in relation to the fire that they are fighting—that deserves a reminder. Of course, individual fire officers and the FBU—as I said clearly in a meeting that I had with it—can feed into the review and pass on information on their concerns or where there is a need for us to go faster on the wildfire strategy. However, in my asks of incident commanders and the chief fire officer, I made it clear that, if more resource was required, we would do what we could to ensure that that could be fulfilled, and they said that they had adequate and proportionate resources in place.

In March this year, the Scottish Government published its “Strategic Action Plan on Wildfires”, which sets out 18 actions across the three pillars of prevention, preparedness and response, which were highlighted by Andrew Baxter and Laura Mitchell, who also talked about PPE. During the Cairngorms wildfire, I requested an urgent review of the plan to ensure that we are moving forward with the pace and scale of action that is needed in the light of the increasing risks that we face, and to test that we remain in the right space in terms of required actions.

The SFRS is developing contractual arrangements on wildfire danger assessments to make the system more resilient and sustainable. We are also considering how we can better communicate those warnings to the public. I am aware that, throughout the Cairngorms fire, partner knowledge, specialist capability and local expertise were crucial in helping to bring the fire to a conclusion. I know that some in the local community felt that their voices were not listened to. That reinforces the need for clear communication and, importantly, engagement with local residents, landowners and businesses in the

course of significant incidents. The SFRS and the Scottish resilience partnership are already considering those issues as part of their wider review. I assure members that multi-agency reviews and debriefs will inform improvements to the wildfire concept of operations, including how the SFRS can work more effectively with partner organisations, landowners and volunteers.

I recognise the significant efforts of communities in response to the wildfire and the valuable contribution of volunteers to tackling it and other wildfires. One strength of the SFRS as a national service is its ability to flex its resources and to work with local resilience partners to reflect the availability of local volunteers and assets. Through the wildfire strategy and wider service delivery review, the SFRS continues to develop the skills, equipment, specialist advice and operational arrangements that are required to respond safely and effectively. That includes strategically located wildfire resources, specialist equipment, tactical advisers and enhanced support for crews operating in rural and island environments.

The budget for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has increased by £23.8 million, bringing the total budget to £435.96 million. In addition, the capital budget was increased to £48.4 million, which is an increase of £1.4 million, to improve facilities for firefighters and invest in the SFRS asset base across property, fleet, operations, equipment and information and communication technology—that is quite the contrast from the suggestion of cuts.

I will finish by endorsing the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service chief officer's statement on Scotland's wildfire preparedness. Preventing, preparing and responding to the increased risk of wildfires needs to continue to be a joint endeavour. Emergency responders must work with the Scottish Government, local authorities, land managers, public bodies, businesses, communities and the resilience partners to consider what more can be done, and that is what we will do.

I thank all colleagues who have taken part today and who have spoken about the clear challenges that we face with wildfires. As I have outlined, I have requested a review of our strategic action plan to identify any further actions that are needed and to ensure that the implementation meets the risk, which the climate change emergency increases. I will say more about that on Thursday when I give a statement on wildfires. I look forward to hearing more about the issue from members then.

Meeting closed at 19:00.

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