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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In preparing for Lachie's funeral, I had the privilege of having access to his unpublished memories of that race and of that day.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)

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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 (Central Scotland) (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 Central Scotland.

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.

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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

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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

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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)

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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. (S70-00143)

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.

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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: 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

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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

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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

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

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 rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

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

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

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

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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

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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.

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

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 reimaged. 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.

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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

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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.

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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

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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

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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

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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.

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