

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

Scottish Parliament

Thursday 3 September 2026

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

General Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): Good afternoon, colleagues. The first item of business is general question time. A lot of members wish to ask supplementaries in addition to the published questions. Those who ask supplementaries should please make them as concise as possible, and it would help if ministerial answers were also as concise as possible.

Rape and Attempted Rape

1. **David Smith (West Scotland) (Reform):** We asked a similar question to this one on Tuesday. Maybe the cabinet secretary will be able to give us a better answer than the First Minister did. The question is, to ask the Scottish Government what action—

The Presiding Officer: You are supposed to ask what is written on the paper. Please do not ad lib at the beginning of a question. Thank you.

David Smith: To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to address the increase in reported and attempted rapes throughout Scotland. (S7O-00164)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Neil Gray): As the First Minister said this week, the Government is very concerned about the rise in violence against women and girls, and he will provide personal leadership in tackling that scourge in society. We will continue to support services and prevention programmes, improve survivor support and strengthen the justice system's ability to bring perpetrators to justice, in which there has been success over recent years. 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 their harmful influences and behaviour before it escalates and women and girls are harmed.

David Smith: Maybe one of the reasons why we have had such an increase in rape cases in Scotland is the Scottish Government's soft-touch approach to rapists. It was this Scottish National Party-led Government that put rapists into the female prison estate, and it is this SNP Government that is now being propped up by the Scottish Greens, whose spokesperson for rapists claims that rapists have been demonised and that rape is a spectrum.

I will give the cabinet secretary an easy question to answer, because I am such a nice guy. Can he please update the Scottish Parliament on the Scottish Government's inquiry into the organised mass rape of children? It appears that there has been no progress whatsoever since February this year.

Neil Gray: In answer to the latter part of that question, there were publications out this morning from the range of inspectorates involved. Mr Smith might want to avail himself of those so that he can be updated on the progress.

On the first part of his question, that is demonstrably untrue. The average sentences for all cases of rape and sexual assault have risen substantially in recent years, as have the number of successful investigations and prosecutions led by the police and the Crown, for which they should be commended. The very fact that we have a burgeoning prison population that is at emergency levels is because of the increase in the long-term prison population, which has been driven by the prosecution of sexual offences. Therefore, what he is pointing out is demonstrably untrue.

Holly Bruce (Glasgow Southside) (Green): What action, in addition to the public health campaign that the Scottish Government has put in the programme for government, is the Government taking to address the root causes of sexual violence across Scotland? Does it recognise that certain groups—namely, refugee and asylum-seeking communities—are currently being wrongly blamed, without evidence, for an increase in sexual violence, when the evidence shows that the majority of sexual violence takes place in our homes?

Neil Gray: There is a significant amount of misinformation and disinformation from those who would seek to divide us about the drivers of sexual offences and violence against women and girls—Holly Bruce is right in that regard. We must work on ensuring that we continue to have strong community cohesion, and that is part of the programme for government.

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

We will continue to focus on the areas that are the key drivers of violence against women and girls—namely, the actions of men—and to ensure that we have better education, better support services and a better public protection landscape so that we can address those issues.

Monklands Replacement Project

2. Mark Griffin (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether, when briefed by officials on the full business case for the Monklands replacement project in March 2026, the then Minister for Public Health considered the £2.1 billion proposal to be at risk of rejection. (S7O-00165)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care (Angela Constance): I reiterate that the case for the new hospital is well made and has not been rejected. Indeed, I visited the new site during summer recess and reiterated that a new Monklands hospital will be built at Wester Moffat. Work is already progressing with NHS Lanarkshire on refreshed design plans.

As I am sure the member will note from recent freedom of information returns, the Government had not fully completed the assurance of the full business case prior to the dissolution of Parliament. Advice to the minister in March noted that point and made it clear that further advice would follow, after those processes were complete. The business case was sent to the health and social care management board on 25 March 2026. Thereafter, we entered the pre-election period. On the formation of the new Government and following further advice, I assessed the business case and made the decision to pause and instruct the redesign to ensure value for money for the public purse.

Mark Griffin: NHS Lanarkshire submitted its £2.1 billion full business case in December 2025, but ministers did not announce the decision to reset the project until seven weeks after the election. The Government presented Monklands as a major capital project during the election only to send it back to the drawing board after votes had been counted. Why were the people of Lanarkshire not told before the election if there were serious affordability concerns? When did ministers first know that plans were going back to the drawing board?

Angela Constance: Substantial information on the matter has, of course, been put in the public domain, and I made an important statement to the Parliament before recess.

It has always been the case that projects of such scale take time to consider fully and to take through the appropriate internal governance and assurance processes, as the public would expect when such significant amounts of public money are involved. In March, the project was still going through various internal assessments and the business case was not ready to proceed for decision before the Scottish Government entered the pre-election period.

For the record, I am 100 per cent focused on the delivery of this much-needed new hospital. I note that the Scottish National Party was the only party to have a commitment to the University hospital Monklands in its manifesto.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Con): I wrote to the new Cabinet Secretary for Justice on 7 August on the back of the recent investigation by the *Scottish Mail on Sunday*, which reported that the Scottish Government was warned by national health service officials about several significant issues relating to the replacement Monklands hospital. That happened in March. Did the former health secretary know about NHS Scotland Assure's concerns back in March while he was out campaigning for a new Monklands hospital in his Airdrie seat? Why is the former Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs letting the former Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care off the hook?

Angela Constance: I remind Ms Gallacher that Neil Gray was recused from decisions in relation to the replacement hospital. I also remind her, with respect, that I made the decision to call a halt and ask for the redesign on the basis of affordability, as the cost to the public purse would have been in excess of £2 billion. Nonetheless, I am 100 per cent committed to delivering a new hospital for Lanarkshire on the Wester Moffat site with core services, including accident and emergency.

If Ms Gallacher has further questions, I would be more than happy to meet or correspond with her.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform): Those of us who smelled a rat during the election campaign were right. The people of Lanarkshire were hoodwinked over Monklands. Given what we now know, how can they have any confidence that the SNP Government will build a new hospital? When will it be built and what is the budget?

Angela Constance: I look forward to Mr Simpson attending the opening of the new hospital in Lanarkshire. As I have said on a number of occasions, I will bust a gut to ensure that plans for the redesign are before me by next year. The indicative plan is to commence building in 2028.

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

People with Complex Needs (Support and Care)

3. Steven Bonnar (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to ensure that people with complex needs, including mental ill health and problematic substance use, receive joined-up support and continuity of care. (S7O-00166)

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs (Maree Todd): Ensuring that people with complex needs receive joined-up support is a priority for the Government. Through engagement with people with lived and living experience and front-line services, we know that people who use substances continue to face barriers to accessing mental health support.

Through the mental health and substance use protocol and medication assisted treatment standards, we are improving co-ordination across services. Our service renewal framework and alcohol and drugs strategic plan promote a person-centred approach, which is supported by third sector partners, who are vital in helping people to engage with the right support for them.

Steven Bonnar: The experience of my constituents the Sweeten family, following the tragic death of their son Paul, demonstrates that national guidance alone is not enough if people with complex mental health and substance use issues can still fall between gaps in services. What further action will the Government take to ensure that that guidance is consistently implemented in practice so that people receive joined-up support and continuity of care, rather than simply being passed from one service to another?

Maree Todd: I thank Steven Bonnar for raising the experience of the Sweeten family. My thoughts are with them following the tragic loss of their son Paul. I recognise how difficult it is for families when they feel that services have not worked together as they should.

Steven Bonnar is right that guidance alone is not enough, which is why we are focused on implementing the national mental health and substance use protocol, with Healthcare Improvement Scotland supporting local areas to embed joined-up working in practice.

Around 80 per cent of local areas have now developed local protocols, and that work is continuing to ensure that implementation is consistent right across Scotland. We will continue to work with partners to improve access to services, because our expectation is absolutely clear that people should receive co-ordinated support that meets their needs, regardless of their circumstances.

Irshad Ahmed (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab): I was pleased that, yesterday, the Government hinted at a move towards multiyear funding for some specialist third sector organisations. Mental health charities are telling me that they can often accept only the most serious referrals because they are at capacity and funding is not secure. Which specialist health services will move towards multiyear funding, and when will the Government announce that plan?

Maree Todd: I absolutely agree with the member that multiyear funding is key to unlocking the power of our third sector organisations, which spend far too much time struggling to ensure that they keep the roof above their heads to keep going instead of focusing on supporting the people whom they want to and have the expertise to support. The Scottish Government is absolutely committed to improving that situation. As the member rightly points out, there have been some announcements about which organisations will have multiyear funding. I will write to the member and let him know what further news he can expect in that area, and I will set out a plan for future multiyear funding for the organisations in that portfolio area.

Link Workers and Social Prescribing (Glasgow)

4. Bob Doris (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to support access to link workers and social prescribing in areas of Glasgow where the Scottish index of multiple deprivation data might mask levels of poverty. (S7O-00167)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care (Angela Constance): Community link workers are a key part of our work to tackle health inequalities and connect people with support in their communities. Through the £190 million primary care improvement fund, we are investing in multidisciplinary primary care teams, including link worker services.

In Glasgow, we have provided an additional £3.6 million over three years to strengthen link worker capacity across 80 general practices and specialist services, helping thousands of people to access support with issues such as mental health, poverty and wellbeing. We are also developing a national social prescribing framework to strengthen access to person-centred community support across Scotland.

Bob Doris: I highlight the important work that is carried out by the community-run Partick Annexe, including taking referrals from across 14 general practitioner practices that do not have access to a community link

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

worker. The project was described to me as a support and social prescribing model, funded by vital investing in communities funding, which, as the cabinet secretary knows, is coming to an end.

How can the Scottish Government work with Partick Annexe to support it to access whatever the successor funding might be, and to support local identified need, which is often masked in SIMD data due to the presence of wealthier nearby communities?

Angela Constance: As a Government, we invest around £1 billion in support to the third sector. We greatly value the essential role that it plays in supporting communities. Further to that, the primary care budget planning will include recognition that community link worker provision is an important part of supporting communities and individuals.

The member makes a reasonable point, notwithstanding that we need to focus funding where there is evidence of greatest need. Currently, the SIMD is the best way for us to do that. However, I recognise that there are pockets of deprivation that are surrounded by affluence, and our third sector is vital to supporting those communities. The member's example of Partick Annexe is a good one, and I know that it has received funding through the investing in communities fund for four years.

Social Care System (Vulnerable Children)

5. Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): To ask the Scottish Government what action it will take in response to the joint statement from all local authority chief social work officers declaring an emergency in the social care system, particularly in relation to the shortage of homes and social care for vulnerable children. (S7O-00168)

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Siobhian Brown): Following the chief social work officers' joint statement, I immediately convened a meeting with them to discuss all the concerns that were raised. After that, on 7 August, I jointly convened a multi-agency round table with Councillor Buchanan from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to identify practical actions that can be taken at local and national levels.

Through that collaborative work, partners have agreed a range of measures to be taken forward urgently to help to address the immediate pressures in the system, alongside longer-term actions that are aimed at increasing capacity. Although there is no single solution to these really complex challenges, all partners are committed to working together to deliver meaningful and sustained improvements.

Julie MacDougall: The Homes for Scotland briefing that was sent to all MSPs earlier this week argued that Scottish house-building numbers in 2025 were 30 per cent lower than the numbers required, and it called for more delivery and less bureaucracy. The recently published programme for government is extremely light on detail when it comes to how the planning system will be changed to speed up house building in Scotland. Will the minister indicate how more permanent homes for vulnerable children in care will be fast tracked and built?

Siobhian Brown: As I said, the Scottish Government is very concerned about the challenges in securing suitable care placements for children and young people who are unable to remain with their families and about the pressures that that is placing on children, carers, families and the workforce. As I said, we are working very closely with COSLA and social work, which will incorporate work across portfolios, including housing.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Will the minister outline what work the Scottish Government is doing through the new National Social Work Agency to address issues with placements for children?

Siobhian Brown: Officials in the agency have led our response to the issue, working closely with the sector and chief social work officers. The agency has worked at pace to gather data on the scale of the issue and to put forward options for consideration by stakeholders with a role in securing suitable care placements for children and young people who are unable to remain with their families.

We now have an agreed set of actions that can support the immediate retention of capacity and options that will support longer-term improvements to capacity. The agency will oversee the delivery of those actions and report directly to me, to ensure that I am updated on progress.

Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme

6. Amanda Lindsay (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform): To ask the Scottish Government what support it can provide to churches following the closure of the United Kingdom-wide listed places of worship grant scheme. (S7O-00169)

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

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Siobhian Brown): The Scottish Government recognises the vital role that churches and other places of worship play for people of faith and wider communities across Scotland. Following the UK Government's sudden decision to end the UK-wide listed places of worship grant scheme, I am pleased that Historic Environment Scotland has announced the new Scotland's places of worship fund. The pilot scheme will make £1 million available in 2026 and 2027 to help eligible listed places of worship to meet VAT costs that are associated with repair and conservation works. It will also provide immediate support to faith communities while helping to inform consideration of future arrangements.

Amanda Lindsay: Listed churches that run food banks and community hubs now face a 20 per cent hit on essential repairs, yet the Scottish Government offers a paltry £1 million pilot to March 2027. That is not a replacement, yet the Government will give more than £1 million to a charity that funds a project coaching men to breastfeed babies. Will the minister scrap that use of public money and put in place a proper Scottish funding route for listed places of worship?

Siobhian Brown: Here I was, thinking that the member had a genuine concern and a query about UK Government funding being ceased for places of worship. As I said, Historic Environment Scotland is doing what it can, given that the UK Government will not give any further funding. We will continue to do that.

Focal Therapy (NHS Forth Valley)

7. Martyn Day (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with NHS Scotland regarding the provision of focal therapy treatment for prostate cancer patients within NHS Forth Valley. (S7O-00170)

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs (Maree Todd): The Scottish Government has communicated about focal therapy provision with NHS Lothian and NHS Fife. Although the Scottish Government has not had communication with NHS Forth Valley regarding that treatment, it is important to note that focal therapy has not yet been approved by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence for routine use across the national health service. NICE states that that procedure should be used only with special arrangements for clinical governance, consents and audit or research. That informs which health boards might be in a position to offer the treatment and has been the basis of officials' conversations with NHS Fife and NHS Lothian.

Martyn Day: Given that patients in Scotland are currently travelling to specialist centres in England for focal therapy, are there plans to establish dedicated NHS focal therapy centres in Scotland to reduce long-distance travel for patients who are already in discomfort?

Maree Todd: Martyn Day will be aware of the findings of the recent NHS England and Imperial College London study, which found that focal therapy might be just as effective as standard treatment for prostate cancer but with a lower risk of side effects. However, I must reiterate that it is not yet standard treatment. I would expect NHS boards to proactively consider how to introduce new treatments such as focal therapy that would improve patient outcomes, in line with NICE and Scottish intercollegiate guidelines network guidance. I would expect NICE and SIGN to swiftly look closely at the new evidence from Imperial College London to help us to implement that new understanding in our NHS.

Hyperscale Data Centres (Planning)

8. Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government whether it has plans to further update planning guidance in relation to the development of hyperscale data centres, following the new data centre planning direction issued on 17 August 2026. (S7O-00171) [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Will members please settle down so that we can hear the questions?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Jenny Gilruth): The Minister for Public Finance issued a planning direction on 17 August to support the strategic monitoring of hyperscale artificial intelligence data centre planning applications. The direction requires planning authorities to now notify Scottish ministers of all new data centre applications exceeding 50MW of power capacity within seven days of validation. That also applies to applications that are already in the planning system. The Scottish Government is giving active consideration to the potential for planning guidance and will keep the Parliament informed accordingly.

Mark Ruskell: Outside the Parliament today are hundreds of people from across Scotland, including people from Auchtertool in Fife. They are angry at the lack of meaningful Government action over the summer to control AI data centres. They are angry at the lack of environmental assessment for all projects. They are angry that ministers are only required to be notified when applications are submitted.

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

Two months have passed since I previously raised the issue in the chamber, and I do so again today to ask the Deputy First Minister for a moratorium—a pause on determining applications—because there is no planning policy in place from the Government at this point. Fracking provides a precedent—planning ministers can step in and have stepped in to deliver moratoriums in the past. Will the Deputy First Minister now step in and show leadership?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Mr Ruskell for his interest in the topic. I am aware of the protests outside, and he will also recognise that, as a fellow Fife MSP, I am very aware of the strength of feeling on these issues. However, I should put it on the record that the ministerial code prevents ministers from being involved in decision making around planning. It is really important to record that.

Since Parliament previously discussed the subject, a number of actions have been taken forward by the Minister for Public Finance, as I set out in my original response. Planning authorities are now required to notify ministers of new data centre applications within seven days, and the new direction will support that strategic monitoring of the pipeline.

Finally, the important part of Mr Ruskell's overall question is that the Government is actively considering the potential for future planning guidance. We will keep Parliament, including Mr Ruskell, updated accordingly.

Green Cleugh Wildfire

9. Calum Kerr (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the debrief report on the Green Cleugh wildfire that impacted 17 hectares of land in the Pentland hills in the Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale constituency earlier in 2026. (S7O-00172)

The Minister for Agriculture, Marine and the Islands (Jim Fairlie): I very much welcome the Green Cleugh wildfire debrief report, and I am very grateful to everyone who contributed to the debrief process. The report provides valuable lessons on wildfire prevention, preparedness, response and recovery, and it reinforces the importance of co-ordinated action across all the sectors. It also highlights a number of recommendations, including the establishment of a Pentlands wildfire partnership, improved multi-agency planning, joint exercising and enhanced public communications. We welcome the progress that has already been made through the newly formed partnership, and we will continue to consider the report's findings as part of our wider work to strengthen Scotland's wildfire resilience.

Calum Kerr: I thank the minister for that comprehensive response. The debrief report recommends restricting disposable barbecues and campfires in the Pentlands hills regional park through legislation or byelaws, and building wildfire resilience and fuel load management in the future land use policy. When the fire management byelaws provisions commence next month, what will the Scottish Government do to encourage local authorities to use them and to ensure that the wider regulatory framework supports fuel management to cut wildfire risk?

Jim Fairlie: The Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2026 gives local authorities the power to introduce fire prevention byelaws, and Emma Roddick was instrumental in bringing that forward. Local authorities can do that as part of their local wildfire management strategies if they wish to.

We are committed to working in partnership with any local authority that wishes to introduce fire management byelaws when the relevant provisions are commenced next month. The Scottish Government welcomes the steps that the United Kingdom Government took to temporarily restrict the sale of disposable barbecues across the UK, and we are very supportive of a more permanent approach. We will raise that issue with the UK Government.

On fuel management, the strategic action plan on wildfires supports a proportionate land management practice that takes wildfire prevention into consideration, but if Calum Kerr wishes to discuss a specific regulatory issue, I am more than happy to do so.

University of Dundee (Organisational Change)

10. Heather Anderson (Dundee City West) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what discussions it has had with senior leadership at the University of Dundee regarding the university's ongoing programme of organisational change. (S7O-00173)

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Siobhian Brown): The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic is in Dundee today to visit the university and meet senior leadership and trade unions, having engaged with both parties in recent months. Although the university is autonomous and responsible for its own decisions, ministers have emphasised that fair work principles and meaningful engagement with staff and students are essential to compliance with the Scottish Funding Council's

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

conditions. The education secretary most recently met the SFC on 25 August to seek assurances on the university's collective consultation and confirmation that the SFC would advise ministers on the university's compliance before any further funding decisions.

Heather Anderson: The minister will be aware that, last week, the University of Dundee opened a process for 154 further redundancies, which will bring the total number of job losses at the university since 2024 to almost 1,000. The minister will understand the effect that the scale of those job losses is having on the staff, the students and the whole city. What reassurances can we in Dundee have that the full conditions of the Scottish Government grant, administered through the Scottish Funding Council, have been met and that every step has been taken to militate against any unnecessary job losses?

Siobhian Brown: I fully appreciate the concerns that have been raised regarding the university's cost reduction measures, and I sympathise with those who are affected. It is imperative that the SFC continues to monitor the university's compliance with all conditions, which apply throughout the funding period. The university has stated that the Scottish Government support has staved off the threat of insolvency and has protected jobs, and we remain committed to supporting the university towards a sustainable future.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes general question time—apologies to the many members whose supplementaries I was unable to take.

First Minister's Question Time

Party Leaders

14:00

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is First Minister's question time for party leaders. Before we begin, I invite members to join me in welcoming to the gallery a delegation of the United States Council of State Governments, led by the Hon Laura Kelly, Governor of Kansas. *[Applause.]*

Social Housing Applications

1. Malcolm Offord (West Scotland) (Reform): It has just emerged that, last year, the Labour-run City of Edinburgh Council froze all social housing applications from homeless Scots. Their applications were shelved while the council's housing stock was provided instead, as a priority, to asylum applicants. That was implemented under a policy that was made possible by the Scottish National Party's cynical abandonment of the local connection rule, whereby the City of Edinburgh Council's attempts to tackle the city's growing homelessness problem were undermined by a broken system that allows asylum applicants to jump the queue.

It is not fair on local people to impose on them a broken housing system that creates perverse incentives and gives priority to strangers over locals. Will the First Minister finally concede that the time has come to reinstate the local connection rule, to reinstate fairness and—as a bonus in this year of Government cost savings—to alleviate the huge cost of immigration on local council budgets?

The First Minister (John Swinney): As I understand it, the City of Edinburgh Council has said that what Mr Offord has put to Parliament is not the case. The council is prioritising the homelessness applications of all homeless individuals and fulfilling its statutory duty in that respect.

Mr Offord suggested that the local connection rules should be changed. Reversing the suspension of local connection referrals will not impact on homelessness presentations made to Scottish local authorities by refugees. The legislative changes that were made in 2022 did not change connection rules for refugee households—rather, the 2022 local connection rule changes only prevent a Scottish local authority from referring a homeless household to another Scottish local authority where they have a local connection.

It is really important, at a time when our country is being affected by disinformation of the type that has just been put forward, that we have clear and authoritative information put to Parliament. I am seeking to bring this country together and Lord Offord is trying to drive this country apart.

Malcolm Offord: If the First Minister does not want to engage on Edinburgh, let us move through to Glasgow. The outgoing SNP leader of Glasgow City Council, Susan Aitken, has implored the Scottish Government to acknowledge the rising cost of the Glasgow migrant crisis. She told the *Daily Record*:

"This is an issue that is not of Glasgow's making and which is significantly beyond our control, but which poses an immediate and untenable threat to financial sustainability, public services and community cohesion in our city."

Not to be outdone, the incoming SNP council leader, Ricky Bell, said this morning on BBC Scotland that the

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

problem needs urgent attention from the Scottish Government.

Meanwhile, the *Daily Record* proclaims today that Glasgow is bust, alluding to its “£110m black hole”. Why is that relevant? Because tackling the homelessness epidemic will cost Glasgow £75 million next year. That is more than two thirds of the deficit.

Councillor Aitken’s words replicate the legitimate concerns that Reform has been raising when trying to draw attention to this crisis. Now we have the proof, from two of our biggest city councils, that the virtue signalling of the SNP is costing our nation dearly. In 2022, just 35 homeless applications were made in Glasgow from outside of Scotland. One year later, that number rose to 1,300. Last year, it was more than 2,000. This is an epidemic for all to see.

If the words of the SNP council leader Susan Aitken are to be taken at face value by the First Minister, will he now acknowledge that he cannot call out Reform as being divisive and inciteful when we are both describing the same real and pressing problem?

The First Minister: In speaking to the programme for government on Tuesday, I made it clear that I thought that there were real threats to the stability of our society and the cohesion of our community because of malevolent actors in our politics. Malcolm Offord has just put more of that in the *Official Report* of the Parliament today.

Susan Aitken, the leader of Glasgow City Council, noted that

“Home Office decisions have created a nationwide homelessness crisis among refugees newly given leave to remain”

in the United Kingdom, which has put

“added pressure ... on already scarce housing”.

That is a recognition of the fact that the United Kingdom Government and its Home Office have not managed the issues of immigration and asylum properly and effectively. I recognise that point and I agree with it.

Malcolm Offord was a member of a Government that created this mess, when he was in the Conservative Party. One of the individuals who was party to creating this crisis now comes in here and asks me to find a solution—to the crisis that is of the making of Malcolm Offord and his cronies.

On another issue that is affecting Glasgow City Council, under the SNP, the city council is tackling the equal pay disgrace that was presided over by the Labour Party for generations there. It is always the case that the SNP has to clean up the mess of the Labour Party and the Conservatives.

Malcolm Offord: These are urgent questions on a housing emergency and a homelessness epidemic caused by 20 years of SNP neglect, incompetence and underfunding. Those crises have been exacerbated by a warped ideology, thanks to years of virtue signalling from a succession of SNP First Ministers blinded by Scottish exceptionalism.

The situation was made pretty clear by the harrowing BBC “Disclosure” programme, “Welcome to Glasgow”. Such was the confected anger directed at Myles Bonnar for drawing similar conclusions to Reform about Glasgow that he has chosen to take time off.

It is not good enough for the Parliament to dismiss the protests, the protesters and the unrest in our towns and cities. It is time to address their core concerns. It is just a fact that removal of the local connection rule has been exploited by the influx of substantial numbers of migrants, to the detriment of our city’s finances and cohesion. It cannot be disputed that local people are being put at a disadvantage. That is not fair. Will the First Minister please now agree with Reform—at the third time of asking—that the removal of the local connection rule has done significant damage to Scotland and that reinstating that rule would relieve our cities of significant financial burden, allowing them instead to focus on housing our own local Scots in need?

The First Minister: As I have indicated already, changing the local connection rule would not in any way, shape or form address the issue that Malcolm Offord has put to me.

The second point that I will make is on the construction of housing, as Mr Offord challenged the record of the SNP Government on that. The SNP Government has built more affordable houses per 100,000 population than has been done in any other part of the United Kingdom since 2007, when the present Scottish Government came to office.

On the “Disclosure” programme and the presentation of the city of Glasgow, I was in Glasgow a lot over the summer for the Commonwealth games, and I saw a city that was welcoming, inclusive, vibrant, creative and colourful. It was the epitome of a modern city in a modern Scotland, and I pay tribute to the people of Glasgow for the success of the Commonwealth games in the summer.

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

Violence Against Women and Girls

2. Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Violence against women and girls is a global problem and a blight on our society, so it falls to all of us in the chamber to do everything that we can to tackle it. I am proud to support the “It’s Time” campaign by the *Sunday Post*, to challenge and eradicate violence against women and girls, and I welcome the fact that John Swinney has pledged his support, too.

However, the uncomfortable truth is that words are no substitute for action, and this is not day zero. Since 2022, sexual crime rates have risen by 11 per cent; rates of rape have soared by a third; and domestic abuse is up by a shocking 81 per cent. To make matters worse, the length of time that victims have to wait for justice has also increased. Rape victims now face an average of nearly three years between reporting an incident to the police and a verdict being given. What is the Government doing right now to ensure that Scotland’s justice system is keeping women and girls safe?

The First Minister (John Swinney): First of all, let me echo Jackie Baillie’s comments about the *Sunday Post*’s “It’s Time” campaign. I admire and applaud the *Sunday Post* for the leadership that it is showing as one of our country’s major media outlets. As Jackie Baillie said, I have given my support to that campaign.

Parliament will have heard what I said on the issue on Tuesday, and I reiterate the personal leadership that I will provide on it. The experience in Scotland over the summer has been appalling, and it must be remedied.

Some of the rise in the reporting of crime in recent years is due to our criminal justice system being more responsive and providing more confidence to those who have had the appalling experience of being victims of sexual crime. Although I deeply regret the fact that there is an increased level of such crime, I welcome the fact that more women are confident enough in our system to come forward and report that.

I assure Jackie Baillie that the Lord Advocate, as the head of the prosecution service, makes clear the importance that she attaches to pursuing these crimes. The Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service is working at pace to ensure that cases can be processed and heard as swiftly and expeditiously as possible, but there must be careful preparation to ensure that cases are robust so that they can result in successful prosecutions. I give Jackie Baillie the commitment that, among the police and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, there is an absolute determination to ensure that that is the case.

Jackie Baillie: I thank the First Minister for his response, but the facts speak for themselves. The promised sexual offences court is still not in place, and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service claims that it has had no extra money to deliver that. It is not enough just to get cases heard in court; women are being failed even after abusers are known to the justice system.

We all remember the tragic killing of Claire Inglis in 2021. She was murdered after her dangerous boyfriend was bailed to her address. This summer, we were all horrified by the murder of Stacy Hunter. She was killed by her former partner, who had been bailed and told to stay away from her. Stacy’s family has demanded that the Scottish National Party Government catches up with other countries and rolls out GPS tracking of violent offenders on bail, but the Cabinet Secretary for Justice has been unable to say when that will be in place. Can the First Minister provide a clear timetable for when these life-saving changes will be enacted?

The First Minister: On the first point in relation to bail and remand, these decisions are taken by courts independently. I appreciate and understand how difficult it is for courts to come to these judgments, but the particular cases of Claire Inglis and Stacy Hunter give us all cause for concern about the fact that the individuals who were able to perpetrate those heinous crimes were on bail.

In relation to the sexual offences court, the cabinet secretary met the law officers and the Crown Agent last month to discuss the progress in implementing the court. The legislation was passed by Parliament in the immediate run-up to the election, and preparatory work is under way to ensure that the sexual offences court that the Parliament legislated for—I welcome Parliament’s support for that—can be put in place.

In relation to some of the work on GPS tracking, pilot work is under way, but I accept unreservedly the importance of having additional protections in place, which can be provided through the use of this technology. I assure Jackie Baillie and Parliament that the Government is giving this matter urgent attention to ensure that progress is made as quickly as possible.

Jackie Baillie: I thank the First Minister for that, but actions speak louder than words, so I want to press him on the timetable for GPS tracking, because women’s lives are being lost while it is not in place. The epidemic of violence against women and girls in Scotland demands immediate action. We cannot afford any more delay.

A year after the Women’s Rights Network published data on sexual assaults in hospitals, it reported that there has been no progress. This Parliament legislated to create domestic abuse protection orders, giving the

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

police extra powers to protect victims. Five years on, they are still not in place. We are still waiting for the SNP's promised misogyny bill. In 2023, its changes to bail laws removed vital protections for domestic abuse victims, and GPS tracking is still not here. The SNP is failing to exempt rapists and sex offenders from its latest plans to release prisoners early.

I do not for a moment doubt the good intentions of John Swinney and his Government. I believe that he is genuine and sincere, but those choices and delays have been fatal.

Will the First Minister do the right thing, acknowledge that his Government has failed to keep women safe, and guarantee that his warm words will finally be backed up with action?

The First Minister: I appreciate the manner in which Jackie Baillie is raising these issues, as well as their substance, but she will understand that I cannot agree with much of the characterisation that she has set out before Parliament today.

The Government, which I have been proud to be part of, has taken significant legislative steps to tackle domestic violence in our country. We look to implement the legislation and ensure that it can be effective as swiftly as possible, but it has to be workable legislation.

I have given a commitment that the misogyny bill will be introduced in the first year of this parliamentary session, and that is exactly what will happen. No decisions have been taken on the penal reform consultation, which closed on 20 August. The Government will consider the issues that have been raised, and the points that Jackie Baillie raises are serious considerations to be addressed as part of that.

I could not have been more open about my sense of shock about what we have experienced in Scotland over the summer in relation to violence against women and girls. For all my involvement in areas of policy in the past, I am determined to make sure that this has the strongest possible and emphatic leadership from the First Minister.

I am a male First Minister. At the heart of all this is the behaviour of men and boys. There has to be a cultural effort, and the *Sunday Post* campaign is really helpful as one dimension of that; the Government's communication is important, and these exchanges are important as well, because they give me an opportunity to say to Parliament and to the country that male violence against women is absolutely and completely unacceptable, and every aspect of this state will be deployed to root it out.

Data Centres

3. Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): For months, the Scottish Greens and communities across the country have called on the Scottish Government to hit pause on the dozens of applications to build hyperscale data centres in Scotland. As I told the First Minister in June, the first 24 of those applications alone would require one and a half times as much energy as our entire country uses right now. That is clearly absurd.

It looked as though the Government was beginning to accept that urgent action was required, but, earlier this week, John Swinney published a programme for government that not only fails to hit pause on those applications but aims to attract more data centres to Scotland. That announcement has been devastating for communities across the country.

The Government's previous position was that it was in favour of so-called green data centres, but, back in June, the First Minister could not give a definition of what makes a data centre green. This week, a new term has been introduced: responsible green data centres.

Can the First Minister tell Parliament and the hundreds of campaigners rallying outside right now exactly what makes a data centre responsible and green?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government has taken a number of steps on the issue of data centres, which were announced by the Minister for Public Finance over the summer. That involved issuing a new direction, which requires planning authorities to notify the Scottish ministers of any planning application for a data centre that exceeds 50MW in power capacity. That will allow the strategic monitoring of the national pipeline of proposals for major data centres and their implications for communities and wider infrastructure.

The minister has also recalled a planning appeal relating to a proposed green data centre in Edinburgh so that the decision can be taken by ministers. The minister has issued directions requiring environmental impact assessments for the proposed data centre developments at Wester Hermiston in Edinburgh and Auchtertool in Fife. In addition, the Cabinet will give further consideration to the issue in its programme of policy work over the autumn.

On the question about the definition, green data centres must be powered from renewable energy sources, make use of energy-efficient technologies, seek to minimise water consumption and support the reuse of

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

excess heat. The assessment and consideration of all those questions will be relevant in every assessment of such planning matters.

Ross Greer: The First Minister says that action has been taken over the summer, but requiring councils simply to issue a notice to the Scottish Government that an application has been lodged does not change any of the fundamentals. Councils have not been provided with the guidance that they require to make consideration of those applications. The Government promises that the strategy that was announced in the programme for government—which it is yet to set out—will include clear definitions for those data centres. Even if that is true, it will come far too late for the communities who are fighting totally inappropriate applications right now. Even the Scottish National Party's own national council agrees that a pause is required until the strategy is in place and until adequate guidance has been given to councils, which are struggling to deal with such applications.

The First Minister says that the Cabinet will consider that in the autumn, but the Cabinet was asked to consider that over the summer, because those applications are live now. For the First Minister's strategy to be of any use whatsoever, it needs to be published in full well ahead of the point at which councillors will actually make decisions on the applications. Can the First Minister tell the Parliament when the strategy will be published?

The First Minister: So that we are crystal clear about it, the Cabinet has considered the issue over the summer. That is the first thing that I want to put on the record. That resulted in the changes that have already been made by the Minister for Public Finance.

The point that Mr Greer makes—that there is no difference as a consequence of what the Cabinet has determined—misconstrues the decisions that have been taken. The notification requirement put in place by the Government will put a greater onus on national scrutiny of those applications and, as a consequence, further advice will be given to local authorities.

I will put on the record some relevant issues. As I indicated in my first answer, the Cabinet will consider the matter again to ensure that we have a proper and effective regime in place so that communities can be protected and the proper assessment of such applications can be made. In every respect, the Government must take responsible planning decisions in relation to such applications, and ensure that our decisions are compatible with planning law. That is an essential requirement on the Government at all times.

Ross Greer: The First Minister says that the changes that were made over the summer will result in more national scrutiny of the applications. On what basis will that be? No planning guidance has been produced to deal with this new wave of applications—the proposed centres are utterly unlike previous data centres that have been constructed, which are necessary for our economy. The Government says that it is in favour of so-called green data centres, but the developer of the development at Larbert admits that its application would have a “major adverse” impact on the environment and the local community. That proposal was for a 300MW data centre with 200 diesel generators right beside a care home, some of the residents of which are on ventilators.

Hundreds of people from communities across the country, from Larbert to Bishopbriggs and from Auchtertool to the Lammermuirs, are outside the Parliament right now, demanding a moratorium on new hyperscale data centres.

That pause should have started in June, but the next best time for it is now. The Scottish Greens are ready and willing to work with the Government on a credible data centre strategy, but if the live applications are not paused, that strategy will come in far too late—it will be meaningless at that point. Will the First Minister hit pause now and halt consideration of all new hyperscale data centres until full planning guidance and a national strategy are in place?

The First Minister: I understand the concerns that have been raised, but they do not take into account much of the existing planning regulation that is in place.

National planning framework 4 provides a robust framework for the consideration of development proposals, including climate and emission impacts. That is central to the national planning framework, which the Parliament approved. In addition, regulatory constraints were added by the Government during the summer.

There is a robust framework in place to guide the assessment of such developments, and the Government will continue to monitor the effect of that as a consequence of the decisions that we have made during the summer to maximise the scrutiny of such issues.

Violence Against Women and Girls (Bail Laws)

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

4. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): John Swinney says that he is determined to tackle the pandemic of violence against women and girls in Scotland. Three years ago, Police Scotland, Victim Support Scotland and Scottish Women's Aid all warned him that weakening bail laws would increase violence against women, but he ignored them. He scrapped a legal safeguard that kept men who had been charged with domestic violence in custody. During recent months, at least two women, Stacy Hunter and Samantha Lee, have been murdered by their male partners who were bailed after attacking them—dangerous scumbags, freed to kill. Will John Swinney bring back that important safeguard?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I hope that members do not doubt or question my determination to address violence against women and girls in our society. Part of the way in which Russell Findlay put his point across does not help us to have a considered debate about such issues or to ensure that we take effective action.

The bail test that was legislated for by the Parliament, on the suggestion of the Government, ensured that, for the first time, the needs and perspectives of victims were to be taken into account in the assessment of bail. I do not make decisions about who gets bail and who gets put on remand; that is for the independent judiciary. At the instigation of the Government, the bail test ensures that the needs of victims are taken into account.

Of course I bitterly regret the loss of any woman's life as a consequence of the violence perpetrated by men against them. I want to make it clear to Parliament that I will do everything that I can, including giving personal leadership to address the issue, to ensure that violence is rooted out in our society.

Russell Findlay: John Swinney keeps saying that the courts make bail decisions, and he is right about that, but his Government sets the law that the courts must follow.

Now, John Swinney is considering plans to automatically release all long-term prisoners after they have served only two thirds of their sentence. His consultation document even admits that that could

"have an impact for ... victims of violence against women and girls."

That cannot be allowed to happen.

I wrote to the First Minister this morning and set out a range of constructive proposals to protect women and girls. Will he stop violent thugs who attack women being given bail and being freed early? Will he agree to meet me, victims and their families to discuss our proposals in further detail?

The First Minister: I am very happy to meet Mr Findlay to discuss these issues. I am also meeting a lot of victims. I spent a lot of my time during the summer meeting victims, so, with the greatest respect to Mr Findlay, I do not need his encouragement to meet victims of such heinous crimes.

I will apply the leadership that I have set out to Parliament to ensure that we have in place a combination of different measures. There are criminal justice aspects to the whole issue that must be properly set out, but there is also a need for principled leadership to communicate to men and boys in our society, through every aspect of the work of the state, the unacceptability of violence against women and girls. I will lead that effort within the Government. If there are constructive contributions to be made in Parliament, I will, of course, welcome them, but I assure Parliament of the determined leadership that I will give to address this issue.

Violence Against Women and Girls

5. Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh North Western) (LD): In our final exchange before the summer recess, I asked the First Minister about protecting women and girls from male violence. In the following month, three Scottish women died at the hands of men and I went to the funeral of one of them. Vikki Soloman was 44. She was a mum and a passionate advocate for the beauty industry and she was known to several of us who are here in the chamber. She called the police asking for help, following an assault by the man who, hours later, would go on to kill her. The police did not attend. Stacy Hunter was murdered by an ex-partner who was out on bail and should have been nowhere near her. Can the First Minister see a pattern of women being horrifically let down by the system, and with fatal consequences?

The First Minister (John Swinney): In all circumstances, the complaints made by women about the conduct that they are experiencing should be addressed seriously and responded to by Police Scotland.

I have engaged with a number of victims over the course of the summer, and indeed over a number of years. I sat on the Criminal Justice Committee during the year when I was not in office, as we considered the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill and we heard from victims who gave accounts of better interaction with the police force and the courts than had been the case in the past. However, in every single case, women must be given the ability to raise their concerns and make their complaints and to have those taken seriously by the police and by the Crown.

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

Ensuring that that culture exists and that there is a focus on all those issues is fundamental to ensuring that we guarantee women's safety within society. That is the commitment that I give to Parliament today.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I certainly welcome that commitment but, just this week, we have heard campaigners say that legislation is not making a difference for women. I want the Government to succeed on this, but it should not take barbaric acts of violence for all of us to wake up to what is really happening out there. In the first half of this year, reported domestic abuse was up by almost 20 per cent. Too many women are living in fear.

There is more that we can do. Homes where there is a history of domestic violence should be properly flagged for priority police call-outs. Abusers who are out on bail should be subject to GPS monitoring and should face severe punishment for breaching their conditions. Police and the courts should be given the power to remove violent men from family homes.

For Vikki, for Stacy and for all those who are currently facing abuse, will the Government act with urgency before more women die at the hands of men?

The First Minister: Yes, we will. I welcome the points that have been made by Mr Cole-Hamilton, because those are legitimate issues to pursue. The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and I, and my ministerial colleagues, are looking at a range of measures, many of which were set out in the programme for government on Tuesday, and I look forward to working with colleagues from across the political spectrum to enact those proposals.

There is another serious threat to our society and particularly to women and girls, and it is the malevolence of so much of the online content that is flooding into the data feeds of men and boys. I will do everything that I can, and I will also co-operate willingly with the United Kingdom Government, to control the epidemic of inappropriate material that is flooding our information systems. The social media organisations that have unleashed that are fuelling much of what is going on in our society.

That is not me making an excuse for anyone; it is me explaining why I think we have such a difficult situation on our hands. If there is one thing that we in this Parliament could do in unity, it is that we could all sign up to making clear to the social media firms in this country and across the globe that they have a responsibility to clean up their act, because they are jeopardising the lives of women and girls in our society.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time for party leaders.

Cairngorms Wildfire

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is a statement by Neil Gray on the Cairngorms wildfire. Questions will be taken at the end of the statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:35

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Neil Gray): Let me begin by thanking every single person and organisation that worked tirelessly to tackle and extinguish the recent wildfire in the Cairngorms national park. I am hugely appreciative of their work, commitment and efforts in demanding, challenging and changing circumstances.

I commend and am grateful for the outstanding efforts of more than 500 firefighters and staff of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, Police Scotland, other emergency responders, landowners, gamekeepers, volunteers, Forestry and Land Scotland, the Cairngorms National Park Authority, NatureScot and RSPB Scotland, as well as the many other volunteers involved. I would like to give special mention to those volunteers who gave up their time to help to fight the fire or to support those who were fighting it. I also thank all the people and communities in and around the Abernethy area who provided support to the response effort and those on the front line and the residents of Nethy Bridge, who supported one another during evacuation.

There is no doubt that the Cairngorms wildfire was a challenging incident for the various responders involved. I am grateful that no lives were lost and property was protected, but the fire has caused significant damage and has had a significant impact on people, businesses, communities and the natural environment and wildlife.

The fire was devastating for businesses in the area, which had to close at a crucial time. That is why we have provided £3 million to directly support affected businesses and to support the longer-term economic recovery of the area, which will be led by Highland Council, along with partners, including the Scottish Government. We all want that significant region of our country to recover and flourish.

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

I assure Parliament of the seriousness with which the fire was taken by the Government. From the outset of the fire, I was in regular communication with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and, throughout the duration of the fire, the SFRS provided consistent reassurance that its response was resourced appropriately and proportionately. Operational activity was continually reviewed to ensure that the response remained suitable for the scale and nature of the incident.

However, let me be clear: the SFRS, as our national fire service, has the statutory responsibility for leading the response to fires wherever and whenever they occur, and is an expert in doing so. The SFRS frequently attends wildfires, 58 of which have been recorded so far this year. Thankfully, most are quickly extinguished.

There has been a range of commentary on what could have been done differently and what lessons could be learned, and it is important that we reflect on concerns that people have raised. As part of that process, there will be a multi-agency review and debrief to examine the specific circumstances of the incident and to capture learning, including on how the SFRS can work more effectively with partner organisations, landowners and volunteers. I am keen for that review to be as inclusive as possible and for it to include a range of local interests as well as public agencies.

That work is in addition to the urgent review of the Government's strategic action plan on wildfires, which sets out a co-ordinated approach through 18 actions across the three pillars of prevention, preparedness and response. I want to ensure that we are taking the action that is needed at the appropriate pace and scale in the light of the increasing risks that we face.

I am also aware that, throughout the wildfire, partner knowledge, specialist capability and local expertise were crucial to helping to bring the fire to a conclusion. I know that some members of the local community felt that their voices were not listened to. That has reinforced the need for clear communication and, importantly, engagement with local residents, landowners and businesses during significant incidents. The SFRS and the Scottish resilience partnership are already considering those issues.

A new concept of operations was put in place earlier this year to guide the SFRS and other emergency services in working effectively with landowners and other partners when dealing with significant-scale wildfires. The Cairngorms wildfire was one of the first major tests of its use, and the operational review will consider how it has worked and what learning needs to be incorporated in it. I would expect a revised and updated concept of operations to be in place and to be properly tested and exercised ahead of the next wildfire season.

The best solution is to stop wildfires happening in the first place. Some significant steps have already been taken, for example to ban disposable barbecues and other open fires in the Cairngorms national park, and the SFRS issues wildfire danger assessments when risks are particularly high. I also welcome the steps that the United Kingdom Government has taken to restrict the sale of disposable barbecues across the UK. I believe that that measure needs to be considered on a more permanent basis when there is a risk of wildfires.

The review will also consider the land management practices that are required to prevent and hinder the spread of wildfires. The strategic plan already contains a number of actions to support that aim, including new tools for wildfire prevention and management that have been introduced through the implementation of the Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2026. Among those tools are new fixed-penalty notice powers to help to enforce fire management byelaws in the Cairngorms national park. We will work with land managers to consider appropriate wildfire mitigation measures, which may include vegetation management, maintenance of access tracks, firebreaks and water access points. As part of the review, we are also examining how we can significantly improve public information ahead of the next wildfire season. That will involve a combination of preventative public communications and an enhanced system of wildfire danger assessments.

It is also clear that, if we are to face an increase in the risk of wildfires, we need to consider an increase in aerial support. That is an important resource in tackling wildfires, particularly in areas where access and terrain are difficult. Operational commanders have made it clear that aerial support is not a silver bullet that immediately extinguishes every fire as soon as it is deployed and that it is most effective in combination with a properly resourced ground attack. However, it is a matter of record that helicopter firefighting assets were not available at the beginning of the Cairngorms wildfire and came on site only within around 36 hours after the start of the incident. They were then used extensively throughout different phases of the incident, when they were available and when they could make an active contribution to the response effort.

The current system of aerial support is provided by commercial contractors. I pay particular tribute to the skills and commitment of those pilots and operators, as well as to those companies. However, there were times during the wildfire when additional aerial water bombing would have been helpful to supplement the resources that commercial operators under contract were already providing. That is why we requested military assistance for that specific purpose, at the request of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. Although we had been made aware informally that the UK military did not have such assets in the UK, our position was that we

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

would explore every option to put the required supports in place. I believed then, and I believe now, that it was right to put that request to the UK Government formally to allow it to explore every option that might be possible, including repatriating any assets that were based overseas.

The current contracting model is a complex process involving landowners purchasing support, which is then directed by the SFRS incident commander. Availability can vary, as those contractors also have a range of other commitments using the same assets. Indeed, the reality that we faced in this instance was that some of the helicopters were already committed to fighting a wildfire elsewhere.

The challenge of aerial support availability is not restricted to Scotland; there is a lack of capacity across the whole of the UK. I believe that fire and rescue services in England and Wales responded to 342 wildfires in the first six months of 2026 alone, including one in Derbyshire that burned for well over a month and a serious one in Oldham that destroyed hundreds of acres of moorland.

We need to improve on the current arrangements before the start of the next wildfire season. I can announce today that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service will be in a position to put helicopter resources on standby as soon as the wildfire danger assessment process indicates that there is a need to do so, and the service will now have the ability to immediately mobilise those assets directly in support of firefighting operations. That is not a complete solution, but it is a meaningful improvement on the current situation. We are also commencing work immediately to improve aerial support availability, including options for four-nations collaboration and military support.

Wildfires are no longer a seasonal hazard; they are a direct impact of climate change, which is fuelling an increase in their frequency and severity. As everyone is aware, there has been extreme weather across the world this year, and wildfires were a feature across many European countries this summer with incredibly devastating impacts. Although I am thankful that we did not see the loss of life and property that was tragically experienced in France and Spain, which caused huge devastation and economic loss, there is no doubt that the Cairngorms wildfire caused huge damage.

The changing climate that countries across the world are dealing with will increase the risk of significant wildfires, which have a devastating impact on our communities, local ecology, businesses and livelihoods. The work that we are taking forward with stakeholders and partners will ensure that we are prepared to face those new challenges and risks. As our climate becomes warmer and drier and extreme weather patterns intensify, Scotland must strengthen its resilience and ability to prevent, prepare for and respond to wildfire events. That is exactly what we will do.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Thank you, cabinet secretary. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions. A large number of members wish to ask a question, so concise questions and answers would be helpful.

Victor Currie (Highlands and Islands) (Reform): I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for providing advance sight of his statement and for the daily updates that he provided to me during the incident for cascading to concerned constituents.

An ounce of prevention is far better than a pound of cure, in common with what the cabinet secretary said in his statement. The cabinet secretary has announced £3 million to help communities and businesses to recover from the severe impact of this summer's wildfires. However, over the period from 2023 to 2026, only £1.6 million was allocated to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service for dedicated wildfire capability. Support for communities after such events is essential, but that disparity raises serious questions about whether the Scottish National Party Government is placing enough emphasis on prevention and operational capability rather than simply funding recovery once the damage has been done.

Communities across the Highlands are directly exposed to the growing threat of wildfires. They need credible support before a fire takes hold, not just assistance after land, property and livelihoods—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Mr Currie, could you get to your question, please?

Victor Currie: Of course, Deputy Presiding Officer.

Will the cabinet secretary explain how the Government expects to deliver a robust national wildfire strategy when front-line emergency response appears to receive less dedicated funding than post-incident community recovery and what monetary allocation will be provided for wildfire fighting equipment to keep Highland communities safe?

Neil Gray: I appreciate the acknowledgement that the updates that my office and I provided to Mr Currie were useful for him to disseminate to his constituents.

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

On the support for capability as well as recovery, I set out in my statement the work that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is carrying out to expand its capability and what the Government is looking to do on aerial capability. However, that is not the end of the story. There is more work to be done through reviews of whether there are further capability requirements.

Mr Currie asked a direct question about access to equipment. The £1.6 million that has been made available to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has allowed the purchase of additional all-terrain vehicles, fogging units, support vans, specialist personal protective equipment and further all-terrain trailers. We will keep under review any further requests that come through, to ensure that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is appropriately resourced to respond to the changing need.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Scottish Labour welcomes the review of the response to wildfires. The Cairngorms wildfire lasted longer and spread further than it needed to because the fire service did not have enough of the equipment that it needed. Scottish firefighters and volunteers put in heroic shifts to contain and extinguish the fires, but they were working beyond the point of exhaustion, critically supported by crews in control rooms and with resources drawn away from other regions of Scotland.

The Fire Brigades Union has long warned that the service needs to be properly equipped for threats that are due to climate change. However, the loss of 1,239 firefighters since 2012 and the crisis in the retained duty system are pushing the service to breaking point. Currently, 200 of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's 311 retained duty system appliances are unavailable due to insufficient retained duty system crew numbers. In relation to the cabinet secretary's statement, where would the standby helicopter resources come from? What assessment has been undertaken regarding the suitability of the crewing arrangement for those specialist resources and the risk that they might be unavailable due to crew shortages on any given day?

Neil Gray: There are many points that I wish to address in Pauline McNeill's question. First, in relation to increased access to aerial support, that support will continue to come from commercial operators in the first instance. We want to ensure that it is available from the moment that the high risk of wildfire warnings come into play, so that we are in a better position with regard to its availability as early as possible.

Secondly, I do not think that it is right for Pauline McNeill to say that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service had anything less than what it needed. She has suggested that the fire burned because the SFRS did not have access to what it needed, but, as I said in my statement, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service chief officers told me directly that they had appropriate resourcing throughout the wildfire. However, that is not to say that we cannot do more.

Ms McNeill also suggested that drawing resources from other parts of Scotland was a negative thing. To be able to draw on resources from other parts of the country with experience of fighting wildfires is a benefit of having a national fire service and a credit to it. The discussions that I have had recently with the FBU and the SFRS can be contrasted with the response and the capability that has been available in other parts of the United Kingdom through recent wildfires. However, we will continue to consider the points about capability and resourcing that Pauline McNeill has raised.

Laura Mitchell (Moray) (SNP): As was mentioned in the cabinet secretary's statement, the UK military does not possess any helicopters with water-bombing capabilities. Given the prevalence of wildfires across the UK this summer, does the Scottish Government intend to engage with the UK Government to robustly make the case that the Ministry of Defence needs to acquire those capabilities as a matter of urgency?

Neil Gray: Yes, it does, and yes, I will. I have pointed out the areas in which we are looking to provide the necessary resilience in a Scottish response, which I know that, given her constituency interests, Laura Mitchell is interested in. We are looking to increase water-bombing capability and will keep under review access to the likes of specialist PPE and other resources.

I also think that it is incumbent on the UK Government to look at the resilience posture that we have across the UK. The UK military is there for all of us; it is our resilience fallback for many areas. We will contact the UK Government to open a discussion on shared resources, including what the military could and should offer to us because of this rising risk. I know that stakeholders in that area are particularly interested in making the UK-wide resilience posture much stronger.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): The Scottish Greens, too, welcome the review that the cabinet secretary has talked about, and I thank him for his update. I particularly welcome his commitment to a four-nations approach to aerial firefighting support, including fixed-wing aircraft, which I have been calling for throughout the crisis.

On prevention, which is essential for tackling the issue, what reassurances can the cabinet secretary give me that the Scottish Government will put resources into making the landscape more resilient through nature-

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

based solutions, including by rewetting peatlands and creating wetlands? Will he convene a Scottish landscape resilience summit to ensure a cross-sector, multi-stakeholder approach to the issue?

Neil Gray: My colleague Mr Fairlie has taken forward extensive work in that area, with colleagues, stakeholders and landowners, in order to take the best possible steps to put in place the right land management processes, to use those steps to prevent wildfires in the first place and to mitigate the spread of wildfires if they take hold.

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The Strathy, which is the local newspaper, as I am sure the cabinet secretary knows, has today launched a campaign for better aerial support, so I welcome the cabinet secretary's message that there have been improvements there, and I am already working on a letter to him to get some of the finer detail.

The cabinet secretary also gave his thanks to the many volunteers who helped with the fire. On 18 September, at 6 pm in Aviemore, many of them whom I have already met are coming together to talk about what they have learned from the fire. It is essential that someone from the Government is at that meeting. If not the Cabinet Secretary for Justice, can the Minister for Agriculture, Marine and the Islands or the Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Rural Affairs promise to be at that meeting?

Neil Gray: Following Mr Eagle's raising the issue on Tuesday night, I have already been exploring my availability, including the potential for remote participation in that meeting. I am keen—as I know other ministers are—to hear directly from stakeholders as part of the review, to make sure that it is multi-agency and that everybody is able to feed into the process of the wildfire strategy and its 18 recommendations.

We are moving as fast as possible, and we know the areas that we need to focus on. I hope that Mr Eagle gets a sense, from my statement and from the action that we—not just me, but Mr Fairlie, who has a lot of experience in this area—have taken, that we are exploring the right areas and that we will work collectively to achieve a better position when it comes to preventing wildfires from happening in the first place and then spreading.

Andrew Baxter (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD): I associate myself with the cabinet secretary's thanks to all of the firefighters and volunteers who tackled the wildfire in my constituency. I also welcome the cabinet secretary's announcement about aerial capability, which is a significant step forward.

This morning, a retained firefighter who was deployed to the Cairngorms told me that they worked 13-hour shifts without suitable wildfire PPE, with kits so heavy and hot that they ended up fighting the fire at times in their T-shirts. When I asked whether the fire service was adequately resourced for wildfires, their answer was simply no.

Why should members accept ministers' assurances that resources were adequate when that is not the experience of firefighters on the front line?

Neil Gray: I was receiving live commentary and representation from the likes of Laura Mitchell and Emma Roddick on the situation with regard to PPE. I was passing that information on to the chief fire officer, who has responsibility for ensuring that those fighting the fires are properly resourced.

I have already pointed out that part of the resource that has been given to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to ensure that it has the necessary resources to tackle wildfires is a significant amount of specialist wildfire PPE—400 sets at a cost of £300,000 have been purchased. However, we are keeping the area under review as part of our discussions with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service.

Emma Roddick (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): I am relieved to hear that provisions to allow byelaws to be introduced by local authorities will commence next month and that the cabinet secretary will work with the UK Government on restricting the sale of disposable barbecues, and on air support. However, for those of us with experience of waiting months for answers from UK ministers, a little more reassurance might be useful.

Can the cabinet secretary go into any more detail regarding what that engagement will look like and how the Scottish Government will ensure that action is taken here, wherever possible and as quickly as possible, to protect people, businesses and the environment in Scotland?

Neil Gray: When stakeholders have asked me to get the UK Government to move faster on particular issues, I have given a commitment to them that I will make sure that engagement is done in a constructive way and not in a political way. I do not want this to become a constitutional issue. This is about ensuring the necessary resilience posture for the entire UK in response to an issue that has no borders and that we all face because of the climate emergency. I will make my representations to UK ministers in that vein.

However, given the very significant challenges that have been faced in other parts of the UK with regard to wildfires, I would also expect that such work would already be under way in Whitehall.

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

Max Bannerman (Highlands and Islands) (Reform): The cabinet secretary says that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service will be in a position to put firefighting helicopter assets on standby as soon as they are assessed as being needed. I want to press him on the detail of that. Does that mean that, as of today, under that policy, a helicopter is guaranteed to be available immediately when requested and will be on standby, or are we still dependent on the helicopter not being hired by someone else? People in Strathspey deserve an answer to that urgent question.

Neil Gray: I have said clearly that, from the moment that the wildfire risk is heightened, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service can use the contractual frameworks that are in place with commercial suppliers to ensure that commercially operated aerial support for tackling wildfires is on standby.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Disposable barbecues will continue to be a major problem for as long as they are available for purchase. They can reach temperatures of up to 450°C, and they stay hot for many hours after someone might think that they are out, with that heat going straight into dry soil, grass or underground peat. Convenience should never come before the safety of our countryside, our wildlife, our communities and, of course, our emergency services and volunteers. Will the cabinet secretary call on the UK Government to take the necessary decisive action to remove that hazard by permanently banning disposable barbecues?

Neil Gray: I welcome the steps that were taken during the summer by the UK Government in response to the wildfires in England to restrict the sale of disposable barbecues across the UK, given the risk that they can pose to the environment, local communities and agricultural land, particularly during periods of warm and dry weather when the risk of wildfire is heightened. There is also a risk in other areas, including beaches, parks and moorlands, and there needs to be consideration of the issue on a more permanent basis when there is a high risk of wildfires. A more permanent approach would provide greater protection for communities and the environment and greater consistency for members of the public in understanding how they can act with due responsibility while out enjoying our natural environment.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): A large number of members still want to come in.

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

Alongside gamekeepers, farmers, crofters, foresters and conservation workers, retained firefighters were at the forefront of dealing with the Cairngorms wildfire, as we have heard so much about today. What discussions has the cabinet secretary had with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service about the crisis in recruitment in the retained duty system? Will the cabinet secretary ensure that capacity in the retained duty system will form part of the review that he has just announced?

Neil Gray: I thank Mr MacKinnon, and I recognise his significant interest, given his experience. As I said earlier in the week, those issues were raised with me when I was on visits in Mr McArthur's constituency in Orkney, as there have been challenges with recruiting retained firefighters in some of the northern isles. I want to get the balance right, as I am sure Mr MacKinnon does, and it is important to ensure that we have people on the retained firefighter roster who have the requisite training so that standards are high. However, I recognise that, in many of the communities that he represents, the people who are helping to ensure that communities can continue to function wear many hats. I continue to speak to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service about how we can ensure that we get the balance right.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): Although wildfires are becoming an unwelcome occurrence in Scotland, many countries have been combating them for a number of years. How is the Scottish Government seeking to learn and engage with practitioners and Governments in parts of the world that, historically, have been more affected by wildfires and where we might expect to see them?

Neil Gray: Mr MacGregor is absolutely right. I wish to assure him that we are looking beyond Scotland. That includes engagement with practitioners and wildlife networks across the UK and internationally, including in countries such as Canada and the United States, where wildfire management, community preparedness and integrated fire management are more developed than they are in the UK. We are already seeing practical examples of that being reflected in our approach, including in work around wildfire danger assessments, alerting, rural-urban interface mapping, community resilience models, integrated fire management and the data and mapping around tactical burning.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Fighting a wildfire is different from tackling a building fire. There are different equipment and welfare requirements, and there are different command and co-ordination complexities. Three years ago, the FBU report, "Scorched: Firefighters and resilience to wildfires", pointed out a series of concerns—sun exposure, overlong shifts in challenging terrain, lack of suitable PPE despite well-understood fire effluent risks, training gaps and a shortage of welfare facilities. Many firefighters

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

respond to wildfires from retained duty system stations that face crew and appliance shortages. What measures have been put in place to safeguard the health and wellbeing of our firefighters, mitigate exposures, allow firefighters to shower within the hour and reduce cumulative exposure at large-scale protracted wildfire incidents?

Neil Gray: I very much appreciate the points that Ms Chapman raises. Again, those issues, including the points around decontamination, were raised during the debate on Tuesday evening. We are investing in and supporting the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to invest in the likes of additional specialist wildfire PPE. The facilities that are available to firefighters are part of the issues that are under consideration around the review that was carried out by the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service of its infrastructure. I will continue to talk to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service about its resource demands in that area.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): There can now be little doubt that Scotland faces a serious and escalating threat from wildfires. What is the Scottish Government's latest assessment of how vulnerable our landscapes, communities and infrastructure have become to that aspect of a changing climate?

Neil Gray: There have been 58 wildfires in Scotland so far this year. We experienced our worst season for wildfires in recent memory in 2025, with 241 recorded wildfires, including the UK's largest in Carrbridge and Dava moor, which burned nearly 10,000 hectares. The impact and risk are high.

Last year marked a significant escalation in wildfire frequency, intensity and impact, and climate change is increasing temperatures, extending dry spells and creating conditions in which wildfires can ignite and spread more easily, particularly in Scotland's peatlands, woodlands and rural landscapes, but also, as we have seen in England and Wales, across the board.

As our climate becomes warmer and drier and as extreme weather patterns intensify, we must also strengthen our resilience, not just here in Scotland but across the UK, to ensure that we have the ability to prevent, prepare for and respond to wildfire events. That is why I have commissioned a review, and why I will be working with partners in Scotland and across the four nations to ensure that our response is commensurate.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): The cabinet secretary talked about the importance of aerial support and acknowledged the lack of capacity, but that was a known issue. In March, the Government published a wildfire action plan that explicitly highlighted the lack of availability of helicopters. On 25 July, four months later, as the fires raged, the fire service told the Government that it needed but did not have four aerial firefighting assets. Did it get them, and if so, how soon was that following that request?

Neil Gray: It is well acknowledged that this is not an issue that is isolated to us in Scotland. We were seeking to draw on the same commercial assets that other parts of the United Kingdom sought to draw on. That is why it is not only me who is suggesting that we need to have a better four-nations posture on the issue; our land managers are also asking for that.

That is why we are seeking to build our own domestic resilience—that is the announcement that I have made today—and why I will be working on a four-nations basis with other ministers to ensure that our resilience posture is commensurate with the risks that we now face.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): That concludes the ministerial statement on the Cairngorms wildfire.

Programme for Government (Child Poverty)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): The next item of business is a debate on motion S7M-01022, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on programme for government: eradicating child poverty—the Scottish Government's defining mission.

15:10

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing (Shirley-Anne Somerville): There are few things more important than ensuring that every child grows up loved, safe and respected, and able to reach their full potential. That is why, despite the significant challenges that we continue to face, eradicating child poverty is the defining mission and number 1 priority of this Government, and, coupled with the targets that we have set in statute, we are determined to deliver. The programme for government that was published earlier this week makes clear our commitment to go further so that children and families can reach their full potential.

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

We are building on firm foundations and the solid progress delivered since 2017. In March, I was pleased to publish the Government's third tackling child poverty delivery plan, which sets out how we will drive continued progress on child poverty in the years ahead. It sets out wide-ranging action, spanning Government portfolios and to be delivered with partners across the country, to help boost household incomes, reduce the cost of living and help children and their families to thrive. Modelling that was published alongside the plan estimates that those actions will keep 100,000 children out of relative poverty this year.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies has recognised the difference we are making. It estimates that some of the lowest-income households with children will be around £2,760 a year better off because of our approach to income tax and benefits, including the Scottish child payment. Our programme for government builds on those actions, setting out our commitments for the coming year and our ambitions for the current session of Parliament.

Members across this chamber will have heard loud and clear from their constituents the impact that the cost of living crisis is having on their lives. Those concerns will only grow with the increase to the energy price cap that was announced last week, with bills already £300 higher than when the United Kingdom Government came into office, despite its pledge to cut those bills by the same amount. We have all heard how the rising cost of essentials such as food and energy mean that people in our communities are having to make decisions that they should never have to make. That is why tackling the crisis is at the forefront of our efforts, bringing together our action to eradicate child poverty, grow our economy and tackle the climate emergency.

This year, we are continuing to invest more than £3.5 billion in measures that will help to cut costs for households and boost their incomes. That includes continuing free prescriptions and the delivery of free bus travel for more than 2.4 million people; freezing fares on ScotRail services; and investing in our package of winter heating payments, which are helping thousands of households that are struggling the most to meet their energy bills.

That sits alongside our wider investment in social security, including our five family payments, which are providing unparalleled support to low-income families in Scotland in comparison with those in the rest of the UK, helping them to meet the cost of essentials and give their children the best start to life. Together, our policies form the most generous cost of living package in the UK, but we know that we need to go further.

That is why our programme for government commits to protecting and expanding support, over the current session of Parliament, to ensure that more people get the help that they need; we are taking meaningful steps this year to do just that. From Monday, we will deliver a £2 bus-fare cap across the Strathclyde Partnership for Transport area, cutting the cost of bus travel for thousands of households and building toward a national roll-out by the end of this Parliament. We will consult on legislation to establish legal price ceilings on some essential food items to tackle the cost of the weekly shop. We will make nearly £2.8 million available to local authorities to write off school meal debt for families who are impacted by the cost of living crisis. That is in addition to our new welcome to school bags and the increased funding for the school clothing grant.

Together with the steps that we are taking to develop the systems and legislation needed to increase the Scottish child payment to £40 for families with a child under the age of one, that action will help to further ease the burden of everyday costs on families.

While we cannot accept the Green amendment today, I do wish to talk about the premise that women's poverty is children's poverty. That is an exceptionally important point, which we need to recognise. I also think that it is very important—particularly given the discussions at First Minister's question time today—to recognise that women's inequality is one of the root causes of violence against women in our society. It, too, must be tackled.

Our programme for government includes a clear and unambiguous statement on our intention to end homelessness in Scotland for good and for everyone, and on the importance of housing in the fight against poverty. We will do all that we can over this parliamentary session to give everyone access to a safe, warm place to call home, helping people off the streets and ending the use of unsafe and harmful temporary accommodation for children.

We have already launched our new first homes fund, and we have committed record levels of public sector investment to our affordable housing supply programme, which will support the delivery of 36,000 affordable homes and will provide up to 24,000 children with a place to call home during this session.

We have set out how we will go further. We are implementing our new homelessness prevention duties, which will ensure that people get the help that they need before they reach crisis point. That is public service reform in action.

Willie Rennie (Fife North East) (LD): I am sure that most members would commend the Government for trying in many of those areas, including by tackling the problems of what is effectively a failed system. Surely

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

that is not a long-term solution, however. I have not heard the cabinet secretary talk about growing the economy, creating jobs and the value of good work. Surely that is the long-term solution to all those failures. We cannot keep patching up the system; we need to build a long-term solution. Will the cabinet secretary tell us more about that in the remainder of her speech?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Willie Rennie and I will be in agreement about that point—if I can expand on my remarks. While it is important that the Government assists households, particularly those with children, through the social security systems, it is exceptionally important to support people into work. That is exactly why the delivery plan in the programme for government mentioned the raising income through skills and education—RISE—initiative, which is being implemented through colleges, which is about getting skills and childcare to work together. That is exactly why whole-family support is important and it is exactly why the multiyear support for our employability schemes is integral to our programme. It is not a matter of focusing on one part of the issue; it is about looking to see what the individual needs and how we can best support them, whether that relates to childcare, transport or employability and skills.

Duncan Dunlop (South Scotland) (LD): Does the cabinet secretary recognise that, while the whole-family support fund very recently gave out £20 million, that is meant to be spent by March next year? That does not enable planning or long-term certainty for the agencies that are getting that money. A lot of it is therefore frittered away or has to be manipulated. The third sector organisations using those funds need five-year stability of funding.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: That is exactly why that £20 million fund is a multiyear commitment that we have made. I recognise the point that the member makes.

We will roll out our £50 million homelessness prevention fund, with £1 million already provided to strengthen tenancy sustainment activity by registered social landlords in Glasgow. We will continue to support an estimated 15,000 families who are impacted by the UK Government's freeze of local housing allowance rates, thus supporting families to meet the costs of their rent and helping prevent homelessness. We will phase in the establishment of more homes Scotland from 1 April next year to bring together funding, expertise and delivery tools under one roof, helping to deliver more of the homes that people need.

Together, the action we will take over the course of the session will increase the supply of social and affordable homes in the places where they are needed, helping to tackle child poverty, to support sustainable communities and to drive economic growth.

Thomas Kerr (Glasgow) (Reform): Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am just about to get to the part on skills and employment, which Willie Rennie is so keen to hear about, but I will give way to Thomas Kerr.

Thomas Kerr: I appreciate that. This is on homelessness, the cabinet secretary will be glad to hear. I wonder if she agrees with me and the Scottish National Party councillor and soon-to-be leader of Glasgow City Council, Ricky Bell, who mentioned local priority on BBC Radio Scotland this morning and asked for it to be reinstated.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I have known Ricky Bell for many a year, and it would be fair to say that it would be hard to find much that Ricky Bell and Thomas Kerr have in common. Ricky Bell is interested in helping the people of Glasgow and ensuring that they have a sustainable future; it is unfortunate that Mr Kerr is more interested in causing division, in Glasgow and elsewhere.

Ensuring that people have access to the skills and opportunities that they need to succeed is also key to eradicating child poverty. Across this session of Parliament, we will fund at least 150,000 apprenticeships, create new schemes to support disabled people into work, and provide national co-ordination of a skills and employability programme that delivers locally to meet people's needs. Our commitment to invest up to £90 million a year in devolved employability services—another multiyear commitment—includes dedicated funding to support parents' access to and progress in work. It will build on the £22 million of funding delivered this year, in partnership with Scotland's colleges, which I mentioned to Mr Rennie earlier. Our action will help not only to increase household incomes from employment, but to support economic growth, by helping businesses to access the skilled workforces that they need.

Our approach to increasing earnings is also underpinned by our commitment to transforming the childcare offer for families by the end of this parliamentary session, providing support 52 weeks a year for children from the age of nine months to the end of primary school.

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

Our programme for government sets out the key steps that we will take to make our ambition a reality. That includes continuing to fund a range of targeted childcare support for low-income families, including our extra time programme and our childcare early adopter communities, supporting more than 7,000 children and their families. It includes investing an additional £15 million this year for expanding breakfast club provision, to help schools, councils and third sector partners to prepare for the introduction of a national breakfast club offer in all primary schools by August 2027. From August 2029, there will be an after-school and holiday childcare offer, which will reduce the cost of childcare at the times that we know cause families the most challenge. In the coming year, we will publish and consult on a blueprint, setting out that phased delivery, with a focus on what matters to families.

We know that ending child poverty will never be about income alone. People's lives are complex, and public services can play a key role in helping to prevent poverty and supporting people out of crisis. Across this session of Parliament, we will work with our local partners to deliver on our vision for whole-family support, ensuring that people get the right support at the right time and place, for as long as they need it. The work that we have already undertaken through the fairer future partnerships has shown what a difference that approach can make when we work together.

I am pleased that, since returning to government in May, we have already delivered further progress. We have awarded £2 million to support the expansion of Children First's "national front door" support line, which offers a one-step gateway to support families across Scotland. We have awarded 10 charities a share of £20 million from our whole-family support third sector delivery fund, with the charities involved estimating that they will be able to assist up to 35,000 families. Last month, I was pleased to speak with families supported by the Salvesen Mindroom Centre in Dundee; they made it clear to me the difference that such services can make to their lives.

We will continue to build on that progress by maximising the opportunities for lawful data sharing and by co-designing a partnership agreement with the third sector that recognises its critical role in tackling poverty and inequalities. Again, that is public service reform in action, focused on enabling local partners to bring support together and making services work for the people.

The programme for government published this week sets out our ambitions for Scotland over the next five years. It unashamedly sets out our commitment to ensuring that families have access to the safe, warm and affordable homes that they need to thrive; to delivering a transformational expansion of childcare; and to delivering on our vision for whole-family support. These actions will help to change the lives of children and families across the country and will drive continued progress towards the eradication of child poverty.

In June, I announced a review of our child poverty targets to further strengthen our approach, ensuring that the targets continue to drive the right decisions and the changes that families need. Our approach is underpinned by our commitment to rewiring the state in Scotland and delivering public service reform that is focused on improving our public services so that they work for the people of Scotland.

In 2017, members unanimously agreed legislation in relation to the eradication of child poverty. Although some members and parties in the chamber have changed, I really hope that our focus on child poverty has not.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the publication of the Scottish Government's Programme for Government, Ambitious for Scotland, and its actions aimed at eradicating child poverty and supporting families with the cost of living; recognises the ambition to go further by transforming the childcare offer for families, delivering a £2 bus fare cap across all of Scotland, and investing record public sector funding in affordable housing; welcomes the focus on ensuring support for families is integrated, person-centred and accessible, including through delivery of the £20 million Whole Family Support Third Sector Fund; supports the commitment to build on action set out in the Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan for 2026-31, which is estimated to keep 100,000 children out of relative poverty this year, and to going further and faster so that every child has the chance to succeed regardless of their circumstances, and commits to working together to drive continued progress toward the eradication of child poverty in Scotland.

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