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Aithisg Oifigeil

**DRAFT**

# **Meeting of the Parliament**

## **Coinneamh na Pàrlamaid**

**Thursday 3 September 2026**

**Session 7**



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# 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.

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.

### **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 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 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.

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 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 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.

### **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 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 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)**

**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.

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.

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 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.

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-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.

**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 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.

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 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 and 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.

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 Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson):** I call Julie MacDougall to speak to and move amendment S7M-01022.5.

15:24

**Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform):** I thank the minister for securing this important debate. It is also important to state from the outset that Reform members believe that more Scots should be able to feel that they can start families. In the face of Scotland's demographic crisis, our young people should be encouraged to do so and raise our next generation of workers, as opposed to the import-first policy that is shared by the rest of the parties here.

I want to focus on two major factors that can have a massive impact on a child's life chances and family life—the economic opportunities available to their parents and access to housing.

In its “Poverty in Scotland 2025” report, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that all lower-income families—regardless of size—had experienced steep declines in their quality of life. It was particularly concerning to read that the rate of what it called in-work poverty increased to six in 10 people, with three-quarters of children who are classified as being in poverty falling into that category.

Although I commend the Scottish National Party Government for finally talking about employment as a means of addressing child poverty, it seems to once again take a back seat in this programme for government. When reading the section on putting more money in families' pockets, I noticed that, out of the five bullet-point policies that were presented, only one of them talked about low-income parents staying in jobs. That is simply not good enough. It was especially disappointing to see that one of those policies encourages maximising “take-up of benefits”.

I echo the sentiments of my party leader, Malcolm Offord, expressed on Tuesday. For those who are able and fit to take it on, meaningful and well-paid work should always be more financially and emotionally rewarding than claiming benefits. However, to achieve that, the SNP needs to support our local businesses and industries to start creating better-paying jobs. That would mean overriding the nearly 20 years of net zero ideology and overbearing business regulations pursued by this Government, both of which have been proudly paraded in this latest document.

Even when talking about skilled jobs, these so-called new ideas seem to fall flat when this SNP Government proposes them. For more than a decade now, instead of encouraging young people to celebrate success in any field, the SNP has indulged itself in the same kind of snobbishness as

the old Blairites. That is a closed mindset that says that going to university is inherently more valuable and means that those people are more educated than someone who picks up tools and gets a technical qualification—

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

**Julie MacDougall:** I would like to make some progress with my speech.

**Lloyd Melville (Angus South) (SNP):** Will the member take an intervention on that point?

**Julie MacDougall:** I would like to make some progress, as I said.

That closed mindset suggests that those people are more educated than someone who picks up tools and gets a technical qualification in college or simply learns better on the job.

**Alan Brown:** Will the member take an intervention on that point?

**Julie MacDougall:** If Mr Brown would not mind, I would like to continue with my speech and then I will come back to him. *[Interruption.]*

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson):** Members, can we hear the member who has the floor, please?

**Julie MacDougall:** I think that I am allowed to make way on my speech. Is that correct, Deputy Presiding Officer?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson):** Yes.

**Julie MacDougall:** Thank you.

If that were not the case, the Scottish Government would not have been sleepwalking into a national skills gap crisis for the past 10 years, and our colleges would have been given the support and respect that they so rightly deserve.

I remind members of the question that I asked John Swinney before summer recess. I asked him whether he would look into reforming the funding mechanisms for apprenticeships to sustainably establish the many placements that the programme for government hopes to create. At the time, I was given a backhanded response, but the programme for government gives me my real answer. The Government does not have a plan, it does not have a clue and it does not want to listen to the colleges that are on the brink of financial collapse. *[Interruption.]*

I want to try to wind up by talking about the difficulties that families and children face on housing. *[Interruption.]*

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson):** Members, can you settle down, please?

As a Fife councillor, I have personally witnessed too many cases—

**Lloyd Melville:** Will the member take an intervention? *[Interruption.]*

**Julie MacDougall:** I will wait until you have finished and then I will continue. *[Interruption.]*

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson):** Members, we have an important debate to get through.

**Julie MacDougall:** As a Fife councillor, I have personally witnessed too many cases of families being crammed into housing that is way too small for their needs.

At one time, social housing used to be a safety net for those families who fell on hard times. Now, it works like a lottery in which you might be put in for a ticket but there is little chance of actually winning. We in Reform have said from the start that not only do we need more housing, we need to make sure that social housing prioritises the locals, especially children, who are in most need.

Once again, I can only say that anything in the programme for government proposed by John Swinney that resembles a good idea on that issue lacks both detail and credibility. With some help from the Greens and others, the SNP has created what is probably the most hostile regulatory landscape when it comes to building homes in Scotland. It has meant that homes are more expensive for developers to build, more expensive to sell and, therefore, less available to low-income families. Once again, the Government seems to think that creating more bureaucratic institutions, drafting more laws and throwing more of our constituents' money at the problem will make it go away. That is simply not good enough: there are real lives at stake and too many children, particularly those in social care situations, who will struggle for the rest of their lives due to nearly 20 years of spin, piecemeal fixes and corporate bullet-point policies disguised as any kind of real leadership.

This programme for government was not indicative of a fresh, innovative Administration. It proves more than ever that the Government is desperate for ideas, but not so desperate that it will listen to the people on the ground who may contradict it. I was elected to reflect the views of those people who have been ignored for far too long. On that basis, I cannot support the programme for government.

I move amendment S7M-01022.5, to leave out from "recognises" to end, and insert:

"notes that, by the Scottish Government's own admission, child poverty is above its 2023-24 interim target of 18%, meaning that approximately 210,000 children are still living in poverty; expresses its disappointment that, despite the buzzwords and branding of its title, *Bringing Hope, Building Futures*, the Scottish Government's tackling child poverty delivery plan for 2026-2031 will not reach the 18% target until 2031; acknowledges that child poverty cannot be tackled in isolation, but rather by the totality of Scottish Government's policies; believes, that, in particular, the combination of Scottish Government policies on taxation and business regulation as well as lagging educational attainment have a detrimental impact on the economy and, as a result, the incomes and job opportunities for families, which undermine the positive impacts of policies designed to reduce child poverty, and calls on the Scottish Government to commission an independent review into whether its taxation, business regulation and education policies have led to the higher than expected levels of child poverty."

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson):** I remind members that it is up to the member who is speaking whether they wish to take an intervention.

15:32

**Mark Griffin (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab):** When the Parliament passed the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act in 2017, the cabinet secretary who led that legislation, Angela Constance, told members:

"statements of intent are all very well, but it is what we do that counts."—*[Official Report, 8 November 2017; c 62.]*

I completely agree. Nearly a decade later, when it comes to child poverty, that intent still lies far from delivery and Scotland's children continue to pay the price. Children are still going to school hungry, despite their parents skipping meals themselves. They are worried about rent, bills and whether their family can keep a roof over their heads. Those are the kinds of worries that should be the furthest thing from children's minds. They should be dreaming big and thinking about what they can achieve in life, rather than having those concerns.

It is a real worry that child poverty has become a generational tragedy. Too often, children born into poverty grow up to raise their own children in poverty. Despite having the powers to take a different path, we are still failing far too many young people. The Government comes to the chamber at the start of this parliamentary session and, once again, says that eradicating child poverty is its defining mission. However, it seems as though, instead of having a credible plan to meet its own legislative targets, the Government is settling for moving the goalposts. Reviewing the definition of poverty will not lift a single child out of it. The Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 was meant to hold ministers accountable for progress, but organisations such as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation have questioned whether the latest

delivery plan meets the requirements of the act, and only 26 per cent of people in Scotland believe that the Government has done enough to tackle child poverty. Ministers have argued that income-based targets fail to capture the impact of childcare, employability support and wider family services—but the problem is not that those policies are missing from the targets; it is that they have not been delivered at the scale that we require.

Nowhere is that seen as clearly as it is in housing. Today, nearly 10,000 children are living in temporary accommodation without the security and stability of a permanent home. No Government in the world could claim credibly that child poverty is a defining mission while record numbers of children remain trapped in temporary accommodation. Housing policy is child poverty policy. If ending child poverty is truly the Government's mission, then getting those 10,000 children into permanent homes should be the priority.

Labour has set out practical measures to reduce poverty, including helping parents into secure employment through a parent work scheme, affordable childcare that works for families, support with holiday childcare costs, family network hubs that are based on sure start principles, breakfast clubs in every primary school, action on school debt and a renewed focus on tackling homelessness.

Clearly, there are welcome areas of crossover in the programme for government. We welcome them and we would be happy to support them, but we would like to work to push the Government further on some of the measures that I mentioned. Those are anti-poverty policies because they help parents earn more, reduce costs and improve children's life chances.

**The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Neil Gray):** I think that Mr Griffin and some of his Labour colleagues have described the Scottish child payment as “game changing”. It has undoubtedly supported our aim of reducing child poverty in Scotland. If the UK Government replicated that, it would also have a significant impact across the UK. Why have his UK colleagues not sought to follow suit?

**Mark Griffin:** The child payment has had a clear impact, but it has not had enough of an impact. The Scottish Government is still close to missing its legally binding child poverty targets—so that is still an issue.

The UK Government has implemented a range of child poverty reduction measures, including one that Neil Gray and I have campaigned for: the removal of the two-child limit. That will be the single biggest measure to lift children out of poverty in the UK since before the early 1990s.

There is still work to do. Scotland has done something different with the child payment, but that is the beauty of devolution. Social security is devolved to Scotland, and that is to be welcomed, but it is not to say that nothing is happening at the UK level. Ongoing work is happening there.

The UK Government is working on child poverty, bringing together housing, employment, childcare and family support in a completely cross-governmental way, because reducing child poverty has never been only about social security, as Neil Gray would acknowledge. It is also about providing secure homes, affordable childcare and well-paid work and using absolutely every lever at our disposal to tackle child poverty and improve family incomes and opportunities.

Although we campaigned for the Scottish child payment way before its introduction, and it has lifted children out of poverty, there is more to be done. Wider intervention by the Scottish Government is needed if it is to lift children out of poverty.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson):** I ask Mr Griffin to conclude.

**Mark Griffin:** I will finish with a question to the Government. Does it still intend to meet the child poverty targets that were set out in the 2017 act? Reviewing them will not pull a single child out of poverty, but delivering on them will.

I move amendment S7M-01022.1, to leave out from “supports” and insert:

“regrets that, while eradicating child poverty has been a defining mission for the Scottish Government for nearly a decade, too many children remain trapped in poverty, record numbers are living in temporary accommodation and key anti-poverty measures have not been delivered; reaffirms the commitment to meet the targets set out in the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017; believes that a new approach is clearly needed with a focus on both delivery and tackling the root causes of poverty; further believes that tackling child poverty requires action across housing, homelessness, childcare, employment and family support as well as finally closing the attainment gap, and believes that if ministers are serious about delivery, they should engage in cross-party working to achieve the statutory targets and improve outcomes for children and families across Scotland.”

15:39

**Holly Bruce (Glasgow Southside) (Green):** Six years ago, the Scottish Government declared a climate emergency; two years ago, it declared a housing emergency; and, as we heard in June, Scotland remains in a child poverty emergency.

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing has laid out how she plans to eradicate child poverty in the years ahead. That is no small feat, and I commend her dedication and holistic view on how to tackle child poverty in this country

through whole family support, childcare and cost of living measures. I also welcome her agreement with the part of the Greens' amendment that connects child poverty with women's poverty, and I look forward to working with her on that front.

However, I call on her today to be braver and bolder and to rise to the challenge of progressively increasing the Scottish child payment, during this session of Parliament, for all children under the age of 16. Also, we should be looking at a top-up for those parents under the age of 25 who are so cruelly impacted by the UK Government's young parent penalty, to ensure that their entitlement is the same as that of older parents.

In this increasingly post-truth world, I invite members to look at the evidence on child poverty. This week, I brought members of the Child Poverty Action Group to Parliament. Together with the End Child Poverty coalition, which is made up of more than 150 organisations, CPAG has been calling on the Scottish Government to increase the Scottish child payment progressively over the course of this session of Parliament.

Those organisations work with children and families day in, day out. They are the experts who hold the real, horrible and traumatic lived experience of children in poverty. We owe them a great deal for the work that they do, and I thank them all. They came to Parliament to witness my asking the First Minister the same question: if the Government really wants to tackle child poverty head on, would he increase the Scottish child payment? The answer was that he would do that only by a wee bit, and only for one very specifically targeted group.

The programme for government contends that child poverty is a defining challenge for this Government but, according to its own analysis, it is set to miss its 2030 target if we do not radically rethink what it means to live in poverty. Standing here as a working-class person, I do not know what it is like to live in relative or absolute poverty. I understand many of the hurdles that come with being working class, but I have never had to think about whether I will eat today. It is crucial for me to recognise, understand and advocate for those 150 organisations and for families, constituents and children otherwise I will not be doing my job properly.

I return to the evidence. The Institute for Public Policy Research tells us that hard cash—money—giving direct financial relief is the best way to tackle poverty directly and quickly. The Scottish child payment has successfully cut child poverty in Scotland by 4 to 5 percentage points. If I were in the Scottish Government, I would be channelling all my efforts into that tried and tested model, and not completely reinventing the wheel. As I have

said, I agree that we need to take the holistic look at child poverty that many others have already mentioned in today's debate, but, if we want to make a real difference right now, we must increase the Scottish child payment.

I keep hearing that money is another stumbling block. How are we going to fund an increase? Yes, it will cost money, and we all need to think creatively about how to fund initiatives in these financially precarious times. Is that not what we are here to do? We are meant to grapple with complex problems, deal with the hard stuff and solve them.

Increasing the Scottish child payment to £40 a week for all of Scotland's impoverished children will cost £180 million. That has been set out in writing, because the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has done the costings. We give tax relief to arms companies, private jet polluters—as we heard yesterday—private schools and big banks when we could be channelling that money towards the country's most vulnerable children. How can we possibly justify that? We are talking about an investment in our young people so that they can thrive and can have their own children, who would then have children who would not need a Scottish child payment. It is an investment in our young people today and in tomorrow's generation. It is preventative spending.

I have heard the argument that such an increase would be a sticking plaster, and I agree. I do not want us to need the Scottish child payment, but we must do something right now—and quickly—not only to meet the targets but for all the children in the country who need it most.

I am going to pre-empt the coming groan by saying that I truly believe that, if we had the full powers of a normal independent country, we would do welfare policy a lot differently. Unlike the Conservatives, whose leader down south is today putting the two-child benefit into her spending plans, we would do things differently here.

Right now, we have far too many children living in deep poverty. That is the top line, and I see a tried and tested model for a way out for those families. Why do we not use it?

I move amendment S7M-10122.2, to insert at end:

"; calls for decisive and committed action to disrupt financial inequality between women and men, and recognises the need for targeted action to confront women's poverty as a vital part of realising its mission to eradicate child poverty; supports the progressive increase to the Scottish Child Payment to £40 per week for all children, not just those under one year old, with the goal of increasing this to £55 per week by the end of the current Parliamentary session, and believes that an increase to the Scottish Child Payment for young parents must be made to compensate for the UK Government's Young Parent Penalty."

15:44

**Morven-May MacCallum (Highlands and Islands) (LD):** Before I begin, I highlight the fact that I am a councillor on Highland Council.

I am keen to approach this session of Parliament by looking for ways for us to agree and to work together wherever possible, and I am glad that we agree on the need to eradicate child poverty. I commend the Government for the amount of money that it is spending on doing so, but money alone will not overcome that challenge. The issue runs deeper than that.

Around half of all children in Highland live in areas where people's access to essential services is among the most limited in Scotland. The direction that we take needs to encompass all of Scotland's children. Our policies need to be flexible enough to match the unique challenges that are faced in different parts of the country.

For example, the Government's motion talks about transforming childcare in Scotland, which is excellent. Good provision of childcare helps parents to get back into work, which is the best way to lift children out of poverty, so we need to make that process easier, more affordable and more accessible to people up and down the country. Unfortunately, no matter how much we reduce the childcare bill for parents, we are not addressing the core issue of provision. There are simply not enough childcare spaces available in Scotland, particularly up in the Highlands.

Over the summer, I visited the local jobcentre in Inverness, where I heard about the amazing work that the staff are doing to encourage people to get back into work. Astonishingly, they told me that they have a pot of money set aside for paying up to 80 per cent of the childcare costs of some people who are seeking employment but that money just sits there unused, because people cannot find childcare provision. That is why more than two fifths of rural businesses cite childcare issues as one of the main reasons why they are struggling to recruit. Our amendment calls on the Scottish Government to improve access to childcare in rural communities.

The Government's motion talks about delivering a £2 bus fare cap across all of Scotland. That could make a huge difference, but only if there are buses for people to go on. Transform Scotland has stated clearly that

"We shouldn't confuse affordability with availability."

Let us take the bus pass for under-22s, which is an example of a good policy that should, in principle, help young parents to get into education or employment. However, Highland Council's analysis concluded that uptake was far greater in more densely populated areas than in rural

communities. Why? The reason for that is the greater availability of bus services in urban areas. Policies such as the bus fare cap are good and well meaning but, at the moment, they are not getting to those who need them the most.

The programme for government is entitled "Ambitious for Scotland". I share that ambition. I want it to succeed, and I want to eradicate child poverty. I am keen to work with the Government to do just that, which is why I hope that it will be able to accept my amendment.

I move amendment S7M-01022.4, to insert at end:

"; calls for action to ensure that families, particularly in rural communities, do not face challenges in accessing childcare services with parents and guardians having real choice and flexibility over how to organise their lives and fewer barriers to work; acknowledges that, by providing a choice, parents are enabled to return to work if they want, boosting family incomes, tackling child poverty and growing the economy; believes that access to early learning and childcare (ELC) would be enhanced by introducing fairer rates for private, voluntary and independent providers of ELC to cover the actual costs of delivering high-quality ELC; further believes that the Scottish Government commitment in its Programme for Government to invest in independent providers does not go far enough, and calls on it to fully close the funding gap between independent and local government providers of ELC and to ensure that parents have sufficient access to childcare provision wherever they are in Scotland."

15:48

**James Adams (North East Scotland) (Con):** I declare an interest as a councillor on Aberdeenshire Council.

There will be no disagreement among members on the statement that eradicating child poverty is an incredibly important task for any Government. Unfortunately, child poverty remains a persistent challenge in Scotland. In my opinion, the SNP has failed to meaningfully reduce it since coming into power. Instead of fully using the powers that are available to it to tackle poverty, it has too often chosen to shift blame rather than take responsibility for policy failures and financial mismanagement. After almost two decades in government, the SNP must be judged on its record, not its rhetoric.

**Lloyd Melville:** I am more than happy to provide the member with the record of the SNP Government, which shows that Scotland has the lowest level of child poverty anywhere in these islands. Does he accept that?

**James Adams:** Thank you for that intervention, but will you admit that child poverty still remains unacceptably high in Scotland? Whether it is the lowest in the UK is irrelevant. The issue is that it is still unacceptably high in Scotland. *[Interruption.]* We are in the Scottish Parliament. I am making this

speech in Edinburgh, not London. *[Interruption.]* That is the truth. *[Interruption.]* It is the truth. *[Interruption.]* Well look—after years of missed targets by the SNP and rising welfare costs, we will continue to hold the SNP to account and to demand a credible plan to tackle poverty.

**Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP):** The gentleman says that it is irrelevant whether Scotland has the lowest child poverty in the UK. He says he is not concerned about whether it is lower than anywhere else. Is that an argument for more powers for Scotland so that it can do even more to lower child poverty?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark):** I call James Adams, and I would remind the member to speak through the chair.

**James Adams:** Thank you. If the SNP were to focus on Scotland instead of focusing on what is going on elsewhere in the UK, we would be in a much better situation. Every child in Scotland deserves the chance to grow up safe, supported and able to fulfil their potential, no matter their background or their postcode.

If we are serious about changing lives, we must be honest about what has gone wrong, what has not been delivered and what now needs to change. The Government motion talks about “ambition”, “progress” and going “further” and faster. The reality is that the SNP has already missed its statutory interim child poverty target, with child poverty remaining at 22 per cent rather than falling below 18 per cent. More than 200,000 children are living in relative poverty.

**Clare Haughey (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP):** Does the member have any thoughts on the impact on child poverty, in Scotland and across the UK, of his party’s policy of a two-child benefit cap, which it implemented when it was in power?

**James Adams:** I am not here to talk about Westminster; I am here to talk about Holyrood. I was elected to talk about the issues affecting Scotland in this Parliament. If the SNP Government were to grow our economy, we would be in a better situation.

**Lloyd Melville:** Will the member take an intervention?

**James Adams:** I will continue. I have already given way. *[Interruption.]*

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark):** Lloyd Melville—

**James Adams:** I have already given way; I will continue. I have already given way; I will continue. Thank you.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark):** — the member does not need to give way.

**James Adams:** Although we all share the ambition of giving every child the best possible start in life, ambition alone is not enough. There are measures in the programme for government that can and will help families. The Scottish child payment provides support to eligible families, and the Government plans to increase it to £40 a week for children under one year of age. There are also proposals around school meal debt and further expansion of free school meals.

However, increasing welfare spending alone will not eradicate child poverty. We need to grow Scotland’s economy, make work pay and support parents into secure employment. We need affordable childcare so that parents can work, high-quality education so that children can fulfil their potential, and secure housing so that families have stability. That is a fundamentally different approach from simply measuring success by how much Governments spend. The social security bill is forecast to reach £9.2 billion by 2030-31, yet the SNP is making work less rewarding while expecting taxpayers to fund the soaring benefits bill.

Tackling poverty simply cannot mean increasing spending year after year. It must mean creating opportunities, supporting families into work and ensuring that work pays.

**The Minister for Business and Fair Work (Tom Arthur):** I wonder whether the member can clarify something for me. Earlier in his remarks, he certainly implied, and I think that most people listening would infer, that, in his view, the Scottish Government was not doing anything with its devolved powers to tackle child poverty. He has just cited the Scottish Government using its tax powers to expand provision of social security, which we know is having a material impact on the fact that there are lower levels of child poverty in Scotland than we see elsewhere in the UK. Would he like to clarify what his position is?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark):** The member has taken a number of interventions. We do not have any time in hand, so he may want to consider whether he should take further interventions.

**James Adams:** Maybe I am being a bit too generous. I take Mr Arthur’s point and I acknowledge it.

The SNP has made—*[Interruption.]* I will continue. The SNP has made repeated promises to families and children that it has failed to fully deliver. In 2021, the SNP promised every pupil a laptop or free internet access. That commitment was not properly funded. The SNP also promised

free breakfast and lunches for every primary school pupil. That promise has not been delivered in full. The SNP promised free bikes for children of school age who cannot afford them. That was admirable, but only a fraction of that commitment has been delivered. There is a recurring theme here.

Meanwhile, the number of children living in temporary accommodation has reached a record high. As of September 2025, there were 10,480 children living in temporary accommodation. Secure housing is an essential part of giving children a decent start in life. No child can be expected to thrive while their family is stuck in temporary accommodation, waiting for a suitable home or facing uncertainty about where they will live next.

We should also recognise that poverty is not experienced in the same way in every part of Scotland. In our rural and island communities, families can face higher transport costs, fewer childcare options and longer journeys to access services. A national policy that looks good on paper will not work if it does not reach people right across the country. Therefore, although the Scottish Conservatives will support action that genuinely helps children and families, we will not sit here and pretend that the SNP's record has always been good enough.

If eradicating child poverty really is the Government's defining mission, it is time for a change in approach. We need a credible plan that tackles poverty while creating opportunity, an economy that grows, childcare that works for families, education that closes the attainment gap, secure housing and employment that provides a route out of poverty. Scotland's children deserve more than political promises and missed targets: they deserve a Government that delivers.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark):**  
We move to the open debate.

15:50

**Clare Haughey (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP):** Like many of my colleagues who are in the chamber, during recess I was out and about in my constituency engaging with constituents and meeting many local charities, third sector organisations and voluntary groups. I take a moment to pay tribute to the volunteers and staff who work day in and day out to support families in our communities and do all that they can to ensure that children and young people are given the best chances and opportunities in life. Their work is vital because child poverty remains a serious challenge in Scotland. Experiencing poverty touches every aspect of a child's life, from

health, education and the opportunities that are open to them to the wellbeing of their families.

As we heard from the First Minister on Tuesday, eradicating child poverty is the Government's defining mission. That mission is about building on the progress that we have made and continuing to make a real difference to the lives of families. The policy and spending choices that we make in the Parliament make a difference. Child poverty in Scotland is falling and is significantly lower than across the UK as a whole.

One of the simplest and most effective actions that we can take is to put money directly into the pockets of parents. The IFS estimates that some of the lowest-income households with children are around £2,760 per year better off because of the SNP Government's progressive approach to tax and benefits.

The Scottish child payment, which is unique in the UK, is projected to lift around 50,000 children out of poverty this year alone. It has been shown not only to have helped to reduce financial pressures on families but to have helped them avoid getting into debt and to have improved their physical and mental health by helping to reduce their stress around everyday budgeting. Therefore, I am delighted that it will be increased again for children under the age of one, with around 12,000 children set to receive support.

Of course, tackling poverty is not just about the money in people's pockets but about making sure that money goes further. Global events are again leading to increases in the cost of living and it is vital that we do all that we can to ensure that those pressures do not undermine the progress that we are making. Scotland already has one of the most generous cost of living packages in the UK.

That is the solid foundation that the programme for government will protect and expand. From radically expanding childcare, lowering public transport fares, providing free bus passes for our young people and further expanding free school meals to providing support with fuel bills, it is a programme to help to protect people from the cost crisis and ensure that they have the resources that they need to thrive.

There is no silver bullet policy that will eradicate child poverty. Time restricts me from being able to detail the many actions in the programme for government to tackle some of the issues that are inextricably linked to child poverty. I refer to action on affordable housing, homelessness, growing the economy, employment and skills, childcare, whole family support, violence against women and girls and many more. I am sure that there will be more opportunity to speak about those measures over this parliamentary session.

**Willie Rennie:** *[Made a request to intervene.]*

**Clare Haughey:** Do I have time to take Willie Rennie's intervention?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark):** You can take an intervention.

**Willie Rennie:** The member mentioned childcare. When she was the Minister for Children and Young People, she made an attempt to close the gap between private, voluntary and independent nurseries and council nurseries. Now that she has a position in the Finance and Public Administration Committee, is she committed to exploring that gap to try to close it, as the Government has tried to do for years but without success?

**Clare Haughey:** I am not about to lay out the Finance and Public Administration Committee's work programme here before it has been discussed with colleagues. However, Mr Rennie has that point on the record and I am sure that some of my colleagues on the committee might well raise it as a possible inquiry.

The Government's commitment to eradicating child poverty runs through the document like letters in a stick of rock. The election in May showed that the public want and demand that their politicians focus on the issues that really matter to them, such as the cost of living and their children's future. That is what the SNP Government is doing. The programme details a concerted cross-Government effort to increase incomes, bring down costs and prioritise investment where it will have the highest impact on child poverty. It builds on the Government's actions that are set out in the tackling child poverty delivery plan, which is estimated to keep 100,000 children out of relative poverty this year. We will build on that foundation and go further and faster so that every child, regardless of their circumstances, has the chance to succeed and thrive.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark):** I call Jack Middleton for up to four minutes. We have no time in hand.

16:01

**Jack Middleton (Aberdeen Central) (SNP):** I thank the cabinet secretary for reaffirming that the Scottish Government's defining mission is the eradication of child poverty, which is a scourge on a society as developed and wealthy as our own. On his appointment in 2024, our First Minister, John Swinney, could not have been clearer that his number 1 priority was the eradication of child poverty—not a reduction in it, but an end to it. It was a bold and ambitious aim that he knew would not be easy to achieve and that would take time, but that he knew was the right thing to do for

Scotland—a sentiment that I think sums up his leadership.

The work of the Scottish Government, which is investing in social security and in the future of our young people with the tools available to it, has led to a fall in child poverty. Across the UK, 27 per cent of children are in poverty; in Scotland, the figure is 21 per cent. Of course, that reduction is welcome and, as anti-poverty charities recognise, it is down to the SNP's cost of living package, which is the most extensive in the UK. It is using the limited powers that we have through devolution to push the boundaries and create positive change with measures such as the Scottish child payment.

Other speakers from all parties have already said this, but it is a point that needs to be underlined: let us be clear that the fact that one in five children in Scotland lives in poverty and is robbed of opportunity, of chances and often of a long and healthy life because of the problems that their parents face—keeping a roof over their heads and food on the table and keeping the family from drowning further in debt—is not just their problem but every MSP's and Scotland's problem, too. A system and a society that allow so many of our citizens to go cold and hungry is a system that does not work at all.

On that point, I welcomed the comments from Andy Burnham earlier this week—shocking, I know—in which he acknowledged that the broken UK political system is failing working-class people and has done for many decades. He said that wealth has not trickled down but has been grabbed and hoarded by a few who were enabled to do that by a system in which services were privatised, communities de-industrialised and resources sold off to the highest bidder. Burnham agreed that the system punishes working families and that their struggles were compounded by the misery of austerity.

The political system in the UK is, of course, broken. My colleagues on the SNP benches have been arguing that very point for longer than I have been alive, yet, astonishingly, they have been told by Labour, Tories and Lib Dems that they are wrong—told to this day that our struggling citizens must remain part of that rotten system, with no option or route by which to ever leave. Scottish families on the edge are punished so that the narrow will of politicians in London and the fiscal interests of the UK Treasury can be satisfied.

The eradication of child poverty is a bold and ambitious mission but an utterly necessary one. To realise that mission, it is necessary to have a bold and ambitious system to match. That can be built only on the ground that an independent Scotland offers, where a new system that truly works in the interests of working people and families can be

designed. We must, absolutely, go further and use the tools that we have available just now, but only with the full powers of a normal independent nation can Scotland eradicate child poverty.

16:05

**Laura Mitchell (Moray) (SNP):** When people think of my Moray constituency, they will undoubtedly think of its beautiful coastlines, its rolling hills and the iconic pagodas that populate our rural communities. However, behind the beauty there is hardship, with one in four children in my constituency living in poverty. Many families are struggling to get by on low wages and are dealing with the higher costs associated with living in rural Scotland, where everyday essentials, transport and energy can be significantly more expensive.

In our towns, it is not hard to see that poverty and inequality exist. Moray's highest and lowest rates of child poverty are both located in Elgin. Travel just 1 mile from the west of Elgin to New Elgin and the percentage of children living in poverty rises from 7 to 42 per cent. In our rural communities, poverty can be much more hidden, and in those communities, where everyone knows everyone, it can be much harder for folk to seek out help.

There are brilliant organisations in my constituency that support households that live in poverty or those who have short-term financial challenges. Those organisations include Moray Food Plus, Moray Citizens Advice Bureau and the income maximisation team at Moray Council. Although those services and their staff and volunteers are all excellent, they are simply responding to the symptoms of a broken UK economic system that leaves far too many people unable to simply just get by. Therefore, it is right that the First Minister has made tackling child poverty his top priority.

Of course, Government priorities around poverty, growing the economy, improving the national health service and investing in social housing are all interlinked, and we must deliver in each of those areas to succeed in delivering the change that we all want to see.

I have already spoken in the chamber about the transformational potential of the SNP Government's plans to expand childcare, to tackle the gender pay gap, to support more parents into work and to improve outcomes for young people, so I am delighted that the Scottish Government is providing Moray Council with £1.6 million to get that work started by funding a pilot of flexible after-school activities that are to be delivered in partnership with local clubs and organisations.

In rural communities, the cost of public transport can be a real and tangible barrier to people accessing work and training. Moray was among the first areas to roll out the £2 bus fare cap scheme, and I have lost count of the number of constituents who have told me just how much that has helped them. It puts money back in their pockets at a time when costs are rising.

The Scottish Government's interventions to tackle child poverty are having a real impact, and it is because of those interventions that Scotland is the only part of the UK where poverty levels are falling, despite our not having the full powers that we need to truly transform our economy.

There is more to do and it is clear the Government is not complacent. By delivering on all of its priorities—to grow the economy, to improve the NHS, to expand childcare and to invest in social housing—this is a Government that can transform the life chances of people across Scotland. I hope that MSPs across the chamber will get behind that plan so that we can truly deliver on the mission to make sure that every child thrives.

16:08

**Jenny Young (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Lab):** In the nearly 10 years since the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 was passed, we have heard a lot about the eradication of child poverty and about a defining mission and a moral purpose, but we must face a hard truth: we are not going to eradicate child poverty by 2030. We are not even going to meet the targets that were agreed to in 2017. The upcoming review of the targets used to measure child poverty should be a chance to reflect and take stock, but, at the moment, I fear that it is just going to be a moving of the goalposts.

There have been positive steps forward in the past decade—first and foremost, through the Scottish child payment. Cash transfers remain one of the primary means of lifting families out of poverty, but there is much more to fighting poverty in our country than that, and I welcome the fact that the Government's motion at least acknowledges that. Childcare, transport and affordable housing are all important, yet, on housing alone, there are still more than 10,000 children living in temporary accommodation, which is an absolute scandal, and, more than two years on, Scotland remains in the grip of a housing emergency, with no sign that it is about to be alleviated.

There have been many announcements and many shiny, eye-catching policies, but, unfortunately, many good ideas have not survived the crucial implementation stage. It might be better if the Government and the Parliament

concentrated on getting the delivery of one policy right before expanding it or announcing a new one.

Childcare is a key example. With 75 per cent of Scottish children who live in relative poverty coming from working households, we cannot expect to meaningfully tackle child poverty until childcare is addressed. Parents across Scotland were offered 1,140 hours of free childcare for three and four-year-olds, but, as other members have set out, the system that has been delivered does not work for working parents. There are well-documented issues around flexibility, especially for parents who do shift work, and the availability of childminders is a key issue, particularly in rural and more remote areas. As it stands, the 1,140 hours policy does not address families' desperate need for wraparound care, as well as for whole family support. Simply expanding the system to include children from the age of nine months will not address many of its fundamental flaws.

To tackle the underlying systemic factors that cause people to be stuck in cycles of generational poverty, we need honesty. This cannot be a chance to move the goalposts or fudge the numbers so that things look better than they really are.

I believe that the Government's desire to eradicate child poverty is genuine, and I firmly share that sentiment. I left a career in teaching to work in politics because I saw what was going wrong in our education system, which is one of the key means by which people can escape generational and cyclical poverty. I saw children coming to school hungry, unable to concentrate in the classroom and, often, with dysregulated behaviour. There was a boy in my secondary 1 French class who could not read in English, let alone in French. Support staff were stretched thinner than ever, unable to cope with a range of complex needs. School budgets struggle to make ends meet, with departments running out of key resources such as pencils and jotters mid-year. None of that is lifting children out of poverty, and I certainly could not fix all of that as one teacher in one classroom in West Lothian.

We cannot fix all of that instantly in this Parliament either, but we certainly have the levers to try to do so and to make far more progress than has been achieved in the past 10 years. The language in the Parliament about having the lowest child poverty rates anywhere in the UK betrays a paucity of ambition that has held this Parliament and this Government back from making greater progress in the past 10 years.

Families across Scotland do not need more warm words, lofty ambitions and changing goalposts. They need us to get on and deliver.

16:12

**Stuart McMillan (Inverclyde) (SNP):** Bringing an end to child poverty in Scotland should be a top priority for every politician and political party, and I warmly welcome the First Minister making it the Scottish Government's defining mission. I agree with colleagues from across the chamber that education and employment are the best routes out of poverty, but it remains the fact that there are people who live in poverty for a whole variety of reasons.

I will gently come back to a point that was raised by Julie MacDougall. She is not in the chamber now—sorry about that. She spoke earlier about the overregulation of house building, but the building of better-quality homes surely provides better health outcomes for the people who live in those homes. That is surely a good thing and something that we should all welcome.

The SNP Government has already made great progress in Scotland. We have mitigated the cruel two-child cap that the Tories introduced in 2017 and that the Labour Party kept in place until April this year. We introduced the Scottish child payment, as has been spoken about. We increased the value of the five family payments, which can be worth around £26,000 by the time a child turns 16. We have saved families who take up the offer of free school meals £400 per child a year, and we have expanded funded childcare to 1,140 hours, with plans to extend that further to provide care for children from the age of nine months until the end of primary school. Many of those policies are unique to Scotland. Further, over the past two decades in government, the SNP has spent more than £100 million a year mitigating shameful Westminster policies such as the bedroom tax. That is not taking people out of poverty—that is putting people into poverty, and that is Westminster's shame.

Reducing child poverty has long been one of the SNP's main priorities, including through the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017. The briefing from the Child Poverty Action Group for today's debate says that the latest official statistics show that the proportion of children in poverty in Scotland fell from 25 per cent in 2020 to 2023 to 21 per cent in 2022 to 2025. That is a substantive four-percentage-point reduction. I gently say to Jenny Young that I welcome the fact that that figure has been reduced. That is a good thing, but—my goodness—we still have a long way to go, and the fact that this Parliament has only some powers and not the normal powers of a full independent country means that we are limited in what we can do. That is just the fact of the matter.

The UK had 28 per cent of children living in poverty across the same period. That is far too high for the UK, but 21 per cent is also far too high

for us, in Scotland. That is why we need to do so much more. Despite the fixed budgets and the limited powers of devolution, we are doing a lot more.

**Jenny Young:** *[Made a request to intervene.]*

**Stuart McMillan:** I would normally take interventions, but I have only up to four minutes. I apologise.

I welcome the SNP's policies in the area. Scotland is the only part of the UK where levels of child poverty are falling—and it is a good thing that they are falling—but we still have more to do. I welcome the programme for government and I welcome the fact that the Scottish Government is consulting on legislation to establish legal price ceilings on some essential food items, writing off school meal debt, further expanding free school meals and ensuring that families can access breakfast clubs in all primary schools, among other things. I welcome those policies, but I know that we have so much more to do.

I am aware of concerns about children across the country not having beds or having to share beds due to overcrowding and poverty. That is a disgrace and is shameful. We should do better than that. We live in an energy-rich country. We could do so much more. If we had the full powers of independence, we could change the poverty situation for good.

16:17

**Heather Anderson (Dundee City West) (SNP):** I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests and declare that I am a serving councillor in Dundee City Council.

There is not much that Dundee does not know about poverty. We have survived recurring waves of deindustrialisation. The jute mills closed, shipbuilding ceased, Timex and Levi's came and went, and on bad days the scars of lost jobs are still visible. We remember Mrs Thatcher.

The statistics are stark. Six of the eight wards in the city have families living in the areas with the highest levels of multiple deprivation, with all the associated damage that that brings—higher levels of ill health and disability, higher alcohol and drug-related hospital admissions, poor mental health and more than 20 per cent of our bairns living in poverty.

However, that poverty does not define those bairns or their families. Those bairns are as full of joy, wonder and potential as any other bairn, and the job of this Government, above everything else, is to ensure that poverty does not define or diminish who those bairns are, who they can become and what lives they might lead. We in the

SNP will do everything that we can to help them to succeed. We are expanding early learning and childcare from nine months to the end of primary school by the end of this parliamentary session, and we are building thousands of new homes.

It is particularly galling to be patronised by people who either caused the problem or have not done as much as we have to try to solve it. In Dundee, we know in our bones the difference that an SNP Government makes. Dundee was one of the first cities to roll out the Scottish child payment in 2021. Since then, the weekly rate has increased—although not by as much as Holly Bruce would like—from £10 to £28.20. It started for children under six and is now paid to the age of 16. This Government will increase the amount to £40 per week for under-ones, and we keep investing in our children. More than 10,000 children in Dundee have benefited from the Scottish child payment.

We sometimes talk about the Scottish child payment as if it is ordinary, but it is not—it is extraordinary. It has not been matched by any of the other three nations. It is a massive strategic intervention. Professor Danny Dorling of the London School of Economics—an erstwhile adviser to the Labour Party—said that the Scottish child payment is the most significant intervention in tackling child poverty in Europe since the fall of the Berlin wall.

Scotland is the only nation in the UK where levels of child poverty are falling. Are we satisfied that we have got it low enough? Absolutely not. Will we keep working on it? Absolutely. Most importantly, this party has never accepted that poverty is inevitable. Yes, we have generational poverty, but we know that two thirds of children living in poverty have a working parent. Charles Dickens would be stunned to learn that we still have the working poor with us.

We also know that poverty is a place that anyone in this room can find themselves in. Anyone can lose a job, have an accident or become seriously ill. Just this week, I spoke to Ellie from Children's Hospices Across Scotland, who eloquently explained the impact of a child's illness on family finances, in terms of both loss of earnings and the increased costs of daily living. Having the best cost of living support in the UK makes a big difference to those families every single day.

Finally, we also know that it is not just about the money. As the cabinet secretary mentioned, Dundee is pioneering whole family support across the city. Our child poverty and inequality strategic leadership group will be starting work in our new Greenfield academy. The multidisciplinary team will target vulnerable families with babies and infants under three, because we know that the first

1,000 days of a child's life are critical to their future development, so we want to get in there and ensure that every child gets the best start in life.

I say to the cabinet secretary that Dundee will make good use of the £20 million whole family support third sector delivery fund—we have already applied for it, and we will be coming back every year. I commend the programme for government and all the work that this party does, every day, to ensure that children in Scotland have the best start possible.

16:21

**Colm Merrick (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP):** I welcome the opportunity to speak in the closing stages of the debate. We have heard a number of interesting and thoughtful speeches today, and I thank all those members who have made a positive contribution. I also thank the Scottish Government for making the eradication of child poverty a defining mission of this session of Parliament because, regardless of political persuasion, I do not think that any member in the chamber can doubt the Government's heartfelt commitment to tackling poverty and improving the lives of children and families across Scotland.

However, I reserve my biggest thanks for those local organisations, community groups, charities, volunteers and ordinary people—such as those whom Holly Bruce highlighted—who make such a difference every single day. They are tackling not only the effects of child poverty but, where they can, its causes, and they are doing so at a local and individual level, often quietly and without recognition. They are the real unsung heroes.

I am sure that every member in the chamber could name organisations in their constituencies that are doing exactly that. I will highlight just a couple in my constituency of Anniesland. Local organisations such as the Temple Shafton youth group, Linkes and the Whiteinch Centre provide invaluable services, support and opportunities for children, young people and their families. Kingsway Community Connections and Brodys Bites cafe in the Netherton community centre have been providing breakfasts free of charge. Many schools also provide breakfast clubs, which would simply not survive without the dedication of parents, teachers and volunteers who give their time to make sure that children start the school day fed and ready and able to learn.

That work sits alongside the Scottish Government's support for primary 1 to primary 5, and those in primary 6 and primary 7 who receive the child payment. In Glasgow, we have gone further, extending support to P6 pupils last year, and rolling it out to all primary 7 pupils just a few weeks ago. Although I absolutely welcome the

Scottish Government's support, organisations such as those that I have highlighted, and the ordinary people behind them, will be essential to the successful delivery of the Government's ambitions.

Yesterday, I asked the Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic how we will

“ensure that children's voices are ... heard when”

we talk about

“raising standards and delivering excellence for every child”.—[*Official Report*, 2 September 2026; c 37.]

Today, I ask a similar question: how will we ensure that the voices of our local communities are heard? How will we ensure that their experience, knowledge and ideas are placed at the heart of the Scottish Government's thinking on how we eradicate child poverty?

The Scottish Government's response to the report on widening the use of people's panels committed it to ensuring that they become properly embedded in the work of Government, so that they can have the maximum possible impact. I welcome that commitment. Although I acknowledge the financial constraints that the Government faces, I believe that the development of smaller, lower-cost, locally focused panels could be both attractive and achievable, and I urge the cabinet secretary to feed that into Government thinking.

Those who live and work in our communities understand the challenges better than anyone. They know where services are working, where they are failing and, more importantly, what could be done differently. If we are serious about eradicating child poverty—and we are—we need to listen to them.

Next week, we will debate building stronger, safer and more inclusive communities. I hope to expand—if I am able to speak in that debate—on why that principle is so very important to this debate, too.

The Scottish Government's programme for government is ambitious but, if we are to realise its ambitions, we must ensure that everyone's voice is heard, listened to and valued. It is only by working together—Government, Parliament, communities, organisations and individuals—that we can realise those aims and, ultimately, share in their success.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark):** We move to the closing speeches.

16:26

**Duncan Dunlop (South Scotland) (LD):** As Liberal Democrats, we are here to get things done, so we will work with the Government constructively

on one of its great ambitions: to focus on the eradication of child poverty. However, the evidence does not suggest that the Government is anywhere near reaching the targets that it has set itself. Successive First Ministers have pledged to eradicate child poverty yet, despite some positive steps, not enough has happened.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's statistics that have been quoted are looking to the future. The poverty rate for all children is marginally down, from 25 per cent to 23 per cent, but the poverty rate for children in large families went up from 32 per cent to 41 per cent. That is significant, with our birth rate in Scotland plummeting. Furthermore, the poverty rate for families with a baby went up from 31 per cent to 35 per cent.

In this debate, I am less interested in what the Government has done and more interested in what it will do that will have impact. I will focus on two areas: housing and employment. Despite Scotland having some of the most progressive homelessness legislation, Shelter Scotland highlights that a record 10,480 children are trapped in temporary accommodation. That figure has been getting progressively worse over the past decade. Put another way, 39 children are becoming homeless every day. Without a stable home, the conditions in which children grow up are seriously compromised. What is the Government planning to do to close the gap between legislation, associated guidance and the appalling lived reality of homelessness? Reviews and strategies are not enough.

Then there is the matter of employment, which we have talked about a lot today. For many families, employment is an important route out of poverty. It helps to build confidence, pride, ambition and stability for family homes and children. We should not pretend that employment alone is the answer, however, as simply cutting social security and telling people to get back to work will leave people in poverty. There is more nuance to it than that.

Save the Children notes that around 60 per cent of parents receiving universal credit are already in work. Those are working families who are struggling to make ends meet. We need to help people get into work, which is the answer, while supporting those who remain in poverty despite working, and those who are not able to.

That brings me to the Government's flagship employability programme and its no one left behind approach. More than £80 million has been invested in that approach each year for several years. Between April 2020 and December 2025, it supported 32,005 parents but, of those, only 8 per cent were in confirmed sustained employment after a year. Compare that with Fife Gingerbread,

which was part of the funded programme that supports families in low-income communities across Fife: it reported that more than 70 per cent of the people who it supported were in employment after a year. The Government must understand where and why some delivery agencies work and others clearly do not.

Why does the Government not give certainty and stability to third sector organisations such as Fife Gingerbread by giving them five-year performance-related contracts? Instead, the plethora of funding streams bakes in waste and frustration when funding is time-limited and organisations are short of time when it is rolled out. The no one left behind approach does not stand alone. It sits alongside a range of other employability funds and programmes. I counted nine that are distributed through local authorities. The approach is not strategic; it is sporadic, and it fails to deliver value for money. My message to the minister is simple: look to organisations that are demonstrating what works and not for the cheapest option.

Can we make use of the data that we already have? Can we focus more closely on deep poverty—on those who are really at the sharp end? With the data that we have and the advances in artificial intelligence, we know which families are furthest from escaping poverty. Why can we not better target our funding for the child payment by giving more, as necessary, where it will make the greatest difference?

If eradicating child poverty really is the defining mission of this Government and this Parliament, we should measure ourselves not by the ambition of our promises but by the lives that we actually change by taking effective action. Right now, even where budgets are tight, we could do much, much more.

16:31

**Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Con):** I hope that we can all agree that this debate has been characterised by strongly held views about how best to tackle child poverty. If I may begin on a point of consensus, I believe that every MSP who has spoken in the debate wants to reduce the chances of a child growing up in poverty. Where we disagree is on how best to achieve that.

The breadth of the debate has demonstrated just how many issues feed into child poverty: the economy, childcare, housing, employment, transport and educational attainment—I think that there was even a mention of net zero. However, when a debate becomes a hotchpotch of so many different ideas it becomes difficult to properly scrutinise any one of them. Having reflected on the

contributions overall, I am afraid that the Scottish Government has still not learned the lessons that it needs to learn. In fact, many contributions this afternoon seemed to focus on politics and Governments elsewhere, rather than what is going on right here, right now in our country.

This Government has become increasingly reliant on welfare as a means of reducing poverty. This year, the social security budget is £7.4 billion, and it is forecast to reach £9.2 billion by 2031. The trajectory is unsustainable, and I believe that the Scottish Government knows that. The answer cannot be simply to keep increasing spending and taxes and hope that the problem goes away. We need to be honest enough to ask whether the policies that are being pursued are actually working. Tackling poverty is not simply about how much money the Government spends; it is about providing people with the opportunity to work, families keeping more of what they earn, and children getting the best possible start in life. That is the test that this Government should be applying to its policies. Instead of asking how much more money we can spend, it should be asking whether we are actually changing people's lives.

**Lloyd Melville:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Meghan Gallacher:** No, not just now.

Willie Rennie was right that we need long-term solutions, and that involves growing our economy, more investment and more jobs. James Adams was right to say that some policies that the Government announces will receive cross-party support but that there are also areas where the Scottish Government has promised families the world and failed to deliver. I am talking about the free stuff that is not actually free but paid for by taxpayers, such as laptops and bikes; and, now, there is the offer of a free school bag. I wish that the Scottish Government would divert its attention away from the props and focus on the back-office changes that need to happen to close the attainment gap or reduce in-work poverty—changes that could divert more resource to our classrooms, give working families more control over the money that they earn and help families to make the decisions that they believe are right for their children.

I appreciate that that would not necessarily grab the headlines, but governing is not always about grabbing the headlines—it is about results and meeting targets. The Scottish Government needs to stop focusing on propaganda and start using resources better by directing them towards the areas where they would be most valued and where we can make the greatest difference.

The Scottish Conservatives support the Lib Dem amendment because we understand the issues in

the childcare sector. I hope that we can work cross-party on that, particularly in relation to the cross-boundary aspect, but also on what happens when families who have twins—or more—are looking for childcare.

If we are serious about tackling child poverty, we have to be serious about childcare and about growing our economy. It is not about what looks good in a press release—it is about what works for families.

16:35

**Laura Moodie (South Scotland) (Green):** As I close this debate for the Scottish Greens, I want to return to the claim at the heart of the motion, echoed by Clare Haughey in her contribution, that eradicating child poverty is the Scottish Government's "defining mission".

It is fair to say that this year's programme for government will do very little to shift the dial on child poverty. There is plenty to commend in the motion from the cabinet secretary today, not least the continuing of ideas that were put forward to the Government by the Scottish Greens, such as the £2 bus fare cap.

However, if this programme is ambitious for Scotland, I am still waiting to see the ambition. If ambition is to be more than a slogan, it must be reflected in the choices that we make and it must mean taking real action to reduce the costs that families face every day.

For the Scottish Greens, tackling child poverty means addressing household incomes and household costs. If there is one area where we can make a transformative difference, it is childcare, as Jenny Young and Morven-May MacCallum both said in their contributions.

Childcare is not simply a service for working parents—it is economic infrastructure, an anti-poverty measure, a gender equality measure and one of the most powerful investments that we can make in children's futures.

Parents are currently left spending a huge share of their income on nursery fees, reducing their working hours or leaving employment altogether, and the burden falls overwhelmingly on women. That is why the Scottish Greens have called for a universal childcare guarantee, to ensure that every child has access to funded childcare from six months until they start school. We have proposed extending those hours of funded childcare to all two-year-olds and expanding funded provision for children aged six months to two years. We have also argued for flexibility, so that support can be used either for childcare or to help parents who choose to stay at home during those early years. If the Scottish Government is serious about child

poverty, this is the scale of ambition that we should be discussing.

Childcare is not the whole story. Poverty is experienced through the accumulation of costs. It is felt in the weekly food shop, when a family buys school uniform and every time a parent has to decide whether they can afford another school activity, another item of clothing or even another meal.

When Green MSPs secured a £2 bus fare cap pilot in the Highlands and Islands, that was a game changer to help families cut the costs of travelling around. Although I welcome the cap's expansion to the SPT region from Monday, large swathes of the country are still missing out.

People across my region, in Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders, who rely so heavily on bus services, have faced rising bus fares for years, all while services are being cut. They are paying more for less. Telling them that they may have to wait until 2031 for a £2 fare cap is too little, too late.

In the past couple of years, I have been really pleased to see the progress that New College Lanarkshire has made in connecting its campuses by bus with the communities that they serve. The college worked with local bus operator JMB Travel to extend the 42 service, which provides direct links to the Coatbridge and Motherwell campuses, stopping at points in the communities surrounding them.

It is vital that there are not only the measures to be able to travel by bus, but also the bus services to colleges at reasonable times to match, because Scotland's colleges do so much to tackle the challenges that prevent young people and adult learners alike from taking up learning or employment.

Flexible learning and support with childcare and travel costs are all vital anti-poverty measures that colleges that are anchored in their communities can provide.

However, in relation to schools, I remain disappointed by the lack of urgency around expanding free school meals. Free school meals reduce the stigma that Laura Mitchell talked about so eloquently, particularly in rural and close-knit communities. They improve health and educational outcomes and, crucially, put money directly back into family budgets. So, I was astonished to see—as my Green colleague Holly Bruce pointed out yesterday—that the Government is actually retreating on free school meal provision in secondary schools. At a time when too many households are still under financial pressure, we should be moving faster, not slower.

Likewise, stronger action on school uniform guidance could make a tangible difference. No child's education is improved by expensive branded clothing. Parents should not feel compelled to buy costly items when affordable alternatives are available. Reducing those unnecessary costs is one of the simplest steps that we can take to support families.

When Governments invest in children and families, poverty falls. When they fail to do so, inequality deepens. If eradicating child poverty is truly the Scottish Government's defining mission, then let us match that ambition with action. Let us ensure that every decision we make is judged against a simple question: will this help to lift children out of poverty? Scotland's children deserve nothing less than that.

16:41

**Katherine Sangster (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab):** I thank all the members who have contributed so thoughtfully to the debate—in particular, my colleagues Mark Griffin and Jenny Young. Mark set out practical anti-poverty policies that will help parents earn more, reduce costs and improve people's life chances, reflecting the approach taken by the UK Government. To Laura Moodie's point on branded school wear, I say that the UK Government has already banned that in England and Wales.

We must be honest with ourselves: too many people feel overlooked by our politicians and think that debates in this Parliament do not change lives. They feel that the economy is not working for them. If we are to rebuild trust in politics, the Scottish Government must show through its actions that it is dealing with the issues that matter most to the people of Scotland.

Recent polling found that 76 per cent of people in Scotland are worried about child poverty. We have heard that child poverty is one of the Government's defining missions but, as my colleague Jenny Young put it so well, we are not moving at the scale or speed that we need to in order to ensure that the targets are met.

Children get only one childhood. They cannot wait. We cannot accept a Scotland in which a child's opportunities are still shaped by the income of the household that they are born into. I am pleased to hear from the tone of the debate that we can all agree on that. I thank Holly Bruce for bringing the lived experience of poverty campaigners into the Parliament today.

I point to the report from Save the Children and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, "The New Story of Child Poverty in Scotland". It is so important that we change not only what we do about child poverty but how we talk about it.

I thank Heather Anderson, who said that poverty is something that can happen to everybody. It is not a them-and-us situation. We have heard a lot of statistics today, but behind every statistic is a person's story: a child going without a winter jacket; a parent lying awake at night, stressed about how they will pay the next bill; or a child who knows that asking to go on that school trip, or admitting to their parents that they need a new pair of shoes, is going to be a source of anxiety for their mum and dad. We need to tell that story honestly. It is not a story about irresponsible families; as many colleagues have pointed out, it is a story about the cost of living, insecure work and a social security system that often fails to provide the security that families need.

We have heard that there are particular groups that we need to target more: lone parents, larger families, families with babies, young mothers, families from ethnic minorities and families in which a child or adult is disabled. More targeted support is needed.

We need to put more money in people's pockets. Social security is one tool; income maximisation is another. Wales has put income maximisation at the centre of its strategy and we should do the same. Too many families do not receive everything that they are entitled to.

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** Does the member accept that an exceptionally important part of income maximisation is the benefit take-up strategy, and will she join me in calling on the UK Government to develop its own benefit take-up strategy, which it does not have, unlike in Scotland, where we do have one?

**Katherine Sangster:** I agree with that because community organisations have shown us that income maximisation makes a huge difference. We also need decent, secure employment.

On Jenny Young's point, and similar ones made by other colleagues, we have to ensure that employers provide family-friendly, flexible work with secure hours, and we need childcare that works for families. That is why I support the Lib Dem amendment.

As one parent told me, childcare costs feel like an issue for everyone. If we want to support parents back into well-paid work, childcare has to work for families. We also need greater investment in holistic, relationship-based family support. I welcome Duncan Dunlop's intervention on that. The £20 million fund is welcome, but we need to ensure that we learn from projects, that successful approaches are scaled up and that whole family support becomes a sustained part of how we tackle child poverty, rather than making short-term interventions.

We need to make changes. We need to change the way that we talk about child poverty. We cannot constantly tell people that child poverty is too enormous, complicated and impossible to solve, because we risk people feeling overwhelmed and powerless.

The story is that ending child poverty is possible. We must end it. The Parliament has already set out that ambition in law. The target is there, the evidence is there, and we have many of the tools that we need. All that is required is the political will. Michael Marra set out the idea of a cross-party commission, and I hope that all parties take that seriously.

We have a choice. Childhood happens once. We do not need another target review. We cannot retreat from this issue. We need to advance and we need action. That is why I urge members to support the Labour amendment.

16:46

**Amanda Lindsay (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform):** This is the Scottish Government's third attempt at a child poverty delivery plan. First, we had the "Every child, every chance" plan; then there was the "Best Start, Bright Futures" programme; and now we are invited to applaud the "Bringing Hope, Building Futures" plan. Slogans change; targets do not.

The results have not kept pace with the rhetoric. The Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 was passed with a clear promise that relative child poverty would be below 10 per cent by 2030. The interim target was that it would be below 18 per cent by 2023-24. Ministers have called that their defining national mission, but let us look at the record, not the branding.

The latest figures still put relative child poverty at around 21 per cent—more than 200,000 children. That is more than double the 2030 target. The Government's own modelling for its third plan projects that relative child poverty will fall only to about 18 per cent by 2030-31. Even in the Government's own paper, the statutory target will be missed, and it is not a near miss. The plan admits failure in the small print while claiming hope in the title. Behind those percentages—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark):** I ask the member to speak up. Some members are not able to hear her.

**Amanda Lindsay:** I apologise. And behind those percentages—

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Could you advise the chamber whether members who opened the debate should

actually take part, particularly when their own member is closing?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark):** I am not clear which member the cabinet secretary is referring to. Is she referring to a member who is not present?

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** Yes.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark):** We are aware of that, and we will take it up with them. I am grateful to the cabinet secretary. I would also be grateful if Amanda Lindsay could continue with her speech.

**Amanda Lindsay:** Behind those percentages are families living it every day. Action for Children recorded one mother of three saying:

"We've been relying on food banks to get by and been eating smaller portions to make what we have last longer. When my children go into the kitchen to look for food, all I see is their disappointed faces as they find the cupboards empty."

That is the reality that the Parliament should be judging plans against, not another slogan.

Charities that usually give the Government the benefit of the doubt have noticed. As Mark Griffin stated, in June, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation said that the latest plan fails to set out how the targets will be met as the act requires, and it is open to legal challenge.

The Poverty Alliance, Aberlour, CPAG, One Parent Families Scotland, Save the Children and the Trussell Trust have warned that ministers cannot ignore the fact that they are reviewing part of their targets because they have not done enough to meet them. They say that removing income from the measurement would be like having a speedometer that tells us only the temperature. When even those organisations say that the Government is at risk of watering down its responsibilities, Parliament should listen.

I will give credit where it is due. The Scottish child payment helps hundreds of thousands of low-income households, and investment in social housing can ease housing costs. Those measures have a real and immediate effect and are welcome, but they are short-term tinkering and move people across a statistical line without fixing the reason why so many families cannot stand on their own feet. Free bus travel, breakfast clubs and free school meals reduce costs and the whole family wellbeing fund and employability programmes have a place. Morven-May MacCallum and others were right to say that affordable childcare is an important factor. Targeting the six family types that account for most child poverty is a recognition of reality. However, none of that is the same as having a strategy that creates work that pays.

Reform's position is simple: the long-term answer to child poverty is for people to have a good job. It is a wage from work—not another slogan or another transfer—that will lift families permanently. Work provides income, routine, dignity and an example for children. Benefits can cushion a shock, but they cannot replace an economy that produces enough decent jobs. Meghan Gallacher, James Adams and Willie Rennie agree.

That is where the Government has failed. Energy costs, taxes and regulation have made it harder to make things and employ people in Scotland. We have seen industrial jobs go, including those in the communities that needed them most. We cannot run a national mission on child poverty while making it more expensive to create the work that ends poverty. Parental employability schemes will not succeed if there are too few jobs to go into or if those jobs do not pay enough after housing and energy costs are met. As my colleague Julie MacDougall said, we must ensure that social housing prioritises local people, especially those with children, who need it most. "No one left behind" is an empty phrase if the industrial strategy leaves communities behind.

Let us be honest about this third child poverty plan: it recycles the mission language; it leans again on social security; it projects a path that still misses the targets in the law that the Government wrote for itself; and it treats work as one theme among many instead of treating it as the foundation. Parliament should not accept another five years of hopeful titles and missed numbers. The Government must not water down its targets to hide failure or pretend that having another delivery plan is the same as delivering. It is for those reasons that I cannot support today's motion.

In conclusion, if ministers are serious they will put growth, energy costs and jobs at the centre instead of having just another round of income transfers. Reform will back measures that help families to work their way out of poverty, but we will not pretend that slogans are a substitute for a pay packet.

16:53

**The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Siobhian Brown):** I thank all members for their contributions today. There have been really good contributions from some members because eradicating child poverty should be an emotive issue for us all.

I will touch on a few of those contributions. Mark Griffin asked whether the Scottish Government is going to meet its poverty targets. We know that that is challenging, but we will meet our targets. He

also raised the issue of children living in poverty in temporary accommodation. Our programme for government sets out our plans to go further and to deliver on our intention to end homelessness for good, including through record public sector investment in the supply of affordable homes, by spending £4.9 billion over the next four years to support affordable housing, with at least 70 per cent of that being for social rent and 10 per cent of it for rural and island communities.

Holly Bruce called for an uplift in the Scottish child payment. Our Scottish child payment already provides unparalleled financial help to families, and we are looking at increasing support to £40 a week for children under the age of one. I agree with Holly Bruce, Jack Middleton and Stuart McMillan—if we were an independent country, we would do things very differently. However, as a Government, we have to live within our pocket money from Westminster. This year alone, we are investing £159 million in mitigating the worst impacts of UK Government welfare policy.

Morven-May MacCallum raised the issue of childcare workforce shortages, especially in rural areas. I have been acutely aware of that ever since coming into post and have been having discussions on the matter for the past couple of months. As part of our work to consult on the blueprint for a transformed childcare offer, we will focus on what matters most. It is vital that we reflect the views and needs of rural and island communities. I am grateful to all the stakeholders and childcare regulatory bodies that took part in the rural and island childcare round-table event in Ullapool in March this year.

**Meghan Gallacher:** One of my constituents has written to me about the provision of affordable childcare for twins, because, as we know, parents of twins face not just one cost but a double cost. Will that be part of the Government's considerations? We know that those families are struggling.

**Siobhian Brown:** We are in the very early stages of discussing that issue, which I had a conversation about just yesterday. I will be happy to engage with the member on that topic.

**Willie Rennie:** Does the Government have an answer on how to close the gap between the funding for private, voluntary and independent nurseries and the funding for council nurseries?

**Siobhian Brown:** We have delivered sustainable increases in the rates that have been paid to funded ELC providers in the private, third and childminder sectors since 2017. I know that, historically, the issue is one that Mr Rennie raised with a previous minister. Over that period, rates have increased by nearly 88 per cent. This year alone, we are making available a further £13.4

million to enable childcare staff who deliver funded ELC in private and third sector services to continue to be paid at least the real living wage. That is on top of the additional £25.7 million of recurring funding that we have delivered.

We recognise that the gap to which Mr Rennie referred is an issue, which is why the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities are continuing to progress the longer-term reforms that are set out in the joint sustainable rates review, including greater standardisation in the rates-setting process and improving the evidence that is available on the costs of delivery.

As the cabinet secretary said at the start of the debate, there are few things that are more important than ensuring that every child grows up loved, safe and respected and is able to reach their full potential, which is why eradicating child poverty is the defining mission of this Government. The contributions that we have heard underline the fact that members across the Parliament share the Government's ambition of tackling child poverty. I welcome the healthy debate that we have had today.

Our programme for government builds on the actions that we set out in the third tackling child poverty delivery plan, which was published in March, and it sets out our plans to invest in young people and their families so that they can reach their full potential. Those plans include action to support people to learn new skills, to find good, fair work and to increase their earnings, as well as action to transform Scotland's childcare offer to provide support for families with children from the age of nine months through to the end of primary school.

Costs should not determine the choices that our young people make and the education that they receive, so we will continue to ensure that pupils—

**Victor Currie (Highlands and Islands) (Reform):** In relation to the extension of funding for the provision of childcare to children from the age of nine months, does the minister recognise that, because we have a finite number of carers who are able to offer such provision, if we increase the number of children who receive provision at a younger age, we will reduce the ratio of carer to child? Rather than a carer being able to look after five children, that ratio will go down to 1:3. As we have a finite number of carers, if a carer takes on three younger children, five places for older children will be lost, which means that we could have a shortfall in the number of workers. That would exacerbate the lack of availability of childcare for parents.

**Siobhian Brown:** I am slightly confused by the question, but what we are doing is working quite

closely with childminders, nurseries and the private sector on how we transform childcare. It will really be up to parental choice. Not every parent will want to put their child into childcare at nine months. It is about giving families the choice of the childcare that they want.

To continue to ensure that pupils and their families do not have to meet the costs of materials for practical lessons in schools—the so-called core curriculum costs—we will provide a further £8 million towards that policy in 2026-27. We also want to ensure that eligible families continue to receive support with the cost of school uniform, and we will continue to uprate funding for the school clothing grant in line with inflation.

Currently, our free school meal programme provides universal provision from primary 1 to 5 and to eligible pupils from P6 to S6, saving those families who take up the offer every day £450 per child annually. I can confirm that, over the course of this parliamentary session, we will expand access to free school meals to all children in primary school.

We are also aware that many families continue to face hardship and difficulties in paying for school meals. While we work towards delivering our expanded offer, we will take steps to address the issue of school meal debt with local authorities, and we will be writing to them shortly to seek information on the school meal debt in their areas.

I want to say a little bit more about our plans for childcare and to address some of the points that have been raised in the debate.

We will publish and consult on a blueprint for a transformed childcare offer, which is focused on what matters most to families. Our ambition is to create a more flexible childcare system that recognises that access to high-quality childcare is not only essential for children's development but critical in tackling child poverty, supporting household incomes, advancing gender equality and supporting economic growth. In the year ahead, we will continue to fund a range of targeted childcare support for low-income families. Earlier today, we confirmed the first £8.2 million of childcare support funding, which will help almost 5,000 low-income families with the cost of childcare at times of challenge or change.

As the First Minister announced earlier this week, we will work in partnership with local governments to deliver a national breakfast club offer. This year, we will invest £15 million in local authorities to expand and enhance breakfast clubs in schools, and from this time next year, we will invest £44 million annually to deliver free breakfast clubs in primary schools across Scotland. From August 2029, we will provide an after-school and holiday childcare offering for families, which will

reduce the cost of childcare at times that we know cause challenge for families. We will prioritise funding within our budget to ensure that that transformation can be delivered.

Eradicating child poverty will require a range of support and action. We must ensure that parents and carers are able to learn, grow and become equipped with the skills that they need to secure and sustain meaningful, well-paid employment. The Government cannot achieve that ambition in isolation. We need to work closely with our partners who are on the front line of our economies and our communities. That is why, during this academic year, we are investing £22 million in the college sector to help parents and carers gain skills that will support them to progress in work and boost their earning potential. That investment of £10 million in the raising income through skills and education—RISE—programme, £2 million in the training access fund and £10 million in the new flexible workforce development fund will support families at risk of poverty by providing essential support, including for childcare and travel, to get into training that fits around family life.

As we begin this new session of Parliament, our commitment to keeping the Promise is as strong as it was in 2020, and a significant amount of progress has been made on that nationally and locally. I am honoured to have inherited the brief to improve outcomes for children and young people who have experience of care. In so doing, I want to continue the excellent collaborative work across the chamber that my predecessor, Ms Don-Innes, so ably led.

**Duncan Dunlop:** Could the minister be specific about where she sees progress for the care-experienced population since the Promise was put in place?

**Siobhian Brown:** There are a lot of places where we want to see progress. I know that a few people have said that not enough progress has been made. The cabinet secretary and I are very much focused on ensuring that we deliver the Promise by 2030. I am sure that Mr Dunlop and I will be having lots of discussions about that.

That joint working culminated in the comprehensive Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act 2026, which was unanimously supported by members across the Parliament.

I say to all members that my door is wide open to sharing ideas and experience so that, together, we can ensure that the 2030 target is a reality. This is a time not for politics but for collaboration through which we can support the delivery of the change that our care-experienced communities require.

Central to the Promise has been our continuing commitment to improve holistic, whole family support. Our whole family wellbeing funding programme has been a key enabler of that system change since 2022. Part of the role of creating and enabling conditions for change is continuing to simplify and streamline our national policy as much as possible. Our delivery partners across the whole family support system have received positively the commitment in “Bringing Hope, Building Futures: Tackling child poverty delivery plan 2026-2031” to integrate the whole family wellbeing programme, the fairer future partnerships and whole family support early adopter areas from 2027.

Literacy plays a foundational and lifelong role in learning, wellbeing and tackling poverty. That is why the Scottish Government has a long-standing commitment to sustaining and enhancing literacy from children’s earliest years and throughout their school education.

I know that time is up, so I close by saying that, despite the challenges that we currently face, the Scottish Government’s action is already making a real difference to families across Scotland. Relative poverty in Scotland is 6 per cent lower than in the rest of the UK. We will do what we need to do to ensure that child poverty is eradicated in Scotland.

**The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson):** That concludes the debate on the programme for government: eradicating child poverty—the Scottish Government’s defining mission.

I remind all members who have an opening speech in a debate that they must also be in the chamber for closing speeches. I am very disappointed that someone who spoke in the opening part of the debate is not even here at this stage, never mind at the start. I expect that person to provide an explanation to me at the earliest possible opportunity.

## Decision Time

17:07

**The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson):** I will comment on yesterday’s decision time. The results of yesterday’s votes were inaccurate as, due to a technical error, one member’s vote was recorded twice on each occasion. That did not affect the outcome of any vote. The error was related to a specific circumstance and has no wider implications for the integrity of the voting system. All steps are being taken to ensure that the situation does not arise again. The correct votes have been recorded in the minute of proceedings, in the *Official Report* and on the Parliament’s website.

There are five questions to be put as a result of today’s business. If the amendment in the name of Julie MacDougall is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Mark Griffin will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S7M-01022.5, in the name of Julie MacDougall, which seeks to amend motion S7M-01022, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on programme for government: eradicating child poverty—the Scottish Government’s defining mission, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

**Members:** No.

**The Presiding Officer:** There will be a division.

There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:08

*Meeting suspended.*

17:11

*On resuming—*

**The Presiding Officer:** We come to the vote on amendment S7M-01022.5, in the name of Julie MacDougall, which seeks to amend motion S7M-01022, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on programme for government: eradicating child poverty—the Scottish Government’s defining mission. Members should cast their votes now.

### For

Adams, James (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Bannerman, Max (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)  
 Beresford, Senga (South Scotland) (Reform)  
 Bland, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)  
 Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)  
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)  
 Currie, Victor (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)  
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)  
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)  
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Kerr, Thomas (Glasgow) (Reform)  
 Kirkwood, David (South Scotland) (Reform)  
 Lindsay, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)  
 McDade, Helen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)  
 Ross, Angela (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform)  
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)  
 Simpson, Mark (North East Scotland) (Reform)  
 Smith, David (West Scotland) (Reform)

### Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)  
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)  
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)  
 Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)  
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley) (SNP)  
 Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)  
 Baxter, Andrew (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD)  
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)  
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)  
 Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)  
 Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)  
 Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)  
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)  
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)  
 Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)  
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)  
 Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)  
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)  
 Chou Turvey, Yi-pei (North East Scotland) (LD)  
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh North Western) (LD)  
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)  
 Day, Martyn (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP)  
 Dijkstra-Downie, Sanne (Edinburgh Northern) (LD)  
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)  
 Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)  
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)  
 Dunlop, Duncan (South Scotland) (LD)  
 Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)  
 Flynn, Stephen (Aberdeen Deeside and North Kincardine) (SNP)  
 Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)  
 Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)  
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)  
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)  
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)  
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)  
 Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)  
 Harley, Adam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD)  
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)  
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)  
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)  
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)  
 Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)  
 Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)  
 Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)  
 Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)

Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)  
 Lennon, Monica (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)  
 Long, Joe (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)  
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)  
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)  
 MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)  
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)  
 Manivannan, Q (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)  
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)  
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)  
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)  
 McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Lorna Slater]  
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn) (SNP)  
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)  
 McMillan, Stuart (Inverclyde) (SNP)  
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)  
 Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)  
 Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)  
 Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)  
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)  
 Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)  
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)  
 Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)  
 Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)  
 Rennie, Willie (Fife North East) (LD)  
 Roddick, Emma (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)  
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)  
 Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)  
 Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)  
 Smith, Alyn (Stirling) (SNP)  
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)  
 Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)  
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)  
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)  
 Thewliss, Alison (Glasgow Central) (SNP)  
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)  
 Young, Jenny (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)

**The Presiding Officer:** The result of the division on amendment S7M-01022.5, in the name of Julie MacDougall, is: For 21, Against 90, Abstentions 0.

*Amendment disagreed to.*

**The Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that amendment S7M-01022.1, in the name of Mark Griffin, which seeks to amend motion S7M-01022, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on programme for government: eradicating child poverty—the Scottish Government's defining mission, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

**Members:** No.

**The Presiding Officer:** There will be a division.  
 The vote is closed.

**Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My voting app has frozen. I would have voted no.

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you. Your vote has been recorded.

**Yi-pei Chou Turvey (North East Scotland) (LD):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My voting app has frozen. I would have voted yes.

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you. Your vote has been recorded.

#### For

Bannerman, Max (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)  
 Baxter, Andrew (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD)  
 Beresford, Senga (South Scotland) (Reform)  
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Bland, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)  
 Chou Turvey, Yi-pei (North East Scotland) (LD)  
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh North Western) (LD)  
 Currie, Victor (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)  
 Dijkstra-Downie, Sanne (Edinburgh Northern) (LD)  
 Dunlop, Duncan (South Scotland) (LD)  
 Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)  
 Harley, Adam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD)  
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)  
 Kerr, Thomas (Glasgow) (Reform)  
 Kirkwood, David (South Scotland) (Reform)  
 Lennon, Monica (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Lindsay, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)  
 Long, Joe (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)  
 MacDougall, Julie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)  
 MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)  
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)  
 McDade, Helen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)  
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Rennie, Willie (Fife North East) (LD)  
 Ross, Angela (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform)  
 Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)  
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)  
 Simpson, Mark (North East Scotland) (Reform)  
 Smith, David (West Scotland) (Reform)  
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Young, Jenny (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)

#### Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)  
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)  
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)  
 Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)  
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley) (SNP)  
 Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)  
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)  
 Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)  
 Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)  
 Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)  
 Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)  
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)  
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)  
 Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)  
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)

Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)  
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)  
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)  
 Day, Martyn (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP)  
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)  
 Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)  
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)  
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)  
 Flynn, Stephen (Aberdeen Deeside and North Kincardine) (SNP)  
 Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)  
 Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)  
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)  
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)  
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)  
 Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)  
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)  
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)  
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)  
 Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)  
 Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)  
 Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)  
 Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)  
 Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)  
 Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)  
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)  
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)  
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)  
 Manivannan, Q (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)  
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)  
 McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Lorna Slater]  
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn) (SNP)  
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammernmuirs) (SNP)  
 McMillan, Stuart (Inverclyde) (SNP)  
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)  
 Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)  
 Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)  
 Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)  
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)  
 Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)  
 Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)  
 Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)  
 Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)  
 Roddick, Emma (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)  
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)  
 Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)  
 Smith, Alyn (Stirling) (SNP)  
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)  
 Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)  
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)  
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)  
 Thewliss, Alison (Glasgow Central) (SNP)  
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

#### Abstentions

Adams, James (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)  
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)  
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)  
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)  
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

**The Presiding Officer:** The result of the division on amendment S7M-01022.1, in the name of Mark Griffin, is: For 35, Against 68, Abstentions 9.

*Amendment disagreed to.*

**The Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that amendment S7M-01022.2, in the name of Holly Bruce, which seeks to amend motion S7M-01022, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on programme for government: eradicating child poverty—the Scottish Government's defining mission, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

**Members:** No.

**The Presiding Officer:** There will be a division.

#### For

Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)  
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)  
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)  
 Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)  
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)  
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)  
 Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)  
 Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)  
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)  
 Manivannan, Q (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)  
 McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Lorna Slater]  
 Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)  
 Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)  
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)  
 Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)

#### Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)  
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)  
 Adams, James (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)  
 Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)  
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley) (SNP)  
 Bannerman, Max (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)  
 Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)  
 Baxter, Andrew (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD)  
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)  
 Beresford, Senga (South Scotland) (Reform)  
 Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)  
 Bland, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)  
 Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)  
 Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)  
 Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)  
 Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)  
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)  
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)  
 Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)  
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)

Chou Turvey, Yi-pei (North East Scotland) (LD)  
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh North Western) (LD)  
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)  
 Currie, Victor (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)  
 Day, Martyn (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP)  
 Dijkstra-Downie, Sanne (Edinburgh Northern) (LD)  
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)  
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)  
 Dunlop, Duncan (South Scotland) (LD)  
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)  
 Flynn, Stephen (Aberdeen Deeside and North Kincardine) (SNP)  
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)  
 Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)  
 Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)  
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)  
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)  
 Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)  
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)  
 Harley, Adam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD)  
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)  
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)  
 Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)  
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Kerr, Thomas (Glasgow) (Reform)  
 Kirkwood, David (South Scotland) (Reform)  
 Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)  
 Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)  
 Lindsay, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)  
 MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)  
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)  
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)  
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)  
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)  
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)  
 McDade, Helen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)  
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn) (SNP)  
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)  
 McMillan, Stuart (Inverclyde) (SNP)  
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)  
 Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)  
 Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)  
 Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)  
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)  
 Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)  
 Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)  
 Rennie, Willie (Fife North East) (LD)  
 Roddick, Emma (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)  
 Ross, Angela (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform)  
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)  
 Simpson, Mark (North East Scotland) (Reform)  
 Smith, Alyn (Stirling) (SNP)  
 Smith, David (West Scotland) (Reform)  
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)  
 Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)  
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)  
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)  
 Thewliss, Alison (Glasgow Central) (SNP)  
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

### Abstentions

Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)  
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)  
 Lennon, Monica (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Long, Joe (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)  
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)  
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Young, Jenny (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)

**The Presiding Officer:** The result of the division on amendment S7M-01022.2, in the name of Holly Bruce, is: For 15, Against 83, Abstentions 13.

*Amendment disagreed to.*

**The Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that amendment S7M-01022.4, in the name of Morven-May MacCallum, which seeks to amend motion S7M-01022, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on programme for government: eradicating child poverty—the Scottish Government's defining mission, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

**Members:** No.

**The Presiding Officer:** There will be a division.

### For

Adams, James (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Bannerman, Max (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)  
 Baxter, Andrew (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD)  
 Beresford, Senga (South Scotland) (Reform)  
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Bland, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)  
 Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)  
 Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)  
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)  
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)  
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)  
 Chou Turvey, Yi-pei (North East Scotland) (LD)  
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh North Western) (LD)  
 Currie, Victor (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)  
 Dijkstra-Downie, Sanne (Edinburgh Northern) (LD)  
 Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)  
 Dunlop, Duncan (South Scotland) (LD)  
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)  
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)  
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)  
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)  
 Harley, Adam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD)  
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)  
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)  
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Kerr, Thomas (Glasgow) (Reform)  
 Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)  
 Kirkwood, David (South Scotland) (Reform)  
 Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)  
 Lennon, Monica (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Lindsay, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)  
 Long, Joe (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)  
 MacDougall, Julie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)  
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)  
 MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)  
 Manivannan, Q (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)  
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)  
 McDade, Helen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)  
 McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Lorna Slater]  
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)  
 Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)  
 Rennie, Willie (Fife North East) (LD)  
 Ross, Angela (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform)  
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)  
 Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)  
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)  
 Simpson, Mark (North East Scotland) (Reform)  
 Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)  
 Smith, David (West Scotland) (Reform)  
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Young, Jenny (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)

### Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)  
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)  
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)  
 Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)  
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley) (SNP)  
 Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)  
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)  
 Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)  
 Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)  
 Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)  
 Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)  
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)  
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)  
 Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)  
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)  
 Day, Martyn (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP)  
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)  
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)  
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)  
 Flynn, Stephen (Aberdeen Deeside and North Kincardine) (SNP)  
 Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)  
 Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)  
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)  
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)  
 Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)  
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)  
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)  
 Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)  
 Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)  
 Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)

Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)  
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)  
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)  
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)  
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)  
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn) (SNP)  
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)  
 McMillan, Stuart (Inverclyde) (SNP)  
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)  
 Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)  
 Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)  
 Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)  
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)  
 Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)  
 Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)  
 Roddick, Emma (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)  
 Smith, Alyn (Stirling) (SNP)  
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)  
 Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)  
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)  
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)  
 Thewliss, Alison (Glasgow Central) (SNP)  
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

**The Presiding Officer:** The result of the division on amendment S7M-01022.4, in the name of Morven-May MacCallum, is: For 59, Against 54, Abstentions 0.

*Amendment agreed to.*

**The Presiding Officer:** The next question is, that motion S7M-01022, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on programme for government: eradicating child poverty—the Scottish Government's defining mission, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

**Members:** No.

**The Presiding Officer:** There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

**Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app did not connect. I would have voted yes.

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you. Your vote has been recorded.

#### For

Bannerman, Max (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)  
 Baxter, Andrew (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD)  
 Beresford, Senga (South Scotland) (Reform)  
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Bland, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)  
 Chou Turvey, Yi-pei (North East Scotland) (LD)  
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh North Western) (LD)  
 Currie, Victor (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)  
 Dijkstra-Downie, Sanne (Edinburgh Northern) (LD)  
 Dunlop, Duncan (South Scotland) (LD)  
 Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)

Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)  
 Harley, Adam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD)  
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)  
 Kerr, Thomas (Glasgow) (Reform)  
 Kirkwood, David (South Scotland) (Reform)  
 Lennon, Monica (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Lindsay, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)  
 Long, Joe (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)  
 MacDougall, Julie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)  
 MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)  
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)  
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)  
 McDade, Helen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)  
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Rennie, Willie (Fife North East) (LD)  
 Ross, Angela (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform)  
 Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)  
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)  
 Simpson, Mark (North East Scotland) (Reform)  
 Smith, David (West Scotland) (Reform)  
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Young, Jenny (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)

#### Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)  
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)  
 Adams, James (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)  
 Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)  
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley) (SNP)  
 Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)  
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)  
 Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)  
 Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)  
 Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)  
 Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)  
 Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)  
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)  
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)  
 Campbell, Kate (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP)  
 Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)  
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)  
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)  
 Day, Martyn (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP)  
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)  
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)  
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)  
 Flynn, Stephen (Aberdeen Deeside and North Kincardine) (SNP)  
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)  
 Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)  
 Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)  
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)  
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)  
 Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)  
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)  
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)  
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)  
 Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)

Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)  
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)  
 Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)  
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)  
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)  
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)  
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn) (SNP)  
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)  
 McMillan, Stuart (Inverclyde) (SNP)  
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)  
 Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)  
 Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)  
 Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)  
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)  
 Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)  
 Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)  
 Roddick, Emma (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)  
 Smith, Alyn (Stirling) (SNP)  
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)  
 Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)  
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)  
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)  
 Thewliss, Alison (Glasgow Central) (SNP)  
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)  
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

#### Abstentions

Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)  
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)  
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)  
 Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)  
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)  
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)  
 Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)  
 Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)  
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)  
 Manivannan, Q (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)  
 McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Lorna Slater]  
 Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)  
 Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)  
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)  
 Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)

**The Presiding Officer:** The result of the division on motion S7M-01022, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on programme for government: eradicating child poverty—the Scottish Government's defining mission, as amended, is: For 36, Against 63, Abstentions 15.

*Motion, as amended, disagreed to.*

**The Presiding Officer:** That concludes decision time. I ask members who are not staying for members' business to please leave the chamber quietly. Thank you.

## Hyperscale AI Data Centres

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson):** We move to a members' business debate on motion S7M-00428, in the name of Graham Simpson, on artificial intelligence data centres. This is the final item of business, and the debate will be concluded without any question being put.

*Motion debated,*

That the Parliament notes with concern proposals for hyperscale AI data centres across the Central Scotland and Lothian West region, including at Ravenscraig, Larbert, Newhouse and West Calder, and near communities affected by the proposed AI Growth Zone at Chapelhall; understands that such developments may rely on diesel generators to support 24/7 operation; further understands that there are concerns over potential nitrogen oxide emissions; recognises that there are community concerns about the cumulative impact on air quality, emissions, green space and energy costs; regrets that National Planning Framework 4 does not define "green data centres", and notes calls for the Scottish Government to issue urgent guidance on the term, including in relation to the use of gas and diesel power and the air quality standards that should apply.

17:21

**Graham Simpson (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform):** I thank colleagues, including my good friend Meghan Gallacher, who signed the motion to enable us to debate it today.

I start by apologising to you, Presiding Officer, and to members, as I might have to leave before the end of the debate if it overruns to 6.20. I expect that it might, because there is a lot of interest in the subject. I did inform the office of the Presiding Officers yesterday.

The debate matters because communities across Central Scotland and Lothians West and beyond, who were represented outside the Parliament today, face a wave of hyperscale AI data centre proposals, while the rules to guide decisions have not kept pace.

**Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con):** Will Graham Simpson take an intervention on that point?

**Graham Simpson:** Yes, of course.

**Rachael Hamilton:** It is quite early in the debate for an intervention, but Graham Simpson has hit the nail on the head. Does he believe that the Scottish National Party's planning regulations and guidance are not fit for purpose? This issue was not included in the fourth national planning framework, and it should have been.

**Graham Simpson:** I will certainly come on to that in more detail, but, in summary, yes, I agree.

Ministers have had plenty of time to design and issue guidance, and they have failed. The Deputy First Minister told us earlier today that they would be exploring options for the potential for future planning guidance. Frankly, that was waffle. The First Minister said that the Cabinet would discuss it in the autumn, but councils, our constituents and the developers need the guidance now.

The scale of what is coming forward is extraordinary. According to Action to Protect Rural Scotland, there are now 21 data centre proposals in planning portals. This is a gold rush. We saw something similar with battery storage until the National Energy System Operator ruled on what the country actually needs. That same national direction is now needed for AI data centres, and it is for Government to spell out where they should and should not go. They should not be on green-belt land or prime agricultural land or in areas of great natural beauty. Scotland has plenty of brownfield and industrial sites, and that is where development should be directed.

**Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):**

What we lack here, as Graham Simpson has just articulated really well, is a strategy about data centres. I hope that we all acknowledge that, realistically, our economy needs data centres, but it is about where and how they are deployed, and that requires a United Kingdom-wide strategy. I hope that he agrees that the Scottish, UK and Welsh Governments all have a part to play in bringing together a common-sense strategy by which data centres are appropriately sited.

**Graham Simpson:** I thank Stephen Kerr for the intervention. He is absolutely right that we could do with a United Kingdom strategy, but the Scottish Government is in charge of planning here, so we need a Scottish strategy.

The energy demand shows why guidance is urgent. Current Scottish applications would require an estimated 7,300MW of electricity. To put that into context, Scotland's peak winter electricity demand is just over 4,000MW, so, on paper, the proposals could demand significantly more power than Scotland uses at peak winter demand. That should worry everyone.

On 18 August, the Minister for Public Finance announced that councils must notify the Scottish Government within seven days of receiving an application for a data centre of over 50MW. The Government should be told about plans, but then what? Nobody knows. The central questions remain unanswered: what is a green data centre? What limits apply to diesel or gas back-up generation? What air quality standards can residents rely on?

We also need to know how many of these things Scotland needs, and where they should go. The

minister has had all summer to do that thinking, but we have yet to hear the conclusions. Today may be the day that we find out, but I suspect that it will not be.

Data centres are now part of the essential infrastructure of our modern economy. Some data centres already operate here, and in some areas people would barely know they are there. They support cloud computing, online banking, digital public services, cybersecurity, business productivity and, increasingly, artificial intelligence, so we should not simply say no to them. We should welcome investment, innovation and jobs but, equally, we should not wave vast projects through based on marketing slogans, speculative promises and undefined claims of being green.

There is a positive case for investment. Scotland has renewable energy potential, engineering expertise, former industrial land that needs regeneration and a workforce capable of supporting high-value digital jobs, but recognising those benefits does not mean writing a blank cheque. Communities in Ravenscraig, Larbert, Newhouse, West Calder and Chapelhall are entitled to straight answers and protection.

Twelve of the sites in the planning system are on green-belt sites or farmland, including at least two on grade 2 farmland, which is the best that Scotland has. The two brownfield sites are allocated for 1,400 homes. None of the sites in the planning system appears on the priority list drawn up by Government bodies in 2021 and updated in 2023.

Then we have energy and emissions. Data centres need back-up generation and the proposals that we have seen so far in Scotland would use diesel generators. Done well, operators could use renewable power, invest in storage, improve grid connections, recycle waste heat, meet high efficiency standards and deliver local benefits that could support growth and decarbonisation.

That is why I am not arguing for blanket opposition; I am arguing for proper rules, but right now those rules are not clear enough. National planning framework 4 talks about green data centres, but it does not define the term. The guidance should be practical and clear, and it should define what qualifies as a green data centre and set limits on diesel and gas back-up generation.

Transparency matters, too. APRS says that nine of the 16 proposals that reached environmental impact assessment screening were initially not required to carry out those assessments, though three decisions were later overturned by ministers.

Presiding Officer, I have taken some interventions, I am a wee bit over time, and I might have to leave early, so I will finish here. I am calling on the Scottish Government to issue urgent guidance now so that communities, councils and developers know what standards apply before decisions are made. I am really looking forward to hearing the other contributions.

17:29

**Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP):** I congratulate Graham Simpson on securing this debate on such a timely and important issue.

Data centres are a reality of the modern world. In a highly digitised society such as ours, data centres support everyday functions including e-commerce, banking and public service delivery, and applications such as cloud computing and artificial intelligence. Whether we realise it or not, each one of us, in our everyday lives, relies on data centres to stream services, use social media, send emails and carry out online activities. We already have data centres, but they need to be scaled up to support an increasingly digitised society, and to support the delivery of our public services in a digitised world. We cannot escape that fact.

It is artificial intelligence in particular that we see scaling up at an astonishing pace. It has not even been four years since the launch of ChatGPT—probably the most well-known AI chatbot—yet, according to the Office for National Statistics, 55 per cent of UK employees report using AI for work or education, and 35 per cent of businesses report using at least one AI technology.

AI is embedded in virtually every sector of the economy. In life sciences, it is accelerating drug discovery, supporting advanced manufacturing and improving health technology development. For manufacturers, AI is helping to improve production processes, reduce waste and optimise energy use. On net zero, Scottish organisations are developing AI solutions for environmental monitoring, biodiversity assessment, land-use planning and grid optimisation. In Ukraine, we increasingly see the use of AI on the battlefield for automated target detection, drone navigation and combat data sharing.

No country can afford to shy away from AI and risk being left behind. AI data centres constitute critical national infrastructure, and it is simply wrong not to consider them in that context.

**Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Con):** Will the member take an intervention on that point?

**Patricia Gibson:** I will just move on, as I am very conscious of time.

With our abundant energy resources and our strong AI research skills and base in Scotland, we can and should be seeking to position ourselves as a leader in green data centre development. The question is: how many data centres can reasonably be sustained in Scotland? It is simply not ethical or moral to come to a position while we accept that fact but suggest that they should be housed elsewhere, wherever that is. They have to go somewhere.

The centres need to be located where it is considered most suitable and appropriate to put them. Considerations around their location should be based on access to renewable energy; their impact on the national grid; the economic benefits; their environmental impact; the impact on local amenity, such as noise pollution; and the impact on the landscape.

According to reports, there are proposals across Scotland for up to 70 hyperscale data centres in the near future, and that number of data centres is simply not sustainable. It underlines the point that, given the potential cumulative impact that the development of such facilities across Scotland could have in areas such as energy consumption, it is vital that decisions about data centre proposals are taken not in isolation but with the wider context in mind.

It cannot be right that local authorities are expected to shoulder the responsibility of handling these applications, and it is inconsistent to have a situation in which a planning application for an onshore wind farm that is capable of powering thousands of homes goes to the Scottish Government while an application for a data centre that is capable of consuming millions of households' worth of electricity is considered at local authority level. That is not sustainable, and it is simply not reasonable.

In my view, a national approach to such applications must be taken, although it must consider the views of local residents and local authorities and, of course, the environmental impact should also be considered in any application.

We need to ensure that data centres are built in the right places, powered as much as possible by renewable energy, developed with the confidence of local communities and assessed within a clear national framework. Scotland has the resources, the expertise and the ambition to lead in sustainable digital infrastructure. We should seize that opportunity responsibly.

17:34

**Jenny Young (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Lab):** I thank Graham Simpson for securing this evening's debate. It is encouraging to note, from the speeches that we have heard so far, that there is broad agreement that data centres are required. We will all have made use of cloud technologies today. We will all—intentionally or unintentionally—have used AI. Even a simple Google search now throws up AI answers. We are all responsible for the use of these technologies, and we could benefit from them. Patricia Gibson already laid out some of the different ways in which AI is transforming our economy and so many things in our society, such as supporting cancer diagnosis and detecting fraud. There are many good uses of AI, and it is welcome that we have agreement that these centres are needed, but the question is where, and how it can be done.

It is important, in the broader debate around AI, that, for all the opportunities that it offers, we are vigilant. As with any emerging technology, we should harness and use AI in the right way. It has been observed how social media became so widespread, and the people developing social media tools were much better versed than legislators in how they worked and also in the harm that they were doing, particularly to our children. We are only now catching up to that. There is a parallel to be made there.

As other members have said, hyperscale data centres must be appropriately located, and their development must be consistent with our commitments to local people and the environment. As Graham Simpson has said, my region of Central Scotland and Lothians West faces the potential of a number of hyperscale data centres being built, including at Larbert, Ravenscraig and West Calder—and a few others are in the pipeline.

On the potential data centre at Larbert, it is not surprising, given the proximity of the Denny substation, that somewhere in that vicinity is being considered, but there are specific concerns with the current application for the Larbert site, particularly in relation to its proximity to homes, care homes and Forth Valley royal hospital. That is where the debate really lies: what is safe and what is green?

It strikes me that the wider debate bears some of the hallmarks of the discussions around pylons in the north-east of Scotland, which featured in the previous session of Parliament. It is a case of significant infrastructure being vital for our economy and meeting the needs and wants of local communities.

**Stephen Kerr:** There is another consideration that Jenny Young has not mentioned. I keep coming back to the idea of a UK national strategy.

What is the anticipated requirement? Surely government has a role in relation to the development of this national infrastructure. It cannot just be left to what currently appears to be a wild west scenario, where lots of speculators are coming forward with different types of proposals for different places, usually on greenfield sites. Surely government has a role here, at all levels, to come together and create a plan and a strategy that directs the planning.

**Jenny Young:** I would certainly agree with Stephen Kerr on that point. Leaving it to a wild west approach, as he says, or leaving it to each council is not appropriate. The Scottish Government has a role to play in planning, but certainly there is also a role for the UK Government, which has designated AI data centres as critical national infrastructure—and rightly so, given the technological changes that we have seen. Stephen Kerr is right: there should be leadership from both Governments, for certain.

As I was saying, the debate has hallmarks of the debate on pylons in the north-east of Scotland in the previous session of Parliament, with a clash between significant infrastructure that is so needed for our economy and the needs and wants of local communities. How do we balance those two sometimes competing concerns? That is where Government has a crucial role to play in showing leadership and a clear direction of travel. At times, that will mean taking decisions that are not immediately popular with the general public, but it is the job of Government to take a strategic view, bearing in mind the wider needs of our economy and our communities together.

As others have said, we need clarity from the Scottish Government about the standards that developments need to meet, particularly in relation to air pollution. A number of constituents have raised that with me over the summer. I do not think that local authorities should be left to guess what a green data centre is. I do not know whether that notion is deliberately vague, but it is vague at the moment, and we need clarity on it.

This is certainly not an issue that the Government can continue to ignore. It is happening now, and we have known for months that guidance is needed. I welcome the recent movements from the Government on the issue and the steps that were taken over the summer, but it is still unclear whether the Government is approaching the matter with the seriousness and urgency that are required for people in the region that I represent. If we are to have a serious discussion about how to deal with hyperscale data centres and make the best use of them for our economy and our communities, we need a Government that is willing to address the issue head on.

17:39

**Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley)**

**(SNP):** I thank Graham Simpson for lodging this motion for debate. Many hope that AI will improve their daily lives, and some would argue that that is already happening. The Scottish Government hopes that AI will make public services more efficient. For many developers—such as ILI, which has proposed the Rufus hyperscale data centre in Hurlford in my constituency—AI provides the hope that they can make a quick buck. ILI is looking to get planning permission in principle and sell the site on. That approach makes it almost impossible to fully scrutinise proposals and apply realistic planning conditions.

For that reason, we require better definition of what constitutes a green data centre, and I agree with similar contributions on that point. My local authority, East Ayrshire Council, has written to the Scottish Government requesting guidance on the definition of a green data centre, and it has requested a moratorium in the meantime, which I think we must give serious consideration to.

Presumably, a green data centre cannot be one that relies on diesel generators and cannot be allowed to increase carbon emissions when, ultimately, the taxpayer would have to pick up the cost of reducing those emissions as part of our net zero obligations. I agree that we need a strategic review to assess how many, or how few, hyperscale data centres Scotland can support. The review would need to consider power requirements, water usage and other key assets, as well as identifying possible key sites. We cannot have this position, whereby, at the moment, it is possible for 32 local authorities to award planning permission for a hyperscale data centre, so that 32 or more right across Scotland could be given planning permission. That is just not logical or coherent, which is why we need a strategy.

As Graham Simpson pointed out, if all the data centre applications currently in the planning system were granted permission, they would exceed Scotland's peak energy demand, so we do not have the energy generation capability to power what is in the planning system. That relates to another concern of mine, which is that the rush to apply for planning permission and grid permissions can hold up other renewable energy projects, house building and other key infrastructure projects. We cannot have the UK Government simply announcing AI growth zones, further undermining local democracy.

On the application for the Rufus data centre in Hurlford in my constituency, it is stated that it will have a 540MW demand, which is marginally larger than the generating capacity of Whitelee wind farm, which is the largest onshore windfarm in the UK. How would such a proposed centre manage

to receive 540MW 24/7? It is inconceivable that there is spare capacity in the grid locally that could provide that amount of power. To further put that in context, that is the equivalent of the output of one and a half small modular nuclear reactors running 24/7. On that point, I am still not in favour of small modular reactors, but I just use that as an example.

The argument about using spare wind energy rather than paying curtailment costs to developers is clearly bogus, because there is not that amount of spare energy in the system. If we accept that there is a requirement for data centres, we also have to understand any benefits, as part of the decision-making process. Wind farm developers currently pay £5,000 per megawatt of generation capacity, with the Scottish Government recommending that that increases to £6,000 per megawatt, so what would be realistic for a data centre to contribute to the local economy or local fund? The Scottish Government has mentioned provision of district heating as a way to use up spare energy from the data centres, so we need greater guidance on that.

Developers must be honest with us about jobs. They must tell us how many jobs will be created, but the likelihood is that there will be minimal jobs and they will be in areas such as security and general maintenance. Developers must be honest with us instead of dangling fantastic numbers in front of us.

The Scottish Government should make environmental impact assessments mandatory for 50MW-plus sites and ensure that those assessments are transparent. It should not be down to objectors and local constituents to find that information.

While there is a worldwide rush to get in on hyperscale AI data centres, now is also the time for Governments around the world to clamp down on the behaviours of social media giants, rather than simply facilitating the infrastructure for them to be bad actors.

17:44

**Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):**

I thought for a moment that Alan Brown had finally seen the light on nuclear power, but then he very quickly qualified his analogy by saying that he was not in favour of it. The reality is that that is the direction of travel that is needed to get clean energy for our country.

It is remarkable that Graham Simpson has managed to bring us together and I congratulate him on that. Setting aside the nuances of argument, I think that we are all in the same place, although we have not heard from a Liberal Democrat, and there are no Greens in the

chamber. It is quite astonishing that there are no Scottish Greens present for this debate. My goodness me—what does that say about the Scottish Greens? I think that Graham Simpson deserves congratulations, and I hope that the minister will join me in that.

We seem to be in a very similar place—we understand that we need to have these data centres, but it is about how, when and how many. All of those issues are fundamental to planning, and I am glad that there seems to be a consensus on the need for us to have a strategic approach.

By the way, there is also a national security dimension to this, which Alan Brown hinted at. The question of where our data is stored, how resilient that infrastructure is and whether we have sufficient domestic capacity, increasingly matters to the security of Scotland and the United Kingdom. None of the arguments that I have heard today are arguments against data centres per se, but they are arguments for planning them properly.

The proposed Cato development at Auchtertool demonstrates that perfectly. Auchtertool is a very small community in Fife, yet the buildings for the proposed site would be 35m high and would cover 40 football pitches. I know that that is in David Torrance's constituency, and he is probably going to speak on that as well. The people of Auchtertool are absolutely right to question the scale of that development and whether it belongs on the edge of their village or on valuable agricultural land.

The lesson of this summer, which we will all be learning for most of the autumn and winter months to come, is how fragile our food security is in this country. We need to have a far more serious and secure strategy for domestic food production than we currently have. For far too long, collectively as politicians, we have paid lip service to farmers, and the importance of farming and food production will become more and more apparent as we go forward.

**Stuart McMillan (Inverclyde) (SNP):** I have a genuine question. Notwithstanding the point about a potential overarching strategy, if such a strategy were to be put in place and locations were decided, but the local population said, "No, we don't want that," what would then happen?

**Stephen Kerr:** The planning system should always be robust enough to take on board local objections, so people should be allowed to make the case for objecting.

Jenny Young made a very strong point in her speech, which is that, invariably, any development plan will have objectors. I am afraid that the reality of any national infrastructure project is that somebody somewhere is not going to be very happy. I just happen to think that the example of

Auchtertool highlights the fact that we need a strategy for how many we need and where we need them. If you have ever been there, the idea of situating such a monstrosity on the edge of Auchtertool—my goodness. It would kill Auchtertool, just like some of the industrialisation of the countryside has killed some of the villages of Scotland already. That has been reckless.

We have a responsibility, colleagues, for our country—our countryside and the villages, towns and communities that make up Scotland. We cannot be blasé about it. I understand the point that my colleague has made, but, at the end of the day, I think that Jenny Young hit the right note. Hard decisions must be made on something that is vital national infrastructure. There are all kinds of issues around energy consumption, water consumption, grid capacity and cooling, and food security, which I already mentioned. All of those need to be assessed in the context of the dozens of development applications, many of which—I grudgingly agree with Alan Brown—are speculative. They are fundamentally about people seeking to make money on the back of something that they know is a vital infrastructure that our country needs in order to develop.

I am mindful that I am running out of time, even though I have taken an intervention. I will make one last point—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson):** Very quickly, Mr Kerr.

**Stephen Kerr:** There is a current example of the United Kingdom, Scottish and Welsh Governments coming together and developing a special strategic plan for vital infrastructure in the area of energy. They have commissioned the National Energy System Operator—NESO—to build such a plan for the United Kingdom, which includes future energy infrastructure, location, energy needs, system needs and economic and spatial modelling. All that is being done collaboratively on our island of Great Britain. That is the direction that we need to go in.

Thank you for your forbearance, Deputy Presiding Officer, and thank you, colleagues, because I think that we are pretty much all in the same place.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson):** I am more worried about the forbearance of colleagues, because we are now very tight for time. Due to the number of members who wish to speak in the debate, I invite Graham Simpson to move a motion without notice, under rule 8.14.3 of standing orders, to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes.

**Graham Simpson:** I did anticipate that. I am happy to move the motion, although I might not be

here until the end of the debate—but enjoy yourselves.

I move,

That, under rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.

*Motion agreed to.*

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson):** If members do not keep to time, I will struggle to get in everyone's contributions in that 30 minutes.

17:51

**Gary Bouse (Falkirk West) (SNP):** Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer—I will do my best to keep to time. I ask members to note my entry in the register of members' interests as a Falkirk councillor.

The issue of hyperscale green data centres came to prominence for me on 4 June. Since then, I have sought to examine the matter in great detail. I have looked at the application for the data centre in Larbert and I will refer to that—I know that the minister cannot reply on the subject of an individual case—to give a picture of what people are living with and what they are saying.

I requested further information from the Scottish Parliament information centre. I welcome its blog, which, after a meeting with me, was refreshed to include a reference to the Larbert data centre proposal.

I remain concerned that developments of such scale are being brought forward without sufficient clarity. These are not minor matters—they are fundamental issues that should be addressed clearly and comprehensively before any decision is made. The environmental impact assessment gives cause for concern. Falkirk Council was one of the first councils to request an EIA. I have spent nine years on a planning committee, which does not make me an expert but, I hope, makes me reasonably well informed. However, in my view, the assessment does not appear to be complete, particularly in relation to diesel fuel storage and to the grid connection itself. That is a worry.

Notwithstanding those omissions, the EIA has several findings, including—I hope that you are ready for this; it is a shame that the Greens are not here—operational and construction greenhouse gas emissions assessed as “major adverse” and “significant”; the loss of groundwater-dependent terrestrial ecosystems assessed as “major adverse” and “significant”; and moderate to major adverse visual impacts on nearby residents during the winter months. It also considers a 72-hour emergency generator scenario in which major impacts are predicted, although no significant

effect is assigned, on the basis that the scenario is considered unlikely.

Falkirk Council has employed AECOM, which is an environmental adviser. At the end of its extensive report on that planning application, AECOM states:

“The evaluation of significance has been described and carried out properly, with a conservative assessment of Major adverse and Significant being made for the operational stage.”

What are the people of Larbert, which is where I live, seeing in that? My principal concern is for the people who live beside the proposed development and, in particular, for residents of Glenbervie care home, which would be affected on two sides—it actually sits in the middle of that area. The potential impacts during both construction and operation must therefore be treated with the utmost seriousness.

There is also a wider national context. Digital infrastructure guidance is expected, while strategic energy planning information requested by the Scottish and Welsh Governments is currently with the United Kingdom Minister for Energy—I understand that we do not have a say in it, although I hope that that will change.

I appreciate the actions over the past couple of weeks of the minister with responsibility for planning, which I think have been helpful. However, decisions of this scale should not be taken in isolation from national considerations around energy security, climate obligations, infrastructure capacity and community impact.

In conclusion, the proposed AI data centre in Larbert should not proceed unless and until the developer can provide robust and independently credible evidence that it will not cause unacceptable harm to local residents, public health, infrastructure, the environment or Scotland's climate commitments.

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

**Gary Bouse:** More broadly, Scotland should proceed cautiously, and I ask for a pause before we move forward with large AI data centres, so that a clear national infrastructure framework can be formed using the regulations that I mentioned previously.

17:56

**Monica Lennon (Glasgow) (Lab):** It is an honour to speak as a Scottish Labour and Co-operative Party MSP for Glasgow. On behalf of my constituents in Glasgow and South Lanarkshire, which includes my home town of Blantyre, I will try my best to be an MSP who listens and works

constructively with others to make their lives and futures brighter.

Although I am not new to the Parliament, I am acutely aware that nothing stays the same, so I return eager to learn from new and returning members and to work together to build a fairer, healthier, greener Scotland for current and future generations. That is why I am pleased to be speaking in Graham Simpson's members' business debate on AI data centres.

I will cut to the chase. I believe that we need an immediate pause on all large data centres, so that we can have the robust national strategy for hyperscale AI data centres that we are all asking for. As part of that, I want planning applications to be properly assessed locally. I do not want all decisions to be taken in centrally by ministers, but we need that national strategy and community voices to be at the heart of local decision making.

I am not against AI or digital technology, and I am not saying no to hyperscale data centres. However, I am arguing for a responsible strategic framework that enables evidence-based assessments that are rooted in the precautionary principle, which we do not have right now.

Ad hoc decision making without proper national guidance will be a disaster for our public health, nature, infrastructure and climate commitments. I say that because, for many years, I was a planning professional, so I am no stranger to contentious planning proposals or the need to balance competing interests. It is because of my experience and the expertise that I have gained through working with local authorities, the Scottish Government, developers, investors and communities that I urge ministers to pause and to give planning authorities, communities and developers the clarity and confidence that they deserve.

The concerns have not been raised only by politicians. I ask ministers to look at the detailed proposals for a moratorium that have been set out by Stop Climate Chaos Scotland, and to listen to Friends of the Earth Scotland, Action to Protect Rural Scotland and many others. Campaigners and communities are right to demand a proper assessment of the enormous energy, water and material demand of these projects and, importantly, their cumulative impact on land, climate targets, electricity grids and much more.

Communities are making their voices heard directly by us because they feel that the system is moving faster than the evidence should allow it to, and faster than their ability to have their concerns properly considered. We should listen to them. A pause will allow for good planning.

To have good planning, we also require our planning authorities to be properly resourced. We need expert planners and other specialists with the capacity to properly assess those applications. Those are precisely the kind of green jobs that we need in our communities.

I know that everyone has gone over time so I will try not to. This is not about saying no to technology; it is about saying yes to good planning, protecting our health and evidence, which I hope still really matters to colleagues. It is about saying yes to community voices, local democracy, protecting our climate and nature and unionised good work. Others have made good points tonight about fair work. We must ensure that our energy, land and infrastructure work in the interests of all the people of Scotland.

The proposals for data centres will not go away, so we will not lose anything by taking a little bit of time to get things right. We should not allow the rush towards big tech to determine our future by default.

I will continue engaging with colleagues. I really hope that ministers will listen but that they will act quickly, because our planning authorities and communities need assistance now. That is not about being against development but about having the right development in the right places.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson):** Thank you, Ms Lennon. I congratulate you on your return to Parliament and on your new role.

18:01

**Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** I begin by welcoming Monica Lennon back to the chamber. It is nice to see her back with us. I commend Graham Simpson for securing the debate and congratulate him on his speech, not a word of which I could possibly disagree with—and not for the first time, as Mr Simpson knows.

It strikes me how much unanimity there has been across the chamber. Members who are new here might not realise how rare it is to see so many people in the chamber for a members' business debate on a Thursday evening. The fact that there are so many people here from different parties makes the case for how important the issue is. We have had virtual unanimity from Labour, the Scottish National Party, Reform and the Conservatives, and we will hear from the Liberal Democrats. The only voice missing has been that of the Greens—the call of the Thursday night wine bar is clearly more important to them than the interests of their constituents, but I am sorry that they are not here.

I will not speak for long because others have made all the points that I was going to make. I absolutely agree with the point made by Patricia Gibson and many others that we should not take a luddite approach to AI. It is here to stay, is a useful tool and can be effective in the public sector reform agenda, so we should be using and encouraging it.

We should not be taking a luddite approach to AI data centres because they have an important role to play. They are vital if we are going to develop AI and are also important to our economy. The issue, as Graham Simpson said at the start and as Stephen Kerr and others have said since, is where we locate those centres and how we ensure that they are in the right place so that we get the maximum benefit and do not negatively impact communities.

Stephen Kerr mentioned Auchtertool and I am sure that David Torrance will speak about it, too. Like Stephen Kerr, I visited Auchtertool in the summer. It is a beautiful village in Fife, surrounded by green fields. There is a proposal to build, on those green fields, a data centre that will be the size of 200 football pitches. It will be massive. It will dominate the landscape and dominate what is now an attractive small village and it will be built on green fields that are currently used for agriculture. That cannot be the best use of that land and it cannot be in the interest of the local community, which will have to put up with a major industrial complex.

As Graham Simpson said at the start, we have many post-industrial sites in Scotland that could be used for AI data centres. I am thinking of the former Longannet power station site in Fife, which has excellent infrastructure connections, is connected to the grid and is close to the sea. If we are looking for a site for an AI data centre, let us use existing brownfield sites and not build on green fields.

I will say something about the call for a moratorium, which we heard from Monica Lennon. I hear those calls, but I am not convinced about a moratorium because I do not think that we should stop potential development if some sites are appropriate. However, we need proper and strategic national planning guidance from the Scottish Government. I have a great deal of respect for the cabinet secretary, who I know has been listening diligently to the debate, and I am sure that he has heard the unanimity across the chamber. People from every single party have made the same point, which is that we are not against AI or against AI data centres.

It is a question of identifying the right location and not having a free-for-all, with councils having to make determinations on a case-by-case basis.

We need national strategic guidance, and the responsibility for that comes back to the Scottish Government. I hope that the cabinet secretary is listening.

18:05

**David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP):** I am pleased to participate in this evening's debate about how we embrace the opportunities of new technologies while ensuring that local people, local environments and local interests are not treated as an afterthought. In my constituency, the proposed Auchtertool data centre has become one of the most significant planning issues that local people have faced in recent years.

Artificial intelligence is here to stay, and data infrastructure is essential to modern life. We all use the services that depend on it every day, so this debate should not become a simple argument about whether we are for or against data centres. The real questions that we need to ask are what kind of developments are appropriate, where they should be located and how we ensure that affected communities can have confidence that the claims that are made by developers can be properly tested and scrutinised, because that is where many concerns arise.

In Auchtertool, local residents have expressed deep concerns about the scale and location of the proposed developments. The fact that more than 1,600 objections have been submitted and public meetings have attracted substantial attendances demonstrates the strength of local feeling. Campaigners have raised concerns about the visual impact, the effect of noise and light pollution, environmental effects, and the impact on energy demand and the future character of the village. I have listened carefully to those concerns, and I have met residents, community representatives and the developers. The Auchtertool development is a major proposal, and I am committed to working constructively with all parties to secure the best future for investment in Fife, but that should never come at the expense of local people.

Many residents feel that Scotland is being targeted because we possess two resources that are becoming increasingly valuable in the digital age: energy and water. Communities want to be reassured that Scotland will not simply become a host nation for infrastructure that delivers benefits elsewhere while leaving local people to bear the environmental and social impacts.

I want to take a moment to acknowledge the turnout at today's demonstration outside Parliament. The voices were passionate and the message was clear—people wanted to be heard. I pay particular tribute to the residents of Auchtertool who made the journey to Edinburgh to

ensure that the voice of their village was represented. They have worked tirelessly over many months, engaging with the planning process, organising public meetings and making their case respectfully and constructively. Whatever the outcome of the Cato proposal, the people of Auchtertool have done an outstanding job in standing up for their village and the future that they want it to have, and for that they deserve recognition.

We must not ignore the concerns that have been raised or the anxiety that is felt by the many residents who are worried about what the proposals could mean for their homes, their environment and their quality of life. They have genuine concerns relating to the use of diesel generators and the cumulative impacts on energy demand, emissions, water consumption and land use. Detailed evidence must be gathered on those concerns, and they must be subject to independent examination before conclusions can be reached; they cannot be dismissed out of hand.

The issue of diesel back-up generators is a perfect example. Most large-scale data centres around the world maintain back-up power systems to achieve high levels of reliable demand for customers. Communities have a right to ask questions about the potential noise and air quality impacts and the implications for emissions associated with testing regimes and emergency operations. Those questions deserve robust answers that are supported by evidence rather than assumptions.

However, it is important to recognise that not all proposals are the same. The Auchtertool application differs from the proposals in the places that are mentioned in the motion. The developers have promoted it as a green development, based on the connections to renewable energy and Scotland's significant renewable energy resources. ILI claims that locating and meeting data centres' demand in Scotland could make use of renewable electricity the use of which might otherwise be curtailed. That claim deserves examination. Equally, the concerns that have been raised by residents deserve examination.

That brings me to a central issue in the debate—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson):** Mr Torrance, you must conclude quickly.

**David Torrance:** As many members have said, NPF4 identifies green data centres as one of Scotland's national development priorities, yet there remains no clear definition of what a green data centre is. At present, too much is left to interpretation, and planning authorities are left to make decisions without consistent national guidance. That is why I support the calls for the

Scottish Government to provide detailed updated guidance.

18:09

**Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Con):** I am very pleased to speak in the members' business debate in the name of Graham Simpson on AI data centres, especially because it mentions all the proposals that are happening right across Central Scotland and Lothians West, including Ravenscraig, Larbert, Newhouse and West Calder. For many people right across that region that I represent, it is not just about one development, such as the one at Larbert or Ravenscraig; it is about the scale of them and the speed at which the applications are progressing through local authorities.

The tone of today's debate has been incredibly helpful. I do not think that having data centres is anything to be worried about—as has rightly been stated, we already have data centres. The issue is the requirement that we upscale them across the country. The questions that remain unanswered are where they should go and what proximity they should have to one another. Those are questions that the Scottish Government must answer.

This issue is also a consequence of legislation that has passed through Parliament in relation to the national planning framework. Yes, it has a line about "green data centres", but, as the motion rightly points out, we do not have a real definition of that or know what green data centres will do, what the overall achievements of the data centres will be, and what positive impact they will have on our communities.

If the Government were to address some of those concerns, it would certainly help to inform MSPs for when they attend the public meetings that have been scheduled across the country. I have one coming up in Larbert, because the community is very concerned about the proposed development there, particularly because of its proximity to homes, Forth Valley hospital and care facilities. It is incumbent on MSPs to listen to the concerns of constituents, but we must have clear guidance coming from the direction of the cabinet secretary and the Scottish Government.

The point has been made in the debate that the guidance is coming or that we should get an update soon. However, as I raised previously, given the speed at which the applications are progressing, by the time that information becomes public knowledge and is put through the parliamentary process, it might be too late. Some of the applications that we might have considered not to be in the best locations for our communities and for the people who live in those places will already have been approved.

It is incumbent on all of us to take an ounce of responsibility for that. We are all asking the Government this evening—near enough with a collective voice—to bring forward that guidance and evidence that will allow local authorities to do their job properly.

I will end my remarks there, because I know that quite a few members still have to speak. Again, I do not think that we should be too worried about data centres, but the issue goes back to the points that members have made about where and how many.

18:13

**Steven Bonnar (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP):** I thank Mr Simpson for bringing this debate, because I have had a lot of constituent interaction on the issue in Uddingston and Bellshill. I have had correspondence from constituents as young as 12 years of age to raise their concerns about the long-term local impacts of these hyperscale developments on our climate ambitions and the protection of our urban wildlife and our green-belt land.

It is important to say at the outset, as many members have, that this is not about being against AI or investment or economic growth. It is quite the opposite. There is huge opportunity in Scotland, and particularly in Lanarkshire. We have a proud industrial past, but we also have ambitions about our future—to attract investment, create good jobs and give our young people, such as my constituent Nathan, the opportunity here in Scotland that they so richly deserve. With Scotland's enormous renewable energy potential, there is a real opportunity to bring those ambitions together—to grow our local economy while ensuring that the infrastructure supporting it is sustainable.

However, people in my constituency understandably have questions about what developments of this scale will mean for our local communities. We are seeing proposals for data centres across central Scotland, including in Newhouse and Chapelhall, and there are plans for the old Ravenscraig site, as well. People are asking what the impact will be on their electricity, water, roads infrastructure and green belt. They are asking whether their views will be not only heard but respected.

Those are perfectly reasonable questions. They are not about resisting new technology but about making sure that we get it right. Therefore, I welcome the Scottish Government's engagement with the UK Government on strategic energy planning because developments of such scale clearly have implications beyond individual local authority boundaries.

I fully welcome the recent planning direction that requires authorities to notify the Scottish ministers of data centre applications of more than 50MW within seven days. However, we can go further, particularly by providing clarity on what we mean by "green data centres". Local communities must have confidence that such developments genuinely meet the environmental standards that we expect in Scotland. They must have confidence about where the energy comes from, what happens when renewable generation is unavailable and what standards apply to the back-up generation emissions.

There is another question that matters enormously to the people of Lanarkshire: what do our communities get back? A lot of money is being talked about in relation to the Lanarkshire AI growth zone. We need that investment and we want those jobs. I want our young people to benefit from the new industries, but we need to look beyond the construction phase and ask what the long-term legacy will be. How many sound, good jobs will be created? What apprenticeships and training will be available? How will we use those developments to attract other business, research and innovation into Lanarkshire? We should not simply build data centres in Lanarkshire; we should build an economic ecosystem around them.

Communities must also have a truly meaningful voice in the matter. If developments will have a major impact on our local areas, people's views and concerns cannot and simply should not be swept away. Their concerns must be heard and properly addressed through the planning process.

We do not need to make a choice between economic growth and environmental responsibility: Scotland can have both. Let us attract the investment, create the jobs and give our young people the skills to benefit from those industries. However, let us also ensure that our infrastructure can cope, our environmental standards are strong, and our communities, nature and wildlife are protected.

Let us ensure, too, that local communities have a genuine voice in all of this because, if we are going to build Scotland's future, we need to build it with our communities, not simply round about them.

18:17

**Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab):** I will try to keep my comments brief, because I am aware of the time. I congratulate Graham Simpson—who, I think, has just left the chamber—on securing this debate, which, given the scale of the proposals for data centres up and down the country, is timely.

I will say a little bit about some of the proposals in my West Scotland region. However, before I do so, I argue that, before we consider any proposals that are on the table up and down Scotland, we need to have a wider debate about our public policy on AI, which has risks as well as benefits. We must consider exactly which data centres may be required and what the implications are for society, the environment and other sectors of the economy, as well as the clear and significant implications for our electricity and water supplies.

**Stephen Kerr:** Will Katy Clark give way?

**Katy Clark:** Yes, although I am aware of the time.

**Stephen Kerr:** Katy Clark missed out national security. Does she concede that there is a national security dimension to the issue as well?

**Katy Clark:** I have just said that we need a national strategy. Our economic and security issues are part of that. However, I am very aware of the time, so I will not expand on that.

We also need to consider who owns and controls the developments. That is as much a part of our national security as anything else. We should think about how many sectors of the economy are controlled from outside the country.

**Stuart McMillan:** [*Made a request to intervene.*]

**Katy Clark:** I think that Stuart McMillan is attempting to make an intervention. I know that there is a proposal in his constituency.

**Stuart McMillan:** I did not plan to speak in the debate, but I am the convener of the Climate Action Committee and, today, we agreed to undertake a piece of work on data centres. Further information will come out in due course, but I wanted to put that on the record.

**Katy Clark:** I appreciate and welcome that. I have met campaigners from Mr McMillan's constituency, across the west of Scotland, North Ayrshire, East Dunbartonshire and Inverclyde who have significant concerns about the AI data centre developments in their areas. Those concerns range from environmental harm to light pollution, low-level vibration and health risks, but the campaigners are also concerned about the lack of transparency on the developments.

The views and wishes of local people need to be taken into account, particularly given that there seems to be little community benefit in return but considerable environmental damage. For example, at Hunterston, which is a beauty spot, a proposed AI data centre would be built 50m from the historic Hunterston castle. In Bishopbriggs, a potential data centre site could not only cause harm to the local environment—this week, I met many people in the local community who are

concerned about the development—but would have an impact on the nearby cemetery, prison and driving test centre and also on local bus services. There is a wide range of issues and, as Monica Lennon has said, we need to think about the planning implications.

I have made representations to the First Minister to call for a parliamentary debate in Scottish Government time and for a vote in the chamber on the issues. It cannot be right that such developments are imposed on communities without proper parliamentary oversight. I hope that, in summing up, the cabinet secretary can clarify the issues that have been raised with him about guidance to councils and the position of NPF4, and also clarify whether the Scottish Government is willing to provide more time to discuss that considerable number of proposals up and down Scotland.

18:21

**Adam Harley (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD):** Even though he has left the chamber, I thank Graham Simpson for securing the debate. I, too, will do my best to go as quickly as possible.

I recognise the consensus in the chamber and agree with many of the remarks that others have made. I recognise the need for data centres and the potential benefits that they could bring to the economy, as well as the need for digital infrastructure and national resilience. It is clear that, by designating data centres as national infrastructure through NPF4, the Government believes that they will be important to Scotland's future. If that is the case, surely it is all the more important that we get this right. Unfortunately, so far, it feels as though there has been a real lack of leadership from the Government, which is creating even more uncertainty in communities than there would already have been.

**Duncan Dunlop (South Scotland) (LD):** [*Made a request to intervene.*]

**Adam Harley:** I will take the intervention.

**Duncan Dunlop:** I will be brief. Does Mr Harley agree that the lack of Government leadership as it stands is allowing a free-for-all on data centres, which impacts on communities? At the moment, it is pitting communities against landowners, and it has a lasting impact that goes beyond this issue. A fine equilibrium exists in rural areas, which needs to be preserved.

**Adam Harley:** I thank the member for those points. I entirely agree. At the minute, the lack of leadership from the Scottish Government has led to speculation about many of the proposals, which is creating even more uncertainty in communities. There would already be some uncertainty about

developments of that scale, but that lack of leadership is increasing it.

The Government needs to answer some really basic questions. How many data centres does the Government think that Scotland needs? How many can Scotland support? What benefits should they bring to our economy and to Scottish businesses? What minimum environmental standards should apply, particularly on energy and water use? What requirements should there be for communities who host those developments to see some benefit? If we accept that the data centres will be part of Scotland's future, we need to put them in the right places, so the crucial question is: where are the most appropriate places to put them?

In 2023, the Scottish Futures Trust carried out work to identify the most suitable sites for data centres in Scotland. That work considered issues including power supply and the impact on neighbouring residents and businesses. Westerhill, in my constituency, was not included in either the longlist or the shortlist that were produced as part of that work, yet there are proposals for a 300MW hyperscale development that could be as large as 35 football pitches, which local people are clear that they do not want.

At the very least, the work that the Scottish Futures Trust carries out should be properly considered when those proposals are scrutinised. I would be grateful if, in his closing remarks, the cabinet secretary could confirm whether he agrees with that. In short, we need more and better leadership from the Scottish Government; a good start would be to define what a green data centre is.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson):** I still have four members who wish to speak in the debate, but our remaining time is curtailed. I am minded to offer two minutes to each of those members in which to make their salient points.

18:24

**Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP):** I thank Graham Simpson for bringing the debate to the chamber.

There is a slight irony in my speaking in a debate on AI after having been caught out just last week. Following the sad passing of country music legend Dolly Parton, I shared a picture of what I believed was people gathering and laying flowers at a location in my constituency. Hands up—I should have been more vigilant. With AI improving all the time, I am sure that I will not be the last to be caught out.

In this debate on AI data centres, let me be clear: North Lanarkshire should benefit from investment, jobs and technology. I welcome the opportunities that new technology can bring and the economic growth that we can get from it, but—it is a big but, as others have said—we must be sure that any proposed investment is responsible and in the interests of the people who live here. That is the issue at the moment.

As has been discussed, there are current proposals for very large data centres at places across the country. There might not be any data centres planned in our communities in Coatbridge and Chryston, but constituents who live towards the edges of the constituency, both in south Coatbridge and in the northern corridor, will be close to proposed developments at Chapelhall and Bishopbriggs, respectively, both of which developments have been mentioned.

A great number of constituents have contacted me about this issue and about the scale of the projects and what they could mean for energy infrastructure. They have raised questions about green space, agricultural land, air quality and emissions. They also want to know whether the economic benefits that are being discussed will genuinely reach local people. We can all agree that those are legitimate concerns, and I share them.

The energy requirements are substantial—absolutely massive—and the amount of space that the data centres take up is the same as up to 30 football pitches, so it is a substantial amount of space.

I had a lot more to say on this, Presiding Officer, but you have made it clear that I have only two minutes.

Nobody wants the opportunity to not exist, but we must make sure that it is right and that the climate will not be impacted. There should be a pause or a moratorium, so that we can get the information that we need and so that communities can be in charge of this.

18:27

**David Kirkwood (South Scotland) (Reform):** In this debate, I am probably unusual in having worked in data centres, but I have only two minutes, so I will fillet my speech down to a list of pros and cons.

A pro of a hyperscale data centre is that there is private investment in Scotland. All of the money that comes into these things is from private investors; none of it is public money. Data centres will produce export earnings. Every time somebody in Azerbaijan creates a cat video, a wee bit of money will flow into Scotland from that.

The data centres will create local jobs, but some of them are maybe not of the best quality—they might be security jobs. The promise of a lot of high-quality system administrator jobs is probably a bit of a chimera.

There is a possible local infrastructure benefit in the building of better roads to service the construction phase of the data centre, and there is a possible district heating benefit in trying to dissipate some of the excess heat that these things generate.

Against that, there is a stress on local water supplies unless they are closed-loop systems, but even closed-loop systems need to be refilled, because they always leak. There is a possible contamination of groundwater from condensate from evaporation or from leaks.

There is a stress on the national power grid, unless the data centres are entirely self-contained and produce their own power.

There is noise. There is a constant low-level hum from these things. Also, there is a lot of loud noise from back-up power, either from diesel generators or from gas turbines.

As well as the noise, there are potential problems with air quality, particularly from diesel and including from nitrous oxide, carbon monoxide and particulates.

There are probably local ecological changes caused by the extracted heat that comes out of the data centres. Some data centres are seeing an increase in temperature locally of between 2°C and 9°C, which will have quite a considerable impact locally to the data centre.

The data centres themselves are also generally pretty ugly, although one or two of them have been disguised through planting. There is also light pollution.

I have used up my two minutes, so that is all that I can say.

18:29

**Angela Ross (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform):** I thank my esteemed colleague for bringing this debate to the chamber. It is really important that we look at this issue. I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, as I own a company that has built a large language model and AI models and has used them in products. That might give me insight into a lot of things.

I agree with most of what has been said in the debate. We are lacking leadership on the issue and it feels as though we are freefalling, which can be very dangerous. We are at a moment of

profound technological change. Every one of us uses data infrastructure every day—some of us are using it even now. Whether you are streaming a film or tapping a card to pay for something, you are relying on AI-driven tools. They are woven into the fabric of our life, and this will grow.

In many ways, we are living through a transformation that is much like the industrial revolution, when society had to adapt to new forms of power and production and new connectivity. Just like then, the public have felt uneasy, as we saw today with the protests outside the Parliament.

This is about the pace of change and the impact on communities. It is about whether those communities will benefit or whether only the companies that are involved will benefit.

We must look at the issue with the aim of creating a leadership framework. We need strategy and a way forward, because the digital economy is real—it is here. AI models are huge in terms of the amount of computational capacity that they use. In running my business, I have had to pay for that amount of energy, which is enormous. It costs a lot in terms of energy.

Communities are right to be concerned when proposals for massive industrial-scale data centres emerge. It is concerning when they are popping up in areas of natural beauty or key agricultural areas, which does not make sense. When people see proposals land in places like that, where it does not add up environmentally, visually or socially, they lose trust not only in the project but in the process. We need leadership and we need clear guidelines—everyone has touched on that.

18:31

**Duncan Dunlop (South Scotland) (LD):** I thank Graham Simpson for securing the debate. I represent South Scotland, where at least four data centres are proposed, and I have visited the homes and kitchens of campaigners, as well as the castles and nuclear power stations of developers.

What concerns me most is the impact of not having leadership and guidance from the Scottish Government. As we saw in Galloway, in particular, in the fallout from the national park debate, that could have a residual impact. If you give people clarity about what to expect, you will not put out of kilter the equilibrium that communities rely on, so that, for example, wildfires are combated by everyone putting all hands to the pump. We also need landlords to invest in their communities.

We need to give local people reassurance, and, just as important, we need to give developers reassurance that Scotland is open for business. We need our economy to grow, and, for that to

happen, we must ensure that the Scottish Government recognises that we are allowing a wild west situation around data centres.

The Government must have some gumption and lead. To reiterate what many members have said, it must call in the data centre applications; see them as national infrastructure projects; give clarity on the number of data centres that Scotland needs and in which part of the country they should be; be clear on the expected nature of sites, such as brownfield industrial sites; and involve affected communities and ensure that they get real benefits from data centres in terms of community wealth building. Many millions of pounds should be coming from data centres, because, apparently, billions of pounds will be invested. Finally, the Government must be clear on the environmental impact, as many members have said.

If members go through that process, they will see what I have seen. The Lammermuirs are an inappropriate rural location, whereas a decommissioned nuclear power station is probably the right place. The Scottish Government can find that out pretty quickly. It should please get on and ensure there is some leadership.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson):** I invite Ivan McKee to respond to the debate.

18:33

**The Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform (Ivan McKee):** I am grateful for the opportunity to close this debate on AI data centres. Like many members, I thank Graham Simpson for bringing the motion before the Parliament, and I genuinely thank members from across the chamber for their contributions and for highlighting the range of views that exist on this important issue—although, as Murdo Fraser and other members have said, there has been a lot of unanimity around the chamber on the issue.

The debate touches on a challenge that many countries are now facing: how to harness the opportunities that are presented by artificial intelligence and the digital economy in a way that is sustainable and responsible and, very importantly, that commands public confidence.

Data centres have been designated by the UK Government as critical national infrastructure, given the role that they play in supporting the digital services that businesses, public bodies and citizens rely on every day. They underpin cloud computing, innovation and research, and, increasingly, the development and deployment of potentially transformative artificial intelligence technologies.

We of course want Scotland to be a place where investment can flourish, high-quality jobs can be created and the benefits of innovation can be realised. Equally, we want development to take place in a way that respects communities, protects the environment and supports our climate ambitions. Those objectives are not mutually exclusive.

**Stephen Kerr:** I appreciate what the minister is saying about national infrastructure, but does he agree—it is a very simple question—that if national infrastructure is designated as critical, there should be a national strategy to deliver it?

**Ivan McKee:** I will come on to cover that point in my remarks.

With those objectives in mind, we have in our programme for government committed to publish a strategic approach to attracting and securing responsible green data centre investment, with clear expectations around environmental sustainability, resource use, community benefit and the economic and strategic value that these developments should deliver.

The Scottish Government is committed to developing AI Scotland as a flagship programme that builds public trust and confidence in AI and provides a distinct national voice on the economic and societal questions that AI raises. That will help to support sustainable growth and strengthen public services, while ensuring that Scotland remains competitive in an ever-evolving global landscape. All interventions delivered under the AI Scotland banner will reflect the Scottish Government's commitment to responsible and ethical AI, and we are committed to establishing our future jobs panel to report on the impacts that AI may have on Scotland's skills and future workforce as the technology develops.

I am clear that Scotland's planning system will have a vital role to play in considering applications, harnessing economic opportunities and finding solutions that align with our climate goals. I recognise that communities have questions about the potential impact of large-scale development proposals.

**Victor Currie (Highlands and Islands) (Reform):** On planning—this reinforces Stephen Kerr's point on security—there is an increase in the integration of AI into military capabilities, and thus we are on a trajectory where our future defence against adversaries will depend on superior information-processing capacity, meaning that data centre sites could become targets. Does that risk not indicate that any framework must be decided at a strategic UK level?

**Ivan McKee:** I indicated that we are taking forward a strategy to consider all those issues, and

the point about data centres being critical national infrastructure is clear.

Graham Simpson's motion refers to proposals in a number of specific locations. As members will appreciate, it would not be appropriate for me to discuss or comment on the planning merits of any of the individual development proposals. It is imperative to avoid prejudice to future planning decisions and to maintain the integrity of our planning system.

The Scottish Government and planning authorities must ensure that decisions are taken fairly and transparently, and I have listened to members' general points and concerns about hyperscale data centres, including on potential water use, energy demand, the use of back-up diesel or gas generation, air quality, land use, and cumulative impacts. People rightly expect those matters to be considered carefully and transparently through our planning and regulatory systems, and there are statutory processes that must be followed for all development proposals.

**Alan Brown:** We have heard a lot of requests for greater definition of what constitutes a green data centre. As I said earlier, East Ayrshire Council's planners are saying that they need such a definition. Will the Government bring that forward?

**Ivan McKee:** I will come on to cover that in my remarks.

By law, all planning applications must be determined in accordance with the statutory development plan, unless material considerations indicate otherwise. In Scotland, the statutory development plan comprises national planning framework 4 and the relevant local development plan. NPF4 makes it clear that

"significant weight"

is to

"be given to the global climate and nature crises"

when considering all development proposals, and that

"lifecycle greenhouse gas emissions"

should be minimised

"as far as possible."

Planning authorities have a duty to consider the environmental impacts of all planning applications, and those are informed by site-specific assessments, environmental impact assessments and advice from key agencies, including the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and Scottish Water, where relevant.

To support strategic monitoring of the pipeline of applications and the implications for wider

infrastructure, the Minister for Public Finance has issued a planning direction requiring planning authorities to notify Scottish ministers of new data centre applications exceeding 50MW power capacity within seven days of validation.

Ministers have been clear that we must secure public benefits from this type of major investment in development, and that the voices of communities that host data centres will be central to any considerations on those centres.

**Monica Lennon:** Will the minister take an intervention?

**Ivan McKee:** I am just concluding.

We recognise concerns that members have raised around the absence of an explicit definition of green data centres in NPF4. We have previously set out key factors for planning authorities to take into account when considering this matter, and the First Minister has made it clear that the Scottish Government is giving active consideration to further planning guidance in order to balance the rapid expansion of hyperscale data centre proposals with national energy and climate goals, which are vital to our future prosperity.

In the chamber today, the First Minister made it clear that Cabinet has considered the issue over the summer, resulting in the changes already made by the Minister for Public Finance, and that Cabinet is continuing to consider these issues to ensure that we have in place the proper and effective regime to ensure that communities can be protected and that a proper assessment of applications can be made.

The Scottish Government believes that economic growth and environmental responsibility must go hand in hand. Scotland has ambitious climate commitments, and we expect all sectors to play their part in supporting the transition to a net zero economy.

I thank members again for their contributions and look forward to continued engagement on these matters in the months ahead.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson):** That concludes our debate.

*Meeting closed at 18:41.*

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