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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 9 September 2026

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

Committee Convener

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Good afternoon. We begin with the election of the convener of the Criminal Justice Committee. We have received one valid nomination, for David Linden. The election of the member as convener will be confirmed if no other member objects. If I receive an objection, the election will be subject to a secret ballot.

If any member objects to the election of David Linden as convener, please press your point-of-order button now.

As no member has objected, I confirm that David Linden has been elected as convener of the Criminal Justice Committee. *[Applause.]*

Portfolio Question Time

Deputy First Minister Responsibilities, Finance and Local Government, Parliamentary Business and Veterans

14:01

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): We move to portfolio question time. The first portfolio is Deputy First Minister responsibilities, finance and local government, parliamentary business and veterans. If a member wishes to request a supplementary question, they should press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question.

UK Fishing and Coastal Growth Fund

1. Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what funding it expects to receive from the United Kingdom Government's fishing and coastal growth fund, broken down by financial year. (S7O-00182)

The Minister for Public Finance (Hannah Mary Goodlad): Scotland's consequentials from the fishing and coastal growth fund for the remainder of the UK spending review period are: £2.1 million in 2026-27; £2.7 million in 2027-28; £2.8 million in 2028-29; and an estimated £3.4 million in 2029-30.

It is important to understand that Scotland has been allocated a total of £28 million—or less than 8 per cent—of the £360 million UK fisheries fund and yet, in my constituency and in Ms Adam's constituency, fishing is existential. Shetland lands more fish than Wales, Northern Ireland and England combined. That is another example of a consequence of Brexit, which Scotland and the people of Shetland did not vote for.

Karen Adam: Scotland has more than 60 per cent of the UK's fishing capacity and lands more than 75 per cent of UK quota species, yet Westminster allocated less than 8 per cent of the fund to Scotland, or £28 million over 12 years. That was a political choice as, previously, agricultural funding was devolved without being Barnettised. I fully understand why fishers are looking to the Scottish Government for help, because businesses, jobs, and communities matter. Will the minister press the Treasury for a fairer settlement to reflect Scotland's share of the industry, while working across Government with industry to maximise support now?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: I strongly agree that the decision to grant only a Barnett share of the fund to Scotland was a deliberate political choice by the UK Government. Over the years, fishermen have been used as political pawns. It happened during Brexit, as well as with the 12 years of unchecked access to UK waters, and now, the UK has Barnettised the formula for the fishing fund. It is clear that fisheries are an irrelevance to Westminster, yet the industry is important for Scotland and is existential for Ms Adams's constituency. The Scottish Government has always been clear that the application of a population-based model to fisheries fails to recognise Scotland's greater share of our UK seas. We will continue to make that point strongly to the UK Government in pursuit of a fairer share of the fisheries and coastal fund being allocated to Scotland.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Given the climate and biodiversity crises facing our seas, how can the Scottish Government ensure that the funding that comes to Scotland does not simply

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subsidise business as usual, but is used to support genuine ecological sustainability and, importantly, community benefit, ensuring that there is decent work and supporting resilient coastal communities?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: Our fishers are great stewards of the sea. It is in their best interests to ensure that fish stocks are sustainable now and well into the future. It is important that, as we move forward with our Scottish fisheries fund, which will sit alongside the UK fisheries fund, we take a merit-based approach to allocation. When we talk about economic, social and environmental perspectives on allocation, we must consider all that in the round.

Town Centres and Local Economies (Assistance for Local Government)

2. David Barratt (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government, following the publication of the programme for government, how it is planning to assist local authorities with regenerating town centres and strengthening local economies. (S7O-00183)

The Minister for Public Finance (Hannah Mary Goodlad): The Scottish Government is committed to supporting the regeneration of our towns and town centres to ensure that they are vibrant, thriving places. With our agencies, we work regularly with many local authorities on work to strengthen local economies. For example, in 2026-27, we will provide up to £40 million of regeneration capital investment to support local authorities to bring unused properties back into productive use, to revitalise our town centres and to make the communities that people live in thriving places.

David Barratt: I welcome the Scottish Government's continued investment in regeneration projects across Fife, particularly in the Cowdenbeath constituency. What further action will the Government take to ensure that the benefits of regeneration and economic growth in renewed town centres are felt more widely across communities in the constituency, so that no area is left behind?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: A key part of the programme for government is ensuring that we have growth and regeneration in every region and part of Scotland. Thriving places are absolutely key to our communities and to our country as a whole.

To focus on Fife in particular, which was the subject of Mr Barratt's question, Fife Council has received more than £43 million in regeneration capital investment from the Scottish Government since 2014, including £1.1 million for 2025-26 and £3.8 million for 2026-27 to develop new units at the Glenfield industrial estate. Funding has also supported regeneration projects in Lochgelly and Inverkeithing, such as the transformation of the Inverkeithing townhouse.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to improving our high streets. The minister will know the importance of place-based improvements to local economies and wellbeing. I was also encouraged by the Prime Minister's announcement that the United Kingdom Government is committed to introducing clear design standards for high street shopfronts.

In Glasgow, there is a good example of how that can be achieved. I have seen that in Saracen Street in Possilpark, where shopfronts were upgraded to their traditional shopfront standards due to Scottish Government funding, which I campaigned for with the local business improvement district. A similar scheme has been implemented in Govan, which has led to increased footfall, making the community feel safer for everyone. Will the minister commit to introducing similar design standards at a national level, learning the lessons from Possilpark and Govan, so that other high streets can benefit in the same way?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: I would be delighted to learn more about those shopfronts, both in Govan and across Glasgow more broadly. Over the summer, I have engaged with planning authorities and local government about the purpose of planning across our town centres, so that we can make them more liveable, accessible and pleasurable places to be. I am very happy to engage with the member on the matter and perhaps even visit the shops themselves.

Craig Hoy (Dumfriesshire) (Con): The Scottish Government has announced plans for a last provider fund to support the final remaining shops and pubs in our rural towns and villages. Sadly, for many of the communities that I represent, that fund comes too late, and the lack of support from the Scottish National Party in the previous parliamentary session means that many businesses have been lost, potentially for good. That is the case in Canonbie, where the Cross Keys hotel closed last January and now stands empty.

Will the minister confirm that the cash that is being made available is genuinely new money, and will she also confirm which areas will qualify? Will she commit to ensuring that any additional Barnett consequentials that flow from additional rates relief for hospitality in England are passed on in full to this vital but faltering part of the Scottish economy?

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Hannah Mary Goodlad: It is important to note that the last provider fund is a signal from this Government to our rural and island communities that this is a Government that stands behind our rural and island communities, and the shops that are sometimes at the very heart of these communities and the high streets that they represent.

As Mr Hoy will know, we are reviewing our business rates perspective when it comes to small businesses and hospitality in the round. The Deputy First Minister and I are leading work on that. A wide package of reliefs is already present for businesses across Scotland; indeed, our business package is the most generous across the UK in terms of small businesses being able to qualify under that £100,000 mark.

When it comes to the 20 per cent business rates relief that Mr Burnham has imposed across hospitality, it is yet to be seen what the Barnett consequentialities are. However, I would be happy to engage with the member on how we potentially explore how that transfers across in relation to ring fencing.

Civic Licensing (Local Authorities)

3. Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): To ask the Scottish Government, in light of ministerial comments regarding concerns about the discharge of licensing functions by Highland Council, whether it plans to review the governance arrangements under which local authorities discharge civic licensing functions. (S7O-00184)

The Minister for Public Finance (Hannah Mary Goodlad): Under the Civic Government (Scotland) Act 1982, it is for local licensing authorities to make decisions relating to the day-to-day operation of licensing matters. That reflects the decision making that can be done best locally, with the wishes of communities in mind. That regime includes decisions on, for example, taxis and private hire licences. An independent task force will shortly report to the Scottish Government with general recommendations on how the licensing regimes under the act may be modernised and reformed. That report will be considered carefully before any next steps are taken.

Julie MacDougall: To reiterate my point, I will quote Maree Todd, who described the situation where a convicted rapist was allowed to keep his taxi licence as “incomprehensible”. She also said:

“I’m struggling to understand what they were thinking of when they were making that decision.”

Will the minister confirm whether she supports her fellow minister’s comments? Does she agree that all licensing approval meetings should be held fully in public, in exactly the same way as licensing boards decide alcohol licence applications, to prevent such situations from ever happening again?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: I first want to state my utter disgust at the abhorrent nature of the case and how the licence holder was able to retain his licence. I also want to put on record that Highland Council eventually came to the right conclusion. However, the case should never have been able to get to that stage.

I support Ms Todd in her comments as a concerned constituent. I fully stand behind the words that she, and many other members of the chamber, shared about their disgust at that man’s keeping his licence.

Julie MacDougall raises a good point about where power lies in taking such decisions. The public sector reform approach provides us with the opportunity to start having such discussions and engaging with local authorities on where the power rests and lies in the next three months and the next quarter of this calendar year, as we head towards the Christmas period. We will explore that. As I said, a review has been kicked off, and we will see where that concludes.

Programme for Government (Engagement with Local Authorities)

4. Kate Campbell (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what engagement it has had with local authorities regarding its programme for government, to ensure alignment on shared objectives. (S7O-00185)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Jenny Gilruth): Discussions that took place with local government partners over the summer recess established an agreed need for reform of public services to meet the complex demographic, fiscal and demand-led challenges that those services face. I met Convention of Scottish Local Authorities leadership and political group leaders, and the Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform, and the First Minister also held discussions with COSLA, on behalf of local authorities, which informed our approach. On Friday of this week, the First Minister, Mr McKee and I will again meet COSLA.

As we take forward implementation and the wider reform agenda, we will continue to work closely with local government to build the consensus that is needed around a shared direction and the changes that are needed to deliver better outcomes for communities across Scotland.

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Kate Campbell: Does the Deputy First Minister agree that the review of local government must prioritise the delivery of high-quality local services with fewer managers and more front-line workers? What assurances can she give that services will still be tailored to the needs of local communities?

Jenny Gilruth: Kate Campbell is absolutely correct to point to the need for local service delivery to be maintained and improved as a consequence of public service reform. Ultimately, public service reform is aimed at improving services rather than preserving structures, as was discussed at this morning's meeting of the Social Justice, Housing and Local Government Committee.

Through public service reform, we will ensure that services are much more joined up, sustainable and responsive to local communities' needs, while reducing unnecessary duplication. We are absolutely committed to engaging further with local government partners, as I have already outlined, with communities and, of course, with Parliament to design a reform package that delivers against those objectives.

Breakfast Clubs (Local Authority Funding)

5. Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the funding it has made available to local authorities to expand and enhance breakfast club provision. (S7O-00186)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Jenny Gilruth): The Scottish Government has provided funding to Scotland's councils to deliver on the roll-out of free breakfast clubs in primary schools throughout Scotland from August 2027. That commitment will be delivered flexibly to meet the needs of children, families and communities across the country.

In 2026-27, £15 million has been provided to local councils to expand and enhance breakfast club provision. From 2027-28, that will be followed by the provision of an additional £44 million annually to deliver that national offer. Allocation letters confirming individual local authority allocations were issued on 31 August.

Jackie Dunbar: Will the Deputy First Minister give further detail on what the expanded and enhanced provision will look like in practice and what the benefits for pupils, parents and teachers will be? Will she also advise on how that investment will help with the Scottish Government's wider action to eradicate child poverty and put more money into the pockets of families across Scotland?

Jenny Gilruth: As education secretary, I was proud to begin our national roll-out of breakfast clubs. We know what a key role they play in enhancing and supporting attainment in our schools and, more broadly, in cutting the cost of the school day.

The Government recognises the pressure on households at the current time, which is why, in 2026-27, we are allocating around £3.5 billion to policies that tackle poverty and the cost of living. It is worth recounting that around half of Scotland's schools already have some sort of breakfast club provision as a result of direct investment from the Scottish Government through, for example, the pupil equity fund.

NHS Pension Scheme (Remedial Service Statements)

6. Steven Bonnar (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to address delays in the provision of remedial service statements to national health service pension scheme members affected by the McCloud/Sargeant remedy, including measures to prevent financial detriment to members, in light of reports that some former NHS employees have been waiting almost four years to receive their statements. (S7O-00187)

The Minister for Public Finance (Hannah Mary Goodlad): I recognise that a number of retired NHS employees have yet to receive their remedial service statement. Although the original timescales have been extended, it is important that scheme members receive them as soon as possible.

To support that work, we have increased the Scottish Public Pensions Agency's budget year on year, from £25 million in 2022-23 to £38 million in 2026-27. The SPPA has expanded its workforce and is investing in technology. Governance and oversight arrangements have also been strengthened.

Importantly, members should not suffer financial detriment as a result of any delay. Any benefits that are due will be paid in full, with arrears and with interest.

Steven Bonnar: My constituent has experienced prolonged delay in receiving her remedial service statement from the Scottish Public Pensions Agency, in the way that that the cabinet secretary described. What further discussions has the Scottish Government had with any relevant successor committees regarding the SPPA's delivery of the remedy and the steps that are being taken to address the issues further?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: In the summer, the Deputy First Minister met the chief executive of the SPPA, who then wrote to the successor committees with an update on progress on the McCloud remedy. In

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response, the Finance and Public Administration Committee indicated that it intends to take further evidence this autumn. I ask the member to feed that information back to his constituent.

The Government is clear about the urgency of this work, and has put resource and time into it. It continues to support the SPPA to deliver the remedy as quickly as possible, while recognising that the original United Kingdom Government legislative timetable was not achievable.

The SPPA continues to work closely with employers and staff representatives to ensure that scheme members are kept up to date on progress.

Town Centres (Local Authority Funding)

7. Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how it will ensure that local authorities have sufficient resources to support town centres. (S7O-00188)

The Minister for Public Finance (Hannah Mary Goodlad): Local authorities are in receipt of record funding in this year's budget. As I noted earlier in my response to David Barratt, we are committed to supporting the regeneration of our town centres, backed up with £40 million of regeneration capital investment this year. That investment has supported local authorities to deliver local regeneration activity, including revitalising town centres, accelerating town centre living, tackling vacant and derelict land and supporting community ownership.

Just this summer, as part of my ministerial tour, I went to Dumfries and was encouraged by the extended town centre living that had been supported by the Scottish Government, which included converting blocks of flats to bring people back into town centres. When I consider planning, the question of how we can get more people back into town centres is on my agenda, because that is part of the answer when it comes to social cohesion.

Finlay Carson: The Deputy First Minister recently provided £5 million of Scottish Government support to businesses affected by the fire on Princes Street in Edinburgh. However, businesses in Stranraer have endured more than three years of road closures, disruption, reduced footfall and uncertainty as a result of the redevelopment of the former George hotel. Although the minister in her response argues that it is a matter for the local authority, because it is a council-led regeneration project, the impact on local traders is no less real.

The Scottish Government recognises that redevelopment is a key part of the wider reshaping Stranraer strategy. Does the minister accept that businesses in Stranraer, through no fault of their own, should not be expected to shoulder the cost of failures of a publicly funded regeneration project on their own? Will she commit to looking into the hugely significant impact that prolonged disruption has had on businesses, particularly on Church Street, and explore how the Scottish Government can provide assistance to the affected traders, just as it did for businesses that were impacted in Edinburgh?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: I am well aware that the council owns the hotel in the Stranraer development that Mr Carson speaks about. I also know that he has written extensively to the Deputy First Minister on the issue. In relation to upcoming budget negotiations, our door is open.

Alex Kerr (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): One of the crucial commitments in my campaign to win the support of the communities of Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse was to drive forward the regeneration of Hamilton town centre. There is capital funding set aside by the local authority and through the pride in place programme, and there is revenue funding from the Scottish Government for the business improvement district. Will the minister meet me to discuss whether there is any potential for additional capital funding from the Scottish Government to be leveraged into the regeneration efforts?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: I would be very happy to meet and discuss the matter. In addition to the projects that we will be supporting through our capital regeneration investment programme, we continue to provide funding to Scotland's Towns Partnership to provide support to stakeholders with engagement on and the implementation and development of town centre visions and strategies. I ask Mr Kerr to please write to me, and I will be happy to engage.

Angela Ross (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform): Local authorities across Scotland are carrying a £22 billion net debt. While local authorities are left to look after their own borrowing risk, is the Government looking at aggregated exposure if borrowing costs remain high or increase? What would the impact be on public services, including the regeneration projects that the minister has talked about?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: We had a discussion on that issue this morning at the Social Justice, Housing and Local Government Committee, and it falls into the public sector reform space in terms of how we, as a Government, are taking some of that execution power and putting more of the decision making in at local authority level.

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Angela Ross will be well aware that, under the Scotland Act 1998, local councils have more borrowing power than the Scottish Government itself. However, there are conversations to be explored in order to understand how local government can take that risk and a multiyear perspective when it comes to borrowing. Perhaps there should also be a conversation about and an exploration into how national Government backs and stands behind that.

Future Framework for Universities

8. David Kirkwood (South Scotland) (Reform): To ask the Scottish Government what funding provision it plans to make in its upcoming budget to support the implementation of the initial findings of the future framework for universities. (S7O-00189)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Jenny Gilruth): Work is under way on the 2027-28 budget and, as part of that process, we will work closely with the Scottish Funding Council and Universities Scotland. I very much recognise the need to ensure a sustainable model of funding that recognises the wider financial pressures that our universities face in Scotland and, indeed, across the United Kingdom. That is why, when I was the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, I was pleased to commit to our joint work alongside Universities Scotland. The funding gap analysis report provides the necessary foundation, and it is the first step in that joint work to identify the solutions that are required for a successful and sustainable future to be delivered for all Scotland's universities.

David Kirkwood: The projected savings from the public sector reform programme are relatively modest, at less than 1 per cent of the total spend, but they would be sufficient to cover the more than £200 million annual shortfall in Scottish university funding that the future framework has identified. Will the Government commit to using that money to safeguard an essential investment in Scotland's future prosperity, and can some of the rest be given to schools so that teachers can be issued with more than 23 pencils per year?

Jenny Gilruth: I have to confess that, in my time as a teacher, I do not recall ever being issued with 23 pencils per year. It might be an equation that Mr Kirkwood is acquainted with, but it is not one that I ever engaged with as a teacher.

The broader point about sustainable funding for our universities is important. That is why, last year, in my discussions with the then Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government, I was able to secure an uplift for our universities, with the investment for financial year 2026-27 exceeding £1.4 billion, which includes a combined increase of more than £55 million in resource and capital funding from the Scottish Funding Council.

We will take forward further engagement with the Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic and the Scottish Funding Council in relation to the allocation for our university sector this year.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I call question 9. Stuart McMillan joins us remotely.

Cruise Ship Levy

9. Stuart McMillan (Inverclyde) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its plans to allow local authorities to introduce a cruise ship levy. (S7O-00190)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Please put your camera on, Mr McMillan.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Jenny Gilruth): As Stuart McMillan will appreciate, the Scottish Government has begun a three-month engagement period on the future shape of regional and community governance. We will be looking to establish effective reforms that improve our services and can achieve the support of the Parliament. As that process will consider where responsibilities for a number of powers should sit, I urge Mr McMillan and all members to feed into that process, not least on the suggestion of a cruise ship levy.

Stuart McMillan: The Deputy First Minister will be aware that there is cross-party support for the introduction of a cruise ship levy, with various MSPs, including Liam McArthur, highlighting that in the previous parliamentary session. Will the Deputy First Minister confirm that a cruise ship levy bill will be introduced in this parliamentary session, as it would assist my constituency a great deal more than the tourism or visitor levies?

Jenny Gilruth: Mr McMillan will be aware that the Government carried out a consultation on the potential for a cruise ship levy over the spring of 2025, and the analysis following that consultation was published in March 2026.

A broader consideration with regard to the member's original question is about public service reform, which I view as relevant in this context. The amended Visitor Levy (Scotland) Act 2024 also allows local authorities

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to set a levy of a fixed amount instead of a percentage, and that can help generate resources for visitor services and facilities.

More broadly, however, because of the interaction with public service reform, I encourage the member to engage with the Government. A focused time period of three months is being provided to local government to engage with the Government on those issues, and I encourage members, including Mr McMillan, to make necessary representations about their own constituencies. I have heard Mr McMillan's point about the cruise ship levy, and I am happy to engage further with him further on his ask.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I thank Stuart McMillan for raising the issue. For clarification, as I am sure the cabinet secretary is aware, the alternative of a point-of-entry levy is felt by many who work in the island tourism sector, including in my Orkney constituency, to offer a fairer, simpler and more effective solution to the existing visitor levy on overnight accommodation. Will the cabinet secretary confirm whether the Government will ensure that that option is at least available to island local authorities, as part of any work to take forward the findings of the cruise ship levy consultation?

Jenny Gilruth: To give Mr McArthur some assurance—and I am happy to engage with him on such issues—I very much recognise how important those matters are in island constituencies such as his. I see my minister, on my right, nodding at me. We need to consider more broadly where powers and functions best sit in the context of public service reform, but I will engage with Mr McArthur on the substantive point relating to his question in the broader consultation.

PFI Payments (Public Sector Finances)

10. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update regarding the latest assessment it has made of the impact of private finance initiative payments on public sector finances. (S7O-00191)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Jenny Gilruth): The latest published data shows that the total estimated projected unitary charge of payments for 74 private finance initiative contracts across the public sector in Scotland, from 2025-26 onwards, is approximately £12.9 billion. We are committed to ensuring that PFI contractual obligations are delivered and that contracts are as affordable as they can be. That is why we asked the Scottish Futures Trust to support public bodies in optimising value for money for those contracts.

Alan Brown: The Deputy First Minister is probably aware that Labour's PFI scheme for the Royal infirmary of Edinburgh has already cost the taxpayers more than £1 billion. Despite that, there is a current estimated repair bill of something like £90 million, which will leave a debt liability of potentially tens of millions of pounds when the hospital is returned to public ownership next year. What assessment has the Government made of other PFI schemes when it comes to potential debt liabilities, considering that we were promised that the buildings would be returned to public ownership in perfect condition?

Jenny Gilruth: Across the public purse, the toxic legacy of Labour's PFI contracts continues to impact on the Scottish Government's broader spending power, even to this day. The Scottish Futures Trust has expanded contract management capacity and has established a dedicated PFI expiry service to look at consistent support to public bodies as contracts move towards their expiry. We are also working closely with authorities to reduce the risk of avoidable costs, and PFI hand-backs that have been completed to date have been delivered smoothly and within the parameters that we would have expected.

We need to look at stronger governance in that regard, and earlier planning, but I very much recognise the challenge. The member will be aware that I am having to deal with some of the consequences that, many years later, stem from those contracts.

Public Service Reform, Europe, External Affairs and Energy

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): We move to the public service reform, Europe, external affairs and energy portfolio. I ask that any member who wishes to request a supplementary question press their button. My ability to bring in such questions depends, as always, on how succinct questions and answers are. I will give a few moments for members on the front benches to change over.

Energy Infrastructure (Community Benefits)

1. Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to ensure that communities hosting energy infrastructure receive direct benefits from it. (S7O-00192)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Energy (Stephen Gethins): [*Inaudible.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Your microphone is not on. Is your card in, Mr Gethins?

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For the future, if any member forgets their card when coming to the chamber, they can always get a replacement from the front desk.

Stephen Gethins: Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer. It should be working now.

I ask Jenni Minto for her forgiveness and I thank her for raising the issue, because it is important to her and her constituents. Communities that host infrastructure should see some benefits. She will be aware of my recent comments when the United Kingdom Government announced upgrades to lines but the community did not see as much benefit as it might have expected.

The Scottish Government has some limited powers and we are taking action by refreshing our good practice principles for community benefits from onshore renewables developments. The guidance will reflect the renewable energy sector's evolution, ensuring that host communities receive sustainable, meaningful outcomes from renewables developments.

Jenni Minto: Renewable energy is a key part of our journey to net zero and Scotland already produces huge amounts of renewable power, with the potential to create much more. However, too often, communities such as those across Argyll and Bute host the required infrastructure without feeling the benefits, while continuing to pay some of the highest energy bills in the UK.

Does the minister agree that all energy powers should be devolved to Scotland so that we can ensure that Scotland's energy production has greater benefits for the people of Scotland?

Stephen Gethins: Jenni Minto is right to raise that, and people in Argyll and Bute will be particularly concerned. I agree, and—despite what others might think—the majority of parliamentarians in this Parliament agree, that full control over energy policy should sit in this Parliament, where the benefits of Scotland's energy wealth can be achieved. They cannot be achieved within the current devolution settlement.

Jenni Minto has rightly raised the fact that Scotland is energy rich yet our bills remain among the highest in Europe, despite the promises from the Labour Government. The Scottish Government wrote to the UK Government to formally request that those powers be devolved, on the basis of a vote in this Parliament, so that we can take decisive action in areas such as reducing bills, tackling fuel poverty and making sure that we feel the benefit of Scotland's vast energy wealth, but we have still not had a response.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Communities hosting the Kintore to Tealing energy infrastructure in Aberdeenshire report that it will reduce the value of their properties by up to 40 per cent. They have heard absolutely nothing from the Scottish Government about what benefit they will get out of it. What action is the Government taking to get them direct benefit from hosting that infrastructure, or are they right that the Government has abandoned them?

Stephen Gethins: Mr Kerr will be aware that I cannot comment on certain applications for consent. He will also know that those grid upgrades were a matter for the UK Government in terms of the money off bills and that, further north, in his region of North East Scotland, that was—as I have already commented—insufficient.

Public Service Reform (Public Infrastructure)

2. Max Bannerman (Highlands and Islands) (Reform): To ask the Scottish Government whether its plans for public service reform will include improvements to public infrastructure. (S7O-00193)

The Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform (Ivan McKee): The draft infrastructure strategy, which was published in January, highlights how important it is that all sectors have long-term asset strategies. In line with public service reform principles, those strategies need to reflect opportunities to improve services and maximise value for money through, for example, shared spaces and joined-up services across different public bodies.

The single Scottish estate programme brings together organisations from across the public sector, including national health service boards, local authorities and public bodies, to plan, share, and jointly use space. The programme is reducing the size, cost and emissions of the public sector estate. It is currently pursuing more than £52 million of projected cash-releasing benefits by March 2028, which is well on the way to the target of £50 million to £80 million of benefits over the five years of the programme.

Max Bannerman: Bridge infrastructure in Moray has been in a state of huge disrepair for far too long. This week, we learned that essential repairs to Fochabers bridge, which is a vital artery over the River Spey, are at least 70 days behind schedule, which is causing utter chaos on the A96.

If that was not bad enough, the Cloddach bridge has been closed since 2022 because the Tory-run council voted to axe the repair project, blaming the Scottish National Party for underfunding it. The Scottish Government's response is that bridge upkeep is the responsibility of Moray Council. Shoulder shrugging and

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passing the buck is not good enough. Does the cabinet secretary agree that reform of public services means cutting through those silos, ending the blame game and getting on with delivery for local people?

Ivan McKee: Public service reform absolutely means cutting through bureaucratic structures and getting on with delivery—that is at the heart of the programme. I am not familiar with the specific examples that the member raises—he might want to take them up with the relevant cabinet secretary—but I can reassure him that, where there are barriers to public service delivery, this programme is about cutting through them in order to deliver for the citizen.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I am sure that the cabinet secretary agrees that Scotland cannot cut its way out of its current fiscal challenges and that, instead, it must invest its way out of them. That is why mention of the Clyde metro project in the programme for government was welcome. It is a project that will transform connectivity across the greater Glasgow city region and drive the economic growth that we all want to see.

An infrastructure project of that scale needs relentless momentum to get out of development hell. Can the cabinet secretary confirm that the development of the Clyde metro case for investment remains on track to meet its early 2027 deadline? Can the cabinet secretary outline what capital support the Government will provide for the project over the course of the session, so that we can see construction start by the end of the decade?

Ivan McKee: If the member engages with the cabinet secretary who is responsible for that project, I am sure that he will get answers on the specific points that he is raising.

The general point about the strategic focus on projects that benefit the whole region is critically important. The public service reform programme is absolutely focused on making sure that we maximise the opportunities to unlock the potential of projects such as the Clyde metro project, which, as the member rightly indicated, was committed to in the Scottish Government's manifesto and in the programme for government.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Rather than there being a blame game, is it not a fact that Scotland's capital budget is constrained by cuts that were made by the United Kingdom Government, and that there is a risk of further cuts because the UK might move money to defence spending? Further, does the cabinet secretary agree that Scotland is also constrained by the fiscal framework, which strictly limits the amount of capital borrowing for infrastructure investment?

Ivan McKee: The member makes a valid point. If Scotland, as a normal independent country, were to be in full control of all the relevant powers, it would have the ability to borrow to invest in those capital projects in order to deliver precisely the benefits that he and other members around the chamber have identified.

Public Service Reform (Transfer of Responsibilities to Regions and Communities)

3. **Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government, as part of its public service reform efforts and intent to empower regions and communities stated in the programme for government, what responsibilities and competences it would consider transferring from the Scottish Government and its agencies to regions and communities. (S7O-00194)

The Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform (Ivan McKee): As set out in the programme for government, we will engage in an intensive dialogue over the next three months with partners in local government, members across Parliament and stakeholders, including representatives from local communities, to reach a clear, shared direction about the future of local governance in Scotland. As part of that engagement, we will consider which functions and responsibilities might be better delivered at a regional level, and which powers and resources should sit closer to communities. Through my engagement with representatives of local government, including a meeting this morning, I have made that point. I look forward to people coming forward with suggestions about which powers they and others may feel would be better delivered at a regional or community level.

Daniel Johnson: As the cabinet secretary will be aware, reform is necessary, but speculation in recent days has been about council mergers and powers being sucked into new bodies. Can he confirm that it is the Government's intention that the public service reform programme is about pushing power out from Holyrood and that it will consider areas such as transport, enterprise support and skills? Most importantly, will the programme involve the creation of fiscal competencies such as the business rates allocation that Greater Manchester enjoys in its combined authority?

Ivan McKee: I do not want to speak for my colleague the Deputy First Minister with regard to rates, but we are absolutely open to a discussion on all the other aspects that the member has identified in order to understand whether various responsibilities sit best at a regional or a national level. As I said, that is a conversation that we will take forward with colleagues in local government at pace over the next few months.

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Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): Much council autonomy is undermined by the Scottish Government overruling planning decisions that are made by local planning boards. Will the cabinet secretary confirm whether any changes to the planning system will allow councils to exercise more freedom from the Scottish Government to make planning decisions in their communities' best interests?

Ivan McKee: It is fascinating that, in a debate that I took part in last week, we heard Reform members saying that the Scottish Government should be more interventionist with regard to such matters when it comes to hyperscale data centres. I think that they need to get their act together.

The planning system is designed in a way that allows decisions to be made by the planning authority to which the application is made, but there is provision in that system for Government involvement, depending on the nature of the application and the issues concerning it. That system serves us well. The vast majority of planning decisions are made locally, but where there is a need for the Government to call them in, it does so in the national or strategic interest.

Public Service Reform (Mental Health and Neurodevelopmental Services)

4. Jenny Young (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government, in light of its proposal to reduce the number of national health service boards as part of its public service reform programme, what assurances it can provide that staffing and support for mental health and neurodevelopmental services will not be adversely affected. (S7O-00195)

The Minister for Community Care (Alison Thewliss): The ambitious proposals in the programme for government will improve mental health and neurodevelopmental services, ensuring that they are sustainable, responsive and effective for future generations. As the First Minister has confirmed, there are no plans for compulsory redundancies.

Jenny Young: I thank the minister for that response, but it fails to address the serious issues that have been raised with me by dozens of constituents in the Forth Valley area who have been waiting years for treatment and diagnosis through child and adolescent mental health services and the paediatric neurodevelopmental service pathway. Data that was released following a freedom of information request showed that 56 per cent of CAMHS roles in NHS Forth Valley remain unfilled.

We must recognise the context in which changes to NHS structures might be being made: services are already operating far below capacity due to chronic staff shortages. In the light of the Government's plans to reduce the number of health boards in Scotland to two, can the minister provide a guarantee to my constituents that there will be no increased delays or further cuts to the PND and CAMHS head count in NHS Forth Valley?

Alison Thewliss: If Jenny Young wants to write to me with the details of the cases of her constituents, I will be more than happy to look into them. We are embarking on a process to remove arbitrary barriers, reduce waiting times and ensure that people have better access to services and are not constrained by arbitrary geographical boundaries. People should be able to access better services, and we are embarking on that journey.

Israel (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions)

5. Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what work it has carried out following the Parliament's vote to boycott, divest from and sanction Israel. (S7O-00196)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Energy (Stephen Gethins): I acknowledge yesterday's announcement by the Foreign Secretary, which was welcome, but I am sure that we both agree that it was long overdue. I have asked officials to engage with their counterparts in the United Kingdom Government to explore what the changes will mean in practice and how they might impact the Scottish Government's ongoing work.

We both agree that we need to go further. The Scottish Government has repeatedly called on the UK Government to end all licensed arms exports to Israel. As Ms Mackay will be aware, in September 2025, the Scottish Government announced an immediate pause on new awards of public money to defence companies whose products or services are provided to countries where there is plausible evidence of genocide being committed by that country.

Gillian Mackay: The movement from the UK Government is absolutely welcome, and I am pleased that the Scottish Government is engaging with it. However, as the cabinet secretary will be aware, the announcement covers only goods, and only those from the occupied West Bank, so we need the Scottish Government to go further on affected services and other economic drivers. When will we see a plan to meaningfully implement the vote of the Parliament, which the Government supported?

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Stephen Gethins: As Gillian Mackay knows, the announcement was made yesterday, and I have asked colleagues to engage on the issue. We can come back and discuss the matter once we have engaged with the UK Government to figure out what the announcement means for the Scottish Government. I acknowledge the Foreign Secretary's personal commitment to the matter, but we can all agree, especially those of us who believe in the international rules-based system and the need to protect it, that the announcement was long overdue and that we need to go much further.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Does the cabinet secretary agree that the escalation of extreme physical brutality and violent raids by illegal settlers in the West Bank and by the Israel Defense Forces represents Palestinian ethnic cleansing—a deliberate erasing of the Palestinian state? I am glad that he welcomes the Foreign Secretary's announcement yesterday, but will he also acknowledge that the policy is backed by the new Prime Minister? It represents action, not just words. It is perhaps the bare minimum, but the UK Government took a big step yesterday. I hope that the Scottish Government will work alongside the UK Government in good faith, so that we can be clear with the international community that this is where we all stand.

Stephen Gethins: I have acknowledged the work of the Foreign Secretary, who is obviously backed by the Prime Minister. Moreover, as I mentioned to Gillian Mackay, I have asked officials to engage with their counterparts in the Foreign Office on the matter. Pauline McNeill will understand that we are not even 24 hours out from the announcement, so I think it only appropriate that we give them time to work through matters.

In reply to Pauline McNeill's other point, I would note that, earlier this week, Ratko Mladić was given state honours when he returned to Belgrade and that the worst humanitarian crisis on earth is going on in Sudan. She is right to raise issues about the West Bank, and I am glad that the UK Government has acted, but those events underline the fact that the international rules-based system is under attack as never before, and it is incumbent on us all to react.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I am glad that the UK Government has belatedly taken this action, but I would point out that Britain Owes Palestine, a cross-party campaign, is calling on that Government to formally acknowledge and apologise for its actions during the British occupation of Palestine. In September 2025, the campaign submitted a petition to the UK Government on behalf of 14 Palestinians, documenting systematic breaches of international law during the mandate period. A year on, however, the petition has received no response. Does the minister agree that the UK Government should issue that apology?

Stephen Gethins: Jenni Minto has raised another important issue. I am a great fan of learning about history, and we cannot seek to understand the current situation in the Middle East—or anywhere else, for that matter—without such an understanding.

The Scottish Government's concern about the situation in Palestine is well documented, and I pursued it when I was at Westminster, as well as in the Scottish Parliament. Our focus has been on the necessary steps towards peace and humanitarian—

Mark Simpson (North East Scotland) (Reform): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I am sorry to interrupt, minister. We have a point of order from Mark Simpson.

Mark Simpson: Why are we are wasting time discussing issues in the chamber that, per schedule 5 of the Scotland Act 1998, we have no power or influence over?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): That is not a point of order.

Stephen Gethins: As a member of an internationally outward-looking Parliament, I am pleased that colleagues in my own party and others are raising such issues, and for an important reason—it tells us who we are. Based on that—and based on the good question that was raised by Gillian Mackay, and which was followed by Pauline McNeill and pursued by Jenni Minto—I say that the Scottish Government will continue to do all that we can within our devolved powers to support those suffering in Gaza and the West Bank.

A two-state solution is the only way in which the Palestinians and Israelis can live side by side in peace, prosperity and security. Regardless of what the member from Reform has said, I am going to continue to talk about that.

Public Service Reform (NHS Boards)

6. Kayleigh Kinross-O'Neill (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of how the proposed reform of national health service boards will contribute to

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its public service reform agenda, including by reducing administrative costs and enabling resources to be directed towards frontline services. (S7O-00197)

The Minister for Community Care (Alison Thewliss): We are transforming health and care services so that people in Scotland receive the best treatment, care and support to stay healthy, independent and connected to their communities for as long as possible.

As the member will appreciate, the development of detailed proposals supported by a business case will include engagement with NHS boards, staff, trade unions, local government, integration authorities, social care partners and the public to understand how we better ensure that front-line services are delivered and that administrative costs are reduced.

Kayleigh Kinross-O'Neill: I appreciate that the work is still in its early days and that a three-month programme of engagement has been planned, but it is still not clear what the scope will be. When will we have clarity on what impact splitting the health boards and creating two will have on local authorities that already carry the bulk of social care and prevention work?

Alison Thewliss: As the member has said, this is a three-month process, and it is still at an early stage, but we are already seeing the benefits of working across the east and west of Scotland to make the decision slightly better and more streamlined. We aim to make further progress on that, and more details will come through. I encourage the member, along with her party, to engage in the process.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The former SNP health secretary, Michael Matheson, has described the notion that we can save money by merging health boards as “fool’s gold.” The problem is that we do not know whether he is right, because there is absolutely no detail before us. We do not know what the savings will be, how many jobs might be lost, what the head count will be, whether the resources freed up will be redeployed elsewhere or whether they will go towards filling the £5 billion black hole. When will we get the detail on that, given that the country is crying out for it?

Alison Thewliss: As I said in my previous answer, we are still early in this process, and I encourage Murdo Fraser to engage with it in good faith. [*Interruption.*] He says that he will, which is reassuring.

We know that reform on its own is not enough to deliver the cost reductions that we need or to make services work better for the people who rely on them. It will take a range of efforts to achieve that—reform on its own will not be sufficient. I think that Michael Matheson was acknowledging that fact.

Public Service Reform (Rural Communities)

7. Calum Kerr (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it will ensure that its programme of public service reform strengthens rural areas, including the Scottish Borders, and empowers communities. (S7O-00198)

The Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform (Ivan McKee): Public service reform is central to our programme for government, which commits to delivering improved outcomes by putting more power in the hands of people and communities while ensuring high-quality, sustainable public services. It includes actions to empower regions and communities through engagement on the future of local governance and community empowerment, alongside a community-first approach that shifts services closer to home.

Through prevention, early intervention and people-centred services, the Government will continue to support rural areas, including the Scottish Borders, to thrive and shape local priorities.

Calum Kerr: From my experience of large change programmes in business, I know that it is stakeholder engagement and communication that decide whether they succeed, so I always encourage my teams to overcommunicate. As rural areas such as the Borders and smaller authorities such as Midlothian look on at reform of this scale, what will the Government do to ensure that those communities are engaged with early and kept informed throughout?

Ivan McKee: I appreciate the perspective that the member brings from his career in business. His experience, like mine, is that the need to overcommunicate is central to success in such endeavours.

I reassure him that engagement will be at the heart of the reforms. We recognise that communities, particularly in rural areas, and smaller local authorities will want to understand what the changes could mean for them and will want a meaningful opportunity to shape them in a positive way. We will provide regular updates and work closely with staff, local government, partners and the public across the country as proposals are developed.

No final decisions have been taken, and the engagement process will help shape the reforms, putting citizens’ needs at the heart of our approach throughout.

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David Green (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD): For years, Highlands and Islands Enterprise has successfully worked with communities, businesses and social enterprises to support growth and create opportunities. However, HIE's budget has faced staggering cuts in recent years.

Now, the programme for government proposes looking again at the governance and structure of regional economic partnerships, echoing proposals from 10 years ago to abolish HIE's board. The businesses that I represent are best served by an agency that is rooted in their communities. Does the cabinet secretary agree with that, and will he allay concerns that these reforms represent yet another attempt to centralise HIE?

Ivan McKee: It is quite the opposite. The reforms are about ensuring, as I have indicated on many occasions, that we have the right level of focus on regional empowerment in order to provide strategic regional entities around the country with the power to address specifically the economic development opportunities that the member identifies and to empower communities to shape the places where they live. I am happy to engage with the member on the specifics as we develop the proposals with partners, specifically with regard to Highland.

Regional Energy Strategic Plans

8. Dawn Black (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it is engaging with the National Energy System Operator to ensure that the development of regional energy strategic plans support democratic decision making and meaningful local engagement in energy planning. (S7O-00199)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Energy (Stephen Gethins): I acknowledge Dawn Black's hard work on this issue on behalf of her constituents. She is a strong advocate for them.

The Scottish Government recognises the importance of ensuring that democratic decision making and meaningful local engagement are effectively included in the energy planning process. Consequently, we are actively engaging with the National Energy System Operator as the regional energy strategic plan for Scotland is developed.

We will continue to ensure that communities and other stakeholders are able to engage effectively with the development of RESPs for Scotland by supporting their engagement with NESO directly.

Dawn Black: Constituents across my constituency of Angus North and Mearns are increasingly concerned about the proliferation of speculative applications for battery storage facilities, substations and overhead transmission lines. How will the Scottish Government ensure that regional energy strategic plans move communities from being consultees at the end of the process to being genuine partners in decision making from the very outset?

Stephen Gethins: Dawn Black is right, and she raises these issues on behalf of her constituents extremely effectively. Communities need their voices to be heard in this process, and that needs to happen early, as Ms Black has said.

That is why we will shortly be launching a consultation setting out our statutory expectations with regard to how onshore and offshore developers must engage with local communities and stakeholders in advance of applying to the Scottish Government for new energy infrastructure. That will ensure that communities' voices are heard much earlier, and I am happy to engage with Ms Black to hear her ideas on how that work can be progressed.

SPSO (Investigation Powers)

9. Lorna Slater (Edinburgh Central) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will introduce legislation to grant the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman own-initiative investigation powers to identify systemic public service failures and improve outcomes for service users. (S7O-00200)

The Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform (Ivan McKee): We recognise that the ombudsman is a Parliament-supported body. It is therefore for Parliament to take the lead on any changes. However, the Government is well positioned to provide support as necessary. The SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee recommended the move that Ms Slater has identified, and it will be for Parliament to take that forward if it chooses to do so.

I am pleased to share the fact that I met the ombudsman earlier today, and we talked about this issue among a range of issues where the ombudsman is keen to develop their work further so as to support improving outcomes for service users. The Government is committed to working with the ombudsman and Parliament to make proposals where we think it is right to do so.

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Lorna Slater: Will engaging with the Parliament on this specific issue be part of the three-month push at the beginning of the minister's public service reform agenda, so that we can get any necessary legislative provisions into the year 1 bill?

Ivan McKee: I should clarify that the three-month engagement period specifically concerns the future and shape of local governance. We are, of course, continuing to work in parallel with health colleagues in taking forward the health board restructurings, while I and other colleagues take forward initiatives to restructure public bodies. The issue that the member has raised is absolutely on the list of considerations that are being examined in detail at the moment.

Should there be a legislative requirement for any changes, we have the PSR year 1 bill that is targeted to be brought forward, as the member identifies, and which will address exactly those measures that can add value to service delivery.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): That concludes portfolio questions. Apologies to the member who was not able to get in.

Bluetongue Virus Serotype 3

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The next item of business is a statement by Jim Fairlie on the response to the detection of bluetongue virus serotype 3 in the south-west of Scotland.

Questions will be taken at the end of the statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

15:04

The Minister for Agriculture, Marine and the Islands (Jim Fairlie): I would like to update the Parliament on the Scottish Government's actions in response to the detection of bluetongue virus serotype 3, or BTV-3, in the south-west of Scotland.

Over the past three years, the Scottish Government has been watching with concern the developing disease outbreak in England and Wales, and we have engaged with the livestock industry to develop, jointly, a control strategy that is effective against the threat of bluetongue but also proportionate. I thank all the stakeholders who have been involved for their constructive engagement, and I thank the wider farming community, who have had to endure a difficult time, particularly over the past few weeks.

I have been clear about what lies ahead. The risk of bluetongue spreading further across Scotland next year is increasing, so it is essential that all animal keepers review their vaccination plans now and prepare for the very high likelihood that cases might emerge in new parts of the country next season.

Bluetongue is a notifiable disease of ruminant livestock that affects cattle, sheep, goats, deer and camelids. It does not affect humans or food safety. I repeat: it does not affect humans or food safety. However, it is a very serious disease for animals, causing deaths in sheep and severe fertility problems in sheep and cattle.

Bluetongue is spread by midges rather than animal to animal, although it can be passed from an infected mother to its offspring or through breeding. Movement of infected animals can take the disease long distances, which is why animal movement controls are effective in slowing the spread of disease in the initial stages.

Culling of infected animals is also appropriate but, crucially, once the disease is being transmitted locally by midges, those measures become less effective. Another feature of bluetongue is that the virus transmission is dependent on weather. It can be completed only at average temperatures above 13°C, meaning that there are times of the year when some restrictions can be eased.

I will recap the recent history of the virus. Although there are other serotypes of bluetongue in Europe, BTV-3 has been the most serious in recent years, and it has hit some European countries, such as the Netherlands, Germany and France, quite hard. It was first detected in the south-east of England on 10 November 2023, with a wind-borne incursion over the Channel from continental Europe being the most likely plausible hypothesis.

At that time, there was no vaccine for the virus and existing vaccines against other serotypes did not offer cross-protection, but the pharmaceutical companies worked quickly to produce new vaccines. Prior to full market authorisations, which were given only in 2025, officials worked with other United Kingdom nations and the Veterinary Medicines Directorate to permit the use of those vaccines under emergency licences.

Since then, the Scottish Government has repeatedly issued advice to the industry in which we strongly advise keepers to consult their private veterinary practice to consider vaccinating their flocks and herds. That is because vaccination remains the only long-term strategy for controlling the disease. The disease has

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spread gradually from the south-east of England, with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs declaring all of England a restricted zone in July 2025. The virus then reached Wales, the Isle of Man and Northern Ireland, which then meant that it could reach the Scottish border.

In response, last year, I met representatives of the Scottish livestock industry to review our control strategy and consider whether to continue attempting to keep the disease out for as long as possible or to accept some level of risk to allow more flexible movements into Scotland. We recognised movement controls would disrupt the free flow of livestock from the border but, following the meeting, I agreed to maintain the tight restrictions to keep the disease out of Scotland for as long as possible, allowing keepers time to vaccinate their stock. The strategy was successful—until recently, Scotland was free from bluetongue, and most of it remains so.

Unfortunately, on 8 August, the first case of the virus in Scotland was detected on a farm near Newton Stewart. That was followed by three more cases that were clustered around the area over the following week. After initial attempts to contain the disease, further positive cases were found. In response, and with close engagement with livestock industry representatives, we quickly took the decision to strengthen controls and, from 20 August, put in place a temporary control zone to help to contain the disease and prevent it from spreading to other parts of Scotland. Bluetongue has now been confirmed on 20 Scottish premises, all of which are in the temporary control zone. The most plausible source of infection is a plume of infected midges blown from other affected areas over water, and no links with livestock movements have been detected.

I want to be clear that I fully understand that the restrictions have caused pain and concern in the industry, especially for those who rely on trade with other parts of the country. My officials have been working closely with stakeholders to understand and mitigate those effects where possible.

Industry stakeholders as well as EPIC—the Scottish Government-funded consortium of experts on animal disease outbreaks—and the national reference laboratory for bluetongue provided evidence that informed the Scottish Government's response. Immediately, we published a suite of movement licences to help mitigate some of the impacts that were caused by movement restrictions without compromising our efforts to control the disease. Some of those licences have been adjusted based on our ongoing dialogue with the sector and in recognition of the close industry-Government co-operation on the disease control strategy. I am extremely grateful for that co-operation.

I also put on record that the only long-term sustainable strategy against a disease that spreads through the air is to vaccinate against it. All authorised vaccines are effective against the worst effects of bluetongue, but vaccination must happen well ahead of the expected resurgence of the disease next year. I urge all keepers to talk to their vets and to seriously consider vaccinating.

I encourage MSPs across the chamber to please do likewise and, when speaking to their constituents who are ruminant livestock owners, I urge them to have conversations about vaccination. I am aware that there is concern about the supply of vaccines, but I am assured that that is only short term. The manufacturers and wholesalers have been diverting millions of doses from European stock to Great Britain, and there is more vaccine in production, so I repeat my message: please speak to your vet and put in an order to avoid a repetition of the shortages that we have seen this year.

On a more technical point, I must inform the Parliament that the temporary control zone will change tomorrow. The deputy chief veterinary officer has determined, after considering all available evidence that, regrettably, the disease is in circulation in the south-west of Scotland. That means that, legally, the temporary control zone must be replaced by a restricted zone covering the same area on 10 September. The change means that livestock trade within the zone and with other restricted zones in England and Wales will be more relaxed, as they will have equal disease status. Taking livestock into the free area will continue to be done under licence and with conditions.

Although we have no choice but to establish a restricted zone, the risk of spread reduces during the colder months. That is why, after listening to industry feedback, we will relax some of those restrictions on the movement of some animals out of the zone from 10 September. From that date, store, fattening and non-pregnant female animals will no longer need to be tested or vaccinated to move from a restricted zone to a disease-free area of Scotland. However, some breeding animals, such as breeding bulls, pregnant cows and heifers, will require testing before leaving the zone, unless they have been vaccinated with a vaccine that prevents viremia. Breeding male camelids and deer and pregnant camelids and deer will also require pre-movement testing.

We have to be honest about the limits of the movement controls. Once the virus is circulating in midges, those controls offer no meaningful protection, so we should not rely on them as a safeguard going forward. Vaccination is, and will remain, the only viable long-term strategy for controlling bluetongue. I urge anyone

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with susceptible livestock to speak to their vet as soon as possible to discuss the right approach for their animals as well as to ensure that a vaccine is available when they need it.

It is important that we plan on the basis that bluetongue is becoming an endemic disease in parts of Scotland that we will need to live and work with, rather than one that we can simply keep out. Tackling that challenge will depend on us working together—Governments, vets and the farming community. That means sharing information honestly and timeously and acting on the best available evidence.

I am committed to continuing that partnership, and I take the opportunity to thank the livestock industry for its continued constructive engagement in the efforts to help us control the disease and in the resilience that stakeholders have shown through an incredibly difficult period.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I will allow around 20 minutes for the minister to answer questions on the issues raised in his statement. Members who wish to ask a question should press their request-to-speak button now.

Donald MacKinnon (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of interests, which shows that I have a crofting business. I also thank the minister for advance sight of his statement.

It is regrettable that we find ourselves in the situation that the bluetongue virus is now circulating in south-west Scotland. We have seen the devastation that the disease has caused in parts of the rest of the UK, and the significant economic impact that it has had. The timing of the outbreak presents some real challenges at the busiest time of the year for livestock sales and as we enter the sheep breeding season. However, with temperatures dropping, there is now an opportunity to prepare for what we might be facing in the spring and summer next year.

Although I accept that this is far from an exact science, can the minister advise on any plans to model what we could expect the spread of the disease to look like next year to help provide accurate advice to livestock keepers in other parts of the country?

Jim Fairlie: I absolutely take on board all Donald MacKinnon's points. As we are moving into the sales season, the spread could not have happened at a worse time. Store stock and breeding stock will be moving all over the country, and I absolutely get the difficulty that that will cause.

We have modelled where animals are moving to, but we cannot tell whether a midge or an infected animal has moved. It is incredibly difficult to do that. However, it re-emphasises the point that the only way that we will be able to manage the disease in the livestock sector is to get those vaccines into animals.

Jamie Langan (South Scotland) (Reform): I thank the minister for advance sight of his statement.

After what has been a very challenging summer for Scottish farming, the spread of bluetongue has added further pressure, particularly for many of my South Scotland constituents. Given that the disease had clearly established a foothold in the south-west of England from 2025, following its initial detection in 2023, what was the Government's plan apart from sitting on its hands and naively hoping that the disease would not spread further north?

The moment that bluetongue survived the winter months in other parts of mainland Britain, it was clear that it would make its way to Scotland. Why did the Scottish Government not use that time advantage to instigate a programme of vaccination, such as the one that was successfully carried out in the Netherlands, to proactively pre-empt bluetongue's inevitable spread?

All the statement tells us is what we already knew: vaccination is crucial, south-west Scotland will continue to suffer with restrictions without any support, and bluetongue will likely affect other parts of Scotland. Where is the co-ordinated support package for a mandated vaccine roll-out across Scotland, starting with the south-west as a priority?

Jim Fairlie rose—

Jamie Langan: It is now clearly—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Minister.

Jim Fairlie: I have to say that I find the tone and the way that some of the questions that come from the Reform MSPs who sit in the chamber to be utterly deplorable. We are talking about people whose livestock are under serious threat, and Jamie Langan has made political comments.

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Regarding the movement restrictions that were imposed as the disease took hold in England, it was DEFRA's decision to bring the border up to Scotland. We were not consulted on that decision—it was done, and we had no way to deal with it.

I decided to ensure that we protected Scotland as long as we possibly could, which was why I met the industry in the early part of the season to talk about the disease's potential. That approach worked until August. Had we got through the entire season, I do not think that Jamie Langan would have come here and said, "Well done, minister, you made the right decision there."

However, we are in the position that we are in, so, as I said to Donald MacKinnon, I say to Jamie Langan: encourage your constituents to ensure that they get in front of the disease next year and vaccinate their stock.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I note the minister's points about vaccine availability to address shortages. However, what action is the Scottish Government taking to ensure that farmers and crofters who wish to vaccinate their livestock are able to do so, particularly in rural and island communities such as those in my Argyll and Bute constituency, where small independent veterinary practices might face additional challenges in securing vaccines?

Jim Fairlie: There is no doubt that that has been an issue. I have heard several times that there has been a shortage of vaccines through this period, but that is because there was a great surge of people looking for them.

The Scottish Government, along with its counterparts across the UK, has met manufacturers and the Veterinary Medicines Directorate to look at ways of replenishing the stocks as quickly as possible. The Veterinary Medicines Directorate has informed the Government that the special import certificate is now in place to allow stocks of the vaccine into the UK from the European Union. That has already allowed for the import of several million doses, and more are expected over the next few days and weeks.

I reiterate that vaccination remains our best long-term defence, and keepers are strongly encouraged to discuss that option with their vets and to place orders so that manufacturers know what the demand will be and can keep ahead of it.

Laura Moodie (South Scotland) (Green): For many farming families, the farm is their home and way of life, and at the heart of that is caring for their animals. The impact of disease understandably reaches far beyond the immediate financial cost and disruption.

A farmer in the Machars recently told me that they felt unsupported in coping with the mental and emotional impact of the bluetongue outbreak. How will the Scottish Government ensure that farmers who are affected by bluetongue can access appropriate mental health support during the outbreak and in its aftermath?

Jim Fairlie: I absolutely do not underestimate the impact that this disease, or any other disease in livestock, has on the keepers. Having spent more than 30 years of my life looking after livestock, I am completely aware of the impact on people when they see the kinds of effects that the bluetongue virus is having.

To answer the question directly, the Scottish Government has put money into the Royal Scottish Agricultural Benevolent Institution—RSABI. There are also other organisations out there who are constantly working with the farming community. Isolation, working alone, working very long hours—all of those issues have to be taken into account, and that is why there is excellent support out there. If anyone is feeling unsupported, those organisations are there to make sure that they get help.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Given the minister's acknowledgement that vaccination is the only viable long-term strategy against bluetongue, will the Scottish Government consider committing to a fully supported national vaccination programme, including assistance to secure a reliable vaccine supply?

Will that include exploration of the use of student vets to maximise uptake ahead of next year's risk period, with the clear aim of avoiding area-based movement restrictions, which have brought significant disruption to farmers in rural Dumfries and Galloway?

If the Government is unwilling to support a national vaccination programme, will it at least provide farmers with clear, timely information on low, medium and high-risk areas, so that they can make informed decisions about vaccinating their stock and protecting their businesses?

Jim Fairlie: I genuinely welcome those questions from Finlay Carson.

On the issue of getting information out there, people have to understand that, when a disease is moving, things change rapidly. I understand the point that Finlay Carson is making about ensuring that information gets out there as quickly as possible, and we did that to the greatest degree that we possibly could. I commend

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my officials, who worked day and night—they were taking phone calls at all times of the day and night—as this situation was progressing.

On the roll-out of the vaccine, as I already said to Ms Minto, there is a lot of work ongoing and to be done to make sure that vaccines are available. However, I take the point about student vets. Let me take that one away and find out whether that capacity is required in order to get the vaccine into animals. We will look at that and see whether anything needs to be done.

Duncan Dunlop (South Scotland) (LD): I thank the minister for advance sight of his statement.

As we have heard, farmers in the south of Scotland urgently need two things: access to vaccines and absolute clarity on livestock movements. When I speak to Dumfriesshire vet practices, they tell me that, if they have too much or too little vaccine, they are not legally able to share it with other practices. Will the minister ask the veterinary medicines directorate to change that regulation? Will he also meet me and other MSPs for the South Scotland region, where the disease is at risk of becoming endemic, so that we can continue to provide our constituents with clarity on this fast-moving issue, at a time when there are a lot of ram sales and store stocks moving around the area?

It is disappointing to hear that many of our store lambs move north at this time of year. If there are licences around that, we need to give certainty to farmers—otherwise, this may become a more hidden issue and we will have worse problems.

Jim Fairlie: The member brings up a number of points.

On the issue of legally sharing the vaccine, if he will let me take that away to look at, I will come back to him in writing.

In fact, the vast majority of our store lambs go south; more of our store cattle go north. However, I will absolutely meet MSPs from the south-west and, indeed, any part of the country. I have no issue with that.

As far as the movements are concerned, as I said, the restrictions will change on 10 September so that store animals and animals to slaughter will be able to move without licensing. Pregnant animals and breeding bulls will still need a licence and so on, though. However, I will be happy to meet up and talk about the details so that they can be disseminated among constituents.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): It is crucial to recognise the stress and alarm caused to farmers and crofters. Will the minister therefore commit to engaging with industry to ensure that the voices of those affected are heard when responding to the issues?

Jim Fairlie: I have to push back on that question slightly, because we have been engaging with the sector from day 1—from as soon as we knew that the virus had reached Scotland. That does not, however, diminish the point that David Torrance is making; it is absolutely essential that we get out there with the information as quickly as we possibly can. In these fast-changing circumstances, though, there can sometimes be a lag.

I reiterate that my officials did a sterling job of making sure that information got out to people as quickly as it possibly could. I absolutely take on board the point that people need to know what is happening.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank the minister for his statement and his update on movement restrictions.

The implementation of control zones meant that the livestock holdings of a small number of farmers were divided across different zones, which left them unable to move animals between parts of their holdings. For one of my constituents that was a difficult time, because they thought that they might lose their winter grazing arrangements. Therefore, I am glad that the restrictions are being changed. What engagement will be undertaken with farmers who have smallholdings that might be split across zones, with a view to seeing what can be done in the future?

Jim Fairlie: The lifting of restrictions on 10 September should alleviate the situation that Carol Mochan referred to, which relates to someone who is moving their livestock to a winter holding.

It is a serious point that, if someone's holding is just inside the restricted zone, the whole holding will be restricted. Unfortunately, that is just a part of the process that farmers have to go through until we come out the other side of this. I completely understand that that is a difficult thing for people to get their heads round, but, in trying to control a disease such as bluetongue, it is essential that we know what movements are taking place and that we try to stop them as much as we can.

Martyn Day (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP): Given the existence of midges throughout Scotland, can the minister provide details of what biosecurity measures are available to Scotland's farmers and crofters?

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Jim Fairlie: The biosecurity measures in relation to midges are very limited, because midges fly and we cannot control them. The disease is now circulating in the south-west of Scotland. I reiterate to farmers the point that I have made a number of times, which I will continue to make: vaccinate your animals to protect them against this disease.

Senga Beresford (South Scotland) (Reform): Given the impact that a bluetongue outbreak can have on livestock farmers, and also the significant cost of vaccination, what specific financial and practical support will the Scottish Government provide to farmers in the south of Scotland to help them to protect their livestock? Will the minister consider providing assistance towards the cost of vaccination across Scotland?

Jim Fairlie: I completely understand the difficulty in dealing with a disease such as bluetongue. It is a new disease, so we need people to have the right mindset when it comes to managing it.

The Scottish Government already provides the most comprehensive package of support to the livestock sector. We are the only part of the UK in which farmers still receive direct payments, and we will continue to support the farming industry in as many ways as we can.

Making the decision to vaccinate is a commercial decision for a farmer to take, but, as someone who has kept a lot of livestock, I know that I would want to protect that investment. It is entirely up to farmers to ensure that they do that.

Laura Mitchell (Moray) (SNP): I thank the minister for providing sight of the statement.

Bluetongue is widespread in Europe. How are EU countries responding to the disease? What lessons can Scotland learn from the response of other countries with a similar climate about their approach to combating the disease?

Jim Fairlie: Laura Mitchell is absolutely correct. The EU is three years ahead of us, and it has had much longer to understand the best way to manage the disease. It has come to the conclusion that—I have said this before, and I will reiterate the point until the message gets out—the only way to control the disease is through vaccination.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): The bluetongue situation is likely to be dire not only for livelihoods in the south-west of Scotland, but—judging by the minister's statement—those in the Highlands and Islands region, too. I expect that bluetongue could have a severe impact on our crofting community, so we need to get the information out there quickly, as the minister has said. What work is the Government undertaking to support the crofting community proactively, for example through public information, veterinary advice and a support scheme?

Jim Fairlie: The Government is communicating with people in numerous ways, but let us be clear: anyone who is a livestock farmer in Scotland will know that bluetongue is circulating. We provide regular updates on social media and on our website, and we are in regular contact with the livestock auction centres. In addition, we disseminate information through NFU Scotland and the Scottish Crofting Federation.

We are getting as much information out there as timeously as we can, but people have a responsibility to pay attention to it and to ensure that they know about the situation that we are in. To them, I say: if you want to protect your stock next year, make sure that you get prepared through vaccination.

Jack Middleton (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Has the Scottish Government conducted any modelling on the potential projected impacts of the disease on Scotland's sheep and cattle industry?

Jim Fairlie: That modelling has been done. We definitely know that the modelling tells us that the only way to protect the livestock is through vaccination. If we are talking about the modelling of livestock movements, we know that the vast majority of cattle in the south are going to the north-east for fattening, and we know that the vast majority of store lambs are going south. Therefore, we know where the livestock is going. That tells us that there is every likelihood that, next year, the disease will spread to other parts of the country, so I ask farmers and crofters to make sure that their stock is vaccinated.

Craig Hoy (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I spent the weekend at the Benty show in my constituency, where, understandably, there was no livestock. Local farmers in Dumfriesshire are clearly anxious and are unsure when local vets will have sufficient vaccine supply. They know that the process could be costly, with one Langholm hill farmer telling me that the cost of vaccinating her flock could be close to £20,000—money that is not readily available.

Given that my constituents are paying a heavy price to provide the circuit breaker that might or might not be successful in stopping the virus spreading in Scotland, how will the minister ensure that adequate vaccine supply can be assured for the south-west? How will he determine how financial support can be made available to farmers who were already struggling before the worrying outbreak of bluetongue in the south-west?

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Jim Fairlie: We are not just looking to make sure that vaccine is available for the south-west; we are looking to make sure that vaccine is available across the whole country, because, as I have said many times already, the likelihood is that the disease will spread. That is why work has gone on with countries in the rest of the UK to ensure that we are getting vaccine diverted into Scotland just now.

On support, I reiterate what I have said before. We have the most comprehensive package of support anywhere in the UK, and we will continue to support our farmers and crofters.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): That concludes the ministerial statement on the response to the detection of Bluetongue—[*Laughter.*] That slip has been made before. I mean the statement on the response to the detection of bluetongue virus serotype 3 in the south-west of Scotland.

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