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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 10 September 2026

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

General Question Time

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

Police Scotland (Crime and Antisocial Behaviour Reduction)

1. Adam Harley (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government what engagement it has had with Police Scotland to help reduce incidents of crime and antisocial behaviour. (S7O-00202)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Neil Gray): Ministers and officials continually engage with Police Scotland on crime and antisocial behaviour. For example, following the independent working group on antisocial behaviour, we worked closely with Police Scotland and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to oversee the implementation of improvements to the legislative framework. Earlier this year, at Police Scotland's request, we introduced secondary legislation on the fixed penalty notice regime to increase the penalty to £70, and we are acting on its advice about the powers to seize vehicles that are used antisocially. We are also reviewing the Antisocial Behaviour etc (Scotland) Act 2004 with Police Scotland. We are backing that engagement with record investment of more than £1.7 billion in policing this year.

Adam Harley: Crime rates across Scotland are the highest that they have been for more than a decade, while the antisocial behaviour rate is 7 per cent higher than last year. Following the closure of Bishopbriggs police station, there is now only one police station in my constituency. Over the summer, we have seen incidents involving knives, as well as people driving dangerously on e-bikes on footpaths and through parks, sometimes wearing balaclavas. That has caused real concern among my constituents, as has the thuggish, hate-fuelled behaviour that we have seen in Glasgow in recent months.

What is the Government doing to make sure that people feel safe and to ensure that local policing is properly resourced?

Neil Gray: I completely agree with Mr Harley's sentiments about the thuggish and antisocial behaviour that we have seen. I have already set out the investment that has been made in policing.

Mr Harley will be aware that East Dunbartonshire is a single-area command within the greater Glasgow division and it has its own local police plan, which is agreed with the local authority. Community officers have run focused weekend evening patrols in Bishopbriggs town centre and parks in response to reports of antisocial behaviour, alongside reassurance work with residents. In April, East Dunbartonshire Council reported that community wardens had delivered targeted antisocial behaviour patrols and deployed mobile closed-circuit television in and around Bishopbriggs, responding to youth disorder, graffiti and vandalism. If Mr Harley requires more detail on any of those issues, I am more than happy to correspond with him on them.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): The cabinet secretary may be aware that decisions were made to close the Oban custody suite for more than a week due to significant resourcing challenges. Measures such as that mean that anyone who is arrested who requires to be kept in custody must be transferred to Clydebank, which is putting extreme pressures on policing in the Oban area. Will the cabinet secretary meet me to discuss the matter further and to establish what actions can be taken to ensure that it does not continue to be an issue?

Neil Gray: I am more than happy to meet Ms Minto at any time to discuss that matter. I am aware of the issue and I agree that it is not acceptable either for those who have been arrested or for police officers in the Oban area.

Ms Minto's question is timely, as I met the chair and chief executive of the Scottish Police Authority this morning and I was able to raise that issue with them directly, along with a number of other issues. They agreed to look into the matter further, look at the resourcing of custody suites and report back. I commit to writing to Ms Minto with the outcome of those investigations in due course.

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Front-line police resources are under all kinds of intense pressures at the moment—I know that the cabinet secretary knows that—which are being added to by the Government's policy on early release, bail and electronic monitoring. When the cabinet secretary met the

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chief constable, what exactly did she tell him about the additional demand that those policies are placing on Police Scotland?

Neil Gray: Clearly, where we are requiring the police to do more in order to supervise, monitor or ensure the safety of local areas, there will be resource implications. I will have clear, open and transparent discussions with the chief constable about her resource allocation and how we approach that in the course of the budget negotiations.

Steven Bonnar (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): North Lanarkshire Council has recently established a long overdue, but very welcome, joint initiative with Police Scotland to tackle the illegal and antisocial use of e-bikes, e-scooters and quad bikes. What engagement has the Scottish Government had with North Lanarkshire Council and Police Scotland to support that work and to ensure that effective local approaches to tackling antisocial behaviour are supported nationally?

Neil Gray: As a fellow North Lanarkshire constituency MSP, I am well aware of the issue that our communities are facing with antisocial behaviour and the use of e-bikes, off-road bikes and similar. I have had direct communication with Police Scotland to ensure that we are maximising the devolved powers that we are able to deploy in relation to the police's work to impound and then destroy those vehicles.

I intend to be in correspondence with and have further dialogue with United Kingdom ministers around their responsibilities, such as the licensing of those vehicles, to support our police to investigate and deter that activity.

Maternity Services (Stranraer and Wigtownshire)

2. Senga Beresford (South Scotland) (Reform): To ask the Scottish Government, further to its commitment to provide an update on the availability of maternity services in Stranraer and Wigtownshire after the summer recess, when will it provide such an update. (S7O-00203)

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs (Maree Todd): This month, we will begin our independent review of maternity services, which will be led by Professor Christine McCourt. As previously outlined, the review will consider the challenges that pregnant women in rural areas face, and our published principles include an explicit focus on women living in Wigtownshire. It will be informed by the experiences of women, families and staff. Professor McCourt is expected to conclude the review within nine months but will share any relevant updates throughout.

In the meantime, we expect all national health service boards to provide maternity services as close to home as practically possible, while ensuring the safety of mother and baby. NHS Dumfries and Galloway developed its service model based on findings from an independently chaired local service review, in line with its responsibilities to ensure the delivery of safe, sustainable services.

Senga Beresford: I appreciate that response, but given that this week the Government has announced 34 new embassies and that it continues to prioritise strangers—*[Interruption.]*—that is someone we do not know—including by spending £2 million on free bus passes for asylum seekers, can the minister please tell me when the people of Stranraer and Wigtownshire will become the Scottish taxpayers' priority?

Maree Todd: As I have clearly set out in my response to the member and as the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care set out when she announced the review, there will be a particular focus on several areas that are important to the sustainability of maternity services across Scotland. Maternity services in rural and island areas across Scotland and the experiences of women living there will be included. That will include, but not be limited to, women in Caithness, Wigtownshire and Elgin.

The Minister for Business and Fair Work (Tom Arthur): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I wonder whether you can clarify, with regard to part 7 of the code of conduct, which is about how we conduct ourselves, whether it is permissible to refer to our constituents—who pay our wages and whom we are sent here to represent—as "strangers".

The Presiding Officer: That is a debating point. It is not a direct insult.

I would ask that you press your button to make a point of order. At first I did not even know who was asking for it.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): The minister should be embarrassed standing up to deliver that pre-scripted answer. She visited Stranraer years ago and gave a commitment that the women in Stranraer would be looked after.

What assessment has been made of the clinical and safety implications of pregnant women from Wigtownshire having to travel for up to two hours to access consultant-led maternity services? Does she

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believe that a further delay to access to maternity care, because of repeated consultations, could place mothers and babies at increased risk of adverse outcomes?

Maree Todd: The member will be aware that, when I held the brief previously, I travelled to the area to meet people and hear directly from them. The integration joint board made a decision to change the current service model because of concerns about safe and sustainable services, and members of the community were formally consulted before the IJB made its final decision. Undoubtedly, the area will be a focus during the independent maternity review, which will start this month and will report promptly, within nine months. I urge the member to await the independent view on the decision that has already been made in consultation with the community.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (Waiting Times)

3. Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to lower waiting times for child and adolescent mental health services and ensure that all children and young people are getting access to treatment at the right time. (S7O-00204)

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs (Maree Todd): The Scottish Government continues to take significant action to lower waiting times and improve access to specialist CAMHS support. As a result, we have now delivered the 90 per cent CAMHS waiting times standard for more than 18 months, while one in two children and young people who have been referred to CAMHS start treatment within seven weeks of referral. Total waits have fallen, and waits of more than 52 weeks are now at their lowest level in more than a decade. That progress has been achieved through sustained investment over time to increase CAMHS capacity. We have backed that with national improvement work, including the implementation of the CAMHS service specification and enhanced support for national health service boards to improve services.

Although that represents significant and sustained progress, we are not complacent. We continue to be clear that long waits are unacceptable for children and young people who require specialist mental health support. We are working closely with boards, providing enhanced support and expert advice to drive further improvements in timely access and outcomes for children and young people.

The Presiding Officer: I suggest that we have shorter ministerial responses. It is not fair to members who are asking questions that they are being asked to be succinct when ministers do not appear to be following the same rules.

Fulton MacGregor: Earlier this week, I met the clinical director for Lanarkshire CAMHS, when I was told that, although the department is meeting its target for initial appointments, the demands on the service have increased immensely recently, and many children and young people are still not receiving the assessment or treatment that they need. Some are facing waits of years for assessments by services. Can the minister set out what specific action the Scottish Government is taking to address longer waits, including what additional funding and capacity will be provided to meet the significant increase in referrals? Will she agree to meet me to discuss the pressures that are being experienced by services and the affected children and families in my area?

Maree Todd: It is important to stress that CAMHS is a specialist service for people with significant mental health needs. The member is asking largely about neurodevelopmental services. I recognise that demand for neurodevelopmental diagnosis and support has increased significantly and that long waits for diagnosis can be worrying for families. Diagnosis is important, but it is only part of a person's journey. It is vital that children and young people can access appropriate support based on their needs without having to wait for a diagnosis. Yesterday, I announced £7.6 million in funding for the young people's neurodevelopmental support fund, which will help in the area. I am more than happy to meet the member.

Bus Priority Measures (Glasgow Southside)

4. Zen Ghani (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with Glasgow City Council and the Glasgow city region bus partnership regarding the delivery of bus priority measures on Pollokshaws Road, including any assessment it has made of the potential economic benefits for communities and businesses. (S7O-00205)

The Minister for Business and Fair Work (Tom Arthur): The cabinet secretary met with Councillor Aitken, the leader of Glasgow City Council, on 8 July, where she highlighted the strong partnerships that Glasgow and other local authorities have developed with bus operators through the Glasgow bus partnership and the plans to introduce bus priority measures on key corridors across the city.

Through our bus infrastructure fund, we have provided funding to support the development of bus priority measures on Pollokshaws Road, including corridor design work and artificial intelligence-enabled traffic signal

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improvements. The supporting business case identifies opportunities to improve connectivity, increase access to jobs and services, reduce congestion, and deliver benefits for local communities and businesses.

Zen Ghani: The Pollokshaws Road corridor serves communities across my constituency. With funding already in place for the design of the corridor and an artificial intelligence bus priority pilot, can the minister provide an update on when people who live, work and travel along Pollokshaws Road can expect the delivery of those improvements?

Tom Arthur: Glasgow City Council's AI bus priority pilot on Pollokshaws Road, funded by the Scottish Government, is already delivering positive results. The AI pilot and radar detection upgrades at 20 sites have produced initial journey time improvements of around 33 per cent, on average, across all vehicles.

We are investing in the next phase of the pilot, alongside improvements in the design and development of a wider corridor. Good progress is being made and we remain committed to working with partners to deliver measures that enhance bus journey times, reliability and connectivity along the corridor.

Rural Crime

5. Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its ongoing work to deal with rural crime. (S7O-00206)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Kirsten Oswald): The Scottish Government recognises the significant impact that rural crime can have on individuals, businesses and communities. The Scottish partnership against rural crime, led by Police Scotland, brings together key partners to prevent, deter and tackle rural crime.

A three-year SPARC strategy was published in June, which adopts the four-piece framework of prevent, pursue, protect and prepare, and sets out actions to bring offenders to justice, safeguard communities and reduce the risk of criminal activity. SPARC also works closely with police forces and partners across the United Kingdom to disrupt criminals who operate across borders.

Rachael Hamilton: This week marks rural crime week, which highlights the serious impact that rural crime continues to have on individuals, families and businesses across Scotland, including in my constituency and the Scottish Borders. Earlier this year, several farms were targeted across the Borders by thieves who stole valuable equipment, including power tools, farm vehicles and quad bikes. The thefts cause anxiety and have a major impact on people's livelihoods.

The minister will be aware that I am progressing plans to introduce a member's bill in this parliamentary session to strengthen safeguards against rural crime. Can the minister reinstate the Scottish Government's commitment to working constructively with me and stakeholders as I develop the proposals?

Kirsten Oswald: I am grateful to the member for her focus on this area. It is acknowledged that cross-border criminality is a challenge, which is why SPARC operates closely with police forces across the UK. Protecting rural communities is at the forefront of our minds. I would be happy to meet the member to have a further discussion on the matter, as I acknowledge that rural communities are a core part of our policing priorities.

East Coast Arc

6. Lloyd Melville (Angus South) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what role it envisages for Angus in its proposed east coast arc between Aberdeen, Dundee and St Andrews. (S7O-00207)

The Minister for Business and Fair Work (Tom Arthur): As is stated in our programme for government, we are backing increased growth across Scotland, with every region having its unique strengths and opportunities. Angus, as part of the east coast arc, will play an integral role in helping to drive collaboration, innovation and sector growth. Specifically, given that it will be home to a significant part of Scotland's brilliant life sciences sector, the new cluster development organisation will help to ensure better connectivity and opportunities for businesses across the region and the wider country.

Lloyd Melville: Angus brings significant strengths in food and drink, manufacturing, energy and tourism, alongside the close links with local employers that Dundee and Angus College provides. As the east coast arc is developed, how will the Government ensure that the existing connections between education and business are used to drive investment, skills and economic growth?

Tom Arthur: It is clear that Mr Melville will be an outstanding champion for his constituency. I join him in recognising the strengths that already exist in Angus, which has excellent foundations for growth, built on world-class sectors including food and drink, advanced manufacturing, energy and tourism, and strengthened by the close partnerships between Dundee and Angus College and local employers.

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The development of the east coast arc provides an opportunity to build on those strengths, not replace them. Our approach will be to ensure that existing education and business partnerships are at the heart of the arc's development. As is set out in the PFG, the Scottish Government's absolute focus is on boosting productivity and innovation by linking research universities and businesses.

Willie Rennie (Fife North East) (LD): I am a bit confused about all of that. I thought that we were trying to reduce clutter in the public sector, but now, in addition to the Tay cities region deal and a discussion between universities on the future framework for the sustainability of their finances, we are adding that structure in. What value will that add to what we are already doing?

Tom Arthur: I know that Mr Rennie is well versed in agglomeration economics and the triple helix approach to innovation. Collaboration is absolutely essential to ensuring that we realise all the opportunities in enhancing our productivity. I know that, as he is as much a champion for his constituency as Mr Melville is for his, Mr Rennie will want to welcome this initiative and work constructively with the Government.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): How can the Scottish Government viably construct an innovation corridor that is dependent on Dundee and Aberdeen universities when academic departments and research facilities are being hollowed out by hundreds of redundancies?

Tom Arthur: The member raises important points. We want to see every aspect of the Scottish education system flourish, given what it contributes to our society. To touch on my earlier points, it is vital that we ensure that we are making progress in growing our economy and that we have an innovative, entrepreneurial and dynamic economy. The member raises wider issues, and ministers are happy to engage.

Bus Service Operators (Support)

7. Laura Moodie (South Scotland) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what support it can provide to bus service operators, including Borders Buses, to improve evening services between Edinburgh, Peebles and Galashiels. (S7O-00208)

The Minister for Business and Fair Work (Tom Arthur): Evening bus services in Scotland provide essential late-night mobility that supports local economies, enhances personal safety and improves access to shift work and social activities. We provide £46.5 million via the network support grant to support current bus services, so that operators can provide access to affordable transport for passengers. That fund is paid on a kilometres-run basis, which supports the longer-distance routes that are more common in rural areas.

We also provide funding through the general revenue grant to support local authorities, which are required under law to identify where there is a social need for a particular bus service. That allows local authorities to influence the frequency and routing of services.

Laura Moodie: The last X62 service from Edinburgh to Peebles and Galashiels currently leaves Edinburgh just before 10 pm. For those communities, the time of the last bus restricts what they can do and how late they can stay at venues such as the Eastgate theatre. What assessment has the Scottish Government made of the adverse impact of limited evening bus services on the rural economy, particularly the hospitality and creative sectors?

Tom Arthur: The member raises an important point about our night-time industries—indeed, the matter was raised with me in the chamber just last week. Self-evidently, if there are restrictions or constraints around connectivity resulting from services not running later in the evening, that will influence behaviour and have a detrimental impact on hospitality.

We have a world-class hospitality offering in Scotland. We know that the sector faces pressures, but we want to work constructively with it. I am happy to take that point away and engage with the cabinet secretary on it. As much as it is a transport issue, it is clearly also an economic issue. I am happy to engage further with the member.

Housing Shortages (Rural Communities)

8. Laura Mitchell (Moray) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to deal with housing shortages in rural communities, including in Moray. (S7O-00209)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The Scottish Government is supporting the delivery of more homes in rural and island communities through a record investment of £4.1 billion in the affordable housing supply programme and continued support for a £37 million rural and islands housing fund and a £25 million rural affordable homes for key workers fund, as well as through partnering to unlock development opportunities and ensure sustainable rural housing growth through our planning system.

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We are making strong progress towards our commitment to deliver 110,000 affordable homes by 2032, with just under 20 per cent of the affordable homes that have been delivered to date being located in rural and island communities.

Laura Mitchell: The cabinet secretary will be aware that housing shortages in Moray are a significant recruitment barrier for public services, including at Dr Gray's hospital, as well as for businesses that need skilled workers to move into the area to fill key vacancies. What further action can the Scottish Government take to support the development of key worker housing in rural communities such as Moray, especially for national health service workers?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I recognise that access to affordable housing plays an important role in thriving rural communities and in helping to attract employees and retain the workforce. The rural affordable homes for key workers fund was established to help local authorities and registered social landlords to provide homes in rural communities where there are housing pressures. I know that Moray Council has already made use of that fund.

I am keen to work closely with Moray Council on local housing pressures, and I welcome the collaborative way in which NHS Grampian and local housing associations have been working together to increase accommodation for staff. We encourage other local authorities, RSLs and councils to do likewise.

Adapted Housing (Availability)

9. David Linden (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to ensure that sufficient adapted housing is available to meet medical needs through local authorities and registered social landlords. (S7O-00210)

The Presiding Officer: I struggled to hear you a wee bit there, Mr Linden. Perhaps you can speak up in the future. You had your microphone on, but perhaps the angle is not correct.

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Everyone deserves a home that supports their independence, wellbeing and quality of life. As our population ages and people's needs change, our ambition is to create homes that work better for everyone, which will reduce barriers and support independent living. The Scottish Government provides the majority of local authority funding through a block grant, allowing councils to allocate resources based on local need and priorities. We have protected the £20.9 million budget for adaptations for tenants of registered social landlord properties. We are now updating the design guidance to support a new Scottish accessible home standard.

David Linden: My Shettleston constituent Billie-Jo is 29 and has had a brain injury. She is medically fit to return home to her husband and two kids, but their property has not been adapted. As a result, she is in an expensive social care setting. Is this not an example of the housing authority and the health and social care partnership not talking to each other? Is this not an example of the silo working that demonstrates why public sector reform is needed and why we need to get good value for taxpayers and, most importantly, get folk such as Billie-Jo home to suitable adapted properties?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I thank David Linden for bringing his constituent's case to the chamber. It must be an exceptionally distressing time for the constituent and her family. He is right to point out that this is an example of why public service reform is needed. Although I appreciate that there might be different views across the chamber on what reform might look like, we cannot go on as we are. This example of barriers to a service being provided to an individual is exactly why we need to challenge ourselves to ensure that we are delivering the right service at the right time and in the right manner. Again, I thank David Linden for providing to members this good example of why we must look at public service reform for the benefit of all our constituents.

Cost of Living Support

10. Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the actions it has taken since May 2026 to support people with the cost of living, including in relation to measures to tackle poverty. (S7O-00211)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing (Shirley-Anne Somerville): In our first 100 days, we have further strengthened support for households, launching a first homes fund, expanding breakfast club provision and progressing the procurement of new welcome-to-school bags. Our programme for government commits to going further still, transforming our childcare offer for families; delivering record investment in affordable homes; capping bus fares at £2, with the cap in Strathclyde launching this week; and consulting on capping the cost of essential foods. With the news that energy bills will rise still further, we will continue to call for reform of the energy markets, including for the United Kingdom Government to implement a social tariff.

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Collette Stevenson: Under the Scottish National Party, people in East Kilbride have benefited from ScotRail being taken into public ownership, with new train stations at East Kilbride and Hairmyres and the scrapping of peak rail fares. As of this week—

The Presiding Officer: Question, please.

Collette Stevenson: Does the cabinet secretary agree that Scotland's taxpayers get the best deal across the UK? Will she set out how those and other measures will help to tackle the scourge of poverty?

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing (Shirley-Anne Somerville): I hear some disgruntlement from across the chamber, Presiding Officer, because we are delivering for the people of East Kilbride and the rest of Scotland.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates that some of the lowest-income households with children are around £2,760 a year better off because of the result of our approach to income tax and benefits. It is estimated that our tackling child poverty delivery plan will keep 100,000 children out of relative poverty this year. We have already provided the strongest cost of living package in the UK for low-income households and, as I mentioned in a previous answer, our programme for government commits us to going further. This Government is delivering for the people of Scotland, and I am delighted that Collette Stevenson has come to the chamber to talk about examples of how her constituents are benefiting.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): Low-income families in Scotland are facing a debt crisis, with public sector debt trapping families in endless cycles of poverty. Has the Scottish Government considered calls to reform the public sector debt recovery process and change the way that we approach public debt?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The Scottish Government is already taking action on several aspects that relate to public sector debt, such as the schemes that are already being run with local authorities on council tax debt and how we can assist people to see whether they require support before their debt is challenged. That is one example of how we are keen to look at ensuring that there is support for people who need it, although we need to make sure that there is value for money for the public purse.

I am sure that the ministers who are responsible for the different aspects of public sector debt would be able to take up further detailed conversations with the member.

First Minister's Question Time

Party Leaders

Women's Health (Treatment Waiting Times)

1. **Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year, starts tomorrow, and I want to wish everybody in the Jewish community a happy new year.

Today, the campaign against the dangerous downgrading of neonatal services was represented at a meeting of the Public Petitions Committee in this Parliament. Its message is clear: mothers and their children should not be put in danger due to Scottish National Party centralisation.

That is just one example of how the SNP is failing on women's health. Statistics show that women in Lanarkshire face waits of more than four years for hysterectomies and that thousands of women across Scotland are currently waiting more than a year for gynaecology treatment, but what was John Swinney's answer to this crisis in women's health? He scrapped the role of women's health minister. That is simply not good enough. Does the First Minister know how long, on average, women in Scotland have to wait for an endometriosis diagnosis?

The First Minister (John Swinney): First, I associate myself with Jackie Baillie's comments about Rosh Hashanah, and I express my good wishes to the Jewish community on the celebration of Rosh Hashanah.

I also take this opportunity to indicate that tomorrow will mark the 25th anniversary of the 9/11 tragedy, and I will represent Scotland at a service at St Giles' cathedral to commemorate those whose lives were changed irreparably by the 9/11 incidents.

Jackie Baillie raises significant issues in relation to women's health, and I expect those to be taken forward by my all-female health minister team. I have three health ministers, all of whom are women, and I know from the leadership that the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care will give to that team that all those issues will be prioritised.

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Women wait too long for treatment for endometriosis in Scotland, and the Government, as Jackie Baillie knows, is working very hard to ensure that waiting times are reduced so that treatment can be delivered in a credible and acceptable timescale to everyone involved, especially to women who suffer from endometriosis.

Jackie Baillie: The answer that the First Minister was looking for was 10 years. That waiting time has got worse on his watch, and that was when there were two female health ministers. That is 10 years of women waiting in pain and having their struggles dismissed or diminished.

Women with endometriosis are not the only ones who are being let down in that way. After previous miscarriages, Elizabeth Crammond had a high-risk pregnancy. When she experienced bleeding and pain, she tried to contact the early pregnancy unit in Kirkcaldy. She asked for help 60 times but was not seen. Elizabeth was so desperate that she had two private scans, but, nine days later—nine days—when she was finally seen by the national health service, she was told that she had miscarried.

The Government's miscarriage care framework states that women who are at high risk or who have complications should be able to self-refer to the early pregnancy assessment service. Why was that support not available for Elizabeth Crammond?

John Swinney: I am aware that Elizabeth Crammond has been in dialogue with Jackie Baillie on this question and that Ms Baillie has written to the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care on the issue. We are exploring the circumstances that affected Elizabeth Crammond.

The most important thing that I can say at the outset is to express my sympathy to Elizabeth Crammond about the experience that she had. She should not have had that experience—I state that clearly to Parliament. We will have to get to the bottom of exactly why that was the case, because it is important that when there is any vulnerability whatsoever in relation to a pregnancy, the earliest possible intervention is provided. That is what the maternity framework is designed to offer. It has clearly not delivered that in this case. We must understand why that is the case and provide a remedy.

I appreciate that that will be of little consolation to Elizabeth Crammond, but part of what we must do when things do not go as they should is to be transparent and open about that and ensure that all steps are taken to ensure that the situation is not repeated in the future.

Jackie Baillie: Elizabeth feels failed by NHS Fife and NHS Tayside, and that has left a devastating and lasting impact on her and her family.

However, her experience is not unique. There are lots more women in the same situation. Katie Lyon was pregnant following a previous miscarriage when she noticed spotting on 23 December. On Christmas eve, she had to go to accident and emergency because her condition had deteriorated and there was no capacity to see her in the maternity service. While Katie waited anxiously for news about her baby, the staff struggled to co-ordinate with gynaecology and maternity care. When she finally got a scan, no heartbeat could be found. It was another seven days before her miscarriage was confirmed, and then only after she had had two further scans.

Katie and Elizabeth are in the Parliament today to demand change. As Katie herself has said, families should not have to endure repeated loss before their concerns are taken seriously. The framework for miscarriage care is not working. Will the First Minister do the right thing and ensure that miscarriage care is urgently reviewed and women's voices are heard?

The First Minister: Jackie Baillie has raised two particular cases—the case of Elizabeth and that of Katie. I am terribly sorry for the experience that those two women have had in our health services.

To come back to some of the points that I made in my response to Jackie Baillie's second question, the framework for the delivery of maternity care should address the circumstances that Ms Baillie has put to me. It has clearly not done that. Jackie Baillie has put to me two cases in which that is very apparent.

That is why the Government has commenced a series of inspections of maternity services around the country. A range of unannounced inspections is being carried out by Healthcare Improvement Scotland, and the Government receives the reports on those inspections, which lead to action points. As has been rehearsed previously in the chamber, some of those reports require significant reforms and actions to be undertaken, the implementation of which the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care is monitoring.

I am happy to explore the specific cases that Jackie Baillie has put to me, because it matters to me and to the Government that person-centred care is available for every person who interacts with the healthcare service in Scotland, regardless of the details of the case. We want to ensure that people get the best and most appropriate care. In the cases that Jackie Baillie has put to me today, that clearly has not happened. I apologise for that, and I will happily explore both those cases and will respond by providing as much

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information as I can to Elizabeth and Katie, to whom I express my sympathy and empathy for what they have experienced.

Scottish National Party Priorities

2. Malcolm Offord (West Scotland) (Reform): While I was in the BBC studio on Sunday, getting wired up for my final interview of an eventful weekend, I was forced to listen to the first interviewee droning on and on for 15 minutes without answering a single question. To stop myself drifting off as the First Minister talked himself into oblivion, I reached for *The Sunday Times*. What did I see on the front page? I saw the new column by none other than the former Deputy First Minister, Kate Forbes. Does the First Minister agree with her commonsense analysis on North Sea gas—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Excuse me. Let us hear the question, please.

Malcolm Offord: On defence and on taxation, she said:

“the less complex a tax system is, the better ... you cannot tax your way to growth.”

Does that sound familiar? Will the First Minister look forward to reading her column in the weeks to come?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am always interested in lots of views that are expressed in political debate. I have to listen to them all, and it is not my fault if the BBC wants to put me on in a prime spot instead of Malcolm Offord. That perhaps speaks volumes, but I am sure that Mr Offord, listening down the line from the Reform-fest, where members of the public were being assaulted in the conference hall, would learn a lot from the dignity with which I expressed my case on Sunday morning.

Malcolm Offord: Turning to serious matters, Màiri McAllan has tried to dress up yet another disappointing set of programme for international student assessment—PISA—results as representing stability and as being competitive by international standards. Kate Forbes might say, “Continuity won’t cut it,” but I say that this is not even continuity—this is disastrous for our young people and embarrassing for our nation. To fall so far behind England in education is a national emergency. We invented education. The Scots have had universal education since 1660—the English only got there in 1873.

In August 2016, at the Wester Hailes education centre in Edinburgh, Nicola Sturgeon asked to be judged on her record in education, especially on closing the attainment gap between pupils in poor and rich postcodes. Ten years on, the results are in. Scottish pupils are now a full academic year behind their English peers in science, and Scotland has scored its worst results ever in maths and reading. Meanwhile, England scored a top 10 place in all three disciplines. That is shocking.

All the while, honest John has been ever present. As finance minister, he presided over devastating college cuts. As education minister, he marked down 75,000 working-class kids during the pandemic. Now, as First Minister, he has reduced our great tradition in education from outstanding to average—the ruination of a once-proud nation.

The Presiding Officer: Can we get a question, please?

Malcolm Offord: My question is this: is a free school bag the only gimmick left to this hapless First Minister?

The First Minister: I will tell Malcolm Offord what ruination looks like. It is people like him and Thomas Kerr going around spreading racist filth in our society. That is what ruination looks like.

I accept the outcome of the PISA assessments, but they are one part of the data set for Scottish education. The curriculum for excellence levels data, which is produced by the teachers of Scotland, whom Malcolm Offord has just insulted, shows that the proportion of secondary 3 pupils achieving third level or better in literacy or numeracy is at its highest level ever. We have the highest level of young people leaving school and going to positive destinations, at 93.5 per cent. We have record levels of young people in Scotland going to university for the first time, including record numbers of young people from deprived backgrounds, according to the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service. At both national 5 and higher, pass rates were up compared with last year and also with the pre-pandemic situation, and the poverty-related attainment gap narrowed for national 5, higher and advanced higher.

That is the full report card on Scottish education, and I am proud of Scottish education.

Malcolm Offord: So, let us talk about the attainment gap. Màiri McAllan has been fulsome in her praise of recent exam results in Scotland. However, in 2026, 49 per cent of the S4 student cohort were not even entered in national 5 maths. That compares with 41 per cent in 2019, while student numbers have grown 12 per cent in the same period. The Scottish National Party might claim success for half the pupils who sit the exams, but those figures mask a systemic failure to narrow the attainment gap for all pupils. We must narrow the

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attainment gap by raising the floor, not by lowering the ceiling, and the bottom line is that standards are falling in Scottish schools.

During this week's Education and Gaelic Committee meeting, Patricia Gibson argued that it may be "impossible" to close the attainment gap, as children are starting from very different standpoints. Is that really the stark reality of the SNP's lack of ambition? First destroy an internationally admired gold standard of education and then give up? Reform will never let Scotland's children down with that acceptance of mediocrity.

Does the First Minister agree with Ms Gibson? Does he think that closing the attainment gap is really "impossible"? Has he given up on Scottish children?

The First Minister: The only person who should contemplate giving up is Malcolm Offord. If he had followed the presentation of the programme for government to Parliament last week, he would have seen at its heart the Government's primary objective of eradicating child poverty. That is the stated aim of the Government, and that is what we are taking a variety of measures to achieve. That is why we have lower levels of child poverty in Scotland, which I suspect is contributing to some of the achievements that we are making on narrowing the attainment gap in Scottish education.

All the other policy measures that we have taken, such as expanding—more than doubling—the availability of early learning and childcare to ensure that children get the best start in life through their engagement with early learning, and the measures on book bug work for babies and families, ensuring that children and families have the opportunity to engage in literacy from the earliest possible stages, are justified by international evidence. Those are just some of the steps that the Scottish Government is taking to support families, to close the attainment gap and, most of all, to ensure that every child in our country has the best start in life. That is what children will get from an SNP Government.

North Sea Oil and Gas Licences

3. Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Green): Over the coming weeks, the Prime Minister is expected to travel to Aberdeen to publicly announce the licence for the Jackdaw gas field. After a summer of climate breakdown in Scotland and across the globe, that would be an act of sheer climate vandalism. We have had 72 separate wildfires in the United Kingdom, with more than 700 households evacuated. More than 1,400 people have died in Nepal and Tibet after the recent glacier collapse, with more than 5,000 still missing. Across Europe this year, more than 35,000 excess deaths have been linked to the back-to-back heatwaves.

Every licence that we grant to drill for more oil and gas in the North Sea will contribute to more wildfires, more heatwaves and more loss of life for generations to come. Will the First Minister join me in condemning the climate-wrecking behaviour of the UK Government and say no to drilling at Jackdaw and Rosebank?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The first thing that I want to say is that the Government attaches the strongest possible importance to climate action and to fulfilling our statutory obligations to achieve net zero, which is why the achievement of net zero is one of the four principal priorities of the Government's agenda, as I set out to the Parliament last week in relation to the programme for government.

The United Kingdom Government, in considering decisions in relation to Jackdaw and Rosebank, has to make an assessment of the climate impact of those proposals. That is the legal duty. Those applications have had to be re-examined because such an assessment failed to be undertaken in the past. That assessment is absolutely fundamental, and it must be part of the decision-making process of the United Kingdom Government.

As we utilise oil and gas in the years to come, the question that the UK Government must assess is whether the development of those fields will contribute to more carbon emissions than would, as an alternative, be created through the importation of oil and gas from other jurisdictions. That is the assessment that has to be made.

In all of this, the Scottish Government is focused on ensuring that we make the transition to clean fuel. Yesterday, I was in Aberdeen to set out more grant funding to support the transition to net zero in Scotland, and that will remain the focus of the Scottish Government.

Gillian Mackay: The Scottish Government used to have a clear position on this matter, with a presumption against all new licences for oil and gas fields in the North Sea. Clearly, that would have ruled out support for Jackdaw and Rosebank, but the draft energy strategy has lain in a drawer for more than three years now—it has never been published or finalised. That is despite a majority of people who responded to the consultation supporting the presumption against new licences. Polling from earlier this year shows that that is still the case.

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Last week's programme for government promises a refreshed energy strategy at some point down the line, but it also says that new licences should be treated on a case-by-case basis. People who have had their homes destroyed by wildfires and floods and people who have lost loved ones in the recent heatwaves want to know what the Government will do to prevent things from getting worse. Does the First Minister think that new oil and gas fields in the North Sea will make the climate crisis better or worse?

The First Minister: Applications that are made within the United Kingdom's legal framework must be considered on a case-by-case basis—there is no alternative to that. It would be unlawful for us to do anything other than that.

The Scottish Government will reinforce—as I have reinforced already today—our absolute commitment to taking climate action. That has been reinforced by the commitments that we have made in various budgets, and yesterday, in the city of Aberdeen, I announced further measures to support the utilisation of clean energy, in announcing a project at a hydrogen-related organisation. We are investing in the transition to net zero, which will be the focus of the Scottish Government's agenda.

Gillian Mackay: That represents a departure from the previous energy strategy, which included that presumption. I would be keen to know what has changed to move away from the presumption in the draft energy strategy.

The Jackdaw gas field would contribute just 2 per cent to our gas supply. Any argument that that will somehow contribute to energy security or to making our homes cheaper to heat this winter is simply wrong.

What would make a real and immediate difference would be a rapid roll-out of clean, green heating for homes in Scotland. Replacing gas boilers with electric heating and insulating buildings will make our homes warmer and cheaper to heat and will not contribute to rapid climate breakdown, as Jackdaw will.

When the Scottish Greens were in government, we published a plan to roll out clean, cheap heating to 1 million homes. Last week's programme for government cut that plan by 90 per cent. Has the Scottish Government bought the line that Jackdaw and Rosebank will solve the crisis of high energy bills, or does it intend to take real action to ensure that every home in Scotland has clean, green and affordable heating?

The First Minister: The Scottish Government is taking forward all the measures that Gillian Mackay has talked about. They are all part of the steps that we are taking, whether that is through home insulation, alternative heating systems or community renewables schemes. All those are part of the Government's programme for government, and we have been taking forward those measures for some time.

I am grateful for the support from members of the Greens for the measures that the Government takes, but those measures are integral to the programme for government that I set out to the Parliament last week. That includes, at the heart of the programme for government, one of our four priorities, which is to make the transition to net zero. Whether that should be one of the Government's four priorities will be disputed by members across the chamber, because not everybody will agree with it. Some members in the Parliament do not think that we should make the transition to net zero and do not agree with that agenda, but that is the Scottish Government's agenda, and I am proud to set that out to the Parliament and to the people of Scotland

Education Standards

4. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): I, too, wish Scotland's Jewish community all the best as they celebrate Rosh Hashanah.

John Swinney says that Scottish education is “essentially stable”, but the new programme for international student assessment—PISA—results confirm that he is utterly delusional. After finishing primary school, many Scottish pupils cannot even read or write. Primary teachers are now teaching basic literacy at almost half of Glasgow's secondary school. One of those teachers said:

“They've got reading ages of maybe five or six-years-old—they can't recognise basic words”.

That comes a decade after Nicola Sturgeon said that she would put her “neck on the line” to improve literacy in deprived areas. Of all the Scottish National Party's many failures, is trashing Scottish education the greatest of them all?

The First Minister (John Swinney): As I set out to Malcolm Offord earlier, I am proud of Scottish education. I simply say to Russell Findlay that the proportion of secondary 3 pupils achieving the third level or better in literacy and numeracy is at its highest level ever, and that is because of the investment that the Scottish Government has made in closing the attainment gap, delivering excellence and equity in Scottish education and ensuring that young people are supported to fulfil their potential. That will remain the focus of the Government's improvement work, which was brought forward following the PISA results in 2022, to make

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sure that we deliver curriculum improvement to constantly strengthen the delivery of Scottish education. That is the Government's focus.

Russell Findlay: That failed education secretary has absolutely nothing to be proud of. Here are the facts: thanks to Conservative policies, pupils in England are ranked in the top 10 in the world for reading, maths and science. The same rankings confirm that Scottish pupils' results continue to decline. Those pupils are intelligent, ambitious and hard working, but they have been failed by the negligent, useless and complacent SNP Government—and its only answer is a free school bag.

Glasgow City Council's executive director for education, John McGhee, said that Scotland's success depends

"on the skills of young people leaving our schools."

Leading education expert Professor Lindsay Paterson said that Scottish young people face

"a competitive disadvantage in the labour market."

Why is John Swinney sabotaging the prospects of a generation of young Scots and Scotland's future prosperity?

The First Minister: I do not accept the point about there being a competitive disadvantage for Scottish pupils. The data that I set out earlier shows that, when they leave school, young people in Scottish education are going into positive follow-up destinations—that is, going into education, work or training as a consequence of their education—at a rate of 93.5 per cent.

Universities and Colleges Admissions Service data shows that 97 per cent of Scots who applied to a university got a place. That does not suggest that there is a competitive disadvantage in outcomes for young people.

Russell Findlay made a comparison with the English system, which he said was attributable to the Conservative Government. Let me tell Russell Findlay what the Conservative Government also gave us. Because of his support for Liz Truss, the public finances of this country were absolutely and completely trashed. I will not take any lessons about anything from somebody who thought that having Liz Truss as Prime Minister was a good idea.

Ferry Disruption (Compensation for Businesses)

5. Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh North Western) (LD): I extend the good wishes of the Scottish Liberal Democrats to Scotland's Jewish communities on this most auspicious of holidays.

When it comes to education, we cannot ignore international assessments. Our education system used to be up there with the best in the world, but it is not any longer. If we are to confront that reality, we need the Scottish ministers to address their shortcomings and accept responsibility.

It is not only school pupils that the Government is failing. I have badgered the First Minister about businesses that have suffered endless ferry disruption, but the Scottish National Party Government has repeatedly refused to compensate coastal communities.

This week, the Parliament voted for a Scottish Liberal Democrat amendment to a motion that would have compensation head to the port towns that have suffered the most—the likes of Ardrossan, Dunoon, Mallaig, Oban and Ullapool. In the spirit of respecting the will of the Parliament, will the First Minister tell business in towns such as those exactly which of them will qualify for that compensation, how much they will get and when that money might reach them?

The First Minister (John Swinney): During the summer, I announced the implementation of a financial support scheme for communities that were affected by ferry disruption earlier in the year. That is a matter of public record and the information is available on the Government's website.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Those communities are still suffering and are not getting access to the cash that they were promised. It is clear that the Government is all at sea when it comes to compensation—and to ferries more generally.

Yesterday, in the Parliament, the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport and his director of ferries were completely oblivious to a major BBC news story that said that 700kg of highly flammable gas was released into the Glen Sannox when it had 82 passengers on board. That critical safety failure was hidden for a year and was only recently exposed by journalists for all to see.

That is the latest in a long line of ferry failures. There is the Glen Rosa, which is now eight years overdue. A shipyard in Turkey has been given £20 million while our own yard in Port Glasgow is shedding a quarter of

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its workforce. There was an election promise for four new vessels, but there is still no contract. Now, a transport minister, at a transport committee, was clueless about a transport safety failure.

We have all heard the rumours that the First Minister gave Mr Flynn that job to set him up to fail. Did he expect it to happen so soon?

The First Minister: Well, it takes Alex Cole-Hamilton some time to get to the point. Let me pick apart a few of the things that he said.

First, Mr Cole-Hamilton's comment about the absence of a compensation scheme ignored the fact that I announced the compensation scheme during the summer. All that I will say to him, in the spirit of decent parliamentary exchanges, is that he needs to pay attention to what the Government is actually doing. If he did so, he would not ask me questions about things that I have already done.

Secondly, Mr Cole-Hamilton talked about Ferguson's yard and the Government's intervention to safeguard employment there. When the Government intervenes in such cases, his colleague Willie Rennie criticises the Government—he criticised the Government for intervening in relation to the Dalzell steel yard the other day. I simply point out that there is a level of inconsistency from the Liberal Democrats on all these issues.

The Government is investing in the ferry fleet. Four new vessels are coming from the yard in Turkey, and the Glen Rosa is coming from Ferguson's. The Government is investing to strengthen our ferry services. That is exactly what we will deliver.

The Presiding Officer: That ends First Minister's question time for party leaders. Members who are leaving should please do so quietly—there is too much noise in the chamber.

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