

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

Scottish Parliament

Thursday 17 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 answers.

Royal Mail (Festive Season)

1. **Stuart McMillan (Inverclyde) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what dialogue it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding Royal Mail's preparations for the 2026 festive season, including how Royal Mail will support businesses in Scotland during their busiest time of the year. (S7O-00240)

The Minister for Public Finance (Hannah Mary Goodlad): The Minister for Business and Fair Work has recently written to Royal Mail to ensure that it is fulfilling its universal service obligation and to make it clear that that must be maintained. In my role as Minister for Public Finance, I, too, have written to Royal Mail, but I have yet to receive a reply.

Stuart McMillan: Some might suggest that the reply to the minister has been lost in the post.

I welcome the constant dialogue that I have had with the Greenock sorting office and senior representatives from Royal Mail since Christmas last year, but I remain concerned about service delivery in my area. The demand that is placed on Royal Mail to deliver packages on behalf of other delivery companies for the final mile, which consumers do not always see or know about, places a strain on Royal Mail services, especially in the lead-up to Christmas.

Given that the UK Government has maintained a golden share in Royal Mail, does the minister agree that it has a duty to ensure that action is taken now to increase the workforce before the busiest time of the year? Will she again make representations to the UK Government?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: It could be a case of "Return to sender", rather than the reply having been lost in the post. Let us see.

The Minister for Business and Fair Work has recently written to Royal Mail, as have I. I want to ensure that there is equity for more rural and island communities when it comes to post, and I will continue to stress the importance of ensuring such equity in the run-up to the busiest time of the year. I am glad that Mr McMillan's mind is on Christmas as it comes down the tracks.

Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP): As a result of our hard-working Royal Mail posties having been instructed to prioritise parcels, mail is long delayed or not delivered at all. Serious concerns that are raised by parliamentarians on behalf of constituents simply do not seem to be taken very seriously. Does the minister agree that Royal Mail management has a lot of work to do to restore the faith of business and the public in this once great and trusted brand?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: It remains vital that the services that are provided are of the highest quality possible. I reiterate that I will continue to press for equity of service across these islands when it comes to postal delivery by Royal Mail. It is absolutely vital that the same level of service is delivered from the very north to the very south of the country.

Cladding Remediation Programme

2. **Colm Merrick (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the progress of Scotland's cladding remediation programme. (S7O-00241)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing (Shirley-Anne Somerville): As the annual report that we published this week sets out, 250 single building assessments are now under way in buildings across Scotland, which represents a major acceleration in our programme. We have confirmed assessment funding for all 956 eligible buildings, which includes £31.5 million that we have transferred to local authorities for those purposes.

We are continuing to urge and support building owners and developers to take action to commission and complete single building assessments at pace, and we have committed to providing further financial support to owners to take forward the necessary works.

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Colm Merrick: I have had several inquiries on the issue. For example, many residents at the Glasgow Harbour development have found themselves in limbo due to a lack of clarity over any final decision regarding funding. Will the minister commit to engaging with officials, residents and me to resolve any outstanding issues as soon as possible?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I hope that I can assure Colm Merrick that officials remain actively engaged with residents and residents' representatives. Their most recent meeting with residents was in early September, when progress and next steps were discussed. I absolutely recognise the uncertainty that many home owners continue to face, and we are committed to maintaining regular communication as the work progresses at Glasgow Harbour.

The Scottish Government has already provided significant support towards assessment and remediation activity through the cladding remediation programme, which is helping to improve our understanding of the issues affecting several buildings, including those at Glasgow Harbour. I will continue to engage with the residents and with the member as the work progresses.

Willie Rennie (Fife North East) (LD): The minister is keen to emphasise that the work has been done at pace, but the reality is that it is pathetically woeful. For years, we have been waiting for the Scottish Government to spend the money that it received from Westminster on cladding. It claimed that one building had been resolved and remediated, but that is not even completed now. It has been necessary to go back and do more work on that very building—so we are going backwards. When will the Government get a grip and sort out the cladding situation in Scotland?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Regarding the single building that Mr Rennie is remarking upon, we have made it clear that the external wall remediation, as recommended in the SBA, is complete for that one building. It does not need any further remedial work, and the Scottish Government funded the remediation for that work. I would therefore push back on the assertion that was made on that in the Lib Dem press release this week.

I reiterate that we now have the work and the funding flowing. I have written to registered social landlords and local authorities with buildings in the programme to urge swift action in undertaking the assessments, which will allow the work to begin. We are very conscious of wanting to move at pace.

As at June 2026, 17 single building assessments have been completed, and a further 250 assessments are under way.

Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): Can the minister confirm whether the Government would seek to repeal the Building Safety Levy (Scotland) Act 2026 in the event that all cladding remediation work was completed prior to the act's 15-year expiry date, as set out in section 53?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The building safety levy is expected to commence in 2028, and it is designed to ensure that developers make a fair contribution towards the costs of cladding assessment and remediation, as they do in England. A very fair assessment was made of the need for the Building Safety Levy (Scotland) Bill, which is now an act. I absolutely believe that that act is still needed and that its approach is a fair way of going about things, as it has been in England.

AI Data Centres (Guidance)

3. Graham Simpson (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform): To ask the Scottish Government when it plans to produce planning and environmental guidance on artificial intelligence data centres. (S70-00242)

The Minister for Public Finance (Hannah Mary Goodlad): We had a lengthy—yet also too short—debate on the subject yesterday, and where we are heading is very clear. The Government has issued guidance on considering the collective data centre applications that are coming across the country—for anything above 50MW. As of today, all existing and new data centre applications will be required to have an environmental impact assessment. As was explained yesterday, we will come back before the end of the year with updated planning guidance and a spatial framework.

Graham Simpson: The minister is absolutely right that the debate yesterday was far too short. She said yesterday:

“We are committed to coming back before Christmas with guidelines that will give business and communities confidence”

and

“It is highly unlikely that we will see decisions taken before Christmas.”—[Official Report, 16 September 2026; c 32, 31.]

Will she give a cast-iron guarantee that guidance will be issued before Christmas and that the guidance that councils get will apply not just to new applications but to those already in the system?

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Hannah Mary Goodlad: As a geologist, I am not going to get into the materials of iron, copper or any other mineral within the system. I was very clear yesterday that we will be coming back by the end of the year with guidelines—spatial and environmental, and on energy and heat use. We are wrapping our arms around that right now. It spans several portfolios: planning, energy, technology and economy. We will be coming back on it before the end of the year. As it stands, the EIA requirement that is being issued applies to existing and new data centres that will be put into the system, but we will come back by the end of the year.

Mark Simpson (North East Scotland) (Reform): Does the minister agree that Scotland risks losing investment opportunities if planning guidance is not produced quickly and with sufficient clarity?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: That is why, yesterday, I committed to ensuring that both communities and business have confidence. I do not want to kick the can down the road on this. Unlike Labour members, I am not committed to waiting for 12 months. I want to move quickly, within the next quarter of the year, and come back by the end of the year. It is about making sure that business but also communities have confidence and that we do not kick the can down the road.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Will the spatial framework, the Government oversight process and the planning guidance take account of the possible cumulative effect of a number of data centres and the fact that, in terms of energy use, there is a maximum capacity of data centres that Scotland can accommodate?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: Our national planning framework 4 is set up to handle exactly this kind of infrastructure and planning in the system. I have faith and trust in our dedicated planning officers right across the country. I am strengthening the guidance that we are going to give them, and the EIA, which is now a requirement, also takes into account cumulative environmental impacts. We will strengthen that and we have done so already, starting today.

Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): Can the minister confirm whether the Government has considered the disposal of electronic waste that cannot be recycled as part of any planning guidance on data centres, alongside the management of potentially dangerous pollutants that may result from that?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: The member is referring to perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances—PFAs—and the potential run-off from infrastructure and energy projects including onshore and offshore wind. That will be considered in the environmental impact assessment and mitigated if risks are present. That is exactly why I issued the guidance yesterday, which has come into effect today.

NEET Statistics

4. Katherine Sangster (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how it ensures that students who are enrolled in, but not regularly attending college courses, are accurately classified in statistics on young people who are not in education, employment or training. (S7O-00243)

The Minister for Innovation, Technology and Tertiary Education (Alyn Smith): Skills Development Scotland's annual participation measure—the APM—reports on young people's most common activity throughout the year. It is created using a range of data that is collected through the 16+ participation portal. Within that, colleges provide information on student enrolments and withdrawals at least monthly throughout the academic year to ensure that data is timely and to improve data quality in the interests of both statistics and targeting support for young people who are not participating. The Scottish Government continues to work with partners to improve the quality and range of the data that is available to better understand the participation of young people across Scotland.

Katherine Sangster: I thank the minister for his detailed answer. Statistics from the Scottish Funding Council show a withdrawal rate of 5.4 per cent among 16 to 24-year-olds. What action is the Scottish Government taking, on the basis of the data that it has, to ensure that students are supported to attend college regularly and to reduce that withdrawal rate?

Alyn Smith: This is a common issue across all four home nations. In relation to England, the Office for National Statistics has been working on it consistently. We are aware of the issue, but the fact that someone is not attending college regularly does not mean that they are dropping out. Equally, however, it does not necessarily mean that they are staying. We work with the Scottish Funding Council to ensure that there is targeted support for individuals who are having a tough time or are not engaging in their course. I will keep in touch with the member as that work progresses.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North) (SNP): Following data from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service that shows a record number of young Scots gaining a place at university or college, how is the Scottish Government prioritising investment to ensure that an increasing number of young people enter positive destinations?

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Alyn Smith: The Government is delivering a comprehensive range of interventions to support young people into adulthood and work, spanning the curriculum, positive destination planning, career support and employability. That includes universal support for all young people alongside more targeted and intensive support for those who need it most, with the aim of ensuring that every young person is supported to achieve a positive destination. We are doing pretty well on that. Overall, 93.5 per cent of school leavers in 2024-25 were in a positive follow-up destination nine months post-school. That is the joint highest figure on record. UCAS statistics show that record numbers of 18-year-olds have secured a university place this year, and there is a lot of good work under way in this space to build on.

Mark Simpson (North East Scotland) (Reform): Is the minister concerned that inaccurate classification could mask the true scale of youth disengagement from education and employment?

Alyn Smith: I am aware of that, but I am not concerned as such. As well as us, England has been dealing with that issue with the ONS. As I said in answer to Katherine Sangster, when someone is not regularly attending college, there could be a range of reasons for that, and not all those people are about to drop out. We want to target support to people who are not in regular attendance. That work is under way with the Funding Council, the colleges and Skills Development Scotland.

Youth Unemployment

5. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to address youth unemployment and whether it will work with the United Kingdom Government to support the delivery of better opportunities for young people. (S7O-00244)

The Minister for Innovation, Technology and Tertiary Education (Alyn Smith): In 2024-25, 93.5 per cent of school leavers went on to a positive follow-up destination. That is a good result. Although that is encouraging, the Government remains committed to ensuring that every young person has the opportunity to develop the skills and confidence that they need to participate in the labour market.

A phrase that members will hear a lot from me is that the Government is committed to funding 150,000 apprenticeships over this parliamentary session—that is a big part of the future—expanding work-based learning and reviewing employability services. We are actively considering what further action can be taken, and we will, of course, work constructively with the UK Government on shared priorities when appropriate.

Pauline McNeill: The interim findings of Alan Milburn's review on youth unemployment, which were published in the summer, show that almost 1 million 16 to 24-year-olds are not in education, employment or training across the UK. That means that there is a generation of young people whose needs are not being met.

I thank the minister for his answer. Some of the figures look positive. However, given the overall concern about youth unemployment I am interested in what can be done to ensure that we are totally on track and can identify young people who did not do well at school and have not been found by the agencies. That is where the issue lies.

Alyn Smith: As Pauline McNeill will know, I am in furious agreement on that. An awful lot of people are not getting the support that they need, particularly the young people who are falling through the cracks in traditional education. I will be talking a great deal about vocational skills and alternative routes into the workplace.

I will also update members in due course on the opportunity presented by the Erasmus+ programme, which the UK and Scotland are going back into. The Erasmus+ element will be particularly helpful for young people. That is new money, and I will not be able to offer institutions new money very often. Erasmus offers a huge opportunity for young people, and I will ruthlessly ensure that we take advantage of it.

Craig Hoy (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Too many young Scots who are suffering from conditions such as anxiety find themselves on benefits but not in work. Will the minister commit to working with the Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic to gather and publish data on the number of young people in receipt of adult disability payment who are not in employment?

Alyn Smith: I am very open to that discussion. However, we need to support people if they are having a tough time, not criticise them for it.

Alex Kerr (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): Thanks to the Scottish National Party, three quarters of a million young people have had the opportunity to go to university, because our free tuition policy means that they are not limited by their economic background. What assessment has the Government made of Scotland's offer to our young people, and how does that compare with the offer elsewhere in the UK?

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Alyn Smith: Alex Kerr will find that I am in full agreement with him. Our commitment to free tuition, together with enhanced student support, means that access to university in Scotland remains based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay. The total package of student support is the most generous package across the UK, and it represents taxpayers' money going to our society. It means that Scottish students continue to have the lowest average student debt in the UK. Comparisons with other UK countries are not advisable, as the types of support that Scotland provides, such as free tuition, are vastly different from those in the rest of the UK.

Jamie Langan (South Scotland) (Reform): Does the minister agree that successive arbitrary minimum wage rises that have far outstripped productivity gains have severely limited entry-level job opportunities for young Scots?

Alyn Smith: The minimum wage is a UK matter. I want people to be paid as much as possible for the skills that they have. Jamie Langan raised a point about access to the workplace. A range of support is available to help people to get into the workplace, and I want to redouble our work on apprenticeships to ensure that workplace-based learning is the norm, not the exception.

Additional Dwelling Supplement (Repayment Period)

6. Sanne Dijkstra-Downie (Edinburgh Northern) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its consideration of changes to the additional dwelling supplement to take account of exceptional circumstances and introduce an extended repayment period for owners of properties affected by cladding and fire safety issues, including the Bond building in Edinburgh. (S7O-00245)

The Minister for Public Finance (Hannah Mary Goodlad): I recognise the concerns of home owners with properties that are affected by cladding and fire safety issues. In March, as part of the land and buildings transaction tax review, the Scottish Government published a summary of an expert working group's consideration of the impact of the additional dwelling supplement when difficult or exceptional circumstances might apply. That included consideration of property-related barriers to sale. The group's work highlighted the need to consider how to balance legislative clarity, administrative feasibility, fairness to taxpayers and the protection of revenue in any approach. The Scottish Government will consider that evidence carefully, and it will inform the next steps.

Sanne Dijkstra-Downie: Two and a half years on from the Bond building fire, residents cannot live in, let alone sell, their homes because of ongoing safety and cladding defects and delayed remediation works. Some have since bought other homes and paid tens of thousands of pounds in second homes tax. They are running out of time to get that money back through no fault of their own because, unlike in other parts of the United Kingdom, Scotland's three-year repayment window offers no exceptions. Does the minister think that that is fair? Does she believe that there should be an extension that covers fire and cladding defects?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: I recognise and sympathise with the circumstances that residents of the Bond building and other affected developments face. It is important that, in our review, the Scottish Government considers any potential changes as part of a consistent, Scotland-wide approach, not for individual buildings. However, I would be happy to work with Sanne Dijkstra-Downie to understand how we can take the matter forward. I am open to listening and to speaking with her and constituents.

The Presiding Officer: Question 7, in the name of Joe Long, was not lodged, but an explanation has been given.

Bus Fare Cap (Dundee and Tayside)

8. Heather Anderson (Dundee City West) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the roll-out of the £2 bus fare cap to the city of Dundee and the wider Tayside area. (S7O-00247)

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport (Stephen Flynn): I thank Heather Anderson for her question, which has been posed to me by members across Scotland who have not yet been able to benefit from the £2 fare cap that we have introduced in the Highlands and Islands and in the Strathclyde Partnership for Transport area. The scheme covers 60 per cent of Scotland's land mass and 50 per cent of our population. I give a commitment to Heather Anderson that I am keen to move at pace to continue the roll-out of the £2 fare cap across the rest of Scotland and will update the Parliament accordingly.

Heather Anderson: Somebody coming from Kirkton or Charleston to Dundee has to pay £3.35 for a single and, if someone is travelling into Dundee from Forfar, it is £5.90 each way. A £2 cap will mean much more money in people's pockets, which will benefit not just them but, I hope, city centre businesses. Does the cabinet secretary understand how keen we are to see the roll-out of the £2 bus fare cap to Dundee and Tayside? Will he give us a wee glimmer of hope about how quickly he might get round to doing it?

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Stephen Flynn: Heather Anderson is absolutely right. We put in place the £2 fare cap, and it is our desire to implement it throughout Scotland, because we want to do what we can to combat the cost of living crisis and put more money back into people's pockets. Fortunately, in Dundee, 67,000 or so people are able to access free concessionary cards, whether they are young, old or disabled. However, we want to go further and I reiterate that we want to move at pace. When I am able to provide the Parliament with an update, I will make sure to do so.

David Green (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD): I welcome reports of an uptick in passenger numbers across the Highlands. However, as one constituent in Portmahomack put it to me, a £2 bus fare is no use if there is no reliable service. The issue is not just affordability but availability, so what consideration is the cabinet secretary giving to a new model that will give power to the communities that I represent over when and where their buses run? Will he also clarify what assessment the Government has made of the potential impact of the £2 bus fare cap on the far north line?

Stephen Flynn: David Green makes an important point. We need more regular buses operating throughout Scotland. That is why, in recent months, the Government committed £55 million to improving infrastructure, and we have provided bus companies with the network support grant, which is worth, I think, £6.2 million, to ensure that they are able to operate routes, given the impact of the geopolitical crisis on fuel costs.

There is much more to be done, and I look forward to proactively engaging with David Green on that issue as part of consideration of the better buses legislation that we seek to introduce during this parliamentary session.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): The £2 fare cap was secured by the Scottish Greens because we know that people need affordable public transport. However, a cheap bus that does not turn up or run frequently enough to serve its community is not really an example of an affordable public transport system. When the cap is rolled out in Dundee and the wider north-east region, will the cabinet secretary commit to a plan to improve the reliability, frequency and coverage of services? Will he work with us to bring those services back into public ownership?

Stephen Flynn: It would be helpful for members of the Green Party to outline exactly what they would want that plan to look like. Over recent weeks, I have heard calls for nationalisation, for municipal ownership and for franchising. If there is a clear direction of travel that the Greens want us to go down, they should be explicit about it.

I am very happy to work with Maggie Chapman and others across the chamber to ensure that we get reliable buses in place across Scotland. That is why we have put £55 million into the bus infrastructure fund and £6.2 million into the network support grant. There is much more to be done, and we are committed to doing it.

Craig Hoy (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Can the cabinet secretary assure us that, by such times as the £2 bus fare cap comes to Dumfriesshire, there will be an adequate bus service for people to travel on?

Stephen Flynn: I am still unsure on whether Mr Hoy wants us to spend public money on subsidising travel for the public. I am not sure whether his party has come to the point of welcoming the £2 bus fare cap, but I am sure that, in future contributions in the chamber, he will outline whether he supports the £2 bus fare cap to deal with the cost of living crisis that was caused by the Parliament that he loves.

Childcare (Rural Areas)

9. Yi-pei Chou Turvey (North East Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on ensuring that families, particularly those in rural areas, have choice and flexibility in accessing childcare services (S7O-00248)

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Siobhian Brown): We are committed to families in rural areas accessing high-quality childcare that meets their needs, with near-universal take-up of our existing offer of funded early learning and childcare for three-year-olds and four-year-olds.

As we set out in our programme for government, we will transform our childcare offer to provide a flexible system of support for children from nine months to the end of primary school. As we develop our plans, we will continue to engage closely with families, childcare providers, stakeholders and partners to ensure that the transformation delivers for families in rural and island communities.

Yi-pei Chou Turvey: I agree with the minister that the provision of childcare options for families who live in rural areas is vital for the success of children and families, as well as for strong local economies. That is why I was surprised that, earlier this month, the Scottish Government voted against a Liberal Democrat

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amendment on a commitment to improve rural childcare, despite resounding support from the rest of the chamber.

The minister's party made a commitment to sustainable rural communities in its manifesto, and affordable childcare is key to that. Will she work with the Liberal Democrats to make employment viable for more rural families?

Siobhian Brown: The Scottish Government totally recognises how vital early learning and childcare is in rural and island areas, in relation to both giving children the best start in life and supporting families to work. We recognise that the provision of childcare is a key factor in allowing people in rural and island communities to enter and sustain training or employment and to start a business.

As members know, next year, a blueprint consultation will be launched on how to roll out the expansion of childcare from nine months to the end of primary school by the end of this parliamentary session.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): As I am sure the minister will know, the benefits of spending time outdoors from a very young age are huge. The younger we can encourage a connection with our outdoors, the better. Whether it is a fully outdoor nursery, such as MAKI Pups in Lochgilphead, or a combined indoor-outdoor nursery, such as Patchwork in Dunoon, it has been clear to me on constituency visits how much the children love that experience. What action is the Scottish Government taking to support nurseries in providing more outdoor opportunities for children?

Siobhian Brown: I saw at first hand the benefits of outdoor play for young children during a visit to Little Bugs nursery in South Queensferry earlier this month. It was impressive to see so many kids thriving in an outdoor environment.

The national standard for funded early learning and childcare ensures that outdoor play is a part of children's everyday experience of funded ELC, and we have worked with the sector to develop the "Out to Play" guidance, which supports high-quality outdoor experiences. The latest data shows that children in ELC settings across Scotland spend, on average, 39 per cent of their time outdoors. We will continue to work with the ELC sector to support and promote outdoor play.

The Presiding Officer: Question 10, in the name of Duncan Massey, was not lodged, but an explanation has been given.

That concludes general question time.

First Minister's Question Time

Party Leaders

14:01

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): We now move to First Minister's question time for party leaders. Before we begin, I invite members to join me in welcoming to the gallery Her Excellency Sanja Štiglic, ambassador of the Republic of Slovenia. *[Applause.]*

Government Priorities

1. Malcolm Offord (West Scotland) (Reform): When John Swinney became First Minister in May 2024, he promised to lead a delivery-focused, unifying Government that is focused on four priorities: eradicating child poverty, growing the economy, improving the national health service and reforming public services. Why did he suddenly divert to Cardiff for a taxpayer-funded wee pretendy summit? Why has he given up on delivery and unity and instead chosen distraction and division? Which of those four priorities were advanced by his wee day trip to Wales?

The First Minister (John Swinney): One of the many elements of the Government that I have concentrated on, and on which I have given the Government leadership, is ensuring that we have a focus on four major themes: eradicating child poverty, growing the economy, making the transition to net zero and improving our public services. We are making significant progress in advancing that agenda. That might partly explain why I won the election on 7 May, which is a rather important point that I add to the mix.

The people of Scotland heard from me during the election campaign about the importance of self-determination for the people of Scotland and of Scotland being an independent country. If we had the full powers of independence, that option for Scotland—that opportunity—would help us to achieve our objectives of having a stronger economy and tackling child poverty. That is why I went to Cardiff on Monday.

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Malcolm Offord: Let me explain to John Swinney why he is delusional to focus on that issue at the moment. The two most recent Westminster and Holyrood elections were the worst for the Scottish National Party since 2014. Under John Swinney's leadership, support for the separatist parties is now at an all-time low—only 1 million votes in May 2016, which is down from 1.6 million votes in indyref. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Excuse me, Mr Flynn.

Malcolm Offord: Mr Flynn is emitting more gas than a CalMac ferry.

In contrast, 2 million Scots voted to remain in the United Kingdom, and that was for a generation.

This so-called Celtic alliance pact is nothing but smoke and mirrors, distraction and division. Surely the First Minister must agree that he needs to focus on the day job and deal with our faltering economy, our declining education, our struggling NHS, our dysfunctional transport, our chaotic immigration and our rising welfare spending.

The First Minister: I have set out the Government's programme, which covers all the key areas of domestic policy and areas of responsibility. As I said to Malcolm Offord in my first answer, the Government is making significant progress on all those issues, which is perhaps one of the reasons why we won the election.

I point out to Malcolm Offord that 58 SNP MSPs were elected and only 17 Reform MSPs, and we won the election with the biggest gap between us and our nearest rival in the history of devolution. I do not think that I need any lectures from a losing force such as Malcolm Offord, the leader of Reform.

As for the question of "a generation", I note that, by the end of the decade, a million individuals in Scotland will not have been asked their opinion in a referendum on the question of independence. That is one of the reasons why it is so important that the people of this country have the chance to decide their own future and to opt for independence.

Malcolm Offord: Based on that response, it is clear that Piddington has more chance of becoming independent than John Swinney's Scotland. Why is that? It is because the SNP has not prepared for it. In the 12 years since 2014, the SNP could have used its devolved powers to make Scotland the most successful part of the UK. It could have spent 12 years answering the big four questions in relation to separation: currency, pensions, defence and borders.

Instead, what do we have? We have an economy with no growth; our world-famous education has been trashed; NHS Scotland is on its knees; our roads and ferries are in chaos; uncontrolled immigration is upsetting our communities; the police are starved of cash; local councils are about to be butchered; welfare is at an all-time high; taxation is at an all-time high; and we have a black hole of £5 billion, despite a record block grant of £26 billion. That is chronic mismanagement of the public finances—and I have not even quoted the Auditor General of Scotland on the missing ScotWind moneys.

All of that shame list relates to devolved matters; John Swinney cannot blame Westminster for any of that omnishambles—it is entirely home grown. This debacle was created by the SNP. How can John Swinney blame Westminster and say that Westminster is broken when Holyrood is in such a mess? Is the real reason that John Swinney went to Cardiff that he would rather grandstand to the media than face the uncomfortable truth that he is failing in his four priorities?

Scotland does not want a referendum any time soon—*[Interruption.]*—so will the First Minister please honour Scotland's wish to leave this for a generation?

The First Minister: It is really quite remarkable that Malcolm Offord—who seems to think that he, having lost the election, knows the views of the people of Scotland better than I, who in fact won the election, do—seems to be in a very agitated state about the prospect of Scottish independence. It suggests that he knows that he has something to fear at the prospect of being able to take our own decisions on the economy, to use the energy wealth of Scotland to lower the bills for the people of our country and to make sure that our trading relationships with Europe, which Malcolm Offord and his ilk absolutely sabotaged, are good.

That is perhaps an illustration of why the people of Scotland, in increasing numbers, as demonstrated by recent opinion polls, support the concept of Scottish independence and why people in Scotland want that choice. I am going to ensure that the people of Scotland have that choice in this parliamentary session.

Scottish Government Scrutiny

2. Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Before I begin my questions, I put on record my condolences and those of the Scottish Labour Party on the death of former MSP Cathie Craigie. Cathie was a much-loved colleague. She was a woman of great determination and tenacity. She was the first woman to pass a member's bill in this Parliament, protecting mortgage holders. As the daughter of a miner, she was a fierce

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campaigner for miners' welfare and wellbeing. She was committed to our Labour movement, to the Parliament and to her constituents in Cumbernauld and Kilsyth. Our thoughts are with her family at this difficult time. [Applause.]

Presiding Officer, it is another week, another court case. The Scottish Information Commissioner, the man who is tasked with holding the Government to account, is challenging the Scottish National Party in court over its refusal to release vital information. He says that the SNP Government risks undermining the public's right to access information and would relegate him to little more than a "supervisory role".

The SNP Government stands accused of seeking the power to decide what information the public can see and what they cannot see. The public's right to know is on the line, so I ask the First Minister what is more important—the right of Scots to know what their Government is up to or shielding himself, his London-based former leader and his party from scrutiny?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Before I come on to the substance of Jackie Baillie's question, although I made some remarks on Tuesday in response to the Presiding Officer's remarks, I associate myself unreservedly with her comments about Cathie Craigie. Cathie Craigie was a very distinguished member of the Scottish Parliament. She was a generous and kind lady, but she was also a lady of good fun and good humour. We enjoyed her company, and I pay tribute to her and associate myself entirely with Jackie Baillie's words of appreciation for Cathie Craigie. I express my condolences to her family.

On the substantive issue that Jackie Baillie raises, I am limited in what I can say, because there are live court proceedings under way in which the Scottish Government is a party. Jackie Baillie asked me what I believe is important, and what I believe is important is the rule of law. The Government believes that, in the decisions that it is taking, it is operating fully in accordance with the rule of law in relation to the freedom of information legislation and in relation to the disclosure of information on which restrictions are applied by court orders.

I would not be fulfilling my duty as First Minister if I did not ensure that the Government was operating within the law. That is the basis of the judgment that the Government has made, and, of course, that will be tested in the courts in the action that is being pursued.

Jackie Baillie: I thank the First Minister for that response, but my difficulty is that I have seen how John Swinney has operated over 27 years, going from honest John to the John Swinney we now see before us, the architect of secret Scotland. This is the man who deleted WhatsApp messages to hide from scrutiny over life-and-death decisions during the pandemic. This is the man who spends the public's money going to court to deny the people of Scotland access to the truth. This is the man who appointed a now-convicted fraudster, Peter Murrell, and this is the man who oversaw a culture of cover-up, contaminating party and Government.

Those are not isolated examples. They demonstrate a pattern of behaviour—decades of cover-up and conspiracy with John Swinney at its very heart. There is no failure too serious to be covered up by this Government. Is it not time for John Swinney to emerge from the shadows and finally put our country before his party?

The First Minister: It is pretty obvious that I have emerged from the shadows, because I won my own mandate in front of the electorate of Scotland on 7 May.

With the greatest of respect to Jackie Baillie, because we have rubbed shoulders for 27 years in this institution—there are only the two of us left from that first day who have been together continuously in this Parliament over those 27 years—she has been able to observe my career in government for longer than I had to observe her career in government, if I can be so indelicate. If my memory serves me right, it was 12 months for Jackie Baillie in government and it is 19 years for me in government, so we will just leave that judgment for the public to make.

My final point is this: every single thing that Jackie Baillie said there, her predecessor in that office, Anas Sarwar, said to me week after week and month after month in the run-up to the election, and the Labour Party went down to 17 seats. [Interruption.] As Mr Bibby shouts at me, having learned nothing from the failure in the election and absolutely not having learned that all that stuff does not work, the public can see the Labour Party for what it is: a party with no ideas, no hope and no direction—and that will not change at the weekend either.

Jackie Baillie: What the First Minister cannot escape is that everything that I said is all true. I have to say to him to that, much as I have enjoyed these 27 years together, I suspect that, if it has anything to do with Stephen Flynn, I will outlast the First Minister—[Interruption.] The SNP would always rather hide a problem than fix it—[Interruption.]

I am about to raise a very serious matter, and I hope that members on the SNP benches will listen.

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The Presiding Officer: Yes. Let us listen to the question, please.

Jackie Baillie: The SNP would always rather hide a problem than fix it, and that has real consequences. Let us look at one example. We have had years of promises from John Swinney on ambulances. We challenged him on the crisis in ambulance care in May last year, September last year, November last year and again in January this year. He stood on that very spot and promised to fix the problems in the Scottish Ambulance Service, but he never does.

This summer, Julie Parker was left dying on her bathroom floor, waiting for help. The police phoned 999 when they found her. They phoned again when no ambulance came. It took four hours for an ambulance to arrive, but by then it was too late. She was just 55 years old. That is the human cost of SNP failure. When will John Swinney realise that the Government's dishonesty and broken promises have consequences?

The First Minister: Jackie Baillie uses very strong language, and I will treat the substance of the case as I should do as First Minister.

Before I get to that, however, I note what she said about freedom of information issues and transparency in the Government. In the past six months, the Government has received 3,218 freedom of information requests; that is a 50 per cent increase on five years ago. The Government has responded to 96 per cent of those requests within the statutory timescale, so I refute, with evidence, the argument that Jackie Baillie puts forward that the Government is not fulfilling its obligations.

I will now move on to the very serious issue of the human cost of the case involving Julie Parker. I am familiar with the case, and the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care has offered to meet Julie Parker's family following the outcome of a review that is currently being undertaken by the Scottish Ambulance Service and NHS Ayrshire and Arran. Cases such as Julie Parker's, and the case of Elizabeth Crammond, which Jackie Baillie raised with me last week, are examples of unacceptable health service performance and I make no attempt to shield from that.

We work hard to improve outcomes, but unfortunately there will be cases in which the outcomes are not what we would want them to be, and we have to learn the lessons and focus on improvements. That is what drives the Government's agenda. We try to ensure that we deliver the improvements that are necessary, and the health secretary will engage with Julie Parker's family to discuss the issue.

I will close by expressing my condolences to Julie Parker's family. I read this morning, in the *Daily Record* newspaper, the transcript of the call between police officers and the Scottish Ambulance Service. It is profoundly disturbing and requires to be examined, and that is exactly what will be done.

Hyperscale Data Centres

3. Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I pass on the Scottish Greens' condolences to Cathie Craigie's family and her friends in the Labour Party. Her work in establishing a register of landlords in Scotland started an important journey, which the Parliament is still on, to protect those in this country who rent their home, and it has made a real difference to people across the country.

I start by congratulating the community groups across the country whose campaign against hyperscale data centres has forced the Scottish Government to act. There is still some confusion, however, over what the Government's position now is. Ministers say that they will produce new guidance for councils by Christmas. That is welcome—it is what the Greens called for. However, ministers have also said that no decisions will be taken before then.

I struggle to reconcile that with the reality of the timeline. The proposals for data centres for Larbert, Greenock and Auchtertool could all be decided before then. The deadline for determination on the Larbert application is 4 October, and the developers in Greenock are working towards a deadline in November. The Scottish Government has said categorically that no decisions should be made before the guidance is produced, at Christmas. Has it, therefore, instructed Inverclyde, Falkirk and Fife councils to pause their determination of those live applications?

The First Minister (John Swinney): We do not anticipate that any applications will be determined by planning authorities before our planning guidance is issued later this year.

Ross Greer: I struggle to reconcile what ministers said yesterday with what they voted for and what the First Minister has just said today. I and the Greens, and communities across the country who were celebrating last night because they thought that there was a pause—a formal pause—are trying to accept the Government's position in good faith. However, MSPs across this Parliament left the chamber last night confused because they could not reconcile what ministers said with what they voted for.

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The Minister for Business and Fair Work said that no decisions are expected before Christmas, based on discussion with council officials—that is similar to what the First Minister has just said. However, there is nothing in the public domain to confirm that. Today, the Falkirk Council website still has the deadline for the determination of the Larbert application as 4 October. Is the First Minister saying that, if a decision on any hyperscale data centre is made before Christmas, which some councils are still on the record as intending to do, the Government will step in, stop that and make the final decision itself, based on the new guidance that it is producing?

The First Minister: As I said in my first answer, we do not anticipate that any applications will be determined by planning authorities before the planning guidance is issued, later this year. Through the notification direction that we issued during the summer, we are closely monitoring live applications and their intended timescales for determination, hence the statement that I just made to Parliament.

Although Scottish ministers have call-in powers, we use them sparingly, recognising and respecting the important role of local authorities in making decisions in their areas. We can, however, take steps to call in any application where that is necessary and deemed to be a matter of national importance.

Ministers can also recall any planning appeal rather than have the decision made by the Scottish Government reporter, and we have used that power recently in relation to the live planning appeal for a data centre in Edinburgh. I hope that that provides the clarity that Ross Greer is seeking.

Ross Greer: The First Minister's answer does not provide clarity. It hints at something—it strongly hints that the Government would be willing to recall those decisions—and I welcome that in good faith. However, I say again that Falkirk Council still states that the determination deadline is 4 October. The Government's private discussions with local councils appear to be quite different from what is currently on the public record. That needs to be reconciled if our communities are to have confidence in the process.

It is welcome that we have President Connolly of Ireland here in Scotland this week, not just for her leadership on solidarity with the people of Palestine, but because Ireland is a stark example of what happens when greedy technology companies are allowed to build whatever they want. A third of Ireland's entire domestic energy supply goes to powering data centres, but that pales in comparison with what is proposed for Scotland. The first 24 applications here would require one and a half times our entire national energy demand. Our Parliament was warned, earlier this week, that that could push up energy bills. That is exactly what has happened in Ireland. Because of data centres, the energy bills of consumers and households in Ireland have gone up by the equivalent of £300 a year. Councils cannot take that issue into account when making piecemeal decisions on individual applications. Therefore, will the guidance that the First Minister's Government is producing include a clear national strategy on how much of our electricity supply can be used by hyperscale data centres before they damage our climate and push up our energy bills?

The First Minister: The national guidance will set out all the relevant issues that have to be taken into account in the determination of applications. To reiterate one of the points that I made earlier, I state that, through the notification direction that we issued during the summer, we are closely monitoring live applications and the intended timescales for their determination.

Mr Greer raised the role of tech companies. The Government insisted, in its amendment yesterday, that there has to be regulation in the space around tech companies. That was a central part of the Government's amendment to the Green motion last night. I am pleased that the Government's amendment was carried, because it strengthens the representations that my Government can make to the United Kingdom Government to ensure that we are pressing for the appropriate regulatory environment, given the concerns that have been expressed over the weekend, particularly about tech companies. I was a bit surprised that the Greens abstained on that particular vote at the end of the debate, because that regulation is necessary. It is at the centre of the concerns that my Cabinet is wrestling with about violence against women and girls, as, because of the online environment, there is a greater need for regulation. As we make progress on some of those questions, there are big issues for us to wrestle with, and I hope that the Greens will be partners with us in that respect.

As Mr Greer made reference to the presence of President Connolly, I note that it was an absolute pleasure for my wife and I to welcome President Connolly and her husband to Scotland yesterday. President Connolly represents outstanding leadership in the world. She is a voice for peace, for dialogue and for respect. She has much to say to Scotland, and Scotland is listening very carefully to what she has to say.

Independence Referendum

4. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): I, too, express my condolences and those of my party to the family of Cathie Craigie.

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John Swinney's new friends in Sinn Féin have never denounced Irish Republican Army terrorism. They still justify the massacre of innocent men, women and children, including Scottish soldiers. Mr Swinney shamefully told IRA victims and their grieving families to "move on", but the same politician has never accepted the decisive result of Scotland's independence referendum, and John Swinney is now working with Sinn Féin to break up our country. Why should those maimed or bereaved by the IRA move on when the Scottish National Party refuses to move on?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I have always expressed my sympathy to the victims of terrorism. Indeed, just last month, I represented Scotland at the first national day of remembrance for the victims of terrorism, which was convened by the Prime Minister in London. On that occasion, I met families of the victims of terrorism, many of whom were affected by the Lockerbie bombing in 1988. I unreservedly condemn terrorism and any terrorist act, and I always have done.

I also accepted, in good grace, the outcome of the referendum in 2014. *[Interruption.]* In the aftermath of that referendum, I also participated, in good faith, in the work of the Smith commission, which reviewed the powers of the Parliament and led to significant increases in its powers. I put forward arguments in that process to ensure that this Parliament could make more impact on the lives of people in Scotland. I did that, in good faith, to strengthen the powers of the Parliament within the United Kingdom. Mr Findlay's point is completely fatuous, as usual.

People in this country would be surprised if I did not stick to the principled reason why I entered politics. I entered politics because I became convinced that the people who are best placed to decide the future of our country are the people who choose to live here in Scotland, which is why we need the ability to make a decision—a choice—about Scotland's future in a referendum, and I will deliver that in this parliamentary term.

Russell Findlay: We know that John Swinney has denounced terrorism, but has he asked his Sinn Féin friends to denounce terrorism? We just heard, yet again, that John Swinney only cares about one thing: making Scotland poorer and weaker by leaving the United Kingdom. He and his party have never respected the outcome of the independence referendum, and Scotland is paying a heavy price for the SNP's obsession—a broken national health service, failing schools, victims betrayed by the justice system, record high taxes and funding out-of-control state benefits. The people of Scotland want the Government to focus on the issues that matter to them—those issues, not independence—so why is his constitutional obsession more important than fixing Scotland's broken public services?

The First Minister: It is really interesting that, today, Russell Findlay has pursued the same line of questioning as Malcolm Offord. That displays to us that the merger is under way between those two forces on that side of the chamber and, my goodness, it will be some marriage of convenience over there between the Conservative Party and Reform, with some of the stuff they all come out with. That will be a sight worth seeing. They have a lot in common, because Malcolm Offord was a member of the Government that inflicted austerity on this country—*[Interruption.]*

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Answer the question!

The Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: Malcolm Offord was a member and Russell Findlay was a supporter of a Government that inflicted austerity on this country. They represent political traditions that wanted Brexit, which has undeniably made us poorer as a consequence. Therefore, I will take no lessons from Russell Findlay or his chum Malcolm Offord—

Stephen Kerr: Answer the question!

The Presiding Officer: Excuse me, First Minister.

Mr Kerr, as I have already said, please stop shouting from the back. You can express a view without yelling at the top of your voice. We are trying to hear the First Minister. If I cannot hear him from here, how is anyone else meant to hear him?

First Minister, please conclude.

The First Minister: I will take no lessons from the new chums of the Scottish Parliament, Russell Findlay and Malcolm Offord—the people who gave us decline, austerity and Brexit. Instead, I will inspire people with a positive vision of independence for Scotland.

Thirlwall Inquiry

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5. Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh North Western) (LD): As other members have done, I, too, extend the heartfelt condolences of the Scottish Liberal Democrats to the Labour Party, the family of Cathie Craigie and everybody who loved her. She was a towering force in our politics and she will be much missed.

This week, Lady Justice Thirlwall published her report into the horrific murder of babies at the Countess of Chester hospital. That review was instructed following the conviction of neonatal nurse Lucy Letby. That was a shocking case. What has the First Minister's Government learned from the inquiry?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Obviously, it is important for us all to learn lessons from the inquiry, with regard to ensuring the quality and safety of patient care. As Mr Cole-Hamilton will know, an ongoing, persistent priority of the Scottish Government is to ensure that we strengthen patient safety in every respect of our health service care and treatment. That lies at the heart of the answer to the question from Jackie Baillie that I responded to, because vital issues of patient safety are involved in that respect. That will be the focus of our interrogation of that report, to ensure that any issues that are relevant to Scotland, and particularly to maternity services, are learned about and applied.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am glad to hear that but, although the inquiry's recommendations stop at the border, the risk to babies does not. Parents will want to know that newborns here are given the same protection as babies everywhere else. Lady Justice Thirlwall's recommendations include: in-cot cameras with live streaming video; tighter controls on access to insulin; and a duty on every health trust to monitor all baby deaths and escalate concerning patterns.

It now falls to this Government to choose whether to adopt those vital protections, because—God forbid—should Scotland ever have its own Lucy Letby, we must have every possible safeguard in place to keep our babies safe. Will the First Minister's Government include equivalent protections in Scotland—and by when?

The First Minister: Mr Cole-Hamilton raises important issues, and I expect them to be central to the work that the Government is taking forward through the maternity and neonatal task force, which was set up to promote improvements in maternity and neonatal care, and pregnancy and birth outcomes. We have established the task force to undertake that work. It would make logical and rational sense for the task force to look at the issues that arise out of the report to which Mr Cole-Hamilton refers and to identify, based on existing practice in Scotland, where there should be strengthening. I encourage the task force to undertake the work in that way, to make sure that the lessons that can be applied are applied to meet the high standards that Mr Cole-Hamilton puts to me today.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, First Minister.

When I referred to Mr Kerr earlier, I should have said that I meant Stephen Kerr. There are, of course, five Mr Kerrs in the chamber, and I apologise to the other four.

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