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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 23 September 2026

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

Portfolio Question Time

Climate Action and Rural Affairs

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Good afternoon. Our first item of business today is portfolio questions, and the first portfolio is climate action and rural affairs. I will try to accommodate as many questions as possible, but I would ask for concise questions and answers.

Woodland Purchases for Community Use

1. **Adam Harley (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government what support it provides to organisations seeking to purchase woodland for community use. (S7O-00259)

The Minister for Agriculture, Marine and the Islands (Jim Fairlie): The Scottish Government provides support in several ways. The community right to buy and the asset transfer legislation provide the opportunity to purchase assets, including woodland. The Scottish land fund is a source of funding for acquisition. In addition, the Scottish Government provides funding for advisory services, including support for the Community Woodlands Association, which provides independent advice and support to community groups that own, are involved in or are responsible for the management of woodland across Scotland, as well as new or existing groups looking to purchase woodland.

Adam Harley: Members of the Birdston Regeneration Group in Milton of Campsie, which is in my constituency, have knocked on more than 1,600 doors, raised more than £14,000 from local people and gained huge support for their efforts to bring Birdston woods into community ownership. The group was therefore bitterly disappointed when its application to the Scottish land fund was rejected, with insufficient evidence of need and economic returns from the project cited as the reason for that.

Does the minister agree that the substantial community work that has already been undertaken should be recognised and considered in any future funding decision, particularly because the group now faces the prospect of having to return money that was donated in good faith by local residents?

Jim Fairlie: The Scottish land fund is always oversubscribed, so the group not receiving funding does not necessarily mean that its scheme was not a good one. If the member wants to write to me and have a chat about it, I will be more than happy to meet him.

Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): Will the minister confirm whether a wider review will be conducted into the general administration of community asset transfers, given that many community groups have complained about the complicated, bureaucratic and lengthy process that is presently used?

Jim Fairlie: I am not aware of the complaints that the member is talking about, but if she wants to come to me and give me specific details, I will be more than happy to take that away.

Environmental Protection Funding (Prioritisation)

2. **David Kirkwood (South Scotland) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government whether, given the finite amount of funding available for environmental protection, it considers that funding should be prioritised towards measures with certain outcomes or those with uncertain outcomes. (S7O-00260)

The Minister for Agriculture, Marine and the Islands (Jim Fairlie): The Scottish Government takes an evidence-based approach to policy making, as well as in its decisions on funding and regulation. Inevitably, decisions must be taken where there is more or less certainty, so we are guided by the precautionary principle to enable proportionate decision making.

The Scottish Government will set out its spending plans for 2027-28, as part of the Scottish budget, on 3 December.

David Kirkwood: It would not be unfair to describe the effect of an increasing level of atmospheric carbon dioxide on our climate as infinitesimal, and any effort to reduce it as contentious. It would not be contentious, however, to describe Scotland's water, our proudest natural asset, as polluted.

Surface water and groundwater are contaminated by perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances—PFAS—microplastics and pharmaceuticals, among other things, and we are dumping raw sewage into the

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sea for probably more than 1,000 hours every day. Why not divert the thousands of millions of pounds that are currently allocated to chasing the carbon chimera in pursuit of the mythical net zero to where science says that it could make a measurable and positive environmental impact instead?

Jim Fairlie: A debate is happening this afternoon that the member might want to check into. On the debate about net zero, adaptation and where the priorities should be, they are all priorities, and we have the targets for good reason. We understand that the climate is changing and we will take adaptation measures, because we have effects such as flooding, water scarcity, drought, wildfires and coastal erosion. All those things are happening before our eyes, which the member accepts. Therefore, we have to prioritise our spending in the areas that we know are making a difference at the time, as well as looking at longer-term measures.

Laura Mitchell (Moray) (SNP): When dealing with climate and nature, I am unclear as to how anything that is worth doing can feasibly be described as a certain or uncertain outcome, other than the fact that climate change is certainly real and that the impacts of it are being and will continue to be felt in my community, which is why climate action is essential. The Scottish Government will invest £160 million to maximise the power of our land and forests to help tackle climate change and protect nature. What does the Scottish Government expect to achieve as a result of that investment?

Jim Fairlie: I whole-heartedly agree with Laura Mitchell. The crises of climate change and biodiversity loss are very real, as I just stated to the member who asked the previous question. Those crises are linked and mutually reinforcing, and we need to tackle the two together to protect our valuable natural capital, which directly supports £40 billion of economic output and underpins our health and prosperity as a nation.

We are investing £160.1 million in woodland creation, protecting our ancient Caledonian pinewoods, restoring peatland and delivering Scotland's biodiversity strategy. All that will lock up carbon to protect our land-based industries and increase the resilience of our communities to the growing risks resulting from climate change, including flooding and wildfire.

Climate Justice Fund

3. Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government whether its commitment to increase the climate justice fund will match the 25 per cent increase committed for the international development fund. (S7O-00261)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Rural Affairs (Gillian Martin): In stark contrast to cuts that are being made by Governments elsewhere, the recent programme for government was clear that the Scottish Government will grow our climate justice fund up from £36 million over the course of this session of Parliament. Obviously, the level of growth will be determined by future budget and spending review settlements.

The Scottish Government remains committed to delivering programmes that support climate-vulnerable communities in the global south—which have contributed least to the climate crisis but face the severity of its effects—to build resilience to climate impacts and address loss and damage.

Patrick Harvie: It sounds as though we need to continue to make that case as we go into the budget process. I encourage the cabinet secretary to make the case strongly that we align the climate justice fund increase with the wider increase in international development funding, not least because some of the people who are most strongly opposed to international development funding also talk the kind of drivel about the climate emergency that we have heard in the past few minutes.

What more can the Government do to increase public understanding of the positive impacts that the climate justice fund and wider international development funding have around the world?

Gillian Martin: I thank Patrick Harvie for that considered question. I work closely with my colleague Simita Kumar, who has international development as part of her portfolio. We are doing a lot of joint working to maximise both streams of funding and to ensure that they are joined up.

On Patrick Harvie's question and comments about the narrative associated with the issue, we need to get an awful lot better at talking about not just our responsibility to help the global south but the impact of doing so. We are talking about people who do not want to leave their homes and who want to live in resilient communities in parts of the world that have been affected by climate change. Protecting their interests and helping them to continue to thrive in their communities has a net impact on us as a global citizen.

For example, if people are food insecure or are taken out of their homes due to flooding or drought, that impacts on the rest of us. It causes conflict, creates climate refugees and has an impact on neighbouring countries and countries in the global north. Until we take that joined-up approach, we will have to see off some of the nonsense that there is on international spend, which is mainly race baiting, in my opinion.

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Kate Nevens (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green): Following the devastating floods over the summer in Nepal, which were caused by a glacial landslide that was likely a result of the climate crisis, what engagement has the cabinet secretary had with the humanitarian emergency fund team about increasing support to countries that are affected by climate-induced emergencies, and whether any funds might be committed to supporting communities in Nepal?

Gillian Martin: We are always looking at the particular communities that we work in partnership with. Scotland has long-standing relationships with Malawi, Zambia and Rwanda. This year, we committed £7.5 million in programmes to support the most vulnerable climate communities in those countries. I recently had a meeting with Simita Kumar and our teams in which we talked about whether we should be looking at having partnership arrangements with other countries that are becoming more affected by climate change.

It is a changing picture, and what happened in Nepal was horrific. We must always be agile with regards to where we put money, and we also need to use our experience in asking other countries to do more in this space. It was particularly disappointing to see the United Kingdom Government reduce its spend in this area.

Hyperscale Artificial Intelligence Data Centres

4. Q Manivannan (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the cumulative impact of hyperscale AI data centres' energy consumption on its commitment to meet its net zero by 2045 target. (S7O-00262)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Rural Affairs (Gillian Martin): The Scottish Government is working with industry, regulators and partner agencies to understand the cumulative environmental impacts of data centre developments and to ensure that the growth of the sector is consistent with Scotland's net zero ambitions. The Minister for Public Finance has issued a new direction that requires planning authorities to notify Scottish ministers of new data centre applications and mandates environmental impact assessments for all applications that exceed a power capacity of 50MW. Those measures will strengthen our oversight of the development pipeline and ensure that potentially significant environmental effects are considered from the outset.

Q Manivannan: Campaigners in Edinburgh in my region have highlighted that the proposed South Gyle data centre would consume enough electricity to power a quarter of a million homes—more than double the number of households in the city. How is the Scottish Government ensuring that the cumulative impact of such proposals is taken into account in its national climate action plans to reduce emissions from our homes and public buildings?

Gillian Martin: It is important that I do not focus my remarks on a particular application. There are several aspects to that question, and Hannah Mary Goodlad, the Minister for Public Finance, has set out some of the environmental impacts that are associated with live and future planning applications.

One thing that has exercised me over the past few years is that the United Kingdom Government is paying renewable electricity generators to switch off their generation when they cannot get capacity in the grid or when there is reduced demand. We need to consider whether there are off-takers for that electricity—I am not talking only about data centres—so that it can be diverted elsewhere. There was a lot in that question, but I hope that my answer gives Dr Manivannan an indication of my thinking on the matter.

Monica Lennon (Glasgow) (Lab): I will not ask the cabinet secretary about matters that are for the planning minister, but will she advise the Parliament whether the Government will consider what impact the potential hyperscale data centres could have on the commitments in the climate change plan?

Gillian Martin: The climate change plan was set out in March, before the dissolution of the Parliament. However, I have said throughout the whole process that the climate change plan is an agile document. When there are particular developments, such as technological developments, or sectors that are booming, there will always be consideration of whether the climate change plan is fit for purpose. There will also be an update of the climate change plan in five years' time. However, the point was well made about the capacity that we have for particular burgeoning sectors and the stress that they might put on our natural resources. The climate change plan is not a static document for a moment in time that is to be adhered to; it must be agile.

Waste Discharge into Sea (East Lothian)

5. Miles Briggs (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions ministers are having with the Scottish Environment Protection Agency regarding the reported discharge of waste directly into the sea impacting on communities across East Lothian. (S7O-00263)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Rural Affairs (Gillian Martin): Scotland's bathing waters are important for local communities, and 97 per cent of our bathing waters achieve the bathing water standard

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for water quality. I have had regular engagement with the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and Scottish Water throughout the bathing water season, including two meetings with SEPA in the past few weeks, to ensure that all the necessary actions are being taken to protect and improve bathing water quality across the whole of Scotland.

A range of actions are under way or planned by Scottish Water and other public partners to identify and address bathing water quality issues, particularly in Edinburgh and East Lothian. As part of that work, Scottish Water is undertaking a £1 million study—a study that I requested—to consider what work could further improve the bathing water in that region.

Miles Briggs: I am regularly contacted by constituents in Edinburgh and East Lothian about the impact that sewage discharge is having on our communities. Just this morning, there were two reported pollution alerts, at Wardie bay and Belhaven in East Lothian. It is totally unacceptable for such discharges to take place. What action will ministers take? More specifically, will they set legally binding targets to end untreated sewage discharges that affect bathing waters and popular recreational water use by 2030?

Gillian Martin: When it comes to the pollutants that go into our bathing waters, it is important to understand that there are a number of contributing sources. SEPA gives advice to local authorities and landowners and has discussions with Scottish Water. Over the summer, there have been instances in which there have been bathing water alerts in particular bathing waters that have not been a result of anything that has come from the sewerage system but which have been to do with factors such as litter, seagull activity and dog mess, in particular. There are a number of contributory sources. That is why I provided £1 million for the study that I mentioned, to ascertain where the pressures are coming from in East Lothian and Edinburgh. Off the back of that, we will be able to identify whether we need to take certain action in certain places, whether with Scottish Water or local communities.

In addition, there is a big piece of work to be done on communication in relation to what people flush down their toilets that can cause blockages and other issues. There are a number of sources of pollution that must be addressed.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I thank the cabinet secretary for her very full answers to Miles Briggs's questions.

I want to move us from the east coast to the west coast. The waters around the beautiful coastline of Argyll and Bute are used by locals and visitors alike for swimming, paddling, surfing and sailing. What consideration is the Scottish Government giving to supporting communities to introduce bathing water designation for more waters around Argyll and Bute's wonderful coastline?

Gillian Martin: I need do nothing other than agree with Jenni Minto about the beauty of the coastline of her constituency. Over the summer, I had the great privilege of being in Tiree, which must have some of the best bathing waters in the whole of Scotland.

The bathing water regulations require the Scottish ministers to designate a bathing water if they expect a large number of people to bathe there, taking into account past trends, infrastructure and facilities. Any organisation or individual can suggest to the Scottish ministers that a bathing water should be designated. The relevant proposal form is available on SEPA's website, which sets out the supporting information that can be provided. Obviously, things change and certain areas become more popular, so it is important for people to know that communities have the ability to request the designation of bathing waters.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Question 6 has been withdrawn.

Bluetongue Outbreak (Vaccine Procurement)

7. Jamie Langan (South Scotland) (Reform): To ask the Scottish Government, following the previous ministerial statement outlining that it will not be providing support to farmers affected by the bluetongue outbreak in South Scotland region, whether it will reconsider its position and commit to looking at the central procurement of vaccine. (S7O-00265)

The Minister for Agriculture, Marine and the Islands (Jim Fairlie): I fully understand that this is an incredibly difficult time for livestock keepers who are dealing with the impacts of the disease on their stock.

As I said to Senga Beresford during questions on the statement that I made to Parliament on 9 September on the bluetongue virus in the south-west of Scotland, the Government already provides the most comprehensive package of support to the livestock sector through direct payments and targeted grants.

We also support farmers through horizon scanning and alert systems, which forewarned us that bluetongue was coming ever closer to Scotland—not least because the restriction zone that was imposed by the United Kingdom Government covered the whole of the land base of England.

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The Scottish Government also provides advice and practical guidance on the implementation and maintenance of control measures, which include the testing of suspect animals, wider surveillance and veterinary investigations.

Vaccination of stock is a commercial decision, and the Scottish Government has done its bit in licensing the vaccine in Scotland and working with other Governments, industry and manufacturers to ensure continuity of supply, but I must reiterate that demand for vaccine needs to be generated within the industry.

Jamie Langan: The minister alludes to his awareness that bluetongue was coming to Scotland. Does he feel that the Government did enough? How can he assure farmers that, in the future, the Government will be more proactive and not reactive on significant challenges for the industry?

Jim Fairlie: The Government was not reactive; the Government was very proactive. We were messaging the livestock sector that the only way to protect stock was through vaccination. There was vaccine in the country but, because of the low uptake, it was directed back to the European Union, and it then had to be brought back because there was an outbreak of bluetongue. Those in the farming community will have to address the issue by ensuring that they put in their orders to buy their vaccine for the season coming.

Andrew Baxter (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD): The livestock industry has made it clear that vaccination uptake will depend on farmers and crofters receiving practical advice from organisations and individuals they already trust. Will the minister commit to funding an industry-led campaign over the winter to explain that vaccination is the only effective way to protect livestock from bluetongue, and to drive up vaccine uptake before the next high-risk season?

Jim Fairlie: I do not believe that a paid campaign is required. The farming community are very well aware of what is going on. They can see it in the papers. I have spoken to farmers from the south to the very north, and everybody knows about bluetongue. They know that it is there, and they know that it has now gotten into Scotland. It is therefore in their best interests to protect their investment and ensure that they get their livestock vaccinated before the next season.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Given that achieving high vaccination rates before next year's mid-season will be critical in protecting Scotland's livestock sector, will the Scottish Government commit to funding the sector and running a national awareness campaign to encourage vaccine uptake, providing clear and consistent guidance to farmers to give them confidence that they are making the right decisions for their business, and will the Government consider underwriting vaccine procurement for veterinary practices, so that vets can order sufficient supplies without carrying the financial risks themselves, therefore supporting a rapid and comprehensive vaccine roll-out across Scotland?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I ask the minister to address the vets issue.

Jim Fairlie: I see that we have consensus across the chamber, as both Andrew Baxter and Finlay Carson are asking exactly the same question—and the answer is exactly the same. The farming community are very well aware of the risks associated with bluetongue. We do not need a targeted, funded campaign. I am more than happy to keep talking about it. Individual members are talking to their rural constituents. We know that bluetongue is here, so farmers have a responsibility to protect their own livestock by ordering the vaccine and giving the companies that provide the vaccine plenty of notice that a demand-led programme is coming.

Rural Support Plan

8. Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its rural support plan. (S7O-00266)

The Minister for Agriculture, Marine and the Islands (Jim Fairlie): The rural support plan provides a period of clarity and certainty, delivering direct support for the next five years to provide the industry with reassurance and boosting confidence in long-term investment.

I have to point out that certainty does not mean no change. Agriculture reform will follow an evolving continuous-improvement approach designed and delivered in partnership with our rural communities and valued stakeholders and supported by a monitoring and evaluation framework.

The plan will be amended to reflect that evolving reform journey, and I look forward to discussing it further when providing closing evidence to the Rural Affairs Committee inquiry next month.

Tim Eagle: My apologies, Presiding Officer. I should have declared an interest: I am a small farmer, and I am in receipt of payments under the basic payment scheme.

The minister just said "clarity and certainty". Let me give him some quotes from the Rural Affairs Committee. We have heard that lots of things are "missing from the plan", and that

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“we are all a bit frustrated by there being no change at all.”—[Official Report, Rural Affairs Committee, 2 September 2026; c 30.]

I even have a quote to say that

“the rural support plan is a manifest failure of policy making.”—[Official Report, Rural Affairs Committee, 16 September 2026; c 3.]

That, according to the Scottish National Party, is “clarity and certainty”. How many times must we remind the Government that farmers need action? Perhaps, for example, it could give the underspend from the less favoured area support scheme—LFASS—back to the farmers who need it. Has the minister actually been listening to what the experts have been saying to the Rural Affairs Committee? What are his real takeaways from that?

Jim Fairlie: I have certainly been listening to the takeaways from the Rural Affairs Committee and I will give my full responses when I am in front of it. There is absolutely no doubt that we have given clarity and certainty to the farming community. Between now and 2030, farmers know what they have coming, what their payments will be, and what the system is. I point out to Mr Eagle that his party introduced the sustainable farming investment scheme in England, which ran out in six hours, so thousands of farmers across the country had no chance of getting anywhere near that money. The stability and certainty that the Government has provided is exactly what farmers need. They know that they are getting a good deal.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): If we have concise supplementaries, we could fit more in, so I ask for succinct questions.

Donald MacKinnon (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I draw attention to my entry in the members’ register of interests, which shows that I run a crofting business.

After introducing the calving interval condition to the suckler beef support scheme, the Scottish Government correctly had to amend the scheme’s rules to make it workable for small herds. What lessons has the Government learned from that experience? How will the rural support plan ensure that future schemes get it right first time for small producers?

Jim Fairlie: Donald MacKinnon has just pointed out the absolute beauty of how we are approaching the system. We constantly speak to the stakeholders—

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): He could change it!

Jim Fairlie: If we are going to keep hearing chirping from the sidelines, the member will not hear my answer.

Finlay Carson: It is nonsense!

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Enough, Mr Carson.

Jim Fairlie: Mr MacKinnon has just pointed out the flexibility of the scheme that we have brought into play. We are speaking to the people who are directly affected. When we have seen things that we can change to make them better, that is exactly what we have done and will continue to do through the evolution of the rural support plan.

Dawn Black (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): The rural economy and its associated industries are some of Scotland’s most important and make up a vast amount of my constituency. Therefore, how will the rural support plan ensure that the SNP Government continues to develop and articulate the future of Scottish agriculture, in close consultation and collaboration with the industry during the period of the plan and beyond?

Jim Fairlie: The rural support plan is an iterative process that will continue to evolve and develop. Dawn Black is absolutely correct that the system needs to work with and for the farming community. We have done that and have worked with the agriculture reform implementation oversight board for five years to develop the plan. This parliamentary session is entirely about delivery, which is what I have committed to doing.

Climate Action Policies (Integrated Public Transport and Active Travel Networks)

9. Monica Lennon (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the climate action secretary has had with the transport secretary regarding how climate action policies are supporting the development of integrated public transport and active travel networks that connect rural communities with major urban centres, including Glasgow. (S7O-00267)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Rural Affairs (Gillian Martin): I last met the transport secretary on 10 September about the climate action policies that he has responsibility for delivering in his portfolio. In addition, I have established a ministerial delivery group on climate change; I chair the group, and Mr Flynn is a member of it. The group will strengthen delivery monitoring across Government.

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This financial year, we are investing more than £2.7 billion to support public transport and a modal shift from car use. We have also delivered our 100-day commitment to a £2 bus fare cap across the Strathclyde area and have frozen all ScotRail fares this financial year. With my responsibility for rural affairs, I am pleased that those measures will improve connectivity for low-income communities and people in rural and urban communities.

Monica Lennon: Free bus travel is a key policy driver in the climate change plan. As getting more people on to buses will help to reduce Scotland's transport emissions, will the cabinet secretary discuss with the transport secretary how the Bus Services Act 2025 will support local transport authorities and regional transport partnerships to franchise bus services or set up publicly owned bus companies? Will they discuss how the 2025 act will help to ensure that bus services meet the needs of all people across Scotland, instead of cutting routes and hiking fares in regions that are outwith the £2 bus fare cap?

Gillian Martin: In his previous role, Mr Fairlie had responsibility for buses. He spoke about the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019, which gives local authorities the powers that they require.

However, relating the question to the responsibilities of the current Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport, I note that there was a round-table event on 26 August at which there were opportunities for stakeholder involvement to inform the better buses legislation. That was the first stage of the consultation process and I believe that it was a productive meeting. There will be further opportunities for engagement and discussion as the proposals develop, and I will of course keep a keen eye on how they impact on the climate change plan.

Net Zero Policies (Local Economic Development)

10. **Max Bannerman (Highlands and Islands) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on whether its net zero policies are compatible with stimulating local economic development. (S7O-00268)

The Minister for Agriculture, Marine and the Islands (Jim Fairlie): Policies contained in the climate change plan are compatible with economic growth.

Max Bannerman: I thank the minister for that short answer. Reliable infrastructure is crucial to economic development in the Highlands and Islands. I have mentioned the A96 in the chamber before. When I last did so, I received a contemptuous answer from the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport, so I will try again with the minister. In 2021, the dualling of that major trunk road was put on hold for a climate compatibility assessment—the price of Green support for the then Sturgeon Government. Five years on and £6 million later, no bypass for Elgin and Keith is in sight. Can the minister guarantee that net zero ideology will never again be used to hold up vital improvements to the A96?

Jim Fairlie: “Net zero nonsense” sums up the way that Reform is tackling the very serious issues that we have in this country with climate change. I find it really disappointing that we cannot get at least some understanding that the fires and floods and the changes that we are seeing with coastal erosion are very much part of the climate change issue that we are dealing with. We will continue with our net zero journey.

Education, Culture and Gaelic

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): The next portfolio is education, culture and Gaelic.

Scottish Attainment Challenge Funding

1. **Gary Bouse (Falkirk West) (SNP):** I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, which shows that I am a sitting councillor in Falkirk Council.

To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it is having with local authorities regarding the Scottish attainment challenge funding beyond 2026-27. (S7O-00269)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): Over the past decade, we have invested £1.75 billion in the Scottish attainment challenge. Further investment this year, including £130 million of pupil equity funding, is helping to empower headteachers to best support the needs of their pupils.

In recent weeks, I have made clear to Parliament my intention to continue supporting the fund. As Mr Bouse highlights, local authorities are an important partner in the work to develop it. Discussions are ongoing, and just yesterday I chaired a meeting of the education and childcare assurance board, which includes members of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland. My officials are meeting further representatives today, and I will update Parliament when I can.

Gary Bouse: The Scottish Government has provided significant funding to schools and councils that is aimed at closing the poverty-related attainment gap. Although the gap will remain until we eradicate poverty, the funding has proved positive in places such as the Falkirk Council area, where recent figures have

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confirmed a closing of the gap in literacy and numeracy at various stages, leading to record numbers of school leavers going to positive destinations—some 97.2 per cent in the previous academic year.

Can the cabinet secretary outline what plans the Government has to continue sustainable funding to schools and local authorities to further support closing the poverty-related attainment gap? Can she outline a timescale for when announcements on that funding will be made?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I have to ask for more succinct questions.

Màiri McAllan: I very much welcome the positive progress in Falkirk, which the member noted. He is also right to highlight the figure on positive destinations.

I repeat what I said in my first answer. No decisions have been made on budgets, which are yet to be decided, but I am committed to continuance of the Scottish attainment challenge and I will update Parliament with more detail when I can.

Katherine Sangster (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab): The Scottish attainment challenge fund is used in a diverse number of ways to suit the needs of local areas. The success story in Falkirk has been mentioned. However, just because a problem is local does not make it unique. Will the Scottish Government commit to analysing how the funding is being used in order that schools facing similar circumstances can learn from one another and that best practice guidelines can be created so that every school can make the best use of the funding?

Màiri McAllan: Katherine Sangster is absolutely right. We need to strike a balance between what makes pupil equity funding so excellent, which is that it is directed by schools and school leaders, and involving local authorities and the Scottish Government in understanding what exactly the funding is being used for and the difference that it is making. We commit to ongoing oversight of the programme. Equally, the number of staff who are supported by PEF, which is specific to a school's needs, speaks to its value, and, as I say, I am committed to its continuance.

Young Learners with Additional Support Needs (Informal Exclusion from Education)

2. Joe Long (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how informal exclusion from education among young learners with additional support needs is being recorded and addressed, for example, those neurodivergent young people who are unable to attend school regularly or are on part-time timetables. (S7O-00270)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): All pupils are entitled to a full-time education, and schools should provide personalised support that maximises the attendance and engagement of pupils, including those with additional support needs. Temporary reductions in learning hours should be used only in exceptional circumstances and always as part of a wider package of support around a child.

Education authorities are required to have robust arrangements to record, monitor and review attendance, including through the use of specific coding for part-time timetables. That is all done with a view to planning well and supporting a return to full-time education as soon as possible for a child.

Joe Long: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer and commitment. We will not see truly inclusive education without a serious investment in training for educators and provision for young people with additional support needs. More than £500 million has come into the Scottish budget as a consequence of increased special educational needs provision in England. Will the cabinet secretary indicate how much of that money will be committed to additional support needs provision in Scotland?

Màiri McAllan: We are entering into a period of budget negotiations for the coming financial year, but, in respect of the current financial year, I will reflect on a couple of things.

There has been a significant increase in the spend from us to education authorities to invest in additional support for learning. If we look at the difference between the years 2024-25 and 2012-13, we can see that it has gone from £540 million of investment to almost £1.1 billion. There has been an increase in investment to reflect the increase in requirements and needs.

In this financial year, we also made an additional £29 million available for additional support needs, with £28 million of that going to councils and £1 million being held back nationally to, for example, provide support for professional learning.

When it comes to the coming financial year, I will shortly be entering into discussions with the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government.

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Iris Duane (Glasgow) (Green): I appreciate the cabinet secretary's response to Joe Long's question, but, with the refusal of the Scottish Government to take forward the highly anticipated learning disabilities, autism and neurodivergence bill, many of our disabled and neurodivergent constituents are rightfully afraid that institutional failure and discrimination will continue.

Will the cabinet secretary detail what work has been done to ensure that the refusal to take forward the bill will not continue to disadvantage disabled and neurodivergent young people in our education system?

Màiri McAllan: The Scottish Government is absolutely committed to improving outcomes for people with learning disabilities, autistic people and neurodivergent people. Iris Duane referred to the LDAN bill. Our view is that practical action, investment and change now will be of greater practical assistance to those who need it than a long primary legislation process would be.

I assure Iris Duane and those who are listening of two things. First, practical action is under way, not least through the national staged intervention model in the education space. My health colleagues are also taking forward a lot of work.

Secondly, the work that was done in preparation for the bill is informing the action that we will take now. We remain open-minded to the question of a bill, but that would be down the line, once greater practical support has been put in place and action has been taken.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP): Efforts to support learners to achieve and succeed must account for the varying needs of our young people, including those with additional support needs. Can the cabinet secretary provide an update on how the Scottish Government is working to deliver the recommendations set out in the McManus review?

Màiri McAllan: I confirmed to the Parliament in a recent statement that we accept the recommendations of the McManus review and will spend the parliamentary session implementing them.

One of the most impactful changes, perhaps, will be the national staged intervention model that I mentioned. A lot of local authorities are currently using a staged intervention model, but this one will take a national approach so that there is simplicity and consistency, and so that young people and their families know what support to expect for additional learning support needs.

I published a route map to that national staged intervention model in August, and we are working very closely with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and education authorities on its implementation.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I call Mark Griffin, who joins us remotely.

Widening Access Policies (Disability, Neurodivergence and Long-term Health Conditions)

3. Mark Griffin (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government, regarding widening access policies for Scottish-funded students applying to university, what its position is on whether disability, neurodivergence and long-term health conditions should be considered. (S7O-00271)

I apologise that I am not there in person. My appendix clearly does not respect parliamentary timetables

The Minister for Innovation, Technology and Tertiary Education (Alyn Smith): I wish Mark Griffin well with his recovery.

The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that learners with disabilities, long-term health conditions or additional support needs can access higher education and receive the support needed to succeed.

Recent statistics show significant progress. The proportion of Scots entering full-time first degree courses with a known disability has risen from 11.5 per cent to 25.5 per cent over the past decade. Colleges and universities have duties under the Equality Act 2010 to make reasonable adjustments and provide tailored support. To look at what more we can do, we will consider the findings from a recent consultation on disabled student support.

Mark Griffin: I thank the minister for his answer and for his concern.

I have been contacted by the family of Devyn Taylor from Stepps, who achieved five A grades at higher and excellent advanced higher results despite years of illness, disability and delayed neurodevelopmental support. Despite those achievements and the resilience that she demonstrated in overcoming those barriers, she was unable to secure a place to study her dream course in dentistry.

Does the minister believe that disability, neurodivergence and long-term health conditions are given sufficient regard in Scotland's widening access framework, particularly for highly competitive courses such as

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dentistry? Is that adequately reflected in how we assess the barriers that young people have overcome to achieve their academic success?

Alyn Smith: I would very much say that that applies to the high-demand courses as much as everything else. The duties under the Equality Act 2010 apply to everybody. The member raises a specific case and, if he would like to meet me, I would be happy to discuss it with him.

I say to all colleagues across the chamber that, if they have a specific case that they would like to raise, they should do so in advance, and I will probably give them a better answer.

Katie Haggmann (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I know that free tuition under the Scottish National Party is tackling financial barriers to attending university, and Scotland's approach to supporting access to higher education goes further than is the case anywhere else in the United Kingdom.

Will the minister share what assessment has been made of the impact of the Scottish Government's investment, especially in providing pathways to university for more of our young people, regardless of their background?

Alyn Smith: I thank Katie Haggmann for raising a subject that I know is close to her heart. The statistics show that Scotland is widening access to university, with the number of Scots from the most deprived backgrounds who enter university on full-time first degree courses up 55 per cent since this Government's establishment of the commission on widening access. In 2024-25, we had a record 17.4 per cent of full-time first degree entrants coming from Scotland's most deprived areas, which is an increase from 16.7 per cent in 2023-24. That is the highest proportion recorded and it shows progress towards the commission on widening access's target that one in five students who enter university will come from the 20 per cent most deprived areas by 2030.

University Entrants (Scotland-based Students)

4. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the number of Scotland-based students gaining entry to university for the academic session 2026-27. (S7O-00272)

The Minister for Innovation, Technology and Tertiary Education (Alyn Smith): Universities and Colleges Admissions Service data shows that around 37,360 Scotland-domiciled students have secured a United Kingdom university place for 2026-27, with record numbers going to Scottish universities and record numbers of 18-year-olds in Scotland achieving a university place. That shows that the continued success of the Scottish Government's commitment to access to higher education should be based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay, and should be supported by free tuition for eligible Scotland-domiciled undergraduate students.

We are also making progress towards our widening access targets, with a record 6,390 Scots from deprived areas heading to university this year.

Alan Brown: I welcome the fact that a record number of students gained entry to university. The minister mentioned free tuition as well, which means that that record number of students will not graduate with the crippling £50,000-worth of debt that students south of the border have.

A couple of my constituents have contacted me to raise concerns about some universities closing clearing to Scotland-based students. Does the minister have any discussions with universities about a uniform approach to the clearing process?

Alyn Smith: We are in fierce agreement about tuition-free education. Some universities have closed clearing places to Scotland-domiciled applicants at an earlier stage this year, after filling their allocation of funded places.

We are alive to that issue, and the member is right to raise it but it is important to note that neither new students from the rest of the UK nor international students are able to access funded places that have been set aside for Scottish students. Clearing closed a bit earlier, but that was after the allocation was full.

The latest UCAS data for 2026 shows that 76 per cent of acceptances to Scottish universities were from Scotland-domiciled students in 2026, which is up from 71 per cent a decade ago.

Endangered and Critically Endangered Heritage Crafts

5. Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what support it is providing to endangered and critically endangered heritage crafts. (S7O-00273)

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

The Minister for Innovation, Technology and Tertiary Education (Alyn Smith): I pay tribute to Paul Sweeney's advocacy for those issues over a long period. We recognise the importance of traditional and heritage crafts in sustaining Scotland's historic environment, cultural identity and specialist skills base. We support those skills through our investment in Skills Development Scotland and Historic Environment Scotland, which currently includes a range of provision for apprenticeships and skills development opportunities across the heritage sector through the skills investment plan for Scotland's historic environment.

The sector progresses heritage skills and learning and career pathways by building capacity and growing provision. Helping to retain and pass on traditional craft skills ensures that endangered and critically endangered heritage crafts can continue to contribute to Scotland's economy and communities.

Paul Sweeney: I thank the minister for his kind words. I am sure that he will agree that many of our heritage crafts are now critically endangered because public bodies are not buying enough locally. Following the devastating collapse of Ballantine Castings in Bo'ness last year—its historic moulds, which go back 200 years, face being scrapped altogether—Scotland's last architectural iron foundry, Laing's of Lochgelly, wants to purchase it, but the foundry's survival is threatened by a lack of consistent public sector contracts for civic ironwork. We see the exact same failure in the stone industry, with local suppliers at Tradstocks bypassed for imported materials for the Glasgow avenues project and George Square renovation.

If we want to keep these skills alive and allow businesses such as those to take on apprentices, we must change how we spend public money. Will the minister help me and Laing's to save the Ballantine moulds and agree to progress reforms to public procurement so that social value weightings are prioritised to protect Scotland's traditional trades?

Alyn Smith: I thank Paul Sweeney for the very specific question. The closest you will get to me finding an advantage to Brexit is that we can look at procurement rules domestically. Procurement rules could be better worked to ensure a market for the traditional skills.

If there is an opportunity for us to intercede in relation to the issue that the member has raised, I would be very happy to do so. Perhaps we can take that offline.

Morven-May MacCallum (Highlands and Islands) (LD): The minister will be aware that this Sunday marks the start of the 17th Shetland wool week, an annual celebration of Shetland's textile heritage. The textile sector in Shetland has faced difficulty in recent years, including cuts to courses at the University of the Highlands and Islands, reduced availability of funding for small businesses and, on top of that, increased costs for small businesses in the islands. How will the Scottish Government tailor support to meet the needs of those small island-based businesses in the textile and craft sector?

Alyn Smith: I am very glad that the Shetland wool week has been mentioned. My colleague, Hannah Mary Goodlad, was talking about it earlier today, and it is great that we have an advocate for it. We could be doing more through the skills sector.

The member has raised several issues that are not directly in my remit, but I am very supportive of the craft sector. I should declare an interest as a former director of Radical Weavers in Stirling, which is a body that spends a lot of time on such skills. We could be doing more, and I am keen to see those businesses succeed and be supported.

Historic Buildings (Visitor Attraction)

6. Lloyd Melville (Angus South) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it is working with Historic Environment Scotland and VisitScotland to attract visitors to historic buildings. (S7O-00274)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): The Scottish Government works with both Historic Environment Scotland and VisitScotland to promote Scotland's historic buildings and our heritage attractions. Scotland's historic environment remains a major economic asset, generating around £6 billion annually for our economy and supporting more than 81,000 jobs. Through the national strategy, which is entitled "Our Past, Our Future", partners are working to increase public engagement with heritage, strengthen the evidence base for decision making and, ultimately, ensure that our precious historic attractions continue to contribute fully to our economy.

Lloyd Melville: Arbroath abbey, in my Angus South constituency, is one of Scotland's most important historic buildings. However, many visitors and tourists have limited knowledge about its importance. A lot of constituents have come to me to tell me that they feel that it is underpromoted. What more can the Scottish Government do to promote Arbroath abbey and to draw people to the town centre? Will the cabinet secretary meet me and relevant stakeholders to discuss the matter in detail?

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Màiri McAllan: I agree with Lloyd Melville about the importance of Arbroath abbey as one of Scotland's historic sites, and I underline the importance of working together to conserve and promote it locally and nationally. I am aware of events such as the Arbroath market, the declaration day celebrations, bioblitz activities and scaffolding tours, all of which allow people to see conservation work up close and help to attract new audiences to the site. Historic Environment Scotland is leading those efforts, alongside a substantial community effort to raise the abbey's profile. However, I would be pleased to engage with Mr Melville about what more we can do for that important site.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Many historic buildings that are popular with visitors, such as Dunkeld cathedral, face extensive bills for repair and maintenance. The replacement for the VAT recovery scheme for listed places of worship, which was announced by the United Kingdom Government, has generated more than £9 million in Barnett consequential for the Scottish Government, yet only £1 million has been allocated for Scottish buildings. Why are the custodians of those important Scottish buildings being short-changed in comparison with those that are south of the border?

Màiri McAllan: I am pleased that Murdo Fraser is able to acknowledge the work of Historic Environment Scotland in putting in place the places of worship scheme after the unexpected decision by the UK Government to change its arrangements, which had a significant impact on Scotland. That fund is in place and is being piloted. Along with Historic Environment Scotland, we will consider the interest in it and the impact that it has.

However, Mr Fraser will also be aware that ministers have asked and will continue to ask the UK Government for a targeted VAT reduction for the repair and maintenance of traditional buildings. I point Mr Fraser to our housing to 2040 strategy, which was clear that reductions in VAT on household repairs would encourage home renovation in Scotland and better equip homes and buildings, including our traditional buildings, for, among other things, the challenges of net zero.

Additional Support Needs Provision

7. Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what measures it will introduce as part of the programme for government to improve additional support needs provision in schools. (S7O-00275)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): Owing to the importance of additional support needs, a number of questions have been raised today, so I will put on the record in response to Meghan Gallacher what I have said before: that the national staged intervention model, on which we are working with education authorities, is one of the principal pieces of work that we are taking forward. That was a part of the recommendations of the McManus review. It sits alongside additional funding in this financial year and discussions on future budgets, to which I have already referred. It also sits alongside work in teacher workforce planning, in which I am keen to support an ease of transition from parts of the profession into additional support for learning.

Meghan Gallacher: We know that the number of children who are now presenting with additional support needs is increasing, but we also know that there are challenges in our early learning facilities. Can the cabinet secretary update Parliament on ASN training in the workforce, and say whether she is looking specifically at ASN provision as part of any childcare expansion, bearing in mind the current challenges that the sector faces in the private, voluntary and independent sector in particular? We know that if those processes are embedded at the early stages, there is a better transition for children throughout their time in school.

Màiri McAllan: I absolutely agree with Meghan Gallacher on the importance of those formative early years in a child's development, and on the need to ensure that a child gets the support that is right for them and their needs at the earliest opportunity in life.

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise is leading on our development of childcare expansion and, together, she and I are currently working with officials on investing to test, in various childcare settings, what is required and what can best rise to meet a wide and varied cross-section of needs for our children and young people. That money is being invested now and the settings are being tested. In our development of the workforce, which we know will have to be done to facilitate the expansion of childcare, we are very mindful of the needs of our children and of meeting those needs as early as possible.

"Scotland's colleges 2026"

8. Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to Audit Scotland's report, "Scotland's colleges 2026". (S7O-00276)

The Minister for Innovation, Technology and Tertiary Education (Alyn Smith): I warmly welcome Audit Scotland's report, "Scotland's colleges 2026", because it recognises the challenges facing the sector and the

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vital contribution that colleges make to learners and communities, and to Scotland's economy. This morning, I was at Fife College, seeing some of the fantastic work that it is doing with schools and local businesses.

That is why we increased college funding in the round by 10 per cent this year. We are working with the Scottish Funding Council and the sector to strengthen financial sustainability and provide greater flexibility while also redesigning the sector through the college sector of the future workstream. Together, those measures will ensure a sustainable, resilient and high-quality college sector that is equipped to meet Scotland's future needs. I value colleges very highly.

Katy Clark: As the minister will know, more than half of Scotland's colleges are now classed as being at high or very high financial risk. In the past five years, colleges have faced a 7 per cent real-terms funding cut and have lost 13 per cent of jobs, and in the past two years, student numbers have been cut by around 40,000. Ahead of the budget, does the minister agree that colleges need better funding and investment, not more cuts and underinvestment?

Alyn Smith: The member invites me to make commitments that are well beyond my remit, but I very much value colleges and very much appreciate the Audit Scotland report. I have to say that the report itself found a £5.6 million shortfall out of a £740 million investment from the Scottish Government; that does not strike me as being as existential as it has been presented from some quarters.

Scotland's colleges are innovating brilliantly. We need to see some reform of the sector and a focus on skills and the lifelong journey of the citizen, but I have confidence and faith that Scotland's colleges can rise to that challenge, as will the Scottish Government, and, as the minister, I am committed to ensuring that colleges are central to the delivery of our agenda.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): Does the minister recognise the impact on colleges of the Labour Party's decision to increase national insurance contributions, which places a massive burden on our colleges? Can he advise of any further discussions that the Government has had with Forth Valley College regarding the long-term future of its Alloa campus after a successful campaign last year? Can he provide an update on progress toward securing that campus's future?

Alyn Smith: I warmly pay tribute to Keith Brown's ferocious advocacy for the Alloa campus. I know Forth Valley College well, as it has a campus in Stirling. I think that the Alloa campus has a glittering future as part of Forth Valley College; there is some fantastic work under way. At Fife College today, I heard about the Babcock partnership with Forth Valley College and Fife College. That sort of investment across the private and public sectors, focused on skills for the future, is crucial.

On the member's point about the increase in national insurance contributions, that has hit the entire public sector, and indeed the private sector, very hard.

Additional Support for Learning

9. Steven Bonnar (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to ensure that the new national approach to additional support for learning delivers more consistent support for children and young people across Scotland, and provides schools and families with greater clarity about what support is available. (S7O-00277)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): The frequency with which additional support for learning has been raised today in questions underlines its importance to members and the people they represent, and I want to confirm that the Government shares that view of its importance.

I spent the morning with Cerebral Palsy Scotland, speaking to its staff and to young people and their families, who have varied and complex requirements. The young people I was with included people of primary school age and people who have left school, and there was also a young person who is in university. I put on the record that we are having those engagements and are speaking to as many people as we can to understand the varied educational needs of our young people and to ensure that Government policy reflects that.

I emphasise again that the framework that Mr Bonnar asks me about is designed to make support in schools more consistent and predictable for children and their families, regardless of where they live in Scotland.

Steven Bonnar: Last week, pupils from Uddingston grammar school visited Parliament. I know that supporting every young person to reach their full potential is a priority for the school, the school's families and, indeed, the Government. The new national approach to additional support for learning is an important step towards greater consistency of provision. Will the cabinet secretary outline how she will ensure that those changes translate into practical support for pupils, teachers and families in schools such as Uddingston grammar and make a real difference in terms of the positive outcomes that we all seek for young people?

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Màiri McAllan: Mr Bonnar spoke about practical support and the need to make a noticeable difference for children and families. That is exactly what the Government is focused on. The staged intervention model, on which we are working collaboratively with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and others, is about ensuring that we provide the right support at the right time, as early as possible—Meghan Gallacher was right to make a point about that—while always giving families clarity on what they can expect and how decisions are made around a child, and, of course, always being guided by the principles of getting it right for every child.

Cultural Organisations (Aberdeen City Centre)

10. Jack Middleton (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how the programme for government aims to benefit cultural organisations in Aberdeen city centre. (S7O-00278)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): Our significant increase in investment in culture is doing just that by supporting cultural organisations in Aberdeen, including through Creative Scotland's multiyear funding programme, which I understand is currently funding eight organisations that are based in Aberdeen city, five of which are new to the funding cycle. Our expanded festivals fund also supports projects in Aberdeen.

Jack Middleton: Aberdeen is home to many cultural organisations of national significance, including, of course, His Majesty's theatre, which celebrates its 120th anniversary this year. However, our offering could grow even further, with the world-renowned institute, Peacock Visual Arts, looking to expand into a new cultural hub. Is the Scottish Government aware of Peacock's ambitions, and what avenues of Scottish Government support will be available to help with that expansion?

Màiri McAllan: I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate His Majesty's theatre on its anniversary. It is undoubtedly a cultural anchor in Aberdeen, and I wrote to it this week to congratulate it.

We have received an application to the regeneration capital grant fund from Aberdeen City Council for the Peacock project that Mr Middleton raised. That application will be considered alongside others I know of in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire.

Drug Harms

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The next item of business is a statement by Maree Todd on addressing drug harms. Questions will be taken at the end of the statement, so there should be no interruptions or interventions.

15:04

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs (Maree Todd): Today's publication by National Records of Scotland shows that 1,133 people in Scotland tragically lost their lives to drugs in 2025. I begin by expressing my deepest condolences to the families, friends and loved ones of each of those people. Behind every death is a person whose life has been cut far too short because of avoidable circumstances, a family living with grief and a community affected by loss. The loss of 1,133 people is simply devastating. To everyone who has experienced that loss, I want to be clear that they remain at the heart of our efforts to reduce harm, save lives and improve support.

The figures show an increase in the number of drug deaths compared with the number in the previous year. That increase is deeply concerning to me, and the numbers are completely unacceptable.

Today's publication comes at a time when services across Scotland are reporting an increasingly toxic and unpredictable drug supply. There are growing risks from highly potent synthetic substances, changing patterns of drug use and high levels of people using multiple drugs at the same time. Those changes create significant dangers for people who use drugs and can rapidly increase the risk of overdose and death. In the chamber, I have spoken about the potency of nitazenes, for example, which are synthetic opioids that can be hundreds of times stronger than heroin.

At the same time, many of those at risk continue to experience the interconnected harms of poverty, poor physical and mental health, trauma, homelessness and social exclusion. Today's statistics highlight that people in the most deprived areas are 15 times more likely to die from drugs than those in the least deprived areas.

Those realities reinforce the need for a co-ordinated public health response that addresses the immediate risks that people face and the wider circumstances that can make recovery harder to achieve. In recognition of that incredibly challenging context, our programme for government reasserts our commitment to reduce

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the number of drug-related deaths. Our vision is of a Scotland where people receive the support that they need in their communities under a system that not only treats illness but helps to prevent it through earlier intervention.

Earlier this year, the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities jointly published “Preventing Harm, Promoting Recovery: Scotland’s Alcohol & Drugs Strategic Plan 2026-2035”, which sets out our long-term vision to prevent harm, promote recovery and save lives. It builds on the progress that has been made through the national mission and recognises that the scale and complexity of current harms require sustained action over the coming years.

The plan is grounded in a human rights approach and recognises that alcohol and drug harms cannot be addressed by any single organisation acting alone. Partnership working between the national Government, local government, health services, third sector communities and, crucially, those with lived and living experience will be essential to delivering change.

That means building on the steps that have been taken so far. On residential rehabilitation, we have exceeded our commitment to support 1,000 publicly funded placements annually, as more than 1,100 people accessed placements last year. Publicly funded access has more than doubled since 2019-20 and, in August, we announced new support for residential rehabilitation, including dedicated detoxification services in Inverness. Residential rehabilitation bed capacity increased to 574 beds in 2025, and we expect to see further increases when a progress report is published later this year.

We are continuing the implementation of the medication assisted treatment standards. The latest benchmarking report shows that clear progress has been made over the course of the programme, particularly on access, treatment choice, outreach and retention. Across Scotland’s alcohol and drug partnership areas, 77 per cent were assessed by Public Health Scotland as having fully implemented standards 1, 2, 3 and 5, 57 per cent were assessed as having fully implemented standard 4, and 47 per cent were assessed as having fully implemented standards 6 to 10.

It is equally important that people receive the same high-quality care in the justice system. Yesterday’s publication of a report on MAT implementation in prison settings provides a baseline for future improvement. It also highlights good practice, such as HMP Kilmarnock’s work to improve same-day access, which has reduced treatment waiting times through joint working. As patterns of substance use change, we will expand the standards beyond opioids to cover all substances, including alcohol.

We have also continued to widen access to life-saving naloxone, and we remain committed to ensuring that it is available to anyone who may need it. The latest estimates suggest that almost 89 per cent of people at risk of an opioid overdose have now been supplied with a take-home naloxone kit.

We continue to support our emergency services to provide rapid naloxone access during overdoses, with Police Scotland officers having administered it more than 1,300 times since its introduction, five years ago. Since opening, in January 2025, the Thistle, which is Glasgow’s safer drug consumption facility, has been accessed well over 22,000 times, with staff having responded to almost 200 medical emergencies.

Vitality, these policy interventions and the actions of our valued front-line workers are saving lives. Today’s statistics are a reminder of the need for all of us to empower and support the exceptional people in services who are delivering the vital changes that we need to see on the ground, such as those at the charity Cahootz, which I visited this morning and which supports people in recovery through creative activities. It is one of more than 300 local and grass-roots projects that we have supported. Through a new alcohol and drugs fund, independently administered by the Corra Foundation, we will expand this support for community organisations and provide more than £36 million over the next three years.

I also recognise the vital role that recovery communities play by providing trusted, peer-led support to complement clinical services. We will continue our support for the Scottish Recovery Consortium, to strengthen recovery communities and the distinct contribution that it provides.

I know that the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care visited HMP Addiewell last Friday to take part in its recovery walk, and this week marks West Lothian’s recovery week.

This Government has already delivered a broad range of measures to tackle the societal harm that drug deaths cause, but today’s figures are an acute reminder of the need for further action. In recent months, we have worked closely with Public Health Scotland and partners to accelerate our response. That includes a strengthened focus on assertive outreach, temporary and supported accommodation, and public protection measures for people at greatest risk.

In June, I attended the drug deaths summit, along with the First Minister and the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care. The summit was convened in direct response to data on preventable drug deaths and

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harms. We heard powerful testimony from families who have lost loved ones, and we will continue to work with and support initiatives such as families campaign for change, to ensure meaningful family involvement in shaping services and in driving change. The final report from the summit was published yesterday, and we will be working with partners to drive forward action in the key areas identified, including improving accountability, better information sharing and addressing workforce issues.

However, we must also improve the early identification of emerging risks. I am therefore pleased to confirm that Scotland's first local drug-checking service will open in Glasgow at the beginning of October. The service will help people to make safer decisions while providing vital intelligence on the drugs in circulation to our national early warning system. Services in Aberdeen and Dundee will follow in the coming months, with Edinburgh also working towards a site. Those sites, together with the national testing and research laboratory at the University of Dundee, will form a pilot backed by more than £1.7 million of Scottish Government funding.

One of the clearest messages that we have heard from people with lived and living experience is that we must continue to listen, learn and adapt. That is why we are bringing together national and local government, key partners, expert advice and individuals and families with lived and living experience through our new advisory forum and executive group. I will co-chair the advisory forum alongside COSLA's health and social care spokesperson, Councillor Paul Kelly. The forum will draw on front-line insight to ensure that national decision making remains grounded in the realities that individual local communities and services face.

Today's figures are a stark reminder of the devastating effect that drugs have on our communities. They remind us that, despite progress, investment and the dedication of those working to save lives, Scotland continues to face an intolerable level of harm from drugs. The figures must strengthen our resolve, not weaken it. They must push all of us who are working to tackle drug harms in every area—be it health, local government, education, the third sector, justice, housing or national Government—to be compassionate and take an approach that is grounded in human rights.

I close by again offering my condolences to every person who has lost a loved one to the harms of drugs. We must be better. We must strengthen our efforts to prevent harm, promote recovery and, ultimately, save lives. I commit to Parliament to doing that and to ensuring that we use every possible lever available to the Scottish Government to continue this vital work.

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

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I thank the minister for the advance copy of her statement.

The number of drug deaths is a national scandal, with an 11 per cent increase in one year alone. Each of those deaths is a human tragedy, and my thoughts are of course with the families who have lost loved ones. However, seven years on from when the Scottish National Party Government declared a public health emergency, the numbers are increasing, and remain the worst in the United Kingdom and in Europe.

I have repeatedly warned the Government about the danger of synthetic opioids, in every year since 2023. Drug checking facilities are the Government's answer to the problem, but we have been talking about those for more than five years. The Glasgow drug checking facility was delayed because of the snail's pace at which the Government operates. It was approved by the Home Office in October 2025, so why the delay in bringing it into being?

We know that synthetic opioids evolve quickly, so does the minister think that drug checking facilities will be effective? She rightly says that the numbers are unacceptable, but what is she doing to prevent people from losing their lives due to the increased risk of synthetic opioids in Scotland?

Maree Todd: The reason for the delay in bringing forth the drug checking facilities is complex.

Jackie Baillie: No, it is not.

Maree Todd: Yes, it is. We were delayed. As the member is well aware, it took some time—a number of years—to get the licence through the Home Office process. It is not a simple overnight process to set up a drug checking facility. We had to procure equipment and calibrate it. We had to create a national drug testing laboratory in Dundee. *[Interruption.]*

This is a serious subject, and I would appreciate it if, when members ask questions, they listened to the answers that are given. As Mr Marra well knows, we had to build the system in Dundee to create a national drug testing reference laboratory, where samples can be sent for a full and comprehensive check. The facilities in Dundee and Aberdeen both have licences and are in the setting-up phase, so they will follow

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quickly. The Edinburgh drug checking facility was later to join the pilot and will take some time to bring into use.

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