

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

Thursday 24 September 2026

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

General Question Time

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

Question 1 from Amanda Bland was not lodged, but an explanation has been given.

Residential Rehabilitation

2. David Smith (West Scotland) (Reform): To ask the Scottish Government, in light of its commitment to a 16 per cent increase in residential rehabilitation bed capacity, for what reason a right to rehabilitation enshrined in law for everyone was not included within the programme for government. (S7O-00280)

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs (Maree Todd): The Scottish Government has not changed its position that people affected by alcohol and drug harms should have access to the treatment and recovery support that is right for them, including residential rehabilitation, where that is clinically appropriate.

We continue to focus on increasing access to residential rehabilitation and wider treatment services through investment, service improvement and a rights-based approach, rather than by creating a new statutory right to a specific form of treatment.

David Smith: The drug deaths figures that were released yesterday demonstrate that the approach taken by the minister to drugs policy is not working.

Even more concerning was the response from the minister to members' questions yesterday in the chamber. She stated that nobody had died inside the Thistle safer drugs consumption facility. If that was not health misinformation, it was certainly grossly misleading. Will the minister confirm, for the record, that there was, in fact, a death directly outside the centre in March this year?

Will the minister go further? Even the term "safer drugs consumption" is grossly misleading. Will she state for the record that there is no such thing as safer drugs, because there are no safe drugs?

Maree Todd: It is a matter of public record that an individual died outside the Thistle in March this year. The heartfelt condolences of everyone in the chamber go out to his family and his community, who will be mourning him, as we look at the figures of last year's deaths.

On the question that the member asked me, he is absolutely correct that there is no such thing as safe drugs consumption. The focus of the Thistle is on safer drugs consumption; it is about harm reduction.

When we consider the number of deaths that we face in Scotland, we must redouble our efforts to stop deaths, as well as ensuring that we have strong pathways into treatment and recovery. We need to do all those things, not just one of them.

Stuart McMillan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I remind the chamber that I chair Moving On Inverclyde, which is a local recovery service.

I am aware that there are some residential rehabilitation centres where beds are lying empty. What engagement has the minister had with local councils to encourage them to engage with organisations such as Abbeycare and Jericho to ensure that such facilities are fully utilised? I have been repeatedly informed by various organisations that many local authorities continue to underspend their alcohol and drug recovery services budget.

Maree Todd: The member will be aware that, to ensure the continuity of such critical services, the Scottish Government took steps to support the recent takeover of the Jericho society facilities in Inverclyde and Dundee.

We continue to engage with local services to ensure that residential rehabilitation is available to those for whom it is deemed clinically appropriate. To support more people to access residential rehab, we have made an additional £2 million available through the additional placement fund.

The Scottish Government recognises that a diversity of treatment options is important to empower individuals to have more choice and to meet the needs of individuals who seek different types of recovery. That alone should be the driving factor in matching an individual with a treatment provider.

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The Presiding Officer: We come to question 3. I call the late David Green.

Gynaecology Care (Highlands)

3. David Green (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD): I apologise to you, Presiding Officer, and to other members for arriving late. To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to improve access to gynaecology care for women in the Highlands. (S7O-00281)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care (Angela Constance): Phase 2 of the women's health plan will transform gynaecology services. A national plan for gynaecology will be published early in 2027 and will explain how women and girls will receive timely, high-quality and effective care closer to home. Redesigned services will reduce inequalities in access and outcomes, including for those in rural and island areas. Last year, NHS Highland benefited from part of the additional £13 million allocated to target long waits for gynaecology treatment.

David Green: My constituent Mary Richard was told that she would have to wait four years for an operation, which she described as a raw deal compared to the care that she previously received at Caithness general hospital. Another constituent was referred to Raigmore, only to be told that she would have to wait a year for an initial consultation. Those waits are unacceptable, so what steps will the cabinet secretary take to improve access to pain management for patients who are waiting for treatment and to strengthen skills in recognising complex gynaecological conditions so that cases are identified earlier?

Angela Constance: I am very sorry to hear about the experiences of the member's constituents. He is correct to say that long waits are utterly unacceptable.

I say to the member, for his information, that we have seen long waits for gynaecology services decrease across Scotland. For example, long waits in out-patient services are down by 70 per cent and long waits for in-patient day care are down by 47 per cent year on year. However, we have not seen such improvement in NHS Highland—I assure the member that I am completely aware of that. Part of our rationale for national health service simplification is to ensure that we can share capacity, resources and skills and, by removing boundaries, can create more equity of access.

The member raises the important issue of pain management. With any patient care, it is crucial that women are, first and foremost, listened to and that that is dealt with at clinical level.

The Presiding Officer: We have a number of supplementary questions.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): In the Highlands as well as in other parts of Scotland, the centralisation of sexual health services has meant long waiting lists and poorer access for women. The cabinet secretary is right to say that that is acknowledged in the women's health plan, but there does not appear to be any additional funding to address the problem. Does the cabinet secretary acknowledge that women are tired of being shuffled around by a Government that is failing to prioritise women's health and will she bring forward a plan to bring routine sexual healthcare back into community settings, accompanied by funding to meet the backlog?

Angela Constance: As the member is aware, we have a good track record in the targeted use of funding, one example of which is the one that I gave in my original answer to Mr Green of the additional £13 million to be invested in gynaecology services.

I will get back to her regarding her specific question about sexual health, but the issues that she and other members raise are in essence about equity of access. I stress that as we progress our journey of NHS simplification and reform, I hope that we can all work together to ensure that the arrangements put in place will still have local connectivity and will improve equity of access.

Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Regarding gynaecology, I welcome the fact that the Scottish Government is committed to improved outcomes and diagnosis waiting times for endometriosis. Will the cabinet secretary commit to working with Endometriosis UK and NHS Ayrshire and Arran to explore whether Ayrshire could become a fully accredited endometriosis centre, so that care and support will be readily available to those women in my Cunninghame South constituency, and across Ayrshire, who suffer from endometriosis?

Angela Constance: The minister and I would, of course, be willing to engage with Endometriosis UK. In my capacity as a constituency member, I engage regularly with organisations local to West Lothian and I give a shout out to endo warriors West Lothian. The member's proposition sounds interesting and it would be good to hear more about it.

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Mark Simpson (North East Scotland) (Reform): Given the lengthy waits for gynaecology treatment, has the Scottish Government considered making greater use of available private sector capacity to reduce waiting times and ensure that women receive diagnosis and treatment as quickly as possible?

Angela Constance: I refer the member to the answer that I gave to Mr Green, in which I said that we are making progress right across Scotland, notwithstanding the challenges at NHS Highland. From July 2025 to 2026, long waits for out-patient appointments went down by 70 per cent and in-patient day case long waits went down by 47 per cent.

We are making progress. From the weekly statistics that I delve deeply into week by week, specialty by specialty, I can see that boards in half the country are tackling out-patient waits effectively. However, the other half of the country is doing better with in-patient day case care. Therefore, we need to maximise our capacity across the country to reduce that inequity. I am sure that inequity of access or a postcode lottery is not acceptable to any member.

Temporary Migrant Workers (Exploitation)

4. Kate Campbell (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government, in light of reported concerns raised by third sector organisations, including Edinburgh-based Project Esperanza, what support it can provide to temporary migrant workers in Scotland, sponsored under the certificate of sponsorship visa system, who may be vulnerable to exploitation, including fraudulent job offers, debt bondage and wage theft. (S7O-00282)

The Minister for Business and Fair Work (Tom Arthur): The Scottish Government is clear that the exploitation of any worker is unacceptable. Although immigration policy and employment rights enforcement are reserved to the United Kingdom Government, we fund support services that help migrant workers to understand and exercise their rights. For example, constituents who have concerns about migrant worker exploitation in agriculture or social care can contact the Worker Support Centre for advice and support. We also work closely with enforcement bodies, regulators and third sector partners to address labour exploitation in any sector. Through our fair work agenda, we remain committed to fair treatment of all workers in Scotland.

Kate Campbell: I met with people from Project Esperanza who told me that they believe that there are thousands of people in Edinburgh alone who are recruited under the COS scheme. They pay sponsors tens of thousands of pounds and often sell their homes, leaving them with nothing in their home countries. Is the minister aware of the people in that position, who are often forced to work for their sponsors with terrible working conditions, poverty wages and erratic hours? They are afraid to report mistreatment as they face the threat of the sponsorship being withdrawn, which would leave them destitute.

Will the minister meet Project Esperanza and investigate what steps the Scottish Government could take to ensure that resources and processes are in place to end that practice and protect extremely vulnerable people?

Tom Arthur: I thank Kate Campbell for raising that extremely important issue. I am more than happy to join her in meeting Project Esperanza. I recently met people from the Worker Support Centre to learn more about their work and the experiences of migrant workers in Scotland. I reiterate that the responsibility for enforcement and regulation of such matters is reserved, but we have a collective responsibility, and the Government has a responsibility, to ensure that we work with partners to do all that we can to support fair work for everyone in Scotland, while recognising the particular risks that migrant workers face.

I am happy to engage with Project Esperanza and Kate Campbell. I thank her again for raising this important matter.

Kate Nevens (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green): I thank my colleague Kate Campbell for her important question. Migrant workers who experience exploitation are understandably reluctant to come forward for fear of losing their visa status. What steps is the Scottish Government taking to ensure that they can safely report all forms of exploitation without fear of further harm? What steps is the Government taking to help migrant workers understand and access their rights?

Tom Arthur: I mentioned the Worker Support Centre, which delivers outreach, advice and support to migrant workers who might be at risk of exploitation. It also helps workers to understand and exercise their rights.

The Scottish Government provides support through funding. For example, in 2026-27, Migrant Help and TARA—the trafficking awareness-raising alliance—will share more than £3.5 million to provide support and assistance to adult victims of trafficking and exploitation.

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I am looking forward to having further engagement on what is an incredibly important issue, and if there are particular organisations that Kate Nevens—or, for that matter, any other member—wishes me to meet or engage with, I will be more than happy to do so.

Mark Simpson (North East Scotland) (Reform): For the youth of Scotland, things are tough. Many young people are finding it harder to get a start in the workplace, yet, increasingly, attention and resources appear to be being directed towards supporting migrants who have been brought into Scotland from overseas. Does the minister agree that the Government's priority should be getting young Scots into jobs, apprenticeships and training opportunities before expanding support for temporary migrant workers?

Tom Arthur: I do not think that the two matters that the member raises should be considered as mutually exclusive, binary or in opposition. Migrants make an immense contribution to Scotland, and not just with regard to our workforce and our economy. They enrich us as a country. None of us in this place has to look too far back in their family history to come across relatives who were migrants and were subject to the kind of abusive and divisive language that emanates from Reform, but who strengthened our country. Indeed, in many cases, those relatives—this is the case in my family—who came to this country fought, risked their lives and, in some cases, died for this country and its values. I suggest that the member reflect on that.

With regard to the member's points about youth employment and youth employability, the Scottish Government is fully engaged on that matter. I am working very closely with my colleague Alyn Smith on such issues, and we are engaging closely with the United Kingdom Government and the work that has been undertaken as part of the Milburn review.

However, the two matters that the member raises should not be presented as being in opposition to each other. We face a demographic challenge in this country. It is true that addressing economic inactivity and youth employment is a priority, but so is attracting more people to come to, live and work in, and contribute to Scotland, and the Scottish Government is proud to support that.

Violence and Abuse Against Retail Workers and Shoplifting

5. Alex Kerr (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it and Police Scotland are taking to reduce violence and abuse against retail workers and shoplifting. (S7O-00283)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Kirsten Oswald): I fully recognise the particular challenges that the retail sector faces and the significant impact that retail crime has on businesses, workers and communities. That includes the wholly unacceptable abuse, threats and violence that far too many shop workers continue to experience while carrying out their jobs.

That is why the Scottish Government is investing £10 million over three years to support the work of the retail crime task force, which has a wide remit across retail crime. Its focus on prevention, enforcement, protection and preparedness allows it to deliver tangible results—more than 6,400 charges were recorded in the first year, including 648 for offences against retail workers, and detection rates increased to almost 51 per cent—which helps to make retailers, staff and communities safer.

Alex Kerr: I thank the minister for her answer and her update on the work that is being done.

We know that prevention is the best possible cure. Will the minister tell me what work the Government is doing with our young people, both in schools and in the community, to help to reduce the chance of future antisocial behaviour in our communities?

Kirsten Oswald: Over the past three years, we have invested more than £8 million to support implementation of the violence prevention framework, which has supported action across communities and schools to divert people away from harm.

We continue to deliver lessons to youths on the consequences of violence, including knife carrying, as well as providing youth navigator programmes to help young people to lead healthier lives. YouthLink Scotland's no knives, better lives programme provides training, resources and support to young people and local partners on understanding and addressing the drivers of violence, and Police Scotland youth volunteers work with young people to help to break down barriers and develop relationships through volunteering in their communities.

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): When it comes to dealing with the rising tide of violence and abuse that shop workers face, all the evidence tells us that there are just not enough police officers. Will the minister give a straightforward commitment that she and the Cabinet Secretary for Justice will work to ensure that, in the next budget, more resource will be available to enable more police officers to be put back on the front line?

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Kirsten Oswald: I am grateful to Stephen Kerr for his focus on the importance of police officers and of tackling crime in our retail sector. I would say to him, however, that we have more officers in Scotland than in England and Wales per head of population. Our officers receive the best basic pay in the United Kingdom at the minimum and maximum of each rank, and our record investment allows Police Scotland to recruit new officers, with 160-plus new recruits in July and further recruitment planned.

Brain Tumour Diagnostics and Treatment (Research)

6. Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will increase support for research into brain tumour diagnostics and treatment. (S7O-00284)

The Minister for Community Care (Alison Thewliss): The Scottish Government wants people in Scotland with brain cancer to be able to access the best possible care and support. We are committed to supporting high-quality cancer research, including research into the diagnosis and treatment of brain tumours. That is being done through the chief scientist office's open competitive grant and fellowship schemes, access to National Institute for Health and Care Research programmes, investment in NHS Research Scotland to support clinical studies and trials, and work with charities to support research to improve outcomes for people affected by brain tumours.

Finlay Carson: Brain tumours account for around a quarter of cancers diagnosed in children and young people, and they remain one of the leading causes of cancer-related deaths in that age group. Sadly, there has been little change in the survival rates of children and young people diagnosed with brain cancer over the past decade. In light of the Scottish Government's new cancer strategy for children and young people, what specific actions will ministers take to improve access to earlier diagnosis, support greater research into brain tumours and deliver better outcomes for young patients and their families?

Alison Thewliss: I can certainly relate to the member's comments about young people and brain cancer. It is important to note that we are working very closely with the clinical research community and the national health service to support research. We certainly have more to do to ensure that early diagnoses are made and more lives are saved.

Police Provision (Glasgow City Centre)

7. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what action it will take to ensure that Glasgow city centre has an enhanced police provision. (S7O-00285)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Neil Gray): The allocation and deployment of police resources are operational matters for the chief constable, with oversight provided by the Scottish Police Authority. For our part, the Scottish Government is investing record funding of more than £1.7 billion in policing in 2026-27, which is an increase of £81.5 million compared with last year. That investment ensures that Police Scotland has the resources that it needs to support front-line policing across Scotland, including in our city centres.

Police Scotland continues to maintain a strong recruitment pipeline, with 169 recruits having joined in July and with further intakes planned throughout the year. Police Scotland deploys a dedicated community policing team to Glasgow city centre, particularly at the weekends, which helps to provide visible reassurance and tackle antisocial behaviour.

Pauline McNeill: Glasgow city centre has been the focus of a recent BBC "Disclosure" documentary, which has proved controversial—and many people have contacted me since its screening. It filmed open drug dealing on the streets and antisocial behaviour, which intensified when there was no police presence. According to the Glasgow city local policing plan, overall recorded violent crime increased by 17.4 per cent compared with the previous year. The situation has not been helped by the lack of full closed-circuit television coverage.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that it is time to provide specific funding, and to bring back community safety funding, to enhance police numbers in Glasgow city centre, ensuring that there is higher visibility and police patrols in hotspot areas to reduce crime there?

Neil Gray: As Ms McNeill will be aware, the allocation of resources is a matter for the chief constable. As of 30 June, there were 2,424 full-time-equivalent officers in G division, which encompasses Glasgow city centre. I welcome the action that Police Scotland and Glasgow City Council are taking to address the concerns that Ms McNeill has raised, particularly those relating to the city centre. That includes enhancing CCTV coverage, dedicated community policing resources and, where appropriate, the use of dispersal powers.

I am due to meet the chief constable again, I think next week, and I will raise the concerns that Ms McNeill has highlighted.

Proposed Railway Station (Newburgh)

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8. Willie Rennie (Fife North East) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will support the proposal to reopen a railway station at Newburgh, Fife. (S7O-00286)

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport (Stephen Flynn): My officials have completed a review of the detailed options appraisal, and I would expect advice to come to me in due course as a result of that work being completed. I will endeavour to ensure that Mr Rennie and the Parliament are kept up to date accordingly.

Willie Rennie: June 2022, November 2023, March 2025 and September 2025: members have asked for a positive answer—any answer—about Newburgh until they are blue in the face, but yet again the minister is considering the advice. That is exactly what we have heard before. Six years on from the “SEStran Regional Transport Strategy: Case for Change” report and four years on from the Scottish transport appraisal guidance process, will he break with the past and his predecessors and make a positive decision on Newburgh railway station?

Stephen Flynn: For context, as I understand it, the railway station in Newburgh closed in 1955. I know that Mr Rennie has been a long-standing campaigner—although perhaps not since then—and he is right to do so as the local member. I understand his passion and that of the local campaigners who have been fighting to secure a new station at Newburgh.

I do not think that Mr Rennie picked me up correctly. I have advice coming to me, at which point I will review that advice. When I am able to make a decision, I will inform both him and Parliament accordingly.

The Presiding Officer: Katherine Sangster’s question 9 was not lodged, but an explanation has been given.

Face Coverings (Ban in Public Places)

10. Thomas Kerr (Glasgow) (Reform): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will consider a ban on all face coverings in public places, including balaclavas and the burqa. (S7O-00288)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Neil Gray): Police Scotland already has powers under the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 to require the removal of face coverings where there are reasonable grounds to believe that they are being used to conceal identity in connection with criminality or disorder. Police Scotland considers that those powers are sufficient at the present time.

Thomas Kerr: Reform and I have been abundantly clear that we want a full ban: no exemptions, no double standards, just pure common sense. Scotland should follow fellow European nations in putting public safety first.

This Government claims to stand up for women’s safety and for choice, but it is blind to what is going on in many Muslim households across the country, where women are forced to wear this medieval piece of clothing due to pressure from inside their communities and many male family members.

Will the cabinet secretary commit to a full ban on all face coverings, including the burqa, in public places?

Neil Gray: As I have already said, these are operational matters for Police Scotland, from which we take advice on those operational concerns.

As Mr Kerr may be aware, we have little evidence of religious dress being used to perpetrate criminality. However, there is plenty of evidence that the narrative and language that Reform UK uses in this place—as well as support from Thomas Kerr and his party for certain groups—incite increased violence against those who wear religious dress. That is something for Mr Kerr to consider.

The Presiding Officer: In view of the fact that no one has expressed a wish to ask a supplementary on this particular question, we will have a short suspension.

13:57

Meeting suspended.

14:00

On resuming—

First Minister’s Question Time

Party Leaders

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The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is First Minister's question time for party leaders. I welcome Michael Marra to his post as the new Scottish Labour leader.

Drug Deaths

1. Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): My intention had already been to ask today about the shocking statistics that demand continued attention from Government and Parliament. However, yesterday, the deaths of 1,133 Scots as a result of drugs were reported to Parliament. Their loss, overwhelmingly for the grave sin of being poor, requires answers for grieving families and demands a change of course from the Government. The response yesterday from the Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs was a complacent disgrace. It does not feel like the Government is treating this as an emergency. Does the First Minister still agree that the worst drug deaths record in the world is a public health emergency?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I agree that we face a public health emergency on drug deaths. I express my deepest sympathies to everybody who has been affected by drug deaths in Scotland. Those deaths are unacceptable and intolerable, and the Government is focused on addressing the issues.

Mr Marra asks about the significance of the Government's action and the strategy that we are pursuing. On 26 February this year, I was briefed about an expected rise in suspected drug deaths. I therefore asked for a review of the Government's drug and alcohol interventions, which was considered at a summit on 19 June involving the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care, myself, the minister with responsibility for drugs, and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. There, in front of a variety of individuals and representatives of organisations—including, crucially, families whose loved ones had lost their lives to drugs—we tested the scale and the measure of the Government's actions and the approach that we are taking with our local authority and community partners. Those are the actions that the Government is taking, focused on ensuring that we address the severity of the drug deaths position that we face in Scotland.

Michael Marra: Yesterday, the minister cited the scourge of nitazenes and synthetic opioids as the cause of a huge part of the surge. However, this is not a new issue. People buy these pills by the handful. In 2013, prescriptions for Valium were withdrawn under this Government, and I was leading the Leverhulme Research Centre for Forensic Science a decade ago when we saw the consequences of that. We clearly defined that polydrug use and synthetics were at the heart of the huge surge in deaths after 2014, but no minister has ever answered for that policy. Pandora's box was opened, and drug deaths in Scotland skyrocketed to more than two and a half times the rate in England, which had the same drug laws. That is the First Minister's record. It is indefensible. Does he agree?

The First Minister: Two elements fundamentally drive the drug deaths position in Scotland. One is the effect of intergenerational poverty and trauma. We can see in the data that there is a much greater likelihood of individuals experiencing drugs and of drug deaths resulting because of the prevalence of poverty—hence the Government's policy agenda to eradicate child poverty in Scotland.

The second element is the upsurge in grossly harmful synthetics. That is a factor that we can see, and I was alerted to it in the briefings that took place earlier this year. It is one of the factors that is driving the significant increase in drug deaths that we are experiencing. There has been public commentary from experts in the field who believe that, without that upsurge in grossly harmful synthetics, there would have been a reduction in drug deaths this year. The upsurge is a factor that we are wrestling with in this community in Scotland, and the Government's focus on actions to break up the criminality that spreads that practice in our country is at the heart of the Government's response.

Michael Marra: The First Minister would do well to remember that the original surge was 12 years ago. "Indefensible" is not only my word to describe the record; it is the word that, six years ago in the chamber, the then First Minister chose. If it was indefensible then, what on earth is it now? More than 7,000 people have lost their lives since the Scottish Government declared a public health emergency. We cannot go on like this.

Scots are 15 times more likely to die from drugs if they are poor than if they are rich. If this were a middle-class epidemic, we would have locked down, legislated, found the money, educated widely and reformed indiscriminately. Nothing near that scale has happened. We cannot go on like this.

This is one of the most serious issues that Scotland is facing. If the First Minister is prepared to change course and bring a new plan to Parliament, Scottish Labour will work with him on it. Will he do it?

The First Minister: The issues that Mr Marra has raised are of the utmost seriousness. I hope that the explanation that I have given about the engagement that I have had on the early data on the upsurge in drug deaths earlier this year assures him that the issue is central to my thinking about the response that is required.

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The issue also delves deep into my political thinking. That is why, when I became First Minister, I committed that the central mission of my Government would be to eradicate child poverty, because we must interrupt the circumstances that are feeding and refeeding this crisis in our society.

I welcome Mr Marra's willingness to engage with the Government on the issue. I will ensure that that engagement is taken forward and that dialogue takes place. Mr Marra and I had a telephone conversation on Saturday in which I made it clear that I do not command a majority in the Parliament, so I am willing to work with others to seek common ground to improve the lives of people in Scotland. There can be no more important issue than improving the lives of people who are affected by drugs.

In its strategy, the Government has done several things, including increasing rehabilitation services, strengthening support for community organisations and interventions to take forward harm reduction measures and, crucially, listening to the experience of families—that aspect was central to the summit that we had in June.

The Government's strategy, supported and co-authored by our local authority partners, has been developed through extensive engagement across a whole variety of opinions. Mr Marra wishes to engage, and some of his party colleagues in COSLA will be part of that, too. If he is inviting me to have further detailed dialogue on the issue, I will do so, because I want to ensure that the Parliament uses its combined resources and intellect to improve the lives of people in Scotland. I will take up Mr Marra's invitation.

Child Poverty

2. Malcolm Offord (West Scotland) (Reform): Under this Scottish National Party Government, one in five children grows up in poverty and, today, 10,715 children are living in temporary accommodation. That is John Swinney's Scotland in 2026. Is the First Minister ashamed?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am proud of Scotland, I love Scotland, and I am in office to do my best to improve the lives of people in Scotland. However, I have to deal with the country as I find it, and the country that I lead is in no way impervious to the effects of years and years of austerity, of which Mr Offord was one of the authors. What my Government has done is use its powers to address that situation. Child poverty is lower in this country than in the rest of the United Kingdom because of the decisions that my Government has taken, and we are proud of those actions.

Malcolm Offord: I will take that as a no, then. Under this Scottish National Party Government, councils have turned away 21,800 applications from people looking for a home in the past year. Rough sleeping is up 20 per cent. Meanwhile, homelessness applications from asylum seekers are up 40 per cent—a huge two-and-a-half-times increase since 2021, when the local connection rule was last in place.

This is John Swinney's Scotland in 2026. Is the First Minister ashamed?

The First Minister: Let me, once again, correct Malcolm Offord, on his point about local connection, because the local connection rules that he cites as being a problem, which have changed in recent years, would have no effect on the issue that he raises about asylum seekers. The provisions about housing allocations in Scotland were set out in the homelessness legislation more than 20 years ago and they are applied to make sure that we have a civilised, human rights-based approach to tackling homelessness in our country. My party supported that legislation when it was introduced by the Labour Party and the Liberals, and it is the right thing to do.

We are investing in housing infrastructure in Scotland in order to build more homes. We have built more affordable homes per head of population in Scotland than has been the case in any other part of the United Kingdom. We have redeployed funds to bring empty properties back into use, so that families can have good-quality accommodation. More than 2,000 properties have been brought into use because of the Government's intervention to enable that to happen.

We intend to do more to ensure that families are properly supported with accommodation that meets their needs.

Malcolm Offord: Once again, there is no remorse. We just heard from Mr Marra that Scotland has, once again, hit the world's headlines for having the worst rate of drug deaths in Europe. As he mentioned, last year, 1,133 of our fellow citizens needlessly lost their lives to drugs. That is up 11 per cent in a single year, and it is a tragedy for each and every family.

John Swinney demonstrated his priorities this week by wasting three hours debating his vanity project of independence. Meanwhile, yesterday, the Parliament was given only 30 minutes in which to absorb the sheer horror of these shocking figures and John Swinney did not even show up. Let's face it: his national mission

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on drugs has collapsed and the blame lies squarely with the SNP, but this Government cannot bring itself to question the system that it has built.

This is John Swinney's Scotland in 2026—a homelessness crisis, endemic child poverty, plummeting education standards and the drug deaths capital of Europe. However, he does not care, because he is shameless Swinney. For the third and final time, is the First Minister ever ashamed?

The First Minister: I ask people around the country to make their own judgment about me. I serve in office to improve the lives of people in Scotland—that is what I get up every morning to try to do. I have to face the realities of the country that I lead.

On homelessness, we do have challenges, because we have a rising need in our society, and we are trying to allocate as many resources as we can to address that need.

In relation to education, the programme for international student assessment—PISA—statistics are difficult, but the exam results in August were very encouraging. The achievement of curriculum for excellence levels and information on literacy and numeracy are very encouraging with regard to the strength of Scottish education. Record numbers of young people are leaving school and going on to positive destinations as a consequence of their education, and that is very encouraging.

Mr Offord said that I cannot bring myself to question the approach that we are taking on drugs, but that is precisely what we did when I convened a drugs discussion on 19 June with Public Health Scotland, COSLA and various partners, to test whether we are doing the right things to tackle the drugs crisis in our society.

Mr Marra has suggested having a dialogue in order to advance on the issue. Mr Offord just comes here with a depressing weekly critique. I am prepared to take the action that is necessary to improve the lives of the people of Scotland. That is what this Government was elected to do, and that is exactly what this Government will do.

Middle East (Boycott)

3. Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Green): Last week, the Parliament backed a Green motion declaring that

“a company’s involvement in illegal Israeli settlements in occupied Palestinian Territories constitutes grave professional misconduct and should ... automatically disqualify that company”

and

“any parent company or subsidiary”

from public contracts or Scottish Government support.

Just four days later, the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen—ASLEF—union revealed that CAF, which has been named by the United Nations as a company that is profiting from the exploitation of Palestinians, has been shortlisted for a major contract building trains for ScotRail. Does the First Minister agree that CAF should be blocked from the contract, and will he stand with the rail workers who have refused to drive trains produced by a company that, as they say, profits from apartheid?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am aware of the issue, and I understand that Scottish Rail Holdings Ltd, which oversees the procurement by ScotRail, is seeking further advice. I expect it to provide an update to ministers when that advice has been received.

Gillian Mackay: I appreciate the First Minister’s answer. If that update could eventually be shared with members, that would be welcome. However, this is not an isolated case. Last week, the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport, Stephen Flynn, said that the Government was using

“every lever at its disposal to stand up against the inhumanity”—[*Official Report*, 16 September 2026; c 86.]

that is being inflicted on Gaza and the West Bank. Yet, in the days since then, *The National* has revealed that a firm whose parent company has also been listed by the UN holds a Scottish national health service contract worth tens of millions of pounds. If a company has profited from apartheid and genocide, it should not be profiting from public money in Scotland. Will the First Minister commit to ending that contract as soon as possible? Will his Government urgently review every public sector contract, including parent companies and subsidiaries, to ensure that Scottish public money is not going to companies that are complicit in human rights abuses?

The First Minister: In giving my answer, I have to make it clear that, at all times, the Government must have a legal basis for its actions. The Government is forbidden from acting outwith the law, so we must have a legally sustainable basis for our actions.

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The comments that Stephen Flynn made to the Parliament in the debate last week were entirely correct, and I endorse them 100 per cent. Individual organisations within Government must satisfy themselves that the comments made by Mr Flynn, which are an explanation of the Government's position and which I endorse, are being fully applied in all circumstances.

On the particular case that Gillian Mackay has raised, NHS procurement has asked for further advice. I expect Public Services Delivery Scotland's national procurement directorate to satisfy itself of compliance with all requirements. Ministers will consider any further advice that is received.

Gillian Mackay: I appreciate that the First Minister is trying to adhere to last week's vote and to do those good things, but it is difficult to take that position seriously when ministers have named Barclays as a partner in their upcoming bond scheme. Research by the Palestine Solidarity Campaign says that Barclays holds more than £2 billion in shares in, and provides more than £6.1 billion in loans and underwriting to, nine companies whose weapons and technology are being used by the Israeli military against Palestinians. If a company is so directly linked to the financing of arms companies that supply the Israeli military, it surely should be covered by any boycott that is worthy of the name. Is Barclays really the kind of partner that the First Minister wants for his Scottish Government?

The First Minister: Gillian Mackay said it herself: the Government, under my leadership, is trying to do all that it can to address the issue. I am at one with the Green Party on the horror of what is happening in Gaza and the West Bank. The Government's position could not be clearer on that. However, I have to have a legal basis for acting. That is the issue that the Government must always confront.

I understand the deep anxiety that is expressed by Gillian Mackay, but I have to ask the Parliament and the public to accept that the Government's good intentions and policy direction must be substantiated and founded on a legal basis for action. That will always be the approach that we take in considering these issues and deciding on the steps that we can take to deliver Government policy.

Drug Deaths

4. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): What a great shame that the First Minister could not bring himself to back Barclays and the 5,000-plus jobs that it provides for the people of Scotland.

Yet again, Scotland has the worst drug death rate in Europe, with 1,133 lives tragically cut short and 1,133 bereaved families. The Scottish National Party's multimillion-pound drug consumption unit opened in Glasgow at the start of last year. John Swinney says that there is significant evidence that it is saving lives, but the evidence shows that Glasgow drug deaths have actually gone up in that time.

Nearby residents must live with the discarded needles and the drug crime. Despite that, another unit is planned for Edinburgh. Why will John Swinney not listen to and respect the evidence, stop the drug consumption units and, instead, spend that money on rehab?

The First Minister (John Swinney): In relation to Russell Findlay's first point, I welcome the Barclays investment in Scotland and have engaged with Barclays. That kind of antics indicates how trivial the Conservative Party's approach to some of these questions is, when the Government is trying to navigate its way through challenging questions on human rights and on violence in our society.

In relation to drug-related harms, I will not repeat the points that I expressed in my substantive answers to Michael Marra, but Russell Findlay is plain wrong in relation to the Thistle. The staff in the Thistle have responded to 195 medical emergencies in support of individuals. I understand Russell Findlay's concern about the drug death numbers in Glasgow, but they would have been worse if the Thistle had not intervened to support people in relation to their drug use.

In its first year, the Thistle made 612 referrals to wider support services, including housing, accommodation, alcohol, drug recovery and blood-borne virus services, helping people to access treatment, healthcare and recovery support. That is the absolute purpose of the Thistle—to provide person-centred care at the heart of tackling addiction. The Thistle is demonstrating important learning for us, and I am glad that we have been able to take it forward. I am grateful to the former Lord Advocate for the consideration that she gave to the issue to enable us to have another intervention to try to avoid a difficult and serious situation in relation to drug deaths becoming more acute than it would be without the Thistle.

Russell Findlay: Fact check number 1: the First Minister was shamed into backing Barclays. Fact check number 2: Glasgow drug deaths are up. The SNP's failed approach traps addicts in a life of misery, sending thousands to an early grave by peddling the lie that inherently dangerous drugs can be taken safely.

Asked yesterday whether she was doing a good job, the SNP minister for drugs policy said that it was an impossible question to answer, but we know the answer—she is not. Maree Todd blocked our Right to

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Addiction Recovery (Scotland) Bill and now, pathetically, blames Westminster for the SNP's fatal culpability. Does John Swinney accept that the SNP's failed approach and its refusal to back our bill will cost even more lives?

The First Minister: The Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs is taking forward a difficult responsibility, and she is doing it with sincerity and grace, as I would expect her to do, and with a focus on taking forward the necessary action. She was at my side when I was briefed in February about the suspected increase in drug death numbers, and she was at my side in June as we wrestled with those issues with partners.

At that event in June were the families of individuals who had been affected by drugs. Unfortunately, one of those individuals could not be there on that occasion, but she was on the "Debate Night" programme last night—a lady called Sandra Holmes, who has been very open about the fact that her family has been affected by drug use. Sandra Holmes made the important point that the debate is more serious than political point scoring and the blaming of various individuals.

I stand here as First Minister, and I accept full responsibility for everything that happens in the name of my Government. It is my duty to do so, and I accept it willingly. I am determined to ensure that my ministers and I take every action to improve the lives of people in Scotland, including those who are affected by drugs, and to ensure that we deliver improvements in their lives and the support that they require.

We have to face the realities. We have new drugs causing absolute havoc in our communities and increasing the severity of addiction, but the Government is determined to confront that, and that is exactly what we will do.

Drug Deaths (Nitazenes)

5. Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh North Western) (LD): I congratulate Michael Marra on his election to the leadership of the Scottish Labour Party and, given the subject matter of his first question today, I pay tribute to the tireless work that he has done on drug mortality.

Every year, the Government promises to deal with Scotland's drug death emergency, and every year, more people die. I have listened with some concern today as the First Minister has attempted to explain that with reference to the spike in synthetics, as if it was somehow unexpected.

I first uttered the word "nitazene" in the chamber some three years ago, when Humza Yousaf was First Minister. Back then, these drugs were connected to just nine deaths in Scotland; last year, they took the lives of 247 people. The warning signs were there. I raised the matter 10 times. I wrote to ministers, asked questions of First Ministers and appeared at committee. Experts warned the First Minister's Government that nitazenes were coming and that they were deadly.

That begs a question of the First Minister. If addressing this truly is the Scottish National Party's national mission, why has it failed?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government has taken seriously the upsurge in nitazenes in our society. I heard the warnings that Mr Cole-Hamilton gave—I was in the Parliament, and I saw that the Government responded to that through the actions that we have taken in relation to the increase in rehabilitation services; the improvements in community support organisation activity; the harm reduction measures, such as the opening of the Thistle; and listening to families. All that has been done.

I acknowledge the widespread interest among members in the chamber, including Mr Cole-Hamilton, in these questions. However, I highlight that the Government has also engaged seriously with Police Scotland, which has been pursuing criminals who are responsible for manufacturing these drugs and peddling them in our society. That is one of the reasons why we are now seeing more and more people being convicted of drug offences and serving time in our prisons—that is because of the combined action on harm reduction and the pursuit of criminal behaviour in our society. That lies at the heart of the agenda that the Government will take forward.

On the number of nitazenes that are being produced, there is literally one new drug per week being produced as a consequence of criminal activity. Police Scotland is focused on tackling that issue, and we will focus on providing the support to individuals to reduce the harm of taking drugs.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: The first line of defence in the detection of nitazenes and combating their effect is pill checking. The Home Office green-lighted the establishment of a pill-checking facility by the Scottish Government, but it is still not open.

This is a particularly Scottish problem, but we know what works—drug checking works, and we have waited long enough. Safe consumption rooms work, so why is there only one of them? Aberlour Children's Charity's

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mother and baby units work—that is an intervention that Liberal Democrats insisted was part of the budget. Those facilities are saving lives, and we need more of them.

The Government says that this is an emergency, but it is trapped in the headlights. It has thrown money, statements and ministers at the issue, and yet 100 people are dying every single month because of drugs. If this really is the Government trying its best, what hope is there?

The First Minister: I will address the various issues that Mr Cole-Hamilton has raised. First, on drug testing, the Home Office approved our application for a facility, after many years of waiting, in October 2025, and it is expected to open on 3 October.

Since October 2025, the Government has been working with the University of Dundee to ensure that the necessary clinical infrastructure is in place to ensure that drug testing can be undertaken. That is not a straightforward process, but that sophisticated work has now been undertaken and the drug-testing facility will open in Glasgow in October.

Mr Cole-Hamilton asks why we have only one drug consumption facility. We have only one because the establishment of that consumption facility was argued for and prepared for by Glasgow City Council, and the Lord Advocate gave the necessary legal flexibility to enable it to open.

That requires the Lord Advocate to exercise a judgment that is difficult to exercise because of the provisions of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, which is a real impediment to there being more drug consumption rooms in Scotland. If I had my way, I would have more drug consumption rooms in other parts of the country. However, I have to respect the legal process that we undertake. I have been stressing the importance of obeying the law.

Mr Cole-Hamilton mentioned the Aberlour mother and baby unit. I welcome the collaboration with the Liberal Democrats that enabled the budget provision to be put in place for that. That is how this Parliament should work—through engagement across the parties to find ways of working to improve people's lives.

I could not have been clearer to this Parliament since the election that I recognise that I do not command a majority here. If we want to improve the lives of people in our country, we have to work together to do that, and my Government is committed to doing exactly that.

Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body Question Time

14:31

MSP Staff (Employer Pension Contributions)

1. **Colin Beattie (Midlothian North) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body whether it considers it equitable that staff employed by MSPs receive lower employer pension contributions than staff it and the Scottish Government directly employ, and what action it is taking to address any such disparity. (S7O-00298)

Pauline McNeill (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): The members' staff pension scheme has an employer contribution rate of 10 per cent of pensionable earnings. The SPCB has benchmarked staff pension schemes with similar arrangements that are available to staff employed by members of other United Kingdom legislatures, and the employer contribution for all such pension schemes is consistent with that.

The SPCB is an admitted body of the civil service pension scheme, which is managed by the Cabinet Office. That is a historical arrangement dating from the formation of the Scottish Parliament. Initially, the Parliament was staffed by civil servants who were seconded to the SPCB. In order to protect their pension entitlements when those staff were transferred over to the employment of the SPCB, the SPCB was then admitted to the civil service pension scheme. The contribution rates for the scheme are set by the scheme manager and are not subject to SPCB control.

Colin Beattie: Does the SPCB recognise that MSPs' staff undertake an essential role in supporting constituents and the work of Parliament? If so, how can it justify MSPs' staff receiving an employer pension contribution of only 10 per cent, which is substantially lower than the 28.97 per cent contribution that is available to SPCB staff and more favourable arrangements that are available to Scottish Government employees? Will the SPCB commit to reviewing the current arrangements to ensure that MSPs' staff are treated more equitably and to help to improve recruitment and retention across MSPs' offices?

Pauline McNeill: The SPCB agrees that members' staff play a very important role in serving members and members of the general public. There are no current plans to review the pension scheme for members' staff.

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However, as Colin Beattie has raised the issue with the corporate body today, I will give him a commitment to take it away for further discussion.

MSP Staff (Job Families and Pay Scales)

2. Kayleigh Kinross-O'Neill (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body how it developed the four job families and pay scales for MSP staff, including the criteria used to weigh different functions within and between families, and when these will next be reviewed. (S7O-00293)

Graham Simpson (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): The current job families and pay ranges were developed following a comprehensive review of the members' staff cost provision in 2020. The review considered the range of functions commonly carried out by members' staff, the flexibility needed by individual members who are direct employers, and the need for fair and transparent pay arrangements. The job families were designed to reflect the principal types of work undertaken in members' offices. The associated pay ranges were informed by the levels of responsibility, knowledge, skills, autonomy, complexity and accountability that are normally required for roles at different levels in each family.

The pay ranges were reviewed last year, at which point they were benchmarked against similar roles in other organisations, including Parliaments, in the United Kingdom. The benchmarking confirmed that the pay ranges remain proportionate and competitive. However, the SPCB will continue to keep the arrangements under review and will have regard to forthcoming changes that are planned in other legislatures.

Kayleigh Kinross-O'Neill: We hear from regional and constituency MSPs alike that, in some offices, levels of correspondence and casework have doubled but the resource and training have not. That leads to caseworkers, who are usually on the front line of offices, burning out. Will the SPCB consider ring fencing, to allow offices to expand casework teams to address that?

Graham Simpson: I am not sure what the member means by ring fencing. However, I will undertake to look at the issue. Perhaps we could have a discussion offline so that I can hear what she wants, and I will then discuss it with the corporate body.

Facial Template Authentication

3. Kate Nevens (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, regarding its proposed facial authentication security access system, when it is due to be introduced and whether MSPs and parliamentary staff will be permitted to opt out of its use. (S7O-00297)

Jackie Dunbar (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): The corporate body has approved an upgrade from fingerprint template to facial template authentication on card. That should provide quicker and more reliable access, while retaining two-factor security. A phased roll-out will begin on 7 October and members will be the final group to be enrolled. It is expected that the roll-out will be completed by February 2027.

The corporate body sets the security arrangements for the Parliament as part of its responsibilities under the Scotland Act 1998, which include access control arrangements. All passholders are required to comply with the security arrangements set by the corporate body. However, the corporate body previously agreed that MSPs can opt out of the two-factor authentication arrangements if they so wish. Although we encourage all members to enrol, for those who wish to opt out pedestrian access will be available through the main public entrance.

Kate Nevens: The Parliament has committed to ending public-sector procurement from companies that are complicit in genocide in illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank. I understand that the corporate body is not aware of any links between the Parliament's security systems contractor and Israel. However, can the corporate body confirm that full human rights due diligence checks have been made on the facial recognition technology firm? Can it offer absolute assurance that the proposed technology has not been developed for use by Israel or by any company that provides support or technology to Israel or the Israeli military?

Jackie Dunbar: The work is being delivered through the corporate body's current security systems contract with Pointer Ltd, which is a United Kingdom company that is incorporated in Scotland. The corporate body is not aware of any links between Pointer Ltd, or any of its subcontractors, and Israel. I will get back to Kate Nevens in writing about the other points that she raised.

MSP Staff (Travel Expenses Scheme)

4. Kristopher Leask (Highlands and Islands) (Green): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body whether it will consider reviewing the MSP staff travel expenses scheme to ensure that it takes account of the

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differences in travel distance and costs between geographically smaller parliamentary regions and larger ones, such as the Highlands and Islands. (S7O-00290)

Maggie Chapman (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): There are no plans to review MSP staff travel expenses within the scheme. In previous schemes, staff travel was limited by a set number of staff journeys per member each year. However, the corporate body recognised that that disproportionately affected members with larger constituencies and regions, and that it limited the ability to have staff travel for members' staff, who are entitled to claim reimbursement for all constituency, regional and parliamentary travel, based on the actual costs or mileage incurred.

The travel expenses office will support members and their staff to travel around Scotland by booking trains, flights and ferries, meaning that travellers do not need to be out of pocket for high travel costs.

Kristopher Leask: I thank Maggie Chapman for that answer, which provides much-needed clarity given the conflicting advice that I have received previously.

Does the corporate body undertake to review MSP staff accommodation, given the disparity between regions that I have outlined, and given that it also makes sense, when members are travelling greater distances, to maximise the level of local engagement that can be carried out during a full day or two?

Maggie Chapman: If any staff travel and accommodation is to support the member on regional or constituent business, that travel and accommodation will be covered by the scheme, which is uncapped, as I previously outlined.

However, travel to a main workplace for staff is considered commuting travel by His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, and we are required to follow its rules and guidance. The guidance states that commuting travel is considered a personal journey, and that if the cost is reimbursed by an employer through the staff cost provision, it is taxable. The travel and expenses office will work with members and staff to establish working patterns and plans to check against HMRC criteria, should that be helpful.

Alternatively, if the work is done solely to provide constituency support, such costs should be fully reimbursable through the scheme.

MSP Staff Trade Unions (Memorandum of Understanding)

5. Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body whether it will develop a memorandum of understanding with MSP staff trade unions concerning the matters for which it is responsible. (S7O-00250)

Pauline McNeill (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): As my colleague Paul Sweeney will recall, at the end of the previous parliamentary session, the SPCB accepted in full the recommendations of a dignity at work review, which was carried out as part of the inclusive Parliament programme.

That included a commitment to strengthen constructive engagement with MSP staff trade unions to ensure that they offer an important route to enabling the SPCB to understand employment issues that are faced by members' staff, to promote early dialogue and to improve clarity in areas where SPCB decisions can affect members' staff. The SPCB remains fully committed to implementing that recommendation.

Paul Sweeney: The SPCB will surely recognise that, although MSPs remain the legal employers of staff, many issues that affect our staff are outwith members' direct control, whether that is contract terms and conditions, security, facilities or access. If the corporate body recognises that reality, it should put in place mechanisms to engage staff trade unions directly on such matters.

The GMB Westminster branch—I note my entry in the register of members' interests as a member of the GMB—is in the final stages of concluding a memorandum of understanding with the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority at the House of Commons to cover those matters and to formalise engagement for Westminster staff that it represents.

Will the corporate body look at following that example to improve direct engagement with staff trade unions? Will it instruct the senior executive team at the Parliament to engage with the GMB branch and develop a formal mechanism of engagement and negotiation?

Pauline McNeill: I reassure my colleague Paul Sweeney that the SPCB agrees that it is important to have constructive engagement with trade unions; that will be set out more clearly in the coming year.

The SPCB will consider the matter in November, at which time it intends to agree a remit for the next phase of that work, as part of which we have commissioned senior officials to review proposals that were made by the MSP staff trade unions during the dignity at work review. We have informal engagement at the moment, but it is important to set out clearly how that engagement should be constructed. As Paul Sweeney said,

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MSPs are the legal employer, but the staff are affected by decisions that are made in the Scottish Parliament by the corporate body and therefore, such engagement is only right. I hope that Paul Sweeney is reassured by that answer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I appeal for succinct questions and answers.

MSP Employer Pledge (Consultation)

6. Katherine Sangster (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body whether it consulted MSP staff trade unions on the contents of the employer pledge that MSPs were asked to sign up to. (S7O-00300)

Pauline McNeill (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): The dignity at work review formed part of the inclusive Parliament programme and was endorsed by the SPCB and party leaders in March this year, following evidence gathering and consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, including MSP staff trade unions.

One recommendation from the review, which the SPCB accepted, was the introduction of a Parliament-wide employer pledge. All employers based at the Parliament have been invited to sign that pledge, with the aim of ensuring that they join together in a shared commitment to a zero-tolerance approach to bullying and harassment, including sexual harassment. MSP staff trade unions were listened to and their input shaped the recommendations, including that pledge.

Katherine Sangster: Will the corporate body confirm that there are no mechanisms for enforcing the principles contained in the employer pledge and would the corporate body look favourably on the idea of engaging with the trade unions to co-design a revised employer pledge given the need for action due to the pledge not being enforceable?

Pauline McNeill: It is, of course, a pledge, but we are trying to achieve a wider consensus that we should be the best employers that we can be. I can give a commitment that there will be further engagement to ensure that the pledge is meaningful. To date, 43 MSPs have signed the pledge and we encourage more to sign it and to join in further discussion about what more can be done.

MSP Constituency Offices (Technical Standards)

7. Lorna Slater (Edinburgh Central) (Green): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body whether, with respect to the standards applied by the Parliament's allowances office for MSP constituency offices, it will establish technical standards for fire detection, ventilation, heating, lighting and other safety and wellbeing factors that are recognised by surveyors and solicitors across the Scottish property sector. (S7O-00295)

Maggie Chapman (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): The corporate body agreed to changes to the members' expenses scheme from the beginning of this session, following its sessional review of the scheme. Those changes included the introduction of minimum standards for members' offices, with those being explicitly stated in the scheme to ensure that all members understand their responsibilities under health and safety legislation and so that they could be supported to secure suitable offices.

Information about the relevant health and safety legislation and guidelines is available to members on the Parliament's health and safety guidance for members intranet pages, where members will find short summaries of the main points they must address. For example, on workplace temperatures, the minimum temperature for working indoors should normally be at least 16 degrees and there is also guidance on ventilation, fresh air supply rates and a number of other matters.

The different sizes and styles of offices, along with their layout and the proposed number of people using them, will have an influence, but all the information is available on the intranet for members to view.

Lorna Slater: I am grateful for that clarification, because what was provided to my office by the corporate body and the allowances team was a set of nine vague bullet points that failed to specify minimal or technical requirements for ventilation, fire safety equipment, heating, space or adequate lighting, which meant that they were impossible to comply with, therefore creating a stooshie with allowances.

Does the SPCB recognise that any guidance it provides must be communicated clearly so that we can all have proper minimum standards for the safety and wellbeing of our staff?

Maggie Chapman: The corporate body has had exactly those conversations about the issue. This is the first time that we have been through the process in that way and I guarantee the member that we will look to ensure that information is provided clearly and succinctly for all members in future.

First Minister's Question Time (School Visits)

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8. Clare Haughey (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body what assessment it has undertaken of the impact on school visits to the Scottish Parliament of the changes to the timing of First Minister's Questions. (S7O-00291)

Stephen Kerr (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): Without stating the obvious, most schools can now watch FMQs live in the chamber because there are more question sessions to watch.

Our schools programme restarted in September and early data shows that not only are more schools seeing FMQs, more are also staying to watch portfolio question time in its new Wednesday timeslot. The good news is that more pupils are learning about accountability by seeing more business in the chamber, which means that more are seeing the work of their Parliament at first hand and how that relates to their lives. We will continue tracking that closely by using evaluations and monitoring data.

Clare Haughey: To quote Mr Kerr back at himself, stating the obvious, that did not answer my question.

Like many others throughout the country, schools in my constituency are unable to attend the new sessions of First Minister's questions and still be able to travel back in time for the end of the school day. That hugely disadvantages pupils who were previously able to attend and engage with that important scrutiny of the First Minister. How will the SPCB monitor and evaluate equity of access, particularly during sitting days on which FMQs takes place and what will it do to address that geographical inequality, which is exacerbated by changes to the Parliament's timetable that were made without consultation?

Stephen Kerr: The Presiding Officer has made it clear that the changes to the parliamentary week are necessary, from his point of view, to make the Parliament more topical and effective and to make the Scottish Government more accountable to the Parliament. Temporary arrangements have been put in place to enable that change. The Parliamentary Bureau has invited the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee to consider those arrangements with a view to making recommendations on whether any permanent amendments to standing orders should be made. As part of the process, the member—indeed, all members who wish to do so—can feed into the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee any views on how the changes to FMQs impact on school visits and other considerations that they may have to offer.

MSP Staff Pay (Data Collection)

9. Laura Moodie (South Scotland) (Green): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body whether it collects data on MSP staff pay including data on the gender pay gap. (S7O-00294)

Graham Simpson (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): The SPCB holds data on MSP staff pay solely for the purpose of providing a payroll service in accordance with the provisions of the members expenses scheme. As the SPCB is not the employer of MSP staff, it is not required to gather and publish gender pay gap data.

Laura Moodie: That leaves rather a hole in data. Is it possible that that could be addressed to pursue the aim of reducing the pay gap?

Graham Simpson: It is clear that each MSP is an employer in their own right, so it is not a matter for the corporate body. However, the member could conduct her own research and I encourage individual parties, if they so wish, to conduct surveys of staff in their own groups. The member might feel that that is useful, but it is not a matter for the corporate body.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): That concludes SPCB questions. I apologise to members who were not able to get their questions heard in the chamber. I am sure that they will write quickly to the corporate body for a response.

Creative Economy

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Our next item of business is a debate on motion S7M-01304, in the name of Màiri McAllan, on growing Scotland's creative economy. Members who wish to speak should press their request-to-speak buttons now.

14:53

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): I am pleased to open this debate on growing Scotland's creative economy and recognise the extraordinary contribution that our culture and creative sectors make to Scotland and to our international reputation.

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

Our creative economy is among our greatest national strengths. It is found in our theatres and concert halls, in our museums, galleries and libraries, in our festivals, screen sector, music industry, games developers, publishers, designers and creative technology businesses and in the work of thousands of artists and entrepreneurs across the country. It is also found in our community centres, our green spaces and—for anyone whose family is like mine and whose family gatherings inevitably turn into everybody being encouraged to do a song or a wee turn—our homes.

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