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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 29 September 2026

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection. Today, this will be led by Frank Strang, who is the founder of Scotland's Four Words of Hope.

Frank Strang (Scotland's Four Words of Hope): Presiding Officer, what a pleasure it is today to give the time for reflection. Thank you very much, Sanne Dijkstra-Downie, for putting me forward.

For 40 years, I gave ministers from five different parties little slips of paper with ideas about what they should say. I notice that no minister is reciprocating by returning the favour today. *[Laughter.]*

Seriously, it is a joy to be here, not least because I have before me the Parliament's beautiful ceremonial mace and, to my left, Michael Lloyd, who made it. Scotland's Four Words of Hope exists to promote wisdom, compassion, justice and integrity. These are the wonderful words inscribed on the mace by Michael: wisdom, compassion, justice and integrity. Michael describes, somewhat wistfully, how these words encapsulated a generation's hopes for this place. They have the same charm and the same power today.

However, we do not promote these words out of nostalgia. We promote them to help to restore trust and hope. Our fellow citizens seem to be at risk of losing both. Election turnout is in decline. There has been a fall in the proportion of people who say that they trust this Parliament. I invite you today to reflect on how much this matters. The decline in trust is not just some dispiriting statistic that undermines the reputation of this place. Without trust, it becomes impossible to take the steps or implement the laws that will improve people's lives day by day.

One local politician whom I spoke to about these words said, without hesitation, that their policies were clearly wise, just, compassionate and honest. Maybe that person might have reflected a bit first. I suspect that Michael inscribed the words not to help us to justify what we already think, but to prompt thoughtful interrogation. For example, how will these plans work out in five or 10 years? Have we explicitly addressed fairness? Is this based on an honest assessment of the facts? Finally, does this alleviate suffering not just for those whom I know and like?

I do not want to add to your burden with a lecture. One of our guiding principles is that, if we want our elected representatives to show compassion, they must be shown compassion. You are, above all, human beings, and we must bring greater humanity to our politics.

These words are not a stick with which to beat you, but an invitation to return, every time that you enter this chamber, to the reason why so many of you entered politics in the first place: to act with wisdom, justice, compassion and integrity to help to create a Scotland where all can thrive.

Business Motion

14:04

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S7M-01389, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on changes to business. Members wishing to speak to the motion should press their request-to-speak button now.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revision to the programme of business for

(a) Tuesday 29 September 2026—

after

followed by First Minister's Questions (Backbench Members)

insert

followed by First Minister's Statement: The Roles and Functions of Scotland's Law Officers

(b) Wednesday 30 September 2026—

after

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followed by Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party Debate: Protecting Scots from Significant Income Tax Rises

insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Alexander Dennis Ltd.

delete

5.30 pm Decision Time

and insert

6.00 pm Decision Time.—[Jamie Hepburn]

Motion agreed to.

General Question Time

14:04

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is general question time. As always, I ask for short and sharp questions and answers.

Question 1, in the name of Marie McNair, has been withdrawn. An explanation has been given.

Question 2, in the name of Holly Bruce, was not lodged. An explanation has been given.

I am pleased to say that Murdo Fraser did, indeed, lodge his question.

Universal Library Offer

3. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it will take to implement a universal library offer, as recommended by the Scottish Library and Information Council in its report on how public libraries are supported, measured and funded. (S70-00303)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): Local authorities have a statutory duty to ensure that there is adequate provision of library services for their residents, aligning library provision with the specific needs of their communities.

In addition to record funding of £15.7 billion for local authorities in this financial year, the Scottish Government provides more than £1 million to the Scottish Library and Information Council, which includes £550,000 for the public library improvement fund. For members who are interested, in this financial year, the fund is supporting innovative projects that promote reading for pleasure among children with additional support needs, tackling digital exclusion, reducing inequalities and welcoming new Scots, including refugees and asylum seekers.

Murdo Fraser: I thank the cabinet secretary, but I did not actually hear an answer to the question that I asked. Let me try again.

Across Scotland, local libraries are well used, supported and loved by local communities, including in the area of Perth and Kinross, which is part of the region that I represent. However, they have had an axe hanging over them for years due to local government funding cuts. They are looking for some central assurance about the nationally defined minimum library offer, so that those vital local resources can be protected.

Given that the report was published in February, when will we get an answer from the Scottish Government about whether it will accept the report's definition?

Màiri McAllan: I want to re-emphasise that, as I consider the report's recommendations, I recognise the absolutely vital role that public libraries play. I used my initial answer to speak about some of the investment that we are putting into them. However, Mr Fraser is quite right—the Government is still considering the recommendations, and I will respond to them and to the Parliament as soon as I can.

Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP): As the cabinet secretary has pointed out, reading for pleasure is one of the strongest indicators of children's future success and life chances. In recognition of that, the Government has delivered the bookbug programme and recently provided additional funding to school libraries.

However, will the cabinet secretary explore working with the Libraries for Primaries programme, which is run in partnership with the National Literacy Trust and Penguin Books, in order to build on the good work to

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promote literacy that is already being undertaken and strengthen outcomes by ensuring that every state primary school has a library or dedicated reading space?

Màiri McAllan: Since 2010, the Scottish Government has funded the Scottish Book Trust, which Patricia Gibson has rightly spoken about. We do that so that it can deliver the bookbug programme. In this financial year and in the previous financial year, the programme was included in our fairer funding pilot, which meant that it was awarded a two-year grant of £1.8 million per year, offering continuity for planning and for the roll-out of services. I state that to the chamber in order to emphasise the importance that we place on that.

Ms Gibson also raised an additional proposition, which I am very pleased to take up and discuss with her.

Dawn Black (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): As has been acknowledged, local authorities are mandated to deliver library provision. However, they are mandated only to provide one library per local authority. Can the Scottish Government look at mandating a higher number of libraries in local authorities, based on population and geographical spread?

Màiri McAllan: Ms Black is quite right that there is no definition of “adequate” when it comes to the provision of services in the statute that underpins this work. The statute’s flexible approach was intended to allow local authorities to respond to their local needs and to match provision with their communities’ requirements. However, as I said to Mr Fraser, I am conscious of the report’s recommendation about clarifying “adequate” library services. I am considering those recommendations and will be sure to keep Ms Black and other members up to date.

Group-based Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation (Public Inquiry)

4. Senga Beresford (South Scotland) (Reform): To ask the Scottish Government what information it holds regarding when the public inquiry into the response to group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation will begin. (S7O-00304)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): The formal establishment of the inquiry is one of my top priorities, and work has been undertaken at pace to develop the terms of reference and finalise operational arrangements.

In August, I met the chair of the inquiry, Professor Alexis Jay, to discuss the terms of reference. Professor Jay has emphasised that the inquiry must proceed in a timely manner while retaining flexibility to investigate all areas that it considers necessary.

I also attended the national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group earlier this month, to engage with expert stakeholders on that matter and on aligning work with the inquiry. I will consider the finalised terms of reference in due course, and Parliament will be updated in the near future.

Senga Beresford: So, there is still no clarity for the victims. I will move on. There are reports that women are being sex trafficked and forced into pop-up brothels in my home town of Dumfries as we speak. What is the Scottish Government going to do to directly tackle that issue and protect those victims? Or will it fail them in the same way as it is currently failing the victims of grooming gangs?

Màiri McAllan: In response to the first question, I put it on the record that the establishment of an inquiry into group-based child sexual abuse and criminal exploitation is a top priority for me and for the Government. Likewise, the matters that Senga Beresford raises are a top priority for Police Scotland. A significant amount of work is currently under way. We have the expert group that I spoke to, the inspectorate review—the “National review of group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation and child criminal exploitation”—which we have had the phase 1 report from, the truth project, Lady Smith’s inquiry and a forthcoming inquiry by Professor Jay, all of which indicate the seriousness with which the Government treats these matters.

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

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Here we are, a year after the Scottish National Party and the Greens voted down Liam Kerr’s amendment to set up a grooming gangs inquiry, and this review—a multi-agency review—says that we still do not have accurate data and that there is not even a requirement to collect or report the data that is necessary for such an inquiry to take place. It is shameful. It was a mistake not to vote for Liam Kerr’s amendment to set up a grooming gangs inquiry last year, was it not?

Màiri McAllan: That is a confused account of the processes that have led us to where we are. Where we are, as I said in response to the initial question, is that a significant amount of work is under way and a concerted effort is under way to make sure that the abhorrent crime of child sexual abuse and criminal exploitation is well understood in our country, is identified wherever it is taking place and is rooted out. I want to make it absolutely clear, from the action that is under way, that there is no place for that abhorrent crime in Scotland, and the Government is attending to that.

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Clare Haughey (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP): It is hugely important that efforts to safeguard children can meet the evolving dangers that we see today. Ensuring that technology cannot be used for exploitation must be a priority. What engagement is under way with the United Kingdom Government to strengthen protections against online harms?

Màiri McAllan: The online world is a new and ever-developing forum. We must be continually curious about its impact on children and young people, and that is absolutely part of what the Government is taking forward. The regulation of technology is, of course, a matter for the UK Government, so my colleagues and I are in contact with it frequently. Indeed, by way of example, we are supporting efforts to implement new powers through the UK Crime and Policing Act 2026 to tackle online child sexual abuse and exploitation in Scotland. Under those measures, it is illegal to possess, create or distribute artificial intelligence tools that are designed to create child sexual abuse materials. We have also outlawed possession of advice or guidance about child sexual abuse, including AI-generated abuse. We are working with the UK Government on that. All the while, we are using every tool at our disposal within devolved powers to protect children from online harm. We are clear-eyed about the fact that that is another frontier for the potential abuse of children, and we want to shut it down.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): Scotland still has no clear national picture of the scale of group-based sexual abuse and exploitation, partly due to the lack of an agreed definition and the inconsistent approach to data collection. As has been said, the “National review of group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation and child criminal exploitation” urges Scottish ministers to deliver a national definition outlining reporting requirements and to set clear data collection standards by updating national child protection guidance. Can the cabinet secretary confirm whether the Scottish Government will enact those recommendations ahead of the public inquiry?

Màiri McAllan: It is always worth pointing out that the Scottish Government commissioned the inspectorate review in order to get absolute clarity on the extent of the issue throughout Scotland and on local responses to it. There are things that I welcome in the report, including the confidence in public protection arrangements and the points about strong safeguarding in education and effective multi-agency and contextual safeguarding. The review also highlights the value of existing national initiatives that the Government supports, such as the roll-out of the bairns’ hoose and the Scottish child interview model. However, the review goes on to raise matters that we know require to be addressed, including on information sharing, multi-agency approaches and, of course, the matter of a definition, which I expect will form part of what Professor Jay considers in her inquiry—although, of course, that is up to her.

Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): The minister might be aware of ongoing petition PE1979, which the Public Petitions Committee recently agreed to keep open and write to the Scottish Government about. Does the minister agree with the petition’s proposition on setting up a national whistleblowing officer to scrutinise public body failures that have enabled historical child abuse to take place and to prevent them from happening in the future?

Màiri McAllan: I must apologise, as I did not catch the exact reference to the petition that the member spoke about, so I will have to get back to her in writing once I have clarity on that.

However, on the question of whistleblowing, I absolutely support the point that nobody anywhere should feel that they can or should fail to disclose any concerns about a child. In our programme for government, the Government supported the bringing forward of mandatory reporting, which will be a strong provision to say that child abuse, wherever it is happening, must be disclosed by responsible adults.

Health Boards (Proposed Replacement)

5. Craig Hoy (Dumfriesshire) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the potential impact of its plans to replace the 14 territorial national health service boards with two strategic health boards on healthcare provision in Dumfriesshire, including access to locally delivered services. (S7O-00305)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care (Angela Constance): The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that people in Dumfriesshire have access to safe and high-quality healthcare as locally as possible. The proposed reforms are about the strategic governance and planning of NHS services and simplifying access to care and how it is delivered. They do not determine where individual services will be delivered.

We are not taking a one-size-fits-all approach. Local needs will be central to our planning, and we will work closely with local authorities, NHS partners, communities and stakeholders to ensure that future arrangements reflect local circumstances and support services being delivered as locally as possible.

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Craig Hoy: The cabinet secretary will be aware that rural communities, such as those in Langholm and Gretna in my constituency, fear that reorganisation will inevitably mean centralisation. However, given the proximity to the border, many of my constituents travel to Carlisle or Newcastle for local healthcare and specialised treatment, not north towards the central belt. As part of the reform process, will ministers look to remove the administrative, structural and funding friction so that patients who travel south to access medical treatment in England find the process as seamless and safe as possible?

The Presiding Officer: We move to supplementaries. I bring in Calum Kerr. Oh—sorry. I will bring in the cabinet secretary.

Angela Constance: I am happy to answer Mr Hoy's supplementary question. He raises the important issue of cross-border transfers. We know that that works both ways. There are patients south of the border who come to Scotland and, of course, there are constituents of his who go south of the border.

I will say one thing about our reforms. For too long, people have had to fit into the system, and I do not want that for anybody, irrespective of whether they live in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Mr Hoy's constituency or our remote and island communities. We have to design systems that, first and foremost, work for people. That is what I am committed to doing, and I am more than happy to engage further with any members on the detail of that.

The Presiding Officer: As he suspects, I am going to call Calum Kerr for a supplementary.

Calum Kerr (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I would have been happy to answer Mr Hoy's question, too.

I welcome the fact that the cabinet secretary agrees that we must look at robust evidence on how we reform our health boards and how that will improve services for patients and increase capacity. What discussions will be had between the Scottish Government, wider health board staff and unions ahead of the changes? We must ensure that we bring them with us in the transformation in order to meet care requirements in our communities.

Angela Constance: I assure Mr Kerr that the reform process must be done with, and not to, the workforce. The Scottish Government is engaging first and foremost with our workforce and, as part of that work, we will set out an agreed process with trade unions to ensure that the workforce is able to help to shape the plans. Those in the workforce—the people who are on the front line and in crucial roles that support those who are on the front line—often have some of the most informed views about how to reduce duplication and improve services.

Helen McDade (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): Has the cabinet secretary consulted each of the NHS territorial boards, noting that some boards are performing better on particular issues? For instance, NHS Fife's record on drug deaths, which decreased in the area by 13 per cent last year, shows that best practice can be shared out from that area rather than lost.

Angela Constance: The whole purpose of the reform programme is to ensure that there is not unwarranted variation. I am not talking about a one-size-fits-all approach; I am talking about reducing unwarranted variation in access to healthcare and reducing health inequalities in this country. If there are interventions that work well in one area—whether that is on reducing drug deaths, improving waiting times, improving access to orthopaedics or discharging our old people—and there is no reason why they could not be applied elsewhere, it is beyond me why we would not ensure that that happens, because doing so is in the interests of the health of the nation and the overall health of our population.

Duncan Dunlop (South Scotland) (LD): My constituent Victor King has spent a year in hospital after a stroke because not one care provider covers his rural address in Kirkpatrick Durham in Dumfriesshire. NHS boards often cite social care shortages as the main driver behind delayed discharge, yet social care is a council responsibility. What assessment has the cabinet secretary made of how the reorganisation of health boards and councils will affect locally delivered care for people such as Mr King in Dumfriesshire?

Angela Constance: I am very concerned to hear about the experiences of Mr Dunlop's constituent Mr King. Mr Dunlop touches on important matters regarding the locally available capacity of care home provision, on which we need to work hand in glove with care providers. I would be happy to receive more information on Mr King and on the solutions that we will all need to work together to bring to bear on the issue.

Local Government Restructuring (Costs and Savings)

6. Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what estimate it has made of projected costs and savings associated with its proposed restructuring of local government. (S70-00306)

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The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Jenny Gilruth):

The proposals that were set out by ministers on 21 September are intended as a starting point for discussions on local governance reform with those who deliver and use our public services. That dialogue will help us to develop a shared vision for reform and better understand the full implications of change, including the financial impacts. That will ensure that any future projects are aligned with the fiscal challenges that we face while delivering improved outcomes for our people and communities.

Alexander Burnett: Yesterday, it became clear that the Scottish National Party is hiding whether its £1.5 billion public sector savings plan is on track. John Swinney has repeatedly failed to explain the detail of his public service reforms. Does the Deputy First Minister think that the current local government proposals will cost more or less than the £556 million that the 1994 local government reforms would have cost today?

Jenny Gilruth: It is fair to say that the Government has been up front about the quantum of savings that are required through the portfolio efficiency and reform plans. Together, those plans will help to deliver £1.5 billion of recurring annual savings by 2028-29. I am sure that there will be further questions on that when I attend tomorrow's meeting of the Finance and Public Administration Committee.

More broadly, it is important to set out that, at the current time, local government reform is in a consultative period, and we are engaging with our local government partners on the future shape of local government. I invite Alexander Burnett and his party colleagues to be part of that dialogue to help us to arrive at a shared consensus on the future for local government in Scotland.

Rural Communities (Empowerment)

7. David Green (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to democratically empower communities across rural Scotland. (S7O-00307)

The Minister for Public Finance (Hannah Mary Goodlad): Thriving rural communities and empowering communities are priorities for the Scottish Government, which is why we have taken steps to empower communities to participate in decision making. We have reviewed the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 and introduced new land reform legislation that favours community buyouts. We have published proposals for the reform of local governance, which we will discuss later today. In addition, through our islands programme, we provide new funding for infrastructure projects that will help to boost employment, empower communities and ensure a sustainable future for Scotland's islands.

David Green: A constituent recently listed to me some of the consequences of having a one-size-fits-all approach to policy, including the closure of the Inverness control room, more patients having to travel outwith Highland for care, and rural fire station appliances being off the run. What works in the central belt will not always work for rural and island communities. The Parliament endorsed that principle when it created the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018, but it must now answer the question for rural Scotland, too. Former SNP MSP Gail Ross recognised that when she championed the case for a rural-proofing bill. Does the minister agree that Gail Ross was right to do so?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: Mr Green is as committed to and passionate about the strength and diversity of rural and island areas as I am. Our Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 is a landmark piece of legislation for this Parliament. I want it to be used further, and I want island communities to use it further. I look forward to working with Mr Green on that, and I am sure that he will be very engaged in the debate that is coming up later this afternoon.

Disinformation (Government Response)

8. Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will develop a strategy to respond to disinformation. (S7O-00308)

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Jamie Hepburn): Misinformation and disinformation represent a growing risk for all societies. The Scottish Government is working to consistently identify and, where we can, counter suspected misinformation, and we are active in United Kingdom and international information networks. We are developing an action plan to supplement our existing work.

The First Minister has spoken out against rumours and false narratives on social media and he has written to tech companies about that issue. He has also highlighted Police Scotland's warnings that provocative online misinformation that contains incendiary language can cross the threshold into criminality, and he condemned the deliberate setting on fire of a Glasgow apartment block following false online rumours.

Patrick Harvie: I recognise that, incident by incident, there can be individual responses, and I welcome the Government's decision to be proactive in relation to health disinformation. However, this is a much broader issue, whether it is about the targeting of asylum seekers, migrant communities and LGBTQ+ communities

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or about the chilling rise of far-right violence and intimidation on our streets. Does the Government recognise that disinformation, including deliberate disinformation from some Governments and major corporations, is now one of the most profound threats to our society? Will it consider developing a cross-Government strategy and consider whether legislative change is needed?

Jamie Hepburn: I fundamentally agree with the premise of the questions that Mr Harvie poses. We are all concerned about those things. We brought a debate on health misinformation to the chamber and I was glad to see the Parliament overwhelmingly agree on that.

As I mentioned, we are developing an action plan on these areas, and we will be happy to consider further what more we can do. In some areas to do with the spreading of misinformation and disinformation online, there is a limit to what we can do, because the powers are reserved. However, we will of course always be willing to consider what more we can do.

The Presiding Officer: That ends general question time. I apologise to the members I could not call to ask supplementaries.

First Minister's Question Time

Back-bench Members

14:29

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is First Minister's questions from back-bench members. I ask for short and sharp questions and answers.

Artificial Intelligence (Controls and Safeguards)

Paul McLennan (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP): What is the First Minister's position on controls and safeguards for artificial intelligence, following the recent announcement by the United Nations-backed independent international scientific panel on AI, which called for stronger safeguards?

The First Minister (John Swinney): There are many advantages that will come from artificial intelligence, but there are also many challenges and risks into the bargain. The Scottish Government supports a much stronger regulatory framework for the development and application of AI. That is not within the Scottish Parliament's responsibilities, but it will be a shared responsibility across many jurisdictions around the world. That is why there is a need for clear, emphatic and global leadership. We will engage with the United Kingdom Government to ensure that it takes such an approach to influence global dialogue on this important question.

NHS Grampian Critical Incident

Laura Mitchell (Moray) (SNP): This weekend, NHS Grampian declared a critical incident due to extreme pressure on emergency departments at Dr Gray's hospital and Aberdeen royal infirmary. Staffing, hospital capacity and social care pressures were cited as factors, with a small number of patients from Dr Gray's hospital diverted to Raigmore. Although the decision to stand down the board-level incident yesterday and the Dr Gray's hospital incident today are welcome, what discussions have the First Minister and others had with NHS Grampian over the weekend? What support can we offer to prevent further incidents as we head into the winter season?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care has been in regular dialogue with NHS Grampian over the course of the weekend during what I recognise would have been a concerning incident for residents in the NHS Grampian area. I pay tribute and express my thanks to members of staff for their sustained efforts to manage the situation. The cabinet secretary briefed members of Parliament for the area earlier this afternoon and she stands ready to provide further information about the incident.

I am glad that the incident has been stood down. The issues that have been addressed include an accumulation of high presentations at accident and emergency departments, along with challenges related to the number of delayed discharge patients in Dr Gray's and the Aberdeen royal infirmary. We have been working closely with the health and social care partnerships in the locality to ensure that patients can be delivered into communities with appropriate care packages to avoid congestion in hospitals, which undermines the flow of patients. We will continue to work closely with NHS Grampian and other health boards to resolve those issues as we approach winter.

Glasgow City Council Pay Dispute

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Iris Duane (Glasgow) (Green): As the First Minister will know, Glasgow City Council was forced last week not to commence the largest firing and rehiring process in United Kingdom history, which forced 23,000 staff members to take a pay deal that they had no say in. Although the Government has finally stepped in, Glasgow Green councillors wrote to the First Minister a number of weeks ago to indicate our concern about the level of detriment faced by workers and the financial ability of the council to deliver a fair deal in the equal pay dispute. Will the First Minister also step in and provide the financial support that is required to ensure that all Glasgow City Council employees get a fair deal that trade union members can be balloted on?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am glad that the Deputy First Minister's intervention on Friday resulted in the creation of more time to negotiate an agreement that can be put to trade union members. Glasgow City Council has been trying to resolve a long-running issue that the current administration inherited from its Labour predecessors, which meant that unequal pay has been part of Glasgow City Council's pay scheme.

There have been extensive negotiations. Two unions wish to put the current offer to their members, but one has been unwilling to do so. I hope that there can be dialogue over the next few days so that the issue can be resolved. It is important that there is fair and equal pay for people who have been disadvantaged for many years as a consequence of the pay scales in Glasgow City Council. The Government stands ready to engage in constructive dialogue to try to bring about an agreement that will be acceptable to the interested parties.

Ketamine Use (Treatment and Awareness)

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): The BBC has reported that children as young as 13 are suffering from serious bladder damage as a result of ketamine use, with some experiencing such severe symptoms that they are unable to attend school. I recognise that NHS Grampian has established a specialist clinic and has launched an awareness campaign following an increase in admissions from young people.

What action is the Government taking to ensure that everyone across Scotland has access to specialist treatment? Will he commit to a national awareness campaign that highlights the long-term and permanent damage that the drug can cause?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I share Claire Baker's concerns. We are working with alcohol and drug partnerships and specialist services to ensure that the issues that Claire Baker raises are widely understood and appreciated in our healthcare systems. We welcome the establishment in Aberdeen of the ketamine bladder clinic, which provides a specialist service to people experiencing the debilitating impacts of extensive ketamine use on normal bladder function.

It is, of course, utterly and completely inappropriate for that to affect children and young people. Several Government-funded organisation, including Crew, WithYou and the Scottish Drugs Forum, are raising awareness around ketamine use, particularly among young people. As part of the wider work that the Government is undertaking on drug use, and to address the issues that were raised in relation to the statistics last week, we are strengthening the messaging on those points to ensure that there is wide awareness of the dangers of the use of drugs such as ketamine and of the enormous damage that they can cause young people, should they use them.

Antisocial Behaviour (Under-22s Bus Passes)

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con): On Friday evening, the 240 bus service was removed from its route in North Lanarkshire due to some passengers' antisocial behaviour. Bus drivers should feel safe at their work, and passengers should feel safe when using the bus. When will the First Minister adopt a zero-tolerance approach to antisocial behaviour that is caused by under-22s and permanently remove their taxpayer-funded bus passes?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government has a zero-tolerance approach to those questions, because anybody who is involved in antisocial behaviour should have their conduct addressed by the relevant authorities, including Police Scotland.

In relation to the question about the bus pass, this issue concerns the behaviour of a very small minority of young people, who are abusing the facilities that are available. The Government has legislated to address the very issue that Meghan Gallacher has put to me.

Support for Industry (United Kingdom Government)

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Nationalising British Steel cost the UK Government £750 million on the first day and has cost it £1.3 million a day thereafter. Yorkshire-based Speciality Steel UK has also been taken into public ownership. Although Scottish taxpayers contribute to those schemes, there

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are no Barnett consequential in return, because they are deemed UK-wide interventions. Meanwhile, Grangemouth is overlooked. Although £22 billion was pledged for carbon capture in England, the Acorn project is also overlooked. Given that the UK Chancellor of the Exchequer has just made a pledge about reindustrialisation, what discussions does the First Minister plan with the UK Government on fair support for Scottish-based jobs?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Mr Brown makes a very fair and important point, on which the Scottish Government is taking a number of steps. I saw some of those steps in action yesterday at the port of Montrose, where significant investments were announced by Subsea Micropiles and significant commitments were offered by SSE, which will deliver a strengthened industrial future for Montrose port as a consequence of the investment in renewables that have been made by the Government.

On the example of Grangemouth that Mr Brown cites, it is an absolute scandal that the support that the Labour Party promised in 2024 has not been forthcoming, and the Scottish economy has been damaged as a consequence of that.

The Scottish Government will maintain the dialogue with the UK Government to press it to remember that Scotland has a necessity for industrial investment too, and to remind it that the investment that has been prioritised south of the border must be extended north of the border as well.

Electroconvulsive Treatment

Amanda Lindsay (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform): A recent freedom of information release found that more than 50 per cent of patients in Scotland who are receiving controversial electroconvulsive treatment are being subjected to it against their will. There were 2,128 of those treatments in the past year alone, so it is not a small problem. Worse, NHS Tayside admitted that it carried out the treatment

“without properly checking if patients needed it or if it was helping.”

What urgent action will the First Minister take to ensure that vulnerable patients are fully protected from a treatment that is effectively a form of torture?

The First Minister (John Swinney): That area of clinical intervention is of a very sensitive nature. I understand the significance of the points that Amanda Lindsay raises with me. Very high standards are applied in any particular cases of such a nature, because the individuals who are likely to be considered for the treatment will, without doubt, be some of the most vulnerable individuals in our society. Therefore, high standards must be set, and have been set, and they must also be applied.

Obviously, clinical judgments have to be arrived at, and it is totally inappropriate for me as First Minister, or for any minister, to speculate on them. It is down to the exercise of clinical judgment to support vulnerable patients where it might well be, or will be, in their interests for such treatment to be administered. However, that must be after the application of the highest standards of clinical care in exercising that judgment.

Household Bills (Energy Costs)

Lloyd Melville (Angus South) (SNP): Despite pledging to cut bills by £300, new analysis shows that household bills are up significantly since the Labour Party came to power. The University of Aberdeen published new research that shows that 58 per cent of Scots face fuel insecurity. Despite that, Andy Burnham has skimmed just £4 off energy bills for energy-rich Scots. What action is the First Minister taking to put more money back in the pockets of hard-working Scottish families?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Scottish Government has set out a range of different measures that we are taking to support individuals who face cost of living challenges, whether through the expansion of childcare that we are delivering, free breakfast clubs, or the steps that have been taken to apply the £2 bus fare cap around vast areas of the west of Scotland and the Highlands and Islands. There is also a commitment to extend that to other parts of Scotland, including the areas represented by Mr Melville.

The issue that Mr Melville raises is about energy costs. The Labour Government was elected on a commitment to reduce energy bills by £300. However, energy bills are still higher than when Labour came to office, with further increases projected in the foreseeable future.

The lesson for me is that, in an energy-rich country such as Scotland, it is clear that Westminster is failing to deliver the sustained reduction in energy bills that is required. If the United Kingdom Government will not deliver that, it should devolve energy powers to the Scottish Government so that we can take action to reduce the bills of people in Scotland.

Maternity Services Review (Remit)

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

Helen McDade (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): More than 4,300 people have signed a petition because the maternity services review will look only forward. Bereaved parents, including families who have lost loved ones at Ninewells, have called that an absolute insult. Does the First Minister agree that their trust in this review is hanging by a thread before it has even begun? Will he now widen the remit so that past cases of death and avoidable harm are properly investigated?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The maternity services review is an independent review that will be informed by the lived experience of those who utilise maternity services. It will be for the review to decide how it takes forward its agenda.

I note that, at the Government's request, Healthcare Improvement Scotland has embarked on a series of inspections to look at the delivery of maternity services.

If my memory serves me correctly, the review has already looked at the situation in Tayside and has published its findings in that respect, requiring certain actions to be undertaken. I assure Helen McDade, and those who are concerned about the issue, that the review will exercise its independent judgment and will be comprehensive in taking into account the views of members of the public who have lived experience in that area of activity.

Mining Remediation (Clackmannanshire)

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): What discussions has the Scottish Government had with the Mining Remediation Authority, and other relevant agencies, following reports that its investigation into the ground movement at Coalsnaughton in my constituency has now widened to other sites in Clackmannanshire, where similar historical mining remediation work was undertaken? What assurances has it sought regarding whether there could be implications for other former mining communities across Scotland?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am very familiar with the issues that Mr Brown raises, and I am grateful to him for the strong support that he has given to his constituents in Coalsnaughton as they have wrestled with the deeply distressing experience that they have had. I hope that it is of some reassurance to the members of the public who are affected that the Mining Remediation Authority has indicated that historical mine-working activity has led to the instability that has been experienced.

We are aware of further reports of other sites being examined. Yesterday, officials engaged further with the Mining Remediation Authority on that question. The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing will provide a written update to Keith Brown on the details of those discussions, but I assure him of the sustained engagement of the Government with the MRA on that important question.

Friedreich's Ataxia (Treatment)

Adam Harley (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD): I declare an interest as a former employee of Ataxia UK. Ella, aged 10, lives with the rare neurological condition Friedreich's ataxia, which affects movement and co-ordination and has a profound impact on daily life. For the next three years, Ella will receive a new medication—Skyclarys—as part of the BRAVE clinical trial in Germany. New gene therapies are also being developed that could potentially transform lives. However, without a clear pathway in Scotland, families are worried that they will miss out when those treatments become more widely available. Can the First Minister give Ella, and everyone with Friedreich's ataxia in Scotland, the assurance of clear pathways to accessing potentially life-changing treatments without having to fight the system to get them?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Our objective as clinical advances take place is to work to deploy them in Scotland when they are safe to be deployed. As Adam Harley has set out, clinical trials are under way. As we learn more information about the proceeds of those trials, and as the Scottish Medicines Consortium makes independent judgments about the availability and appropriateness of the use of those drugs, we must ensure that there are clinical pathways that will work effectively for members of the public in Scotland. That is the normal process of the delivery of interventions that will improve clinical care for individuals. I give Mr Harley the assurance that that approach will be applied as we look to hear the outcome of the clinical trials that are currently under way. I wish Ella and her family well in the undertaking of those clinical trials.

Care-Experienced People (Premature Deaths)

Duncan Dunlop (South Scotland) (LD): A child who was six when Scotland announced its care review is now 16—in essence, that is a childhood. Today, the independent oversight board has again warned that progress is still too slow but said that properly scrutinising premature deaths in the care-experienced community could improve outcomes. Last week's appalling drug deaths figures will include many care-experienced people. However, we cannot say how many, because the Scottish Government chooses not to

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track them. I ask the First Minister again—please—when will his Government start publishing the premature death rate for all care-experienced people?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I will explore the particular and specific issue that Duncan Dunlop has raised about the gathering of data. The Government gathers and publishes a huge amount of data. He commented on some of that data in relation to the drug deaths figures last week.

I accept his point that a proportion of those who lost their lives due to drugs will be people who were care-experienced. That is why the Government's approach to the Promise is not an isolated area of Government activity but is anchored in our commitment to whole-family support, to ensure that individuals have a rounded level of support in dealing with the challenges that they face.

I welcome the oversight board report that has been published. It indicates that progress has been made in a number of areas, not least in the legislative provisions in relation to the service redesign that is under way. We need to ensure that there is comprehensive focus on all those aspects of policy in all areas of the country, which is why the public service reform agenda is crucial to ensuring that we are able to make the progress that is envisaged in that agenda.

Antisocial Behaviour (Children and Young People)

Kate Campbell (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP): Yesterday, I met primary 6 and primary 7 pupils in the Burgh primary school in Musselburgh. Their number 1 issue was antisocial behaviour by teenagers. All of them had a story about when they had felt unsafe. What can the First Minister do to tackle ASB by a very small number of teenagers to ensure that all our children and young people feel safe in their communities?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Kate Campbell sets out the point in its proper context. It is a minority of young people who are undertaking antisocial behaviour.

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and I spent some time last Thursday with police officers in Leith in Edinburgh, alongside the display of the knife angel statue, which has been in Leith for the past few weeks. Part of the issue that we were discussing was the minority of young people who are inflicting antisocial behaviour on other members of their communities.

The Government takes a number of steps to tackle that behaviour by young people, whether it is through the intervention of the police or investment via measures such as cashback for communities and anti-violence programmes. A sustained part of the education programme in our schools is to ensure that young people are encouraged not to take part in antisocial behaviour. However, should such behaviour be prevalent, a criminal justice intervention is available to tackle it. The police have our full support in undertaking that work.

Rosyth to Dunkirk Ferry Service

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): Last week, the First Minister told Parliament that the Government was committed to delivering a ferry service of the type proposed between Rosyth and Dunkirk. Will he update us on the Deputy First Minister's meeting with Forth Ports last week? Is that project going to happen, and when?

The First Minister (John Swinney): We are in ongoing discussions with Forth Ports about the issues relating to a direct ferry connection. Importantly, we need a private sector partner to anchor that development. The Government will be supportive of steps to take forward such a development, but it will require us to be engaged in further discussions with the relevant authorities to ensure that that is the case. The Deputy First Minister and others will be happy to keep Mr Ruskell and Parliament informed of the progress that is being made.

Springholm and Crocketford Bypass

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Local communities and businesses from across Dumfries and Galloway, and the United Kingdom, have waited many decades for the Springholm and Crocketford bypass, but progress is now being made. Will the First Minister or the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport commit to meeting local landowners and stakeholders who believe that a more affordable phased alternative could deliver the long-awaited bypass sooner and avoid the possibility that the current route assessment results in a preferred option becoming so expensive that it is never built?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I welcome Mr Carson's suggestion. It might be best if the transport secretary meets the local representatives, but if there is an appetite for me to be involved in that, I will consider it. However, the transport secretary will be able to engage. Mr Carson raises interesting ideas that I am sure will be discussed in the communities that he represents.

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I am very familiar with the developments in Crockettford. Safety benefits will arise out of that proposition. The Government will be happy to engage with Mr Carson and the communities that he represents on those suggestions.

Glasgow City Council (Homelessness)

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform): What is the First Minister's response to the leader of Glasgow City Council, Councillor Ricky Bell, when he said that the city is

"carrying the burden of homelessness for the whole of Scotland",

and his controversial call on the Scottish Government to change the law to let the city move people out into neighbouring authorities such as North and South Lanarkshire?

The First Minister (John Swinney): We have gone through quite a number of those points already. My firm view is that we have an obligation, as a country, to provide safe refuge to individuals when it is judged appropriate for them to be located here. However, there must also be commensurate financial support from those who are taking those decisions to enable that to be the case. That is the simple answer to the issue that Councillor Bell raises. It is therefore for the Home Office to follow up its decisions about leave-to-remain status by putting in place the financial support to enable people to be properly supported in this country. I reiterate a demand that has been made repeatedly by this Government to the Home Office for that to be the case.

MCR Pathways (Support for Young People)

Martyn Day (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP): Last week, I met young people and mentors involved in MCR Pathways and heard what having a trusted adult in their corner has meant to them. Will the First Minister welcome the work of MCR Pathways and consider how the Scottish Government can help to deliver a trusted adult guarantee for young people across Scotland?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am very familiar with the work of MCR Pathways, which has done extraordinary and beneficial work for young people in providing the reliability of an adult mentor. The Government continues to support MCR Pathways' school-based mentoring programme for care-experienced and other disadvantaged young people, with £3 million of investment in the current financial year. We will sustain our dialogue with the organisation to ensure that the needs of young people are supported as effectively as it is possible for us to deliver.

Police Conduct Regulations

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Why is the First Minister ignoring the Angiolini review's recommendation to have a single set of police conduct regulations rather than one for senior ranks and one for everyone else? That is not the case in other forces in the United Kingdom, so why is he rejecting that part of the review?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I will have to take that issue away and explore the details of the point that Mr Kerr raises. The highest standards of conduct should be expected of all police officers of whatever rank. I will explore the issue that he raises and will write to him accordingly.

Spouse Visas

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): A constituent of mine is devastated that current immigration laws mean that her daughter must move to Germany with her new husband. They cannot meet the financial requirements of a spouse visa, so Argyll and Bute is losing a young couple to Germany's gain. Does the First Minister agree that current immigration laws do not reflect the needs of our rural communities?

If the United Kingdom Government will not make the changes that are needed, immigration laws should be devolved to Scotland to ensure that those who want to live here and contribute to their community are able to do so.

The First Minister (John Swinney): It is pretty clear that the approach to immigration policy by the UK Government is not meeting the needs of Scotland. We require to boost our adult working-age population in Scotland. That has been a long-term challenge and issue for our country. It is essential to enabling and fuelling economic growth in our society, but the UK Government turns its back on those practical proposals.

There has been a wide consensus in this Parliament that there would be advantages in Scotland being able to take a different approach to migration in a number of key areas, particularly in relation to strengthening the working-age population. I encourage the UK Government to engage constructively with us on taking forward such propositions, because they would benefit the economy and the sustainability of communities in Scotland, especially many of the rural communities that Jenny Minto represents in this Parliament.

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The Presiding Officer: Talking of rural communities, Liam McArthur has the next question.

Kirkwall Post Office Closure

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): Last Monday, the closure of Kirkwall post office was announced with no notice, no consultation and no confirmation of when or even where it might reopen. When the branch was franchised by Universal Office Equipment last year, assurances were given that the new model would provide long-term sustainability, but now, islanders are facing significant uncertainty.

The importance of the post office to the local community and small businesses across Orkney cannot be overstated. Will the First Minister engage with his United Kingdom counterparts to establish what steps can be taken to safeguard vital postal services across Orkney?

The First Minister (John Swinney): It is unacceptable that postal services of that nature, which I recognise are pivotal in communities such as those that Mr McArthur represents, are unavailable for people to use. We will make representations to the UK Government on that question.

It is vital that there is an effective and sustainable network of postal services around the country, and that most definitely includes in Kirkwall. We will take forward and make those representations.

Learning Disabilities, Autism and Neurodivergence Bill

Joe Long (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests in relation to my employment at Scottish Autism prior to election.

Last week, a group of charities, disabled people's organisations and MSPs from across the parties came together in Parliament to discuss the scrapping of the proposed learning disabilities, autism and neurodivergence bill. After sharing their expertise, their personal stories and their trauma in the development of the bill, those communities and organisations feel deeply let down.

Will the First Minister detail how the Scottish Government will maintain a strategic cross-sectoral focus on the rights and needs of neurodivergent people and people with learning disabilities, and will he explain how those communities' voices will guide that work, given the dissolution of the lived experience advisory panel and stakeholder groups?

The First Minister: I recognise the concerns that Mr Long raises, and I addressed those in my answer to Steven Bonnar on a previous occasion. The Government came to the judgment, having listened to the lived experience of individuals and all the learning that has been shared with us by different organisations and individuals, that it would be more effective if we took a number of practical steps to enhance the services and support available for neurodivergent individuals, and to support them more effectively with more effective services. We decided that that would deliver more significant and earlier improvement in the circumstances of those individuals than would focusing on legislation. The Government has made that choice and we will press ahead with the agenda to deliver those improvements.

With regard to Mr Long's point about dialogue and engagement, Maree Todd, the minister with responsibility in this area, has met with a range of organisations already and will continue to sustain that dialogue to ensure that we hear the voice of lived experience and that we are able to reflect that in the policy priorities that the Government takes forward.

Secretary of State for Scotland

Alex Kerr (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): On Sunday evening, the Labour conference held its annual Scots night, hosted by the Secretary of State for Scotland, Douglas Alexander. While Labour—unsurprisingly—sets aside just one night at conference for Scotland, can the First Minister point to what tangible difference the secretary of state has actually made for Scotland during the other 364 days of the year?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I will allow the Secretary of State for Scotland to justify himself; he does not need any encouragement from me to set out his rather poor report card.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes questions to the First Minister from back-bench members. A number of members had indicated, by sending questions to me, that they wanted to ask questions, but they either did not turn up on time or did not press their request-to-speak buttons. I remind members that both of those are essential if they are to be chosen.

Law Officers (Roles and Functions)

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The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is a statement by John Swinney on the roles and functions of Scotland's law officers. Questions will be taken at the end of the statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

15:01

The First Minister (John Swinney): The office of Lord Advocate is one of the oldest and most important institutions in Scotland's public life. The Lord Advocate is a Government minister whose principal responsibilities include being both the independent head of the systems of criminal prosecution and the investigation of deaths, and the principal legal adviser to the Scottish Government.

Together with the Solicitor General for Scotland, the Lord Advocate plays a vital role in upholding the rule of law, in the administration of justice and in protecting the public interest. For generations, holders of those offices have discharged those responsibilities with integrity, professionalism and independence. Their work in fulfilling the expectations of the office has been fundamental to the delivery of justice and the protection of rights at all times.

The current Lord Advocate and Solicitor General continue that tradition of outstanding public service. The reforms that they have put in place are designed to provide greater transparency about decision making and to be as open as possible about the sensitive judgments that have to be made while protecting the independence of their decision making.

Over the centuries, the roles of the law officers have not remained static. They have changed alongside Scotland's society, institutions and constitutional framework to meet the needs of the people whom they serve. The current system has ensured that Government policy is informed by expert legal advice and guided by the rule of law, while the Lord Advocate remains directly accountable to Parliament for the exercise of her prosecutorial functions.

However, no system, however long-standing, should be beyond examination. It is right that we consider whether the current arrangements continue to serve modern Scotland as effectively as they can.

In 2022, the Scottish Government commissioned Malcolm McMillan to carry out detailed research into the history and functions of the law officers. His "Report on the Roles and Functions of the Scottish Law Officers", which was published earlier this year, gave us an important foundation and a shared understanding of the roles in question. However, that exercise was not intended to answer the question of what Scotland should do in the future, and it did not address the detailed questions that would have to be considered in order to ensure that there could be assurance on the public expectations on the independence of decision making if the current arrangements were subject to change.

In June, I confirmed to Parliament that I would continue to engage on this matter. As I emphasised then, and continue to emphasise now, it is vitally important that we approach any reform of the law officers' roles in an open and thoughtful way, to ensure that the significant constitutional, legal and operational issues are thoroughly explored and that there is a clear understanding of the implications of any changes. Only then can Parliament have a fully informed discussion about whether any changes should be made to those roles.

With that in mind, I announce to Parliament that the Scottish Government will establish an independent review on the future functions and responsibilities of the Scottish law officers. The review will be independently chaired by Lord Boyd of Duncansby. Having served as both Lord Advocate and Solicitor General, and later as a senator of the College of Justice, Lord Boyd brings to this review extensive experience of Scotland's legal and constitutional framework.

It is essential that the review hears from a wide range of individuals and organisations, such as the judiciary, professional bodies, members of this Parliament and others with an interest in the future role of the law officers.

Lord Boyd will appoint a reference group to support his work, ensuring that the review benefits from a broad range of perspectives and expertise. I am confident that, as chair, Lord Boyd will engage widely and openly to ensure that all relevant views are heard.

The review will examine the advantages and disadvantages of making changes to the current arrangements. It will consider the strengths and weaknesses of alternative models, engage with the legal, constitutional and practical implications of reform, and make recommendations to Scottish ministers.

Crucially, the review will approach these issues with an open mind. It will follow the evidence where it leads, whether that is to reforms or to maintaining the status quo.

In accepting the appointment, Lord Boyd said:

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"I am very pleased to have been asked by the First Minister to conduct this review. The issues it will consider are of fundamental importance to the administration of justice in Scotland.

Any recommendations must safeguard the independence and integrity of the prosecution system, sustain public confidence, strengthen accountability, and ensure that Ministers continue to receive high-quality, professional legal advice.

I approach the task with an open mind and will consult widely before making my recommendations to Ministers in due course."

The Scottish Government will provide administrative support, but the review will work independently and its conclusions will be entirely its own. The review will begin work in the new year, and the current intention of the chair is for it to publish its final report in the latter part of 2027.

Once the review has reported, we will consider its recommendations carefully. If changes are recommended, those proposals may then form the basis of a public consultation and Parliament will have the opportunity to scrutinise any of our subsequent decisions on those reforms.

It has been widely established, including by United Kingdom Government ministers, that consideration of whether any changes should be made to the roles of the Scottish law officers is properly a matter for this Parliament to lead on. By establishing this independent expert review, we are ensuring that Scotland takes a careful, evidence-based and mature approach to an important constitutional question.

In closing, I would like to put on record my gratitude to the Lord Advocate and the Solicitor General for their support, leadership and constructive engagement as we have developed our plans for a review. They have welcomed the opportunity to improve understanding of their roles, while ensuring that any proposals for change are informed by a full and careful assessment of the options and their consequences.

I also welcomed the constructive tone in this chamber on the case for considering reform when the current law officers were nominated in June. I hope that parties across the chamber will engage with the work of the review and its recommendations in a similar spirit.

It is right that we debate the future of the law officers' roles. These long-standing roles have been crucial to establishing and sustaining a legal framework in Scotland that commands public confidence, provides dependable legal advice for Government and enables justice for all to be delivered. It is absolutely critical that, in any process of reform, those attributes are maintained.

In commissioning the review, the Government wants to ensure that the debate on this important issue is guided by the highest quality of evidence, analysis and consideration. I know that Lord Boyd will provide that approach and perspective. I encourage all interested parties throughout our country who wish to contribute to this process to approach the review in that spirit.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, First Minister. We have 20 minutes or so for questions. Everyone who wishes to ask a question should press their request-to-speak button now, please. I ask for concise questions, because otherwise we will struggle to get all members in.

Amanda Bland (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform): Why is it only now that the First Minister agrees that there is a problem that needs to be fixed? Until now, the Government has repeatedly praised the independence, integrity and effectiveness of the current Lord Advocate and Solicitor General. If ministers have confidence in the existing system, what problem is the review seeking to solve?

The First Minister: Let me make it clear that the Government's decision to conduct the review has absolutely nothing to do with our assessment of, or commentary on, the Lord Advocate and the Solicitor General, who carry out their functions to the highest standards of professionalism and independence in their decision making, as I narrated in my statement.

This is the Government acknowledging the fact that there has been widespread debate about whether the Lord Advocate should exercise the dual role of principal legal adviser to the Government and head of the prosecution system. That is not a new issue—it is an issue on which my party and other parties have commented before. As a consequence of those issues having been raised, and given the constitutional significance of the roles of the Lord Advocate and the Solicitor General, I feel that it is important that they are properly and fully examined. Lord Boyd will do that on our behalf.

The Presiding Officer: I call Pauline McNeill, who is dialling in remotely.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Can I have the First Minister's assurance that the review led by Lord Boyd will consider, as a matter of priority, how the Parliament will continue to hold the Lord Advocate and the Solicitor General to account? For example, during the Post Office scandal, it was vital that we heard directly from the Lord Advocate about what exactly happened in the prosecutions of postmasters. Does the First Minister agree that it is vitally important that we do not lose any accountability of our law officers to this Parliament in any changes that are made?

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The First Minister: Pauline McNeill raises one of the most fundamental issues that we must discuss. The current arrangements have served this country well, for the very reason that she sets out: Parliament is able to exercise an appropriate level of accountability in relation to our law officers on issues of significance and prosecutorial policy.

I do not want to see any diminution of that accountability. Indeed, many reforms that the current Lord Advocate has undertaken strengthen accountability, and taking that forward is one of her priorities.

The process that we are embarking on is designed to properly, dispassionately and calmly explore the very important issues that Pauline McNeill raises, because those aspects are fundamental to the role of this Parliament and the exercise of its responsibilities. I feel that that debate must be informed by considered input from Lord Boyd, who I think will help us to reach conclusions on whether there would be an advantage in changing the arrangements or, as Pauline McNeill indicates, whether there would be disadvantages if we do not get the arrangements for accountability right.

David Linden (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP): I welcome the First Minister's statement and the repeated references to the point that the independent review will be evidence led, which is so important in this case.

I want to press the First Minister on an issue. Will the review consider what the roles and responsibilities of the Lord Advocate would be if the position were decoupled?

The First Minister: That is at the heart of the exercise that Lord Boyd will undertake. The Lord Advocate's role is deeply woven into the fabric of Scots law and the way in which justice is exercised in Scotland. The issue that Pauline McNeill just raised about parliamentary accountability is important in providing a line of sight for the Parliament in those areas.

Those points will be material to the judgment that Lord Boyd has to consider and advise on, because none of these issues is straightforward. There is an enormous amount of complexity, at the heart of which is the importance of ensuring that principles of justice are maintained, independence of prosecutorial decisions is enhanced, the Government has access to the highest quality of independent legal advice and members of the public have confidence in that system. The issues that Mr Linden raised are central to the remit of the review that Lord Boyd will undertake.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green): I follow the First Minister in recognising the important contribution that the former Lord Advocate and current Lord Advocate have made to Scotland.

The review is ultimately about whether we should split the role. If that is the route that we go down, there will be a need for prosecutions to rightly be politically neutral, and there will be a need to maintain a system of policing and prosecuting by consent, whereby prosecutors are accountable to the Parliament and, by extension, the public. There will also be a need for unity between the two roles, if we choose to create them, in relation to decisions such as the establishment of the Thistle.

Is the First Minister confident that the review will consider all those practical implications, including the point on unity, to ensure that whatever model is chosen, accountability is maintained?

The First Minister: The Government could have decided to embark on a particular change to the arrangements for the Lord Advocate and the law officers' function. However, in my judgment, there is far too much complexity to be explored, an awful lot of which has been put on the record by Gillian Mackay—all of it legitimate—to enable us to come to an informed position about any particular change in this area.

I give the assurance that, this afternoon, members will be able to see the terms of reference that have been set out for Lord Boyd, which are comprehensive enough to enable all those issues to be addressed. I believe that the Parliament will benefit from having such a dispassionate and considered contribution from Lord Boyd.

I thank Gillian Mackay for her comments about the current and previous Lord Advocates, who, as I have maintained several times, have served Scotland with enormous distinction.

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): The Scottish National Party manifesto promised a review of the Lord Advocate's dual role five years ago. The then Lord Advocate went on to back SNP plans to scrap jury trials, effectively decriminalise possession of heroin and crack cocaine and tip off John Swinney about Nicola Sturgeon's criminal husband. We really do not need another SNP review, so why will John Swinney not just end the Lord Advocate's dual role now?

The First Minister: I suppose that Scotland will be able to see the difference between Mr Findlay's approach and my approach, which is at the very heart of the point that I am making to the Parliament today. That is not a way to go about determining policy. The last way that we should go about determining policy is to be driven by political invective, insults and pathetic comments. *[Interruption.]* Conservative members can

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shout and stick their fingers up at me, but it is totally and utterly debasing to listen to these characters, who have just taken an absolute hammering in the election and who come in here with a sense of entitlement—

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Come on!

The First Minister: They do not understand—

The Presiding Officer: Excuse me. Stephen Kerr, please let the First Minister speak.

The First Minister: The Conservative members are not prepared to contemplate the complexity that is involved in the issue. As I said in my response to Mr Linden and in my statement, we need to ensure that public confidence in our judicial system is maintained by whatever changes we make, that the Government is still able to get access to the highest quality legal advice, that we have accountability around the independence of prosecutorial decisions and that we have available to us a constitutional approach that is compatible with all the other statutory areas of activity in Scotland. That needs a careful, measured process of assessment; it does not need the invective of Russell Findlay.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh North Western) (LD): Theatrics aside, in 2021, this Government recognised the urgent need for reform of Scotland's law officers. We do not need another review to tell us that. The solutions are staring us in the face. There is an inherent conflict of interest in the Lord Advocate's current dual role, and that is why the Liberal Democrats have long called for an independent director of public prosecutions. We also need a separate function and a complete overhaul of the fatal accident inquiry system, because right now, due to the backlog, there are hundreds of families waiting for answers on what happened to their loved ones. The First Minister was largely silent on such solutions in his statement, but, as he makes representations to the inquiry, will he lend support to solutions such as those proposed by the Liberal Democrats?

The First Minister: First, the Liberal Democrats have not long supported the separation of roles, because I can remember Jim Wallace being a strong advocate in the House of Commons for the maintenance of the arrangements that we have during the passage of the Scotland Act 1998. *[Interruption.]*

Alex Cole-Hamilton: That was a long time ago.

The First Minister: Some of us have been around for a long time and are able to remember some of the Liberal Democrat history, even if the Liberal Democrats have forgotten all about it. I will just leave that point where it is just now.

Mr Cole-Hamilton advances a point about a conflict of interest for the Lord Advocate. That is his opinion, not a demonstrable fact. All sorts of different procedural explanations, all of which are publicly accessible, demonstrate how the Lord Advocate applies independence of decision making in all circumstances, so I reject unreservedly the idea of a conflict of interest. The Lord Advocate takes an appropriate approach to the exercise of independent judgment that reflects those priorities.

I have sympathy with Mr Cole-Hamilton in relation to his point about fatal accident inquiries. One of the priorities of the Lord Advocate is to try to enhance the pace at which fatal accident inquiries can be considered in order to provide answers to the families who require those answers.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP): I very much welcome the statement and the announcement of this expert, comprehensive and independent review. It is important to determine what is most appropriate as well as what is most efficacious. Will the review consider whether separation of the roles might create additional bureaucracy and related disadvantages?

The First Minister: Consideration has to be given to these questions, because we are interested in the utilisation of resources—that is also relevant to the point raised by Alex Cole-Hamilton in relation to fatal accident inquiries—but we also have to be mindful, in all these approaches, of the question of accountability for decision making. There has to be absolute clarity about accountability for decision making. Those questions will be relevant to the review that Lord Boyd undertakes.

Mark Simpson (North East Scotland) (Reform): Reform UK has said that the dual role should end, and we voted that way in June. Can the First Minister explain the timings of the inquiry? Why are we waiting until 2027, and with what degree of certainty can the First Minister say that we will get the final report in 2027?

The First Minister: We are taking steps to prepare for the necessary support for the inquiry to commence in January. Lord Boyd has other commitments that are relevant in the short term. He will commence the work in the new year, and his very firm expectation and commitment to me is that the work will be undertaken during the course of 2027.

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Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I note the First Minister's words on the "constitutional significance" of the dual role. Might the separation of the roles mean that there would always be a need for a political role in Cabinet?

The First Minister: For the duration of the SNP Government, the law officers have not been political appointments. Indeed, the most recent political appointment of a law officer was that of Lord Boyd. Colin Boyd was appointed as the Lord Advocate by the Labour Government in about 2001, if my memory serves me right—or it was something of that order.

The Lord Advocate and Solicitor General have been appointed in their capacity to provide independent legal advice to the Government and to lead the prosecutorial functions of the Crown Office. The Lord Advocate only ever participates in Cabinet in offering legal advice to the Government. For me, that is an absolutely fundamental necessity. From my experience in Cabinet over many years, having the law officers present to provide us with legal advice and to ensure that we act appropriately and within the law is fundamental to the exercise of good governance in Scotland. I pay tribute to all the Lord Advocates who have served round the Cabinet table for discharging that function in an independent and dispassionate way.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): Given what the First Minister has said about conflict of interest, does he accept that there is considerable concern that the dual roles of head of prosecution and legal adviser to the Scottish Government are incompatible and that there is a perception of conflict of interest? Will that be included in the review's terms of reference as a substantial consideration?

Will the First Minister outline whether discussions have taken place with the UK Government about the review, including on the timetable for any potential legislation?

The First Minister: Katy Clark makes a point that is relevant and important to the decision that I am taking. I recognise the debate that is being aired about the dual role of the Lord Advocate, and it is important that that issue is solved and addressed in a considered fashion, because many complexities have to be worked through. Simple solutions have been offered to us, such as just adopting the English system, which apparently separates the functions. However, the Attorney General has involved functions in relation to prosecutorial decisions, so there is not a neat separation of roles in the English system. Some myths need to be explored to enable us to have an informed debate. I accept that the debate is happening, and it needs to be addressed in a dispassionate fashion. The remit and terms of reference of the review will accommodate all the issues that Katy Clark has raised with me.

In relation to the UK Government, I have written to the Secretary of State for Scotland to advise him of the statement that I am making. Obviously, we await the dialogue that comes out of the review that is to be undertaken by Lord Boyd to consider any issues about parliamentary timescales and legislative opportunities.

Kate Campbell (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP): I welcome the fact that the First Minister is encouraging broad engagement and contributions to the review, but what lessons does he think that Scotland can learn from jurisdictions that have separated prosecutorial and advisory functions?

The First Minister: It is vital for us to understand and appreciate that learning in undertaking the review. It is vital that we have an appreciation of the issues that are raised. As I mentioned in my answer to Katy Clark, there is a suggestion that there is a neat separation of responsibilities in England, but the situation is not nearly as simple as that. Those are some of the material questions that we have to consider. We need to think about what is appropriate for the judicial experience in Scotland, which runs over many centuries; about how our legal system has developed; and about whether such steps are the correct ones to take.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): The First Minister says that reform of the law officers is properly a matter for the Scottish Parliament to lead on. However, any changes to the roles of Lord Advocate and Solicitor General will involve reserved matters and therefore will need either UK Parliament legislation—a section 30 order or similar—or transfer of the power to make such changes to this Parliament. What discussion has the First Minister had with the UK Parliament on the issue, other than having written to the secretary of state? How will the First Minister ensure that this Parliament has the decisive role in determining any future model?

The First Minister: As I indicated in my statement, almost everyone—including UK ministers—has accepted that this Parliament should lead the consideration of these issues, hence the process that I am commencing today. Beyond what I said in my answer to Katy Clark, I have had no further dialogue with the UK Government on this question, but we will engage in such work as we hear from Lord Boyd in the fullness of time. However, to be crystal clear, I believe that this Parliament should determine any changes to the roles of the law officers in Scotland and that it should be responsible for legislating for such changes, should that be needed.

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Colm Merrick (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): How can we sure that, if the dual role of the Lord Advocate were to be separated, a new model would preserve prosecutorial independence and effective Government legal advice?

The First Minister: How the arrangements that we take forward will enable those elements to be asserted and assured is the central question that must be considered. Those elements are central to the effective exercise of the Lord Advocate's functions, and the Government and the prosecutorial system depend on them. Therefore, those questions will be central to our consideration of all these issues.

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): If there was an Olympic sport for kicking things into the long grass, the SNP would almost certainly win the gold at every Olympics. The First Minister and that lot over there might not like it, but it was in 2021 that the SNP said in its manifesto that it will consult on the separation of the roles. It is now 2026, and we are talking about the end of 2027, 2028 or 2029. There has been the McMillan report and there will now be the Boyd review. We are talking about taking a decade to consider something as simple as a generation, for heaven's sake. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr. We are all having a great time, but how about getting to a question?

Stephen Kerr: The First Minister is certainly not operating at pace. Has he really never spoken to a UK Government minister about this fundamental aspect of the constitution, which is reserved?

The First Minister: I have not spoken to UK ministers about this issue. I notified the Secretary of State for Scotland earlier this morning about the review, which was the courteous and responsible thing to do, and I am sure that there will be further conversations about it.

One can always rely on Stephen Kerr to put his foot right in it. We now know that, according to him, a generation is 10 years. That admission has been a long time coming; this is a beautiful moment and I am glad that we all witnessed it. We will hold Mr Kerr to his definition of a "generation".

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the ministerial statement on the roles and functions of Scotland's law officers.

Empowering Communities and Strengthening Local Democracy

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is a Scottish Government debate without motion on empowering communities and strengthening local democracy. Members who wish to speak in the debate should press their request-to-speak buttons now.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I call Ivan McKee to speak, for up to 12 minutes.

15:34

The Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform (Ivan McKee): I am delighted to open the debate. Our public service reform agenda is focused on delivering the Christie principles of integration, prevention, efficiency and empowerment. Of those, to my mind, empowerment is of critical importance. Reform of Scotland's public services must empower communities and strengthen local democracy by supporting people to take decisions for their areas.

These are not questions for Government alone, which is why the Scottish Government has committed to a period of genuine and extensive engagement on public service reform to help to ensure that proposals deliver meaningful improvements. This debate is part of that process. It is about engaging positively and constructively on how, together, we can rewire the public sector in a way that supports people to take decisions for their communities.

Graham Simpson (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform): Will the cabinet secretary explain why the consultation on local government will last for only three months?

Ivan McKee: We feel that it is important that we move at pace on this important issue and, frankly, we want to make sure that we get minds focused on the change that is possible. The three-month period will allow us to engage extensively, and an awful lot has happened already. As we reach the end of the period, we will outline where agreement has been reached and where we will go next. I do not know whether the member is saying that we should take longer to do that and, if so, how long it would be before he started to complain that we were taking too long to do it, as we have heard in previous contributions from his party.

I want to hear what opportunities this work could bring for communities in members' constituencies and how we can help to reshape Scotland's public services together. Our communities are best placed to understand what is needed in their local areas. Development trusts, third sector organisations and a wide

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range of community groups sit at the heart of our communities, and many volunteers give their time to serve their local areas and support our vibrant grass-roots democracy in Scotland.

The community development sector and workforce underpin so much of this activity, and they form a critical part of the infrastructure that builds communities, enabling people to know their rights, have a voice and make a change. We recognise that those who are closest to the challenges that communities face are also closest to the solutions. I look forward to hearing views from across Parliament.

This debate complements wider engagement that has already started. Recently, the Minister for Public Finance and I met Norway's Minister of Local Government and Regional Development to discuss Norway's model of local government and what learning might be shared in taking forward our reform programme. When the Deputy First Minister was in Shetland last week, she discussed the reform proposals with the council leader and chief executive. Scottish Government officials recently met representatives from all three Ayrshire councils and, separately, East Renfrewshire Council to discuss reform. A programme of bilateral meetings between ministers and local authority representatives will be in train over the autumn, and in the next few months we will engage with public bodies, national health service boards, trade unions and the third sector, as well as communities themselves, to ensure that proactive leadership and collaboration are central to our approach to public service reform.

The programme for government is clear that community empowerment, community wealth building and our democracy matters programme will be at the heart of our approach to public service reform and, in particular, to changes to local governance. It recognises that our model of governance and decision making for public services increasingly creates disparities and risks inconsistencies in delivery and in outcomes for the people we serve. The current model of local government has not been reviewed since devolution and the restoration of the Scottish Parliament in 1999.

The Government's starting point is to ensure that we have a stronger democracy and the organisational capacity and capability that we need at the right levels to unleash economic opportunities and achieve the ambitions of communities in all areas of Scotland.

Monica Lennon (Glasgow) (Lab): The minister mentioned organisational capacity, and he spoke about the importance of empowering communities. Does he understand why trade unions and workers are so concerned that up to 20,000 public sector workers could lose their jobs as part of the reform? Does he agree that it is hard to empower and have the right capacity if we could potentially lose that many workers?

Ivan McKee: The wider public service reform programme is all about getting the right workforce in the right place to ensure that we are delivering effectively for the people of Scotland. We firmly believe, as indeed Christie did, that by introducing prevention, joining up services, removing duplication and empowering communities and the workforce, we can end up in a place where public services are more effective and more efficient at the same time.

The programmes that we are taking forward will create new governance arrangements that are strategic and capable of enabling more local decision making, that identify where resources can be pooled to greatest effect and most efficiently, and that ensure that key services and outcomes are delivered consistently well in line with what communities want and need.

To support that dialogue, on 21 September, ministers published an initial set of proposals that describe our ambition for significant and transformative change and act as a starting point for discussion to help to shape engagement over the coming months. Our starting point for the discussion is simple: we need to reform local governance, not to preserve existing structures for their own sake, but to deliver better services, stronger economies and better outcomes for communities. We want more local decision making, not more bureaucracy.

Adam Harley (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD): The minister mentioned the importance of local democracy and local accountability. Many of my constituents in East Dunbartonshire are concerned that they will be subsumed into a much greater Glasgow authority and that they will lose local accountability in the process. Can the minister assure them that that is not going to happen?

Ivan McKee: The work is about strengthening local communities and giving them more power to deal with issues locally. In the member's constituency and in constituencies across the country, local communities should look at the reform agenda as an opportunity to have more say in the issues that directly affect their everyday lives.

Scotland has councils that are, for the most part, too large to be truly local and too small to operate strategically at the scale that is now required. We are therefore proposing a model that is built around a smaller number of strategic regional authorities alongside a much larger number of community authorities, which will be able to operate closer to specific communities. We propose to have bespoke arrangements for

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island communities. The principle is that strategic decisions such as those on economic development, housing, transport and long-term planning should be taken regionally, where appropriate, while decisions that affect everyday community life should be taken much closer to local people. As we have set out in our paper, the potential number and range of community and regional authorities that could be established is intended to be illustrative of the scale of change that the Government envisages.

Monica Lennon: On the point about giving communities more say, is the Government prepared to look again at its position on equal rights of appeal for the planning system?

Ivan McKee: The planning system is outside the scope of this work, but I am sure that my colleague the Minister for Public Finance would be happy to take that up and comment on it in her closing remarks.

The key point is that some decisions should be made closer to the community to reflect each community's needs. That includes decisions such as those on how our local environment can be protected and preserved, how our local history, arts, culture and heritage can be promoted and enjoyed, how high streets could be renewed and further developed, and how local services can best be designed and delivered to meet the needs and circumstances of the people who use and rely on them.

As I said, the proposals are a starting point for debate, not an end point. They are intended to start a discussion that I hope members will continue to contribute to openly and constructively. The proposals and dialogue build on work that was taken forward during the previous parliamentary session through the local governance review and the democracy matters engagement. We heard from more than 4,000 people across the two phases of engagement. The number of people who took part in that conversation and the strength of feeling that was expressed through that engagement are a reminder that accessibility, not apathy, is the issue with local democracy.

The upcoming period of dialogue is an opportunity to discuss how we can design future governance structures; how we can reinforce and scale up community support and democratic infrastructure to achieve an approach to public sector decision making that is more inclusive and responsive to what people want and need; and how we can achieve a democracy that is better able to anchor our towns, villages and neighbourhoods. It also means supporting the growth of a vibrant and robust civil society across Scotland.

Tools to enable participation, such as citizens assemblies and participatory budgeting, have shown their value in bringing down barriers to playing a meaningful role in Scotland's democracy.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): If, under the new two-tier structure, councillors would be expected to serve on both bodies, what would that mean for the role of a local councillor? Would they, in effect, become full-time politicians? What would that mean for the resourcing of those positions?

Ivan McKee: As the First Minister has already indicated, that issue will need to be considered as part of the consultation and our current discussions. However, I absolutely recognise the point that Murdo Fraser makes.

In the previous parliamentary session, we supported the Electoral Reform Society and Fife Council to deliver a citizens assembly in Dunfermline to enable deliberation on the future of Scotland's newest city. That work brought together people from all walks of life to consider the issues and the bonds that bind them. The outcome was a robust and ambitious plan for Dunfermline, and I commend Fife Council for committing £5 million towards the delivery of the citizens assembly's recommendations.

For more than a decade, we have championed participatory budgeting as a mechanism for empowering communities to decide how public money should be spent. We have worked with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to support more than half a million people to engage in participatory budgeting processes relating to more than £750 million of local authority budgets.

Although there is more to do, Scotland can already point to significant progress in empowering communities. Backed by the provision of more than £3 million, our strengthening communities programme is supporting 83 community anchor organisations. The programme, which is now in its 14th year, has empowered hundreds of organisations across the country to become more sustainable and resilient.

We recognise that our local areas and democracies differ widely across Scotland, and we recognise the importance of supporting the development of thriving rural and island communities. Scotland's communities have achieved great things, and if we want to have public services that are preventative, person centred and sustainable, we must move power closer to communities and create systems and joined-up services that are more responsive to local circumstances, more accountable to local people, and more effective and efficient.

Lloyd Melville (Angus South) (SNP): I agree with the points that the cabinet secretary is making. A point that is continually made to me by my constituents about local government—I put on the record that I am a

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serving councillor—is that it is not just the structure of local government that is not working; in too many instances, the culture within local government is not working, either. Does the cabinet secretary accept that point? How does he see progress being made on that issue as we move through the programme?

Ivan McKee: I would need another 12 minutes to explain the importance of culture change as part of the public service reform agenda. However, the member can rest assured that there is clear recognition that a change in culture and in how people perceive these processes and the engagement and empowerment agenda is central and critical to the work that we are taking forward. We believe that the structural work can encourage and engender a culture change that is, in many cases, necessary.

This debate arrives at an important moment. The challenges that communities are facing are significant, but so, too, are the opportunities. That is why we published a proposal for reform of our democracy and the governance of our public services last week. As I have already outlined, these questions are not for Government alone but for local government, the wider public and third sectors, community organisations, businesses, civil society and communities themselves. This debate will help to spark the first discussions about those ideas and how they can renew our democracy and further empower communities.

I look forward to contributions from colleagues from across the chamber, representing their constituencies, and I look forward to a constructive discussion that can bring fresh thinking, energy and support for this important ambition.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I remind members that, should they wish to speak, they must press their request-to-speak button.

15:48

Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): I wish to declare, from my entry in the register of members' interests, that I am a sitting councillor on Fife Council.

I want to first express to the chamber that Reform UK is serious about fixing our broken council system in Scotland. I assure the public that, where good ideas are presented, we will genuinely support them and that, where consultation is needed from a fresh perspective, we are more than happy to provide it. On that point, I am happy to take an intervention from the cabinet secretary if he will confirm whether the Government is willing to collaborate with Reform UK and whether it is willing to meet our representatives in the spirit of co-operation.

Ivan McKee: The First Minister has made clear the Government's position with regard to engaging with Reform UK.

Julie MacDougall: I thank the cabinet secretary for being willing to co-operate with us—is that what I am to understand?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): This is not a debate—it is an opportunity for the member to make her speech.

Julie MacDougall: Oh.

I have already done the cabinet secretary a favour and have begun my own consultation with all of Scotland's council chief executives. I am sure that he will welcome honest and genuine feedback from an unfiltered perspective. In response to a question that I put to him last week on this subject, he said that he would

“engage with everyone who has an input to make”—[*Official Report*, 22 September; c 12-13.]

on local government reform. I am sure that this would make his boss unhappy, but if he makes a serious commitment today to accept our olive branch and work with us to get this right, it is our constituents, third sector volunteers and the vulnerable people who rely on essential council services who will be very happy instead. I do not know about the cabinet secretary, but that sounds like a perfect trade-off to me. Unfortunately, his Government will have to build back a lot of trust with both the public and the councils that it has badly let down for many years.

Three years ago, the SNP promised Scottish councils a more collaborative approach when it came to policy making and funding, via the Verity house agreement. It took barely a year for the SNP to go back on its word. One of its biggest betrayals came when Humza Yousaf announced his infamous council tax freeze—not even in Parliament, but at his party's conference in 2024. That gimmick—which is what it was—was cynically designed for only one reason: to bribe the public into supporting his failing Government. However, all that ended up happening was that councils were bullied into becoming even more financially unstable and the SNP suffered one of its greatest defeats at the 2024 general election. That should tell us all one thing: that

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local government is too important to be the plaything of any political party. It must be taken seriously, and all of us in this chamber should play our part in positively contributing to seriously reforming our broken council system.

Unfortunately, I do not think that we have got off to a good start, given the way that the Government has decided to approach today's debate. The fact that it has not lodged a motion for debate not only represents an immense disrespect to this Parliament, by depriving it of a key vote, but also clearly proves something that I said when we returned from the summer recess. *[Interruption.]* The SNP has no plan, no clue and no intention to be held accountable for its complete mismanagement of our public services. Given that the few proposals that it has come up with look like they were written by a student trying to crunch a last-minute deadline, it is no wonder that it wants to avoid accountability.

In the absence of a ministerial statement, a motion or an actual proposition by the Government on its vision for local government, all that I can do is ask some questions, which I hope the Government will answer in its closing speeches today.

My first question is, why now? The timing of these discussions is utterly bizarre. There was no indication in the SNP's 2026 manifesto that it would embark on local government reform of this scale. Anyone who has been elected as a councillor, who has worked in a council or who has simply been paying attention would know that these reforms have been badly needed for many years. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member must be allowed to speak.

Julie MacDougall: I suppose that the reason why this has taken everyone by surprise is that we have all become accustomed to decades of SNP neglect—not to mention the fact that we have council elections next year, which could leave councillors making long-term decisions for a local authority that may not even exist in a few years' time.

My next question is, why do we have just three months in which to consult with stakeholders? The Local Government Information Unit described those arrangements as unworkable and unreasonable if the Scottish Government itself does not have a clear aim of where the reforms are heading.

On top of that, where are the numbers? We have no estimated costs, no savings estimates and no timescale for when the reforms will be implemented. The Deputy First Minister's fob-offs and improvised responses at the weekend are simply not good enough.

David Barratt: Will the member take an intervention?

Julie MacDougall: COSLA vice-president Steven Heddle thinks that a decision of this scale cannot be made without knowing what it will cost and whether it will work. Will the Government confirm whether scaling back the number of local councils will result in any redundancies from existing council jobs?

David Barratt: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Mr Barratt, please sit down. It is clear that the member is not willing to take an intervention.

Julie MacDougall: On that point, is the actual number of councils really being reduced? Replacing 32 councils with more than 100 new bodies does not seem like streamlining.

I could go on, but it is clear to see that the SNP Government's position on local government reform is nonsensical. If its track record is anything to go by, we cannot take anything that it says at face value. Although I want to remain optimistic, I do not believe that the SNP has the best intentions for genuine reform of local government.

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