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

Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 3 November 2026

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): Good afternoon, colleagues. The first item of business is time for reflection, which will be led by the Rev Neil Gardner of Canongate kirk.

The Rev Neil Gardner (Canongate Kirk): It is good to be with you in person this afternoon, instead of seeing you, as I often do, scurrying down the road to get to work. I wonder if you have ever stopped en route to look at the parish war memorial fixed to the wall of the Tolbooth next to Canongate kirk. It is where poppy wreaths will be laid after our service this coming remembrance Sunday and it bears the names of hundreds of men who once lived in this immediate area but who did not return from the first or second world wars. The sheer number reflects a time when this was a densely populated industrial part of the city and, in turn, it prompts us to reflect on the impact of such losses on this neighbourhood where you and I find ourselves working today.

As the minister of what is widely known as Edinburgh's military church, and a former Army chaplain, I have stood at many a war memorial across the country and around the world. One of the most memorable remains the national war memorial in Sydney, Australia. It is situated in the centre of an impressive rotunda, and when you first go in you climb steps to look down on the body of a young soldier cast in bronze and held aloft on a shield by four statues beneath it. It is only when you go down to ground level that you discover that those four statues are all of women, representing the soldier's mother, wife, sister and daughter. It is a powerful and vivid illustration of the wider impact of one man's death, and of all those whose lives would never be the same again.

The verse that most immediately follows the very familiar lines by Laurence Binyon in his poem "For the Fallen" addresses that very subject:

"They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.

They mingle not with their laughing comrades again;
They sit no more at familiar tables of home".

To this day, the names etched on war memorials in every community, across every constituency in Scotland and far beyond, reflect not just the sacrificial cost of conflict but the wider impact on the places where we still live and work. It is why we should, it is why we must, and it is why we will remember them.

General Question Time

14:03

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

Antisocial Behaviour and Retail Theft

1. **Angela Ross (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government what action is being taken to address antisocial behaviour and retail theft in town centres and high streets across Edinburgh and Lothians East. (S7O-00415)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Kirsten Oswald): Antisocial behaviour and retail crime have a real impact on businesses and communities. That is why we are acting to provide record funding of more than £1.7 billion for policing in 2026-27. That supports visible local policing and targeted operations where communities are experiencing particular concerns. In addition, we provide £3 million to support the police retail crime task force, delivering targeted action against shoplifting and repeat offenders.

I recognise and thank Police Scotland for its work across Edinburgh and the Lothians taking forward a range of interventions, including high-visibility patrols, retail crime task force operations, bus and tram patrols,

action against the illegal use of e-bikes and targeted activity to prevent disorder around Halloween and bonfire night.

Outside enforcement, we are strengthening prevention work—for example, we are investing £26 million through the cashback for communities programme, supporting young people and providing positive alternatives to offending.

Angela Ross: Businesses and charities in my region have reported concerns about persistent shoplifting and antisocial behaviour, and one constituent recently contacted me regarding repeated thefts from a local charity shop. What action is the Government taking, in addition to what the minister has described, to understand and manage the root causes involved, in relation to antisocial behaviour in particular?

Kirsten Oswald: I am grateful for that question, and I understand the member's concern about retail crime and the challenges that that presents. The Scottish Government recognises the vital role of our retail sector and the real harm that retail crime does to businesses and staff and to our communities. The member may find it helpful to know that the retail crime task force utilises a four-strand approach, commonly known as the four Ps—prevent, pursue, protect and prepare—which is delivering real results by helping to target repeat offenders and drive enforcement in the areas that are most affected.

Miles Briggs (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con): I have met with many businesses across Edinburgh that have told me that they are increasingly being targeted by individuals wearing balaclavas. What specific measures will the Scottish Government support to prevent the inappropriate use of balaclavas in city centres, such as penalty notices and giving Police Scotland powers to demand the removal of balaclavas when someone is attempting to hide their identity from the authorities?

Kirsten Oswald: Police Scotland already has powers under the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 to require the removal of face coverings in certain circumstances if officers reasonably believe that they are being used to conceal a person's identity—for instance, in connection with criminality or disorder. Police Scotland has been clear that it considers that those powers are proportionate and sufficient at present, and it continues to monitor the implementation of powers that have been introduced in England and Wales.

We will continue to engage with policing partners to keep the position under review. The consideration, and implementation, of any additional powers would require clear evidence that existing legislative provisions are not adequate and that further measures would be necessary and proportionate.

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am not sure that the answer that the minister just gave is entirely accurate. The police do not have the powers that she described, except in exceptional circumstances, and she should know the law well enough to know that that is the correct answer to the question about face coverings that she was asked by Miles Briggs.

My question is simple. The thin blue line is stretched to breaking point. The reality is that, although the physical presence of a police officer can be a powerful deterrent to some antisocial behaviour, the Scottish Police Authority has warned that if the Government's budget settlement for Police Scotland is in line with the spending review in January, it will result in 1,000 fewer officers.

Will the minister assure me and my constituents, and members in the chamber, that there is no such plan to reduce the number of front-line officers by 1,000 as a result of a flatline budget settlement?

Kirsten Oswald: I am sure that Mr Kerr does not expect me to narrate the budget in advance of its taking place, but I assure him that there are more officers per head of population in Scotland than in England, and that our officers receive the best basic pay in the United Kingdom at the minimum and maximum in each rank. In addition, the recent recruitment pipeline of new officers into Police Scotland is healthy. I hope that he finds that response helpful.

Urban Rural Classification

2. **Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it plans to review the Scottish urban rural classification, including its application in the delivery of public services. (S7O-00416)

The Minister for Public Finance (Hannah Mary Goodlad): The most recent version of the classification is the "Scottish Government Urban Rural Classification 2022", which was published in December 2024 and is based on the 2022 census. The classification will be updated following the release of the next population estimates. The next version of the classification will be based on 2026 population estimates for settlements and localities, which are expected to be available in 2028 or 2029.

Liam McArthur: Under the classification, much of mainland Orkney is categorised as band 8, which is "Very Remote Rural", but so too are places such as Hoy, Westray, Sanday and other isles that are wholly dependent on ferry and air services. I am sure that the minister will not need persuading that, when

determining how funding is targeted to support the delivery of public services in a rural setting, it is important that all barriers to access are considered. For Orkney's smaller isles, ferry timetables, weather conditions and additional travel and freight costs should be factored in.

Will the minister therefore consider how the classification system might be refined to better capture the different aspects of rurality in an island context, to ensure that the needs of communities in ferry-linked isles are best reflected?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: I welcome Mr McArthur's engagement on the issue, which I understand deeply, being from the islands just to the north of the Orkney Islands. I look forward to engaging with him on the budget negotiation and classification of Orkney, Shetland, the Western Isles and Argyll and Bute. "Rural" and "remote" are terms that we both have strong feelings about, so I also look forward to engaging with him on public sector reform, and finding classification that better suits island communities across our country.

Katie Hagmann (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): Will the minister set out how the urban rural classification statistical tool is currently being used to ensure that robust rural proofing takes place across the design and delivery of public services?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: The Scottish Government's urban rural classification provides a consistent framework for identifying and understanding the circumstances of rural communities across policy development and service delivery on housing, education and transport. The classification that is used today is about travel time and population sizes of less than 3,000. It is quite definitive, and it indicates and balances how we allocate money across the country in a 12-month cycle.

Essential Services (Disruption)

3. **Graham Simpson (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking, in co-ordination with the United Kingdom Government, to ensure that households and essential public services in Scotland are prepared for any prolonged disruption to electricity, water and telecommunications services, including the measures used to assess the effectiveness of that action. (S7O-00417)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Kirsten Oswald): The Scottish Government works with national and regional organisations, utilities, telecommunications providers and local resilience partners to support preparedness for disruption to essential services. Through Ready Scotland, we promote practical household preparedness and support a UK-wide approach to improving public awareness of risk and resilience. We assess the effectiveness of that activity through public preparedness research, engagement and communications data, lessons identified from emergency responses and exercises, and feedback from resilience partners. That includes the UK public survey of risk perception, resilience and preparedness, which provides valuable evidence on the public understanding of risks and the actions that households are taking to prepare, and helps to inform future activity.

Graham Simpson: Does the minister agree with the list of items that we should all stock up on that was recently provided by the UK Government? Have hospitals, care homes, schools and councils recently tested their contingency arrangements for prolonged and simultaneous failures of electricity, water and telecommunications?

Kirsten Oswald: I have followed with interest both the detail of and the commentary on the UK Government's preparedness campaign. The Scottish Government has recommended practical household preparedness for many years, which can be found on our Ready Scotland website. The be ready campaign is running UK-wide and aims to empower households to take simple steps to prepare for disruption. The Scottish Government continues to liaise with the UK Government about the roll-out of the be ready campaign in Scotland.

On the member's question on resilience and preparedness, I am happy to write to him to outline further details on the specifics that he is interested in.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I recently attended an event hosted by the community in Glendaruel in Argyll and Bute, which highlighted the importance of being prepared for situations such as those that Graham Simpson highlighted. The event also showcased the significant support from Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks through the provision of a generator, for community resilience.

The minister gave Mr Simpson a very full response on the Government's engagement around community resilience. Can she add to that with regard to how she envisages the Scottish Government supporting rural and island areas?

Kirsten Oswald: I welcome the event that Jenni Minto outlined and the support that SSEN has provided to many communities, including Glendaruel, where it is clear that it has made a real difference. Different communities will face different risks and circumstances, so generators may be an important part of the answer in some areas but will not be the right solution everywhere.

Building resilience starts with communities understanding risks and identifying the steps that will make the biggest difference locally. Those might include developing community resilience plans, identifying vulnerable residents, strengthening local communications networks, creating community hubs or improving emergency power or welfare arrangements. The Scottish Government supports that through guidance, practical advice and signposting to local and national funding to complement the work of Scotland's emergency responder organisations. Ready Scotland also provides advice to help individuals, businesses and communities prepare for emergencies and periods of disruption.

Blue Badge Scheme (Older People)

4. **Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to simplify access to the blue badge scheme for older people who are in receipt of pension-age disability payment who have significant mobility difficulties. (S7O-00418)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The administration and delivery of the blue badge scheme, including decisions on individual applications, are the responsibility of local authorities. Transport Scotland provides the legislative framework and non-statutory guidance and works closely with local authorities to support the effective administration of the scheme across Scotland.

As the pension-age disability payment does not include a mobility component, it does not provide automatic entitlement. However, recipients may still qualify if they meet the eligibility criteria. Local authorities can provide assistance throughout the application process to help ensure that those who are eligible are able to access the support that is available to them.

Clare Adamson: The blue badge scheme is extremely important to people who are in need of it. People can fall off a cliff edge in relation to that need because, even though they have had a blue badge, it does not follow on when they receive the pension-age disability payment. I have been contacted by several constituents who are over the age of 65 and who are experiencing difficulties reobtaining a blue badge, despite having held one previously.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that older people with significant long-term mobility difficulties should not have to navigate such a burdensome process? Will she undertake to speak to colleagues in the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, in the light of the review of local authority services, to see whether the process can be simplified, to ensure that those in need get the support that they rightly deserve?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The requirement to reapply for a blue badge every three years is set out in legislation and applies equally to all badge holders. Local authorities must periodically confirm eligibility and residency while they protect the integrity of the scheme. To reduce administrative burdens, Transport Scotland has provided shortened reapplication forms, and it continues to work closely with local authorities and Social Security Scotland to identify further opportunities for streamlining. This is the type of challenge that public service reform seeks to address by bringing organisations together to make services more seamless, efficient and person centred for those who rely on them.

Sudden Cardiac Death (Young People)

5. **Andrew Baxter (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to raise awareness of, and improve access to, screening for young sudden cardiac death. (S7O-00419)

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs (Maree Todd): The Scottish Government, like all United Kingdom nations, follows the UK National Screening Committee's recommendations. I recognise the important work being done by organisations such as Cardiac Risk in the Young and the DH9 Foundation to raise awareness of cardiac risk in young people.

Although the National Screening Committee has said that it recognises the devastating impact of sudden cardiac death, its most recent review found that evidence did not support the introduction of population screening. My predecessor wrote to the committee to ask whether it planned to review that recommendation; it is now doing so and its conclusions will be published.

Although there is no formal national screening programme, guidance from the network for inherited cardiac conditions Scotland supports the assessment of families after a sudden cardiac death, including, where

appropriate, genetic screening of first-degree relatives. We will continue to work with the network to ensure fair and timely access to testing across Scotland, including through the national sudden cardiac death project.

Andrew Baxter: Every week, there are at least 12 young sudden cardiac deaths in the United Kingdom. My constituent Ebony Morrice was just two days away from her 18th birthday when she died suddenly from an undiagnosed heart condition while at a concert with her mum. A milestone that should have brought her family together in celebration instead became a birthday that they would have to face without her. Her parents, Melanie and Ally, are in the public gallery, watching, hoping and fighting for their daughter's memory. Through the Ebs memorial fund, they are campaigning to prevent other young people from going undiagnosed, as Ebony was. Will the minister, along with the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care, commit to meeting them to hear Ebony's story and explain what more can be done on cardiac screening and awareness to prevent young lives like Ebony's from being lost?

Maree Todd: First, I give my heartfelt condolences to Ally and Melanie on the loss of their daughter Ebony. I can only imagine how devastating the impact of her loss has been. I am more than happy to commit to meeting them, and I am keen to implement throughout the country any learning that NHS Highland can share in relation to Ebony's care.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): The standard test for assessing the risk of a young person experiencing a sudden cardiac death is a basic questionnaire and a non-invasive electrocardiogram. In a sense, it is all about data and, as such, it is probably the perfect place for NHS Scotland to utilise artificial intelligence. What investment has the Scottish Government made in AI-enabled scanning so that diagnostic tests can become more routine and potentially more accurate?

Maree Todd: I will write to Jackie Baillie on her question about AI.

It is important that we remember that we are talking about population-level screening. Although I absolutely understand the desire for a screening programme and I guarantee that, if evidence is found to support one, Scotland will waste no time in implementing it, we must recognise that all population-level screening has the potential to do harm as well as good.

It is vital that our interventions in Scotland continue to be evidence led. That is why we follow the guidance of the UK National Screening Committee, which plays a vital role in ensuring that screening programmes genuinely improve outcomes. We must let its review progress independently.

Suspicious Deaths (Documentation)

6. **Max Bannerman (Highlands and Islands) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government what the policy and practice of the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service is regarding the provision of documentation relating to the death of a relative to members of the deceased's family where the death occurred in suspicious circumstances. (S7O-00420)

The Lord Advocate (Ruth Charteris KC): The death of a family member is a traumatic time for bereaved relatives. Prosecutors recognise the importance of timely and effective communications, particularly in relation to deaths in suspicious circumstances. Our published family liaison charter sets out how prosecutors liaise with families. It outlines what information can be shared, the timeframes for communications and the commitments to bereaved families.

Precisely what information, including what documents, can be shared depends on the circumstances of each case. If criminal proceedings remain a possibility, disclosure of information may be limited to protect the integrity of the investigation and potential future court proceedings.

Max Bannerman: On her appointment, the Lord Advocate stated that her office was

"an office of significant responsibility"

and that she would

"discharge it with … a clear focus on serving the public interest."

My constituent Mr Ian Riddel has been refused access to information to help him to understand the circumstances of his 19-year-old brother's death, because Police Scotland decided that it was not in the public interest to provide that information. Mr Riddel is in the public gallery. Will the Lord Advocate grant him a meeting to discuss why important information is being withheld from the family and explain how it could possibly be in the public interest to withhold it?

The Lord Advocate: As Lord Advocate, I expect the investigations of deaths to be thorough, independent and timely, and for bereaved families to be treated with sensitivity and to be kept informed. It would not be appropriate to discuss details of any ongoing investigations in relation to the specific case that has been

raised, but I would be very happy for Max Bannerman to raise his constituent's concerns directly with me or with my officials.

I note that a point was made in relation to Police Scotland. I cannot speak for Police Scotland, but I am sure that a meeting could be arranged between me and Police Scotland.

Civil Unrest (Prevention)

7. **David Smith (West Scotland) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the recent incidents of rioting and civil unrest across Europe, what action is being taken to prevent the same happening in Scotland. (S7O-00421)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Kirsten Oswald): The Scottish Government remains committed to upholding the right to peaceful public assembly and freedom of expression. However, those rights should never be used to justify any form of violent, intimidating or otherwise criminal behaviour, and we fully support Police Scotland taking appropriate and proportionate action in response to any such behaviour.

Although there are certainly elements in society that seek to divide communities and to cause unrest and division, as has been discussed in this Parliament, there are appropriate and robust plans in place to respond to any potential incidents, and those arrangements are regularly reviewed to ensure that they remain effective. We work closely with partners, including Police Scotland, to monitor emerging risks and share intelligence as part of overall work to keep all our communities safe.

David Smith: The answer did not really address the point of my question. The riots that have taken place across Europe have led to hundreds and thousands of police officers being injured, and officers' families will be terribly worried about them with respect to upcoming demonstrations. I specifically want to know whether any actions are being taken with regard to demonstrations that are planned for 20 November and to know what might happen after that. Is anything being done specifically now to address that threat?

Kirsten Oswald: I am sure that the member would not expect me to narrate the specifics of Police Scotland's operational deployment plans and nor would it be appropriate for me to do so.

Under the Public Order Act 1986, Police Scotland has powers to deal with any disorder that arises and to ensure that public safety and order are maintained. I am sure that other members will welcome David Smith's focus on officers, but I say to him that the deployment of police officers and the use of tactical options for crowd management must be matters for Police Scotland. We fully support the police to put in place appropriate measures to manage any potential disorder, including the deployment of specialist public order officers, as required.

Public Transport Connections (Review)

8. **Katie Hagmann (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether, as part of its plans for franchising and regulation, it will review existing bus service provision to identify communities that are poorly served or lack adequate public transport connections. (S7O-00422)

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport (Stephen Flynn): Katie Hagmann rightly highlights the reason why we are seeking to bring the bus network back under public control. There are many areas across Scotland where services are poor and are inadequate for the people who rely on them. I reassure Ms Hagmann that the preparatory work for future legislation is very much under way, and I look forward to engaging with her and with colleagues from across the chamber on that issue.

Katie Hagmann: I absolutely welcome any efforts to improve bus connectivity, particularly in rural areas. If a review is undertaken, will the cabinet secretary ensure that it specifically considers villages that currently have little or no bus provision? Sorn, in my constituency of Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley, is located close to Mauchline and Catrine, through which local bus services already operate, but it remains without a regular local bus service. Does the cabinet secretary agree that rural communities should not be left isolated simply because they fall outside existing routes, and will he ensure that any review considers the opportunities to improve connectivity for villages such as Sorn?

Stephen Flynn: I agree that rural communities deserve a standard of bus service that many do not have, and Sorn appears to be one of those villages. Indeed, members from all parties have, in recent months, outlined to me issues across Scotland's bus network. That is why it is important that we continue to progress our plans to bring the bus network back under public control. I reiterate my initial remark that I look forward to working closely with Katie Hagmann on that.

The Presiding Officer: Lengthy questions and answers meant that we were able to take far fewer questions and answers than usual at general question time.

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

First Minister's Question Time

Back-bench Members

14:30

Direct Flight Route to India

Martyn Day (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP): I welcome the First Minister back from India and hope that his visit helps to deliver real progress towards fulfilling the enormous potential of that relationship. Does he agree that a direct flight between Scotland and India would help to realise that potential while connecting families and communities? Will he provide an update on progress towards securing that route, working with airports, airlines and Indian partners?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I welcome Mr Day's questions, because the issue that he raises represents a significant economic opportunity for Scotland. The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport chaired a direct India-Scotland air connectivity round-table session during the Commonwealth games, which brought together stakeholders, including the High Commissioner of India to the United Kingdom and representatives of Scotland's airports, to advance some of the discussion. Officials have been discussing the issue with Air India and IndiGo, and I raised the matter in my discussions with the Government of India last week.

Social Security Scotland (Procurement)

David Smith (West Scotland) (Reform): Will the First Minister explain why an Indian company has been selected, at a cost of £35 million, to process social security payments over a Scotland or a United Kingdom-based company?

The First Minister (John Swinney): For the simple reason that the procurement has been undertaken in line with the statutory framework of the United Kingdom.

Regulation of Fireworks

Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Although the Scottish Parliament has introduced measures through the Fireworks and Pyrotechnic Articles (Scotland) Act 2022, key aspects of firework regulation remain reserved to the United Kingdom Parliament. That means that Scotland's Parliament, which Opposition members ludicrously assert is one of the most powerful legislatures on earth, cannot even legislate on the sale, importation or manufacture of fireworks. Does the First Minister agree that, to effectively control firework safety, all legislation relating to fireworks must be devolved?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The point that Patricia Gibson advances would help us to take comprehensive measures in that respect.

The Scottish Government has consistently called for stronger action to reduce the impact of fireworks on communities. In our recent response to the United Kingdom Government's consultation on fireworks and pyrotechnics in the UK, we supported measures to reduce the maximum noise levels of consumer fireworks, recognising the distress that loud fireworks can cause.

In advance of bonfire night, I would encourage—I urge—everyone to act responsibly and to support organised firework displays, which are an essential way of maintaining public safety. In all circumstances and at all times, our emergency services will be working to protect public safety.

Closure of North Edinburgh Childcare

Irshad Ahmed (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab): What action will the Scottish Government take to secure the future of North Edinburgh Childcare following the announcement that it terminated its activities at the end of last month?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am very sorry to hear about the announcement concerning North Edinburgh Childcare. I have visited that organisation and am full of admiration for the high-quality work that it has undertaken over many years in an area of multiple deprivation, where, without doubt, it has had a formidable impact on the life chances of children.

I will look closely at the circumstances surrounding the decision. I know that, on my previous visit to the organisation, a significant amount of support was available but that there were financial challenges. I will explore the issue and write to Mr Ahmed setting out what action the Government can take.

NHS Dumfries and Galloway (Funding)

Craig Hoy (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Last week, the health board in my constituency sent an SOS message to Dumfries and Galloway Council to ask for a further £2.4 million to prevent the system from buckling. Recently, as patients stacked up in corridors, one in three operations in Dumfries and Galloway royal infirmary were cancelled. Rural councils and rural health boards face acute financial pressures as they approach this winter. What can the First Minister do now—that is now, First Minister—to prevent systems from collapsing and lives being put at risk in my Dumfriesshire constituency this winter?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The issues that Mr Hoy has raised are important and relate to the interaction of social care provision with delayed discharge in our hospitals. As I have previously reported to the Parliament, the health secretary has intervened directly to provide support and assistance to the local authority and to press it to make resources available to ensure that social care placements can address the challenges that the hospital faces.

The Government is regularly engaged on issues in connection with the sustainability of services and the challenges of delayed discharge. Indeed, it is a regular feature of my weekly meeting with the health service leadership. I say to Mr Hoy that the Government's reform plans are designed to ensure that we have much more coherence around the delivery of social care to avoid the circumstances that he has narrated to the Parliament.

Additional Dwelling Supplement (Property Ownership Rules)

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): A constituent of mine is in the process of trying to buy their first home with their partner, who fled Ukraine in 2023 at the height of the war and who still owns a flat in Kyiv, despite there being no prospect of them returning to or making use of the property. My constituents are now being hit with a £9,000 additional dwelling supplement charge. Does the First Minister agree that that is surely not the intended purpose of the tax? Will he therefore ask his ministers and officials to look into the case to see what can be done to arrive at a more reasonable solution?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I share Mr McArthur's view that that is not the purpose of the additional dwelling supplement in the land and buildings transaction tax system. I will ask Revenue Scotland to look at the specific details of the case.

As Mr McArthur will know, the purpose of the supplement is to address issues around multiple house purchase in Scotland, but I understand why the rules have created the situation that he has narrated. If Mr McArthur would be so kind as to advise the Deputy First Minister of the details of the case, we will pursue it with Revenue Scotland.

Violence Against Women and Girls (Government Measures)

Amanda Lindsay (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform): Recent reporting has highlighted a further rise in domestic abuse incidents and the deaths of women in Scotland. Given that the Government has announced new measures, including a misogyny offence, can the First Minister set out what practical difference they will make for women who experience abuse, and what outcomes the Government expects to achieve in reducing violence and supporting victims within the next two years?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The measures that I have set out to the Parliament on violence against women and girls are fundamental to the Government's agenda. As Amanda Lindsay correctly said, legislation will be introduced to the Parliament before the summer recess that will create new criminal offences. In the short term, we will look at how we can work with a range of support organisations to ensure that they have the financial sustainability that is needed to meet the needs of women who face the horror of domestic abuse.

We have also set out details of a range of other measures, such as changing the culture in Scotland, using our education system as part of that platform to ensure that boys and young men are educated about all the evils of domestic violence and that behaviours are changed accordingly. I assure Amanda Lindsay that those measures will be rolled out in the short, medium and long term to ensure that we do all that we can to tackle the scourge of violence against women and girls in our society.

Public Service Reform Targets

Joe Fagan (South Scotland) (Lab): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests. I am a member of South Lanarkshire Council.

Today, the Finance and Public Administration Committee has warned that there are substantial risks to the Scottish budget if public service reform targets are not met. Local government leaders are warning the Scottish Government not to rush into costly reorganisation or to put structures before outcomes. In a joint statement with trade unions, they also warned that radical reform takes years of planning and resource, yet an estimated £5 billion fiscal gap hangs over the Parliament now.

How can the First Minister reassure Scotland's public servants that his reform targets remain credible and that he will remain focused on outcomes and improvements, not structures, to avoid public service reform degenerating into another round of austerity for Scotland's public services?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Part of what we are having to wrestle with is the consequences of the prolonged austerity that has been inflicted on Scotland. Those are the implications of the United Kingdom Government's financial structures for Scotland; my Government is having to pick up the pieces of all that austerity.

I assure Mr Fagan that I am always focused on outcomes. That is why long waits in our hospitals are coming down, it is why attainment is rising in our schools, and it is why Scotland is building more houses per head of population than other parts of the United Kingdom. I am always focused on outcomes, so I look forward to discussing the issues around public service reform, which discussion I think is long overdue, with the leadership of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities tomorrow. I was discussing the issues yesterday with the trade union movement and my ministers are actively involved in that debate. I think that the moment has come when we have to address those issues to secure the sustainability of public services in Scotland, and the Government is committed to doing that.

Gentex Workforce (Stranraer)

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Last week, I wrote to the First Minister following the deeply concerning news that Gentex's facility in Stranraer is at risk of closure, putting 110 skilled engineering and manufacturing jobs at risk. In a town the size of Stranraer, that would represent one of the most significant private sector job losses in recent years. I thank the First Minister and the Minister for Business and Fair Work, Tom Arthur, for their response, but will the First Minister recommit to deploying the full weight of the Scottish Government and relevant agencies as a matter of urgency, not only to support affected workers and explore every opportunity to retain those jobs but to ensure that the highly skilled workforce that has been built up in Stranraer is not lost to the area, that those skills and experiences are retained, and that Stranraer is not abandoned yet again to suffer another major economic blow?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I offer that commitment and reassurance to Mr Carson. The Minister for Business and Fair Work, alongside the leaders of South of Scotland Enterprise, spoke with Gentex last week to express our concerns and to offer to work constructively with the company to explore all potential options to take forward the operations of the business.

I recognise the significant economic impact that the organisation has on the Stranraer economy. A highly skilled workforce is involved and I assure Mr Carson that the Government, through the minister and the partnership with South of Scotland Enterprise, will do all that we can to safeguard employment at Gentex in Stranraer.

Household Incomes

Michelle Campbell (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP): The Resolution Foundation has said that typical working-age households could see their disposable income fall by £1,050, or by 3 per cent, between now and 2029, while the Institute for Fiscal Studies has said that the current decade would be the worst on record for household income growth. As Labour offers no meaningful response to that decline in living standards, what steps is this Scottish National Party Government taking to grow Scotland's economy and help people with rising costs?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government is taking a number of measures to support individuals with their costs. The most recent measure affecting Michelle Campbell's constituents is the roll-out of the £2 bus fare cap in the west of Scotland. We are extending that to Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire at the start of the next financial year.

We are taking steps through a range of other measures, including through our investment in early learning and childcare and the provision of prescriptions without charges, to support households in the challenges that they face around household incomes.

In relation to economic growth, along with the Deputy First Minister, I discussed many of these issues with the Prime Minister at the national economic council on Friday, and I set out the commitments that we are taking forward to ensure that we have a climate in Scotland that is attractive for investment and that enables us to invest in skills and infrastructure, supported by ventures such as the Scottish National Investment Bank, to ensure that we create new growth opportunities in the Scottish economy.

Industrial Strategy

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): The First Minister will be aware of significant concerns in my Motherwell and Wishaw constituency and in neighbouring constituencies following the announcement of the proposed closure of the Honeywell site, which puts manufacturing jobs at risk across the area. I am aware that the First Minister has written to the Prime Minister calling on the United Kingdom Government to commit to working with the Scottish Government and industry on a shared industrial strategy to protect jobs, retain skills and support the future of key industries. Given that the key economic powers sit with the UK Government, does the First Minister agree that it is vital that it comes to the table to ensure that our industry and communities are not left behind? Can he provide an update on his Government's engagement with the UK Government so far?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I was concerned to hear the reports about the future of the Honeywell plant, and Tom Arthur, the Minister for Business and Fair Work, has arranged to speak with the company.

As Clare Adamson set out, I discussed issues in relation to industrial policy with the Prime Minister at the national economic council. In the light of the discussions that I had yesterday with the Scottish Trades Union Congress, I have written to the UK Government encouraging joint work on an industrial strategy to ensure that Scotland's economic interests can be prioritised and that we have in place arrangements to enable the Scottish Parliament and Government to exercise as much scope as possible in trying to deliver economic growth in Scotland. That is at the heart of the Government's economic agenda.

Mears Group (Purchase of Private Properties)

Jamie Langan (South Scotland) (Reform): What engagement has the First Minister had with the Mears Group regarding the purchase of private properties to house asylum seekers in the Scottish Borders and the assessment it has made of the impact on local housing stock, public services and community safety?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I personally have had no engagement with the Mears Group, but I know that my ministers are engaged in those questions in their dialogue with the Home Office, which is responsible for the issues in relation to asylum policy. The arrangements that are put in place for the operation of the Mears Group are a responsibility of the United Kingdom Government.

Mother and Child Recovery Houses

Holly Bruce (Glasgow Southside) (Green): Recent alcohol death figures highlight an urgent need for tailored recovery support in Scotland. Of the 574 residential rehabilitation places that are available, just eight are dedicated spaces for mothers and their babies. That falls drastically short of the overwhelming level of need. Aberlour's two mother and child recovery houses saved an estimated £7.25 million in annual care costs for councils and, crucially, reduced harm and transformed the lives of the families involved. Will the First Minister continue to support those life-saving facilities? Does he intend to fund more recovery houses for mothers and their babies?

The First Minister (John Swinney): In policy terms, the approach that is taken by Aberlour in the mother and baby houses is absolutely robust. It is very effective and I pay tribute to Aberlour for the care and thoughtfulness that have gone into designing that model. I would like more of that work to be undertaken. Holly Bruce makes an important point about intervening as early as possible in a preventative way to deliver better outcomes for individuals.

The type of facilities that the member highlights are perfectly able to be supported through the wider drug and alcohol funding that the Government makes available. Obviously, those issues will be material to the budget decisions that Parliament has to take in the light of the announcements that the Deputy First Minister will make at the beginning of December.

Innovation Strategy

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Last week, the Scottish Government published its third innovation scorecard. Unfortunately, yet again, it showed that more indicators were in decline than were improving. Specifically, the number of patents granted in Scotland last year fell by 29 per cent to the lowest figure since 2018. I do not know whether the First Minister is familiar with the innovation ecosystem diagram in the innovation strategy, but it is something of a spaghetti-tangled mess of responsibilities and convoluted accountability. Does the First Minister agree that, based on the scorecard, now is the opportunity to revive, reform and refocus Scotland's innovation strategy and landscape?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am always keen to make sure that the arrangements that we have in place to provide support to businesses and individuals are as accessible and cohesive as possible. That is exactly why we are undertaking the work on public service reform. I encourage Mr Johnson to engage with us constructively on how we might take that forward.

Our innovation approach—particularly from our university community—has delivered significant results in Scotland. So much of the innovative work that emerges from the private sector has its genesis in the university community, and I want to ensure that that community is closely connected to delivering such prospects for the economy.

Scotland has a very strong innovation ecosystem, and we have overcome the long-term problem of having the poor business birth rate that we had for many years—that issue has largely been addressed. Many of the challenges that we are now focusing on are about the scale-up of businesses, and the Government is investing in that vital policy area, too.

Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere

Katie Hagmann (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): Today is the United Nations international day for biosphere reserves. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Galloway and Southern Ayrshire biosphere spans the vast majority of my Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley constituency. I note the value of that designation across local communities, and it is also an international designation that supports our visitor economy.

Will the First Minister say how the Government is taking forward the NatureScot reporter's recommendations to strengthen arrangements in order to have a

"better resourced and more influential"

Galloway and Southern Ayrshire biosphere? Will his Government work with the UNESCO biosphere to develop new proposals?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I thank Katie Hagmann for raising the UN international day of biosphere reserves and for highlighting that important contribution. The Government remains engaged with the three relevant local authorities that have been considering the national park reporter's recommendations, and the Government will be happy to discuss the proposals that emerge from that local dialogue in order to determine what further steps should be taken.

Artist and Charity Workspaces (Edinburgh)

Q Manivannan (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green): On Sunday, I held a public meeting in Edinburgh that was attended by councillors and MSPs from multiple parties. At that meeting, more than 250 artists and representatives of charities, unions and businesses came together to declare an arts emergency. Nearly 400 artists and charities could be left without a workspace by January. If those were to be 400 businesses on a high street, there would be immediate action. Will the First Minister commit to an urgent review of underutilised infrastructure in Government-owned and operated buildings and work with us to find a home for the affected artists, charities and enterprises before January?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government makes significant support available to the artistic and cultural community. Indeed, it has been a point of principle for me to ensure that such support has risen throughout the course of the budgets that I have presided over as First Minister. I am concerned to hear about the issues that Q Manivannan has raised. The Government will consider any specific proposals that are advanced to it, because I want to ensure that there is a thriving artistic and cultural community in Scotland. The Government will happily consider proposals that come forward and encourage other public authorities to play their part.

HMP Polmont (Riot)

David Linden (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP): On 26 September, a riot broke out at HMP Polmont that involved 30 inmates and which necessitated officers from four other prison establishments to restore order. There was also significant damage in the prison. MSPs had to learn about that from the BBC News website on Thursday night. Does the First Minister agree that it is unacceptable that the riot was not reported to the Parliament or the Criminal Justice Committee? Given that multiple prison officers were injured as a result of the riot, what reassurance can he give me that it will not happen again?

The First Minister (John Swinney): This is an operational matter for the Scottish Prison Service, which dealt with the incident swiftly and efficiently. [*Interruption*.] I hear the reaction of members of the Parliament to the issue and to Mr Linden's question. However, I gently caution members about the judgment that is applied to the disclosure of incidents or potential incidents in the prison estate for which there are safety considerations. There are clearly implications that come from that type of behaviour, and careful judgments need to be applied by the Scottish Prison Service in that respect, which is exactly what happened in this case.

Hyperscale Developments (Community Responses)

Joe Long (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Local communities increasingly face major planning applications such as hyperscale data centres and the Halfway energy park development in the Carse of Gowrie—part of the First Minister's constituency—where I met community groups last week. Does the First Minister recognise that the communities that are responding to those hyperscale developments often lack the resources and expertise that are needed to properly scrutinise and respond to the proposals? If so, how might the asymmetry of resource between developers and communities be addressed?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Fundamentally, the planning process has to be accessible to all. The arrangements that are put in place through, for example, the work of organisations such as Planning Aid Scotland are designed to support communities to build that capacity to deal with these particular issues. However, local authorities and Government, in engaging in the consideration of planning applications, must ensure that, at all times, there is a route and an approach that will ensure that local communities can exercise their views and their contributions on individual planning applications, and the design of those processes has to take that principle into account.

Dog Control

Amanda Bland (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Ind): Will the Scottish Government commit to reviewing and strengthening Scotland's dog control measures, including the Control of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2010? Will it engage with the United Kingdom Government to advocate for reform of the breed-specific provisions of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, with a greater emphasis on effective breed-neutral legislation, responsible ownership and the prevention of dog attacks?

The First Minister (John Swinney): We all want to see a rigorous regime in place in relation to minimising any risk that is prevalent from the actions of dogs, so I understand the point and the seriousness of the issue that Amanda Bland raises. The Government took action in the previous session of Parliament in relation to the control of dogs. The Government engages willingly with the United Kingdom Government on any other legislative provisions, and I will ask ministers to update Amanda Bland on exactly where those discussions have reached at the present time.

Allergy Services (Waiting Times)

Alex Kerr (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): According to the national allergy strategy, three adults in my constituency are expected to suffer a life-threatening food-related anaphylactic reaction this year. Although the Scottish Government's commitment to make adrenaline auto-injectors available in eateries is a welcome and potentially life-saving measure, people who experience anaphylaxis can wait more than a year to access specialist allergy services, leaving them living with uncertainty, fear and the risk of further reactions. What action is the Government taking to reduce waiting times for those services and ensure that people living with severe allergies receive faster diagnosis, treatment and support?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I acknowledge the importance of the issues that Alex Kerr raises. Ministers have been considering the work that is under way in England in relation to Benedict's law, which relates to some of this area of policy. We are investing to bring down long waits, which will address some of the issues that Alex Kerr raises with me. We will also publish our long-term conditions strategy next March, which will set out our approach to improving the care and support for people living with long-term conditions such as severe allergies. That will be part of the ongoing policy agenda of the Government.

Dr Gray's Hospital (Maternity Services)

Max Bannerman (Highlands and Islands) (Reform): On 5 October, NHS Grampian announced that the restoration of full maternity services at Dr Gray's hospital in Elgin would be delayed until next year. On 11 October, yet another Moray woman was subjected to the ordeal of giving birth in the back of an ambulance on the way to Aberdeen. I can scarcely believe that I am about to say this, but being born down a farm track is no way for a child to be brought into this world. What is the First Minister going to do to get full maternity services open in Dr Gray's hospital as soon as possible?

The First Minister (John Swinney): That is what the Government is working to secure with NHS Grampian. We have to do that in a way that is safe and sustainable for the delivery of public services, and those are exactly the considerations that are going into these decisions. I assure Mr Bannerman that the Government's intention is to restore those maternity services to Dr Gray's, and they will be restored when it is safe to do so.

E-bikes

Yi-pei Chou Turvey (North East Scotland) (LD): There appears to be confusion about what happens to e-bikes that are seized by Police Scotland. Last month, BBC reporting highlighted that seized e-bikes are being sold at auction. Following that reporting, my office submitted a freedom of information request to Police

Scotland and was told that it does not have a specific policy regarding the sale of seized e-bikes. However, over the weekend, further BBC reporting stated that e-bikes and e-scooters that are seized by Police Scotland are now being destroyed.

The issue is of growing concern to many communities, including in the north-east, where Police Scotland recently seized about 50 illegal e-bikes in a crackdown on antisocial and criminal behaviour. The force has indicated that it intends to continue that enforcement effort. Given those apparently different approaches, does the Scottish Government know what the policy is once an e-bike has been seized? Is it satisfied that a clear and consistent approach is in place across Police Scotland?

The First Minister: There should be an opportunity for a clear and consistent approach to be taken across Police Scotland because it is a single force. I am advised that Police Scotland does not ordinarily auction those bikes any longer—or the policy says that that is the case. I will ensure that a detailed explanation is provided to the member by Police Scotland. Obviously, it is an operational matter for Police Scotland, and I will ask the chief constable to advise the member on the details of the approach that is taken.

Maternity and Neonatal Services (Serious Adverse Events)

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Between 2019 and 2025, there were 736 serious adverse events in maternity and neonatal services, 406 of which involved a death, and that is just in the NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde health board area. The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care met Julie Keegan and Angus McLean, whose baby son, Mason, died at the Queen Elizabeth hospital in 2023. Julie and Angus were protesting outside Buchanan Galleries on Sunday, when they were joined by more than 100 parents. They do not believe that the serious adverse event reviews are working or that the maternity review led by Professor McCourt goes far enough. Does the First Minister agree?

The First Minister: First of all, I express my sympathies to Julie Keegan and Angus McLean on the loss of their baby, Mason, and to all the other families who joined them on the demonstration at the weekend. I understand the seriousness of the issues involved.

The issues around maternity services prompted the work undertaken by Healthcare Improvement Scotland to scrutinise the performance of maternity units. From that has come Professor Christine McCourt's wider review in relation to those questions. My firm view is that the approach that Professor McCourt proposes will provide us with the basis for investigating the issues that must be addressed in maternity services and will ensure that the Government is furnished with recommendations upon which we can act.

I do not support a public inquiry. I believe that what we have established with Professor McCourt will provide the opportunity to examine those important issues and that, just as the Healthcare Improvement Scotland reports have done, the process will provide an open and transparent assessment of very important issues where there must be an improvement in performance. I hope that goes some way towards addressing the issues that Jackie Baillie raised with me.

United Kingdom Budget 2027-28

Pauline Stafford (Bathgate) (SNP): According to the Resolution Foundation,

"the Chancellor delivered a scattergun Budget that did little to address the sharp challenges facing Britain. Cost of living support is being spread far too thinly and will leave even those families receiving help facing higher energy bills than they did during the last energy price shock."

Does the First Minister agree with that assessment of the recent Labour United Kingdom budget? In the face of UK Government inaction, what steps is this SNP Scottish Government taking to support households with the cost of living?

The First Minister: The concerns of members of the public around the cost of energy are very clearly visible for us all to see. That sits against the backdrop of a commitment from the incoming Labour Government in 2024 to reduce energy bills by £300, and energy bills are now higher than when the Labour Government came into office. The payment of £100 put in place by the budget will not in any way address the issue I have just raised, nor will it deal with the expected increases in energy costs in January.

From my Government's point of view, we are investing more than £3.5 billion in this financial year to tackle poverty and support people with the cost of living through a range of different measures designed to mitigate the impact of damaging UK policies. One of the issues that was not addressed in the budget was the freezing of local housing allowance. If that had been unfrozen, it would have helped to alleviate poverty in our society, but that freeze was kept in place. I assure Pauline Stafford that my Government will do all that it possibly can within the resources available to us, and I make the simple and important point to Parliament that, if the £2 billion of additional revenue that is expected to be generated from Scotland's energy resources in the next

financial year was used to lower the heating bills of people in Scotland, people in Scotland would really see a difference from Scotland's energy wealth being used for the benefit of the people of Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes questions from back benchers to the First Minister. Apologies to those members I was unable to call.

Support for Victims of Domestic Abuse (Council Tax Debt)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): The next item of business is a statement by Jenny Gilruth on supporting victims of domestic abuse—taking action to support those affected by council tax debt. Questions will be taken at the end of the statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

15:06

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Jenny Gilruth): Every day, on average, 204 women and girls across Scotland will be subjected to violent attacks. Police Scotland's figures show a 7.6 per cent increase in violent crime directed at women when compared with the figures for the previous year. Some 74,494 reports were made to Police Scotland in 2025-26. The crimes most commonly committed against women are common assault, threatening or abusive behaviour, and rape.

Police Scotland describes around half of those incidents as domestic incidents involving a partner or a former partner. That means that the people women love and trust are also the ones most likely to turn against them. That thread between trust and terror is fine in nature. It is a thread between love and fear—opposing forces that often create an environment in which abuse can flourish. We need only listen to the brave testimony of the women who have come forward to speak to the press in recent weeks to understand the enormity of the stress of living with domestic abuse and how it can eat away at a person to the extent that they become utterly powerless.

Many of those women are living in abject terror. All around them, their power may have been stolen away, perhaps in small ways at first: a credit card is not in their name, debts are mounting not as a result of their own spending, and there is coercive action, which, today, we all understand to be a form of domestic abuse. Economic abuse is a deliberately used tool of control that restricts a person's freedom and independence. It causes lasting harm, often well after a survivor has managed to flee.

The state has a clear role to play in responding to the epidemic of male violence that is directed towards women. In our communities, our public services should support recovery. The way in which such services operate should not make life harder for survivors who are seeking to escape.

The Scottish Government recognises that imposing joint and several liability for council tax can create serious and unfair consequences for survivors of domestic abuse. That is why, last year, we supported an amendment to the Housing (Scotland) Bill to require a dedicated review of the impact that the rules on such liability can have on a person who has experienced domestic abuse. The review involved engagement with local government, third sector organisations and others with direct experience of supporting survivors. Their evidence highlighted the ways in which financial liabilities can continue to affect survivors long after an abusive relationship has ended, and it demonstrated the need for further action.

Joint and several liability plays an important role in ensuring that council tax debts can be recorded and that local services continue to be funded effectively. However, the current system does not always operate fairly or proportionately for victims/survivors of domestic abuse. Although some local councils have developed sensitive and supportive approaches, we know that such practice is not consistent across Scotland. Fundamentally, the availability of support for victims should not depend on where they live. Public services must respond fairly, consistently and compassionately when supporting victims/survivors of domestic abuse. It is the role of Government to ensure consistency on that across the country.

This month, Scotland will join countries around the world during the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence, and the Scottish Government will renew our commitment to end violence against women and girls. Today, therefore, I am setting out the actions that the Scottish Government will take following our review on the impact of joint and several liability on those who have experienced domestic abuse.

In early 2027, the Government will consult on a package of reforms to ensure that survivors of domestic abuse are not unfairly burdened by council tax debt or water and sewerage charges debt. Central to that will be the creation of a statutory exception to joint and several liability for victims/survivors of domestic abuse. Exceptions to the principle of joint and several liability already exist for students and other groups, but the new exception will break the victim/survivor's financial association with their abuser. They will be liable for only their own share of the outstanding debt and not jointly with their abuser for the full amount. They will also

be able to seek support from their local council in reducing that remaining liability or, indeed, removing it entirely.

The Government is already engaged in dialogue with local government and other partners, and we will continue to work together to develop detailed guidance to support local councils in delivering the exception. It is incumbent on all members to redouble our efforts to end all forms of violence against women and girls. Although no single reform to the council tax system can fully address the impact of economic abuse, this exception will help to ensure that survivors of domestic abuse are not left carrying an unfair burden arising from coercion and control long after they have escaped an abusive relationship.

The Government will also consult on easing council tax reduction backdating rules to further support victims/survivors of domestic abuse. I know that current thresholds can create real difficulties for survivors where, in the past, they were prevented from managing household finances or even applying for support. Increasing or removing those existing backdating limits will help to ensure that those who were unable to claim at the time can still access the support that they missed and to reduce council tax debt that might have accumulated as a result.

The Government is also focused on supporting people who find themselves in difficult circumstances and on making life easier for them wherever we can. Therefore, alongside the planned reforms, which are very much focused on supporting victims/survivors of domestic abuse, we are taking action now so that we can help more households.

During the review, a consistent message from stakeholders was that debt enforcement action begins too quickly once a council tax payment is missed. The current system escalates too quickly. People can lose the right to pay by instalments, becoming liable for their full annual bill and facing enforcement action within a very short period. That must change, and the Government is taking action now to ensure that it will. From 1 April next year, when a council taxpayer has missed one payment, they will not be subjected to enforcement action until 63 days after that missed instalment.

Let me be clear that this change is not about avoiding responsibility for paying council tax. Local councils will continue to have the powers necessary to recover debts from those who can pay but choose not to. The change is about extending the current period from 14 days to 63 days, which will provide vital breathing space for those facing financial hardship, including survivors of domestic abuse who are trying to leave or recover from an abusive relationship.

Indeed, Citizens Advice Scotland has welcomed that as a crucial step for people who are struggling to pay their council tax, giving them much-needed time to get advice and support. I know that financial difficulties can arise for many different reasons, including sudden changes in income, ill health, caring responsibilities or even relationship breakdown. By slowing down that escalation process, we can help to prevent temporary financial pressures from becoming long-term debt problems.

We also recognise that other improvements could be made to how council tax and water and sewerage charge debt are collected, which would benefit everyone in Scotland. In particular, we need to examine whether the period during which council tax debt can be pursued remains appropriate. The public consultation that I have announced for 2027 will therefore gather more evidence on the prescription period in Scotland. The 20-year period is arguably not working in the way that it should, and we also need to consider administration and enforcement issues. A much broader consideration of current arrangements will help us to identify where stronger and more consistent standards are needed and to ensure that Scotland's local taxation system is both fair and effective.

Domestic abuse has no place in Scotland, and women and girls have the right to be free from all forms of violence, yet we know that, by the end of today, on average, 200 women and girls will have been the victims of violent attacks. The epidemic of male violence towards women and girls requires a commensurate response from Government. The measures that I have outlined are, therefore, part of a wider programme of action. Taken together, these reforms represent a significant step in delivering a more compassionate council tax system. They recognise that the effects of abuse do not end when a person leaves an abusive relationship, and that Government has a responsibility to ensure that our policies and services do not inadvertently prolong that harm.

These changes will not, on their own, eliminate economic abuse or remove all the barriers that survivors face. However, they will help to reduce unfair financial burdens and ensure that women can move forward with greater security and independence.

I thank all the stakeholders, and in particular the women, who have contributed to the work so far. Victims/survivors have been at the heart of helping to shape the proposals, and the Government is indebted to them all. I commit that we will leave no stone unturned in taking forward the reforms, which are necessary

to ensure that Scotland's council tax system is fairer and safer for everyone. The women of Scotland deserve no less.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I will allow 20 minutes for the cabinet secretary to answer questions on the issues raised in her statement. Members who wish to ask questions should press their request-to-speak button now.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): I welcome the Government's renewed commitment in the current session of Parliament to tackling violence against women and girls, and I welcome the statement in particular, because it provides some finer detail on measures that I think can make a practical difference to the lives of many women.

However, I want to drill down a little on that finer detail with regard to joint and several liability for council tax. The cabinet secretary said that debt could be written off where there is a victim of financial abuse, but she also said that debt could be reduced and the victim could claim back the support that they previously did not get. I want to understand the interaction between those two possibilities.

In addition, what evidence might be required to ensure that a victim of such economic abuse would qualify? Would that be where a court case has been concluded? The finer detail in that regard will be important.

Finally, has there been agreement with local authorities as to who will fund the writing off of debt when that measure is used?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Pauline McNeill for her interest and for her campaigning, which has been tireless in my time as an MSP, on issues relating to improving the lives of women and girls. I thank her in particular for the points that she made regarding the practical difference that some of the provisions, which are quite technical, will make for victims of domestic abuse.

On the member's questions about the finer detail, as she will understand, some of that detail will arise from the consultation, which will be launched in January next year and will—as I understand it from officials—run until roughly the end of March. We will then look to identify an appropriate legislative vehicle to take forward the changes. There will be an opportunity, through the consultation, to address the finer points that the member has spoken about today, such as in relation the 50:50 split of debt liability that she mentioned.

Through some of the engagement that has already been undertaken in relation to what has been announced today, stakeholders have suggested that having a statutory 50:50 split represents the most straightforward and practical solution, but, as I said, there will be further consultation as a result of the changes that I have announced today. That will, to pick up on the member's final point about local government, speak to the engagement that we will carry out with local government on how we take that forward.

The member will be aware that the Government has made a commitment to wider council tax reform during the current session of Parliament. That legislation will be coming forward shortly and, through that legislative vehicle, there may perhaps be a further opportunity to speak to some of the detail that the member has highlighted today, which I think will be captured more broadly in the consultation that will start at the beginning of next year.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I call Amanda Bland, to be followed by Karen Adam.

Amanda Lindsay (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform): I welcome the commitment to consult in early 2027 on a statutory exception to joint and several liability so that survivors are liable only for their own share of the debt. However, two practical points remain unclear. First, will the exception apply to existing arrears that have already been incurred through economic or coerced abuse, or only to future liability?

Secondly, while the general extension of the enforcement window to 63 days from April 2027 is noted, will councils be required to suspend recovery and enforcement specifically while a survivor's case is being assessed?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Amanda Bland for her question, and for welcoming the statement. In my statement, I spoke about existing arrears and her specific point about retrospective pursuit of debt. We will look at that further in the consultation that we will launch in January.

As I mentioned in my statement, and as the member alluded to, from 1 April next year the Government will extend the period before enforcement can begin from 14 days to 63 days. That approach to slowing down the speed at which someone loses the right to pay in instalments is really important, given the fear and duress that people can experience. It will also bring Scotland into line with other parts of the United Kingdom—the same extension will come into force in England from 1 April next year and, as I understand it, is already in place in Wales.

We will engage with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities in relation to how we take forward those reforms. I would be more than happy to write to the member on the specifics of her questions, but I feel that the issues that she raised may be addressed by the consultation that we will launch in January.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I apologise to the cabinet secretary, Amanda Bland and Amanda Lindsay for the confusion, but I am sure that we can amend the *Official Report*.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Financial abuse is a particularly cruel form of domestic abuse, which leaves survivors facing debts that they may have had little or no control over. For deaf survivors, communication barriers can make it even harder to challenge those debts, understand their rights or access support. Will the cabinet secretary outline how the proposed measures will ensure that survivors are not held responsible for council tax debts arising from economic abuse, and that advice, debt resolution and appeals processes will be fully accessible to deaf survivors and others who face communication barriers?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Karen Adam for raising issues relating to deaf survivors. In her time as an MSP, she has always used her position in this place to advocate for the deaf community. I welcome her doing so again today, because we are aware of the barriers that deaf survivors face. That is why we fund Deaf Links in Tayside to provide a British Sign Language advocacy service for survivors. We continue to engage with that project and the Sign LOUD initiative to help to ensure that the voices of deaf survivors shape our approach to tackling violence against women, which we know is experienced by the deaf community in different ways.

The exception that I have spoken about today, following the consultation that I have outlined, will break the financial association between survivors and their abusers, and, as I set out in my statement, survivors will be liable for a maximum of 50 per cent of overall council tax and water and sewerage charges debt.

The public consultation is a really important way for us to keep speaking to survivors. We will continue that engagement, including with deaf survivors, to make sure that our proposals are fully accessible and, importantly, fit for all.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I start by repeating the thanks that I gave when I moved amendments to the Housing (Scotland) Bill last year to introduce these measures, because this would not be happening without the work of Aberlour Children's Charity, Financially Included, Scottish Women's Aid, Citizens Advice Scotland and domestic abuse survivors themselves. I also thank Shirley-Anne Somerville and the Deputy First Minister for their support in making that progress possible.

Desperate vulnerable people across the country, including domestic abuse survivors, are currently trapped in cycles of unpayable debt for decades because Scotland's system is the most punishing in the UK. If we brought our rules into line with England's, that would bring about the biggest write-off of unpayable toxic council tax debt in Scottish history. We need to break the cycle of poverty and the abuse that it makes possible.

When will the consultation conclude? Will the changes in primary legislation that will be required to deliver that be brought in through the bill on council tax that was announced as part of the programme for government? Whether it is that bill or another, will it be introduced in time to take effect from the 2028-29 financial year?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Ross Greer for his question and his welcoming of the announcement. He put on the record a number of stakeholders—not least himself—who were key to delivering the changes that I have announced, including my colleague Shirley-Anne Somerville. I note the welcome that has also been received from Scottish Women's Aid and Citizens Advice Scotland.

The member asked about the consultation. In my response to Pauline McNeill, I said that my advice is that the consultation period should come to a conclusion at the end of March; thereafter, we will identify the next obvious opportunity for a legislative vehicle. At this stage, my expectation is that that will be the bill on council tax, but I have not yet had the formal advice that I need to take a decision on the matter. I would be more than happy to correspond with the member on that point.

To address Mr Greer's substantive point, there is an urgency to this work. Therefore, I give him a commitment that I will work at pace to ensure that we introduce the proposed changes as soon as we can legislate to do so, to alleviate the council tax debt and the concern and distress that are associated with it.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Con): The statement shows that we cannot look at violence against women and girls in isolation, but here we are. We need to look not only at the financial security aspect but at community justice resources. The Deputy First Minister will be aware that the police do not currently have the power to disclose whether perpetrators are released back into the same community that their victims are in. If we are serious about tackling violence against women and girls, surely that should

be consulted on—whether in relation to the community aspect or the financial aspect that we are discussing today.

Jenny Gilruth: Meghan Gallacher is right to set out that we cannot divorce the financial challenges from the wider community impacts. As a Government, we are keen to take a holistic approach—in fact, the First Minister is leading so keenly on this work so that he can take a cross-Government approach to tackling issues that pertain to violence against women and girls.

There is a substantive point to be made about the resourcing of justice partners. To give Meghan Gallacher assurance on that, I note that I have committed to meet the chief constable, along with the Cabinet Secretary for Justice, in the coming weeks, ahead of the budget. Given the links to today's announcement that the member has identified, I am sure that we will discuss the matters that she has raised.

Yi-pei Chou Turvey (North East Scotland) (LD): I thank the minister for the advance sight of the statement. The Scottish Liberal Democrats welcome any action that seeks to reduce any risk of the impact of violent crime being directed towards women and girls. We understand that the Government has processes that need to be followed, especially if a change to the law is required.

How long does the Government expect that this process will take? Its own evidence has shown how detrimental long waiting times can be for victims—whether for a woman fighting the council to get her ex-partner removed from the council tax account, or a girl waiting months for an initial visit to a rape crisis support centre. Can the minister tell me how quickly the legislation on the issue will be introduced and, more importantly, when victims will start to feel the benefits?

Jenny Gilruth: I identified answers to some of those questions in my response to Mr Greer. To give Yi-pei Chou Turvey some reassurance, those are exactly the questions that I put to my officials: how quickly can we move and what is the first opportunity for us to legislate in relation to the changes that we want to make?

As a minister, I am required to consult. The consultation needs to take its course. The short, truncated approach that we have taken means that the consultation will be launched in January—I am advised by my officials that that is the soonest that I am able to do it. Thereafter, we will identify a legislative vehicle, which, as I set out in my response to Mr Greer, is likely to be the council tax bill that the Government will introduce, although I have not yet had formal advice on that point. We will look to identify the first legislative opportunity, to ensure that we move at the pace that is expected by women and girls across the country. Those issues pertaining to violence against women and girls demonstrate the necessity of urgent action from the Government.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I still have a large number of questions from members, so concise questions and answers would be very welcome. I call Patricia Gibson.

Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I welcome the Scottish Government's recognition that joint and several liability for council tax debt can trap victims of domestic abuse in trauma as they are pursued for debt, which impacts on their recovery from abuse—an aspect of which, as the Deputy First Minister pointed out, too often involves financial control.

What measures will be taken to raise wider public awareness of this initiative? The Deputy First Minister will understand that this announcement will be of particular interest to those victims of domestic abuse who have not yet escaped their abuser because they feel trapped by financial constraints.

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Patricia Gibson for her hugely important question about awareness raising. We want to maximise the reach and impact of the support that is available. That is why, as I set out, we will consult on the detailed design, including the date on which it should apply. We will work closely with local councils, domestic abuse organisations and other stakeholders to ensure that support is accessible and that it reaches as many victims/survivors as possible. I will also engage with officials on the member's substantive point about how we can raise awareness of the consultation—for example, by using the Government's online social media channels. MSPs can help to raise public awareness more broadly by sharing that advice and guidance with their constituents.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I welcome today's announcement and the Government's recognition of the unfair approach to council tax debt collection. Public debt intensifies and sustains poverty, and the Deputy First Minister has rightly recognised the need for a fairer council tax system for women in particular.

Given the inconsistencies across local government in the way in which debt is collected, does the Deputy First Minister recognise—I think that she does—that primary legislation might be required to adequately reform public debt recovery processes across Scotland to ensure that we do not trap indebted women and

families in a cycle of poverty? That legislation might need to be separate from the legislation that she spoke about in her statement.

Jenny Gilruth: Carol Mochan has raised an important point about legislation. I have set out our view on the next steps following the consultation and the next obvious legislative vehicle, but there might be a requirement to consider the broader issue that she has rightly raised on public debt.

To give Carol Mochan some assurance, I note that, as the First Minister set out during First Minister's question time, we will meet the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities tomorrow to talk about the wider programme of public service reform. That will provide a welcome opportunity to talk about these issues in the round. Only yesterday, I met Perth and Kinross Council to hear its views on our public service reform approach. We see inconsistency across Scotland in relation to a number of public services, so public service reform provides opportunities to do things differently and more consistently and, ultimately, to improve women's experiences of the current system.

I am more than happy to take away Carol Mochan's suggestion on public debt and to come back to her following our engagement with COSLA.

Katie Hagmann (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): Like others, I very much welcome today's statement. Yesterday, my committee published its pre-budget scrutiny report. Our committee heard evidence of coerced debt and economic abuse. We also heard that female single parents are 68 per cent more likely to have public debt and that council tax debt is pursued much more aggressively than private debt. What further steps can be taken to tackle coerced debt and economic abuse? How will the Government engage with voluntary and third sector organisations, alongside councils, to support victims of domestic abuse?

Jenny Gilruth: I welcome the committee's work in highlighting the impact of coerced debt and economic abuse on victims and survivors. The evidence that the committee heard reinforces the findings of the Government's statutory review. The measures that the Government is pursuing will create a much more compassionate approach to public debt that recognises the point about vulnerability that has been mentioned and that supports recovery for those who have experienced economic abuse.

We recognise that tackling coerced debt requires a partnership approach, which is why we have engaged closely with expert stakeholders such as Financially Included, Scottish Women's Aid, Aberlour Children's Charity—which Mr Greer mentioned—and academics. Their expertise has been invaluable and will remain central to our approach as we go forward with the consultation on the detailed design stage and the range of proposals that I outlined in my statement.

Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): I thank the Deputy First Minister for her statement. We have talked a lot about working at pace on existing debt. Without clear answers on interim protection for those with existing debt, many women will continue to face action on debts that they did not create, as has been said. Why can the Deputy First Minister not make that commitment today, given that she has committed to increasing the enforcement period from 14 days to 63 days?

Jenny Gilruth: To give Ms MacDougall some assurance, I would like to be clearer on those issues, but I am legally required to consult, so I will take the approach to which I, as a minister, am bound.

It is important to note that those who are currently living with debt are still entitled to a level of support. For example, in the 2026-27 financial year, we provided Citizens Advice Scotland with an additional £2.2 million of funding to support people with debt. We have also provided additional support through the council tax reduction scheme, which is saving around 460,000 households £900 a year on average.

I am legally required to consult, and we will take the first legislative opportunity after that consultation ends, which is expected to be at the end of March.

Michelle Campbell (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP): I direct members to my entry in the register of members' interests; I am a councillor in Renfrewshire.

I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for her statement and for informing members about the positive action that the Scottish Government is taking to tackle some aspects of public debt. That is definitely to be welcomed, as has been recognised in other members' questions, the responses to which have shortened the questions that I have.

Will the cabinet secretary elaborate further on the criteria or evidence that will be required from individuals who seek access to that type of support? We know that survivors of domestic violence can find that overwhelming, and I would hate there to be any deterrent to such a well-intentioned action from the Scottish Government.

Jenny Gilruth: Survivors are at the heart of the actions I have set out today. The member raises an important point, and we will continue engaging with survivors as we move into the consultation phase.

Expert stakeholders have informed the work done thus far, and, as part of the consideration of joint and several liability, the Government also conducted a rapid evidence review of recent research on the issue. Survivors' voices have been really clear in the research conducted by Scottish Women's Aid. More broadly, we will continue engaging with survivors groups as we approach the consultation period, which will begin in January, and will provide the necessary support that the member spoke about.

Holly Bruce (Glasgow Southside) (Green): I thank my colleague Ross Greer, who kickstarted this work in the previous session of Parliament.

I hugely welcome the Government's decision to exempt domestic abuse survivors from joint and several liability for council tax arrears that arise from abuse because it is an incredibly important step towards securing economic justice for women who have experienced abuse that too often traps children and families in poverty.

However, it is vital that we get the delivery right, so how will the Government ensure that the assessment process will be designed to protect victims from being retraumatised? How will she continue working with stakeholders such as Aberlour and Financially Included, as well as with victims/survivors, to ensure that their voices and experiences inform implementation?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Holly Bruce for recognising her colleague Ross Greer's work on this really important legislative change. The trauma that she spoke of, in terms of how debt can trap children and families, is prevalent in the experiences that have been shared with the Government as part of our approach to the issue.

The member raised two points. The first was about how the wider approach to council tax will avoid retraumatising women and girls. We will take a sensitive approach to the consultation and will use that to inform the legislative approach that is then taken.

The member also spoke about stakeholder engagement. We have learned from stakeholders—not least from women and girls themselves—throughout the process. We will continue to have really clear dialogue with stakeholders as we approach the consultation, which, as I said in my statement, will begin in January.

Heather Anderson (Dundee City West) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests; I am a councillor on Dundee City Council.

Last month, I visited Aberlour's Tayside family financial wellbeing pilot and saw at first hand the positive effects of assisting disadvantaged families who have public debt. I very much welcome today's announcement. I will build on some of the previous questions: will the cabinet secretary specifically consider consulting on enabling local authorities to accept as evidence testimony that comes from third sector organisations, in order to ensure that women do not have to tell their stories again and again?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank the member for highlighting the really important work done by Aberlour. We looked at the Tayside pilot as part of the joint review, and I assure the member that there are undoubtedly lessons to be learned.

It is really important that our public systems work better for survivors so that they avoid the very issue that the member raises. As far as possible, we want to support a smoother recovery by avoiding survivors having to share their experiences repeatedly. I am more than happy to engage further with the member on that point. The broader consultation that I spoke about in the statement will be launched in January and I hope that we will use some of the learning that the member has set out in the approach that we adopt as part of that consultation.

Labour Market Participation (Young People)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): The next item of business is a debate on motion S7M-01838, in the name of Tom Arthur, on supporting young people to participate in the labour market. Members who wish to speak in the debate should press their request-to-speak button now.

15:40

The Minister for Business and Fair Work (Tom Arthur): I am grateful for the opportunity to open this debate on supporting young people to participate in the labour market.

The Government believes that every young person should have the opportunity to develop their skills, build their confidence and progress into sustainable, fulfilling work. Supporting young people into employment is not only vital for their individual futures; it is essential to Scotland's economy, productivity and future success.

However, this is about more than economic outcomes alone. We know that good work provides purpose, stability, financial security and social connection, while supporting positive mental health and wellbeing and helping young people to realise their full potential. By creating pathways into fair, fulfilling and sustainable employment opportunities, we are investing in a healthier, fairer and more prosperous Scotland. That is why the Government continues to take action to ensure that young people are equipped with the skills, experience and support that they need to succeed in a changing labour market.

Through our programme for government, we are strengthening the connections between education and employment, helping young people to progress into, and engage successfully with, the labour market. That includes improving pathways from education into training and employment through stronger partnerships among schools, colleges, universities, employers and employability services; expanding work-based learning opportunities; providing enhanced support during key transitions; and ensuring that young people can access high-quality, effective careers and employability services. Together, those actions will help more young people to develop the skills, experience and confidence that they need to access sustainable employment and realise their potential.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): That all sounds laudable, but it stands in contrast to the fact that the number of modern apprenticeship starts is declining year on year and is substantially lower than the Government's target. What is the minister saying that the Government will do to address that?

Tom Arthur: I hope that, if the member affords me the opportunity to make some progress through my prepared remarks, I might be able to address some of the points that he has raised, but I will be happy to take a further intervention later on if I am not successful in doing so.

Our commitment to improving young people's pathways into employment is long standing. Building on the recommendation of Sir Ian Wood's 2014 report, "Education Working For All!", we have delivered reforms including the developing the young workforce network, expanding apprenticeships and the young person's guarantee, helping more young people to gain the skills and opportunities that are needed for the future.

Today's debate provides an important opportunity to reflect on the progress that has been made and, most important, to consider what more can be done to ensure that every young person can access the opportunities that they need to succeed.

Although there is no direct comparison between Scotland and the rest of the UK on young people who are not in education, employment or training, the available labour market evidence suggests that Scotland is in a marginally stronger position. However, we cannot and will not be complacent. Too many young people still face barriers, and we remain committed to ensuring that every young person can access the opportunities that they need to build a positive future.

Angela Ross (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform): Does the minister accept that his figures are not comparable with the UK figures, because the Scottish Government uses a different mechanism?

Tom Arthur: I think that I said that there is no direct comparison available between Scotland and the UK on young people who are not in education, employment or training—that is on the record.

However, I note that statistics published by Skills Development Scotland this morning show that we continue to see progress on supporting young people to access and sustain opportunities post-secondary education, with participation rates up from 93.3 per cent to 93.6 per cent of all 16 to 19-year-olds.

Our commitment to that is reflected in our investment across our employability, skills and education system.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): [*Made a request to intervene*.]

Tom Arthur: I will make a wee bit more progress and then come to Mr Harvie.

Through our no one left behind approach, we are delivering flexible, person-centred employability support tailored to individual needs, helping young people to move into work, education, training and other positive destinations.

Too many young people who face additional disadvantage continue to encounter barriers to employment and progression. That is why keeping the Promise remains central to the Government's approach. Through our no one left behind approach, care-experienced young people are a priority group for employability support, with almost 8,000 people supported since 2019. Alongside that, programmes such as discovering your potential and charities such as MCR Pathways provide tailored support, mentoring and opportunities to help young people to realise their potential.

I give way to Patrick Harvie.

Patrick Harvie: I doubt that anybody here disagrees that a great many young people face significant barriers that prevent them from participating in the labour market. However, does the Government accept that a great number of young people do not necessarily face barriers but are being offered a raw deal compared with previous generations and compared with older people? They receive lower pay than older people at a time when their housing costs are going through the roof, and they face a great many other disincentives. Those are not necessarily barriers, but they amount to a raw deal.

Tom Arthur: Patrick Harvie has hit on one of the defining issues with which we are having to wrestle. We took it for granted that each generation would see a rise in their living standards, but that bargain has been fundamentally undermined—indeed, broken—in the 20 years since the global financial crisis. We are not alone in wrestling with that issue; it is an issue across the United Kingdom and in many other countries; it is a large reason for the sense of disaffection, disconnect and alienation that we see in many countries. Some of that is manifesting itself in protest, some in disengagement from the political system and some in the rise of political parties that previous generations thought had been confined to the dustbin of history.

Therefore, Patrick Harvie has raised an important issue that speaks to the importance of the debate that we are having this afternoon as we seek to ensure not only that young people are supported to progress into employment, but that the employment that they progress into is fair, sustainable and well paid, with fair work principles at its heart.

Duncan Dunlop (South Scotland) (LD): Will the member give way?

Tom Arthur: I will give way one more time, then I will make some progress.

Duncan Dunlop: I thank the minister for giving way one more time. He mentioned care-experienced people. Until 2021, there was a programme called community jobs Scotland, through which employers received direct funding to train and employ a care-experienced person. Those people were given a job and received training alongside it.

I used that programme to great success, but it has now ended. The no one left behind strategy does not give an employer money to employ a young person and teach them all the skills that are needed to thrive in the job. Would the minister consider bringing back such direct funding?

Tom Arthur: I thank Duncan Dunlop for his intervention and recognise his expertise in that area. No one left behind is a devolved approach that runs across local employability partnerships; we have seen a move to a more regional approach here in the east. However, Duncan Dunlop has raised an important point, and I am happy to engage with him on that.

I will continue with my prepared remarks. Financial barriers can be a significant challenge for young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, which is why we continue to invest in education maintenance allowance for 16 to 19-year-olds to help them stay engaged in learning. By providing that support, EMA helps young people to build skills, knowledge and confidence while contributing to our wider commitments to eradicate child poverty and improve employment outcomes.

In Scotland, we have long recognised the value of vocational and technical options for young people and the important contribution that they make to equipping young people with the knowledge, skills and attributes that they need to flourish in life, learning and work. In August, we celebrated the achievement of 120,485 Qualifications Scotland vocational and technical qualifications, which was a new landmark, up 9.1 per cent from last year. Even with limited powers and budgets, Scotland has achieved a lot: 95.7 per cent of young people in Scotland are in work, training, college or university three months after leaving school.

Despite that progress, many employers continue to report skills shortages, which highlights the importance of ensuring that young people can access opportunities to develop practical skills and gain experience of the workplace.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Tom Arthur: I am conscious of the provisions around time being given back. I have taken up quite a bit of time responding to interventions. Am I free to take a further one?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): We have some time in hand.

Tom Arthur: Okay.

Rachael Hamilton: I appreciate the minister taking the intervention. Sixteen to 19-year-olds are five times more likely not to be in education, employment or training if they are from a deprived background. Figures show that college funding has reduced by 7.5 per cent in real terms. Kids from deprived backgrounds need

an education close to home. Does the minister accept that it would be better to fund colleges to ensure that the figures are equitable for affluent children and deprived children?

Tom Arthur: In response to Rachael Hamilton's two points, first, we all recognise that education is experienced in a differential way, and secondly, the importance of ensuring sustainable finance in our further education sector was reflected in the uplift that was secured for the budget for the current financial year.

The member makes important points, which recognise that there has to be a suite of interventions across our education and skills system in order for us to realise what we are seeking to achieve. On that point, Education Scotland is taking forward the most significant update to Scotland's curriculum in more than a decade, helping to provide greater clarity on the knowledge and skills that young people need to develop and strengthening the links between learning, skills and the world of work.

Alongside that, Qualifications Scotland is leading work to reform the senior phase qualifications offer, ensuring that qualifications better recognise the breadth of young people's knowledge, skills and achievements and that any changes are coherent, practical and focused on improving outcomes for all children and young people.

Since we started foundation apprenticeships, almost 29,000 young people have enrolled in one. We are keen to build on that success and we are working with partners to explore how they might contribute to our commitment to expanding work-based learning opportunities. After young people leave school, apprenticeships play a vital role in allowing them to earn, learn and develop skills that are valued by employers. That is why we remain committed to supporting at least—I repeat, at least—150,000 apprenticeship opportunities over the course of this parliamentary session, and it is why we have announced a 10 per cent uplift in modern apprenticeships funding for 2027-28 to maintain high-quality provision across Scotland.

Through our commitment to a single national skills plan, we want to enable people at all stages of their lives to have the opportunity and means to develop their skills, knowledge and attributes so that they can realise their potential and make a meaningful contribution to society and to the economy. The plan will provide a strategic framework to align skills provision with economic need, strengthen employer engagement and support people throughout their working lives, so that we can work towards ensuring that Scotland has the required skills base for our future economy.

However, securing qualifications and employment opportunities alone will not guarantee success. Good mental health is fundamental to helping young people to enter, remain and thrive in work. Through our supporting a mentally healthy workplace national learning network, we are working with employers to create more inclusive workplaces that meet young people's needs. The network is complemented by our mental health and wellbeing delivery plan, which includes targeted action to support young people as they move into, and remain in, sustained employment.

Disabled young people can face distinct and often more complex challenges during their transition into adulthood. Our transition to adulthood strategy is helping to address those challenges by ensuring that disabled young people have access to co-ordinated support and clearer pathways to enable them to achieve their full potential.

Although education and employability services play an important role, many young people benefit from support that is delivered within their own community. Youth work provides trusted relationships to help young people build confidence and develop skills for learning, work and life. Youth work is particularly effective in engaging those facing barriers linked to poverty, poor mental health, care experience, additional support needs or disengagement from formal learning. That is why we have renewed our support for more than 5,500 youth workers, including volunteers, through training opportunities delivered by Youth Scotland and YouthLink Scotland. As part of our focus on prevention and early intervention, we will continue working with partners to strengthen youth work provision across Scotland.

Partnership remains central to our success. Supporting young people into employment requires a collaborative approach across education, skills, employability and the third sector. Skills Development Scotland, Developing the Young Workforce, colleges, universities, local authorities and Scotland's third sector all play a crucial role in helping young people to develop skills, gain experience and access employment opportunities.

Strong engagement with employers remains essential if young people are to make successful transitions into work. Through employer-led regional groups, and working with every mainstream secondary school in Scotland, Developing the Young Workforce helps young people to access careers advice, workplace experience and direct employer engagement. We are therefore providing £12.45 million annually to DYW

regional groups in 2025-26 and 2026-27, alongside an increased budget for the national team to support resilient staff planning.

Alongside DYW, we invest around £4 million each year in third sector programmes that provide tailored support for young people who face additional barriers. Through initiatives from Career Ready, Enable and MCR Pathways, young people benefit from mentoring, coaching, work placements and employer engagement to help them progress into positive destinations.

Young people also need access to high-quality careers information and support when making decisions about their future. SDS, along with colleges and universities, provides career information, advice and guidance across Scotland. Skills Development Scotland's 16+ participation portal and our participation measure are widely recognised as key strengths of our youth employability system, providing a comprehensive national picture of young people's participation and helping partners to target support where it is needed most.

Our colleges and universities equip young people with the technical, vocational and high-level skills that Scotland's economy requires, and they work closely with employers to respond to labour market demand.

When a young person secures employment, up-front costs can create a barrier to their taking up an opportunity. Since our job start payment was introduced in August 2020, it has helped more than 6,600 young people to move into employment. By helping with the initial costs that are associated with starting a job, that uniquely Scottish payment reduces the financial barriers to employment.

We recognise, however, that there is more to do. That is why the Minister for Innovation, Technology and Tertiary Education and I are pleased to announce that the Scottish Government will convene a series of discussions with young people, employers, delivery partners, education and skills providers and representatives from the private and third sectors. We will begin by listening directly to young people and the organisations that support them, to better understand the challenges that they face in accessing and sustaining employment. We will then bring together key partners to consider how we can collectively respond to those challenges and identify opportunities for further action. By placing young people's experiences at the centre of those discussions, we can build a shared understanding of the issues and strengthen our collective efforts to improve outcomes across Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Minister, you must come to a conclusion. I have been generous in giving you time back.

Tom Arthur: Finally, it would be remiss of me not to say that I welcome the contribution that Alan Milburn's review of young people and work has made so far. The focus on widening opportunities and strengthening the pathways between education and employment to ensure that all young people can access good quality work aligns with the commitment that no young person is left behind. Alyn Smith and I met Alan Milburn last week to discuss his final report. We will continue to work with employers, delivery partners and young people to consider the findings.

At the heart of the issue is a need for continued partnership working, and we are committed to that. I look forward to the contributions from members from across the Parliament this afternoon.

I move,

That the Parliament believes that every young person should have the opportunity to realise their potential and participate fully in the labour market; recognises that providing young people with the best start to their working lives is critical to Scotland's future economic prosperity; welcomes the fact that 95.7% of young people are going into positive destinations such as work, training, college or university three months after leaving school; welcomes the commitment to deliver at least 150,000 apprenticeships during the current parliamentary session; recognises the importance of ensuring that people receive the right support at the right time to progress towards and within work; welcomes the commitment to review employability services in order to maximise effectiveness of support; acknowledges that some young people face additional barriers to making successful transitions from secondary education and that targeted, person-centred support is essential to helping them overcome these challenges, and supports continued action to ensure that every young person, regardless of background or circumstance, is supported to achieve a positive and sustained destination in education, training or employment.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I call Daniel Johnson to speak to and move amendment S7M-01838.5.

15:56

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): One reason why I love covering the economy brief for Scottish Labour is that I get to meet many people in different sectors all over the country, not least young people in apprenticeships who are entering their sectors, trades and careers at the very start of their working lives, whether that is in defence, advanced manufacturing, construction or energy. Time and again, I see

excellent examples, such as the former apprentice who I met at Prestwick airport and who is earning a very substantial five-figure salary just a matter of years after finishing her apprenticeship in maintaining aircraft.

The reality is that, although we meet amazing young people building warships, houses or aircraft, very often in each of those sectors, the schemes are constrained and the firms involved are employing people from other parts of the world to meet the labour shortage. We have a demand for labour, rewarding careers and growth sectors, yet young people are being turned away from the opportunities because there are not enough places to train them. We have demand from the businesses and the young people, but we have constraint from the system. That is an absurdity that we have to address.

It is important that we address the NEET issue. Alan Milburn's report is highly timely, because many young people are failing to find opportunities, for a broad range of reasons. Some of those are about marginal issues and people being in profound need, but Patrick Harvie hit the nail on the head when he said that a lot of young people, for lots of different reasons, are really struggling to start their careers, full stop.

Patrick Harvie: I am grateful to Daniel Johnson for his kind remarks. Perhaps they indicate that he intends to accept our amendment and support the proposition that the UK Government should have abolished the age-discriminatory bands for the minimum wage.

Daniel Johnson: As Patrick Harvie knows, that is the UK Labour Government's position, but the issue has to be looked at in some detail. There are some problems with the specific wording of the Green amendment, but people should absolutely be paid a fair wage.

Critically, about 13 per cent of young people across the UK are not in education, employment or training. That figure is largely the same in Scotland. Fundamentally, although the issue is about the routes that young people have available, it is also about changes in the economy, which is why urgent attention needs to be given to it. The problems are just as acute in Scotland, which is a point that the minister somewhat circumvented in his speech.

There are also issues with data recording. For example, in Scotland, we record data only for 16 to 20-year-olds; we lack data for 20 to 24-year-olds. However, we know from the cohort for which we have information that things are getting worse. Four years ago, about 8.7 per cent of young people aged 16 to 20 were in the NEET category, but that has now risen to 13.2 per cent. We also know from data that was released recently that increasing numbers of young people are not in education or employment because they are sick. These are substantial and serious issues that we need to interrogate, and it is not good enough to simply say that we are doing marginally better.

Nor is it good enough to be complacent about apprenticeship starts. Although modern apprenticeships are an important and valuable component in starting people on their career path, we must acknowledge that the number of starts is declining. In 2022, the number of starts was 26,000, but that has now declined to 24,800—that is a decline of 1,200 starts in just four years. Furthermore, we know that the level of demand is much more substantial than that—the Confederation of British Industry states that we are short of some 15,000 apprenticeship places.

The issue is compounded by facts that have just come to light in recent days in the Parliament. There are issues not only in the apprenticeship system; in the college system, the head count in colleges has fallen by 40,000 in three years, which is a fall of 20 per cent. That is astonishing. We need to understand and accept that there is an urgent and pressing issue with regard to skills that we must address with a level of urgency and seriousness.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I agree with Daniel Johnson's line of argument. Would he accept that the issue is not just a numbers game? We would probably see a differential between different sectors if we were to interrogate the numbers in individual sectors, but there would probably be a more worrying scenario in some of the key sectors that will be crucial to our economic growth.

Daniel Johnson: I would go even further than that: when we interrogate individual institutions, we see that cuts are happening to the courses that are more expensive to run—that is why there are no stonemasonry courses available in Edinburgh. I do not know whether members have noticed, but there are one or two stone buildings in this city. We not only need to understand the numbers, as Mr McArthur pointed out, but ensure that the right courses are available for the right people in the right places.

Above all else, I have a deep concern that—at a time when there is already a university funding crisis—we have embarked on a structural reform that puts the responsibility for those functions into the Scottish Funding Council, a body that does not have a track record of being industry led or having an industry interface. We run the risk of the functional change that is needed being impeded by the structural change that the Government has embarked on.

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

I move amendment S7M-01838.5, to insert at end:

"; is concerned by figures indicating that as many as one in six young people in Scotland are not in education, work or training; believes that there is a need to simplify vocational qualifications, to create lifelong learning pathways and to support the development of flexible courses that can be tailored to individuals and businesses, and calls on the Scottish Government to draw up proposals to devolve funding for lifelong learning and skills to regional leaders to bring together colleges, employers and training providers, to ensure that people are equipped with the skills industry needs and that local communities share in the benefits of investment."

16:03

Angela Ross (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform): I point to my entry in the register of members' interests, which states that I am a business owner.

Let us think back to our first jobs. It might have been doing a paper round or a milk delivery, or working in a shop. Margaret Thatcher—one of the minister's favourite people—started behind the counter of her father's grocery shop, Jeff Bezos spent his youth flipping burgers in a McDonald's restaurant and Sean Connery delivered milk very near to the Parliament using a horse-drawn vehicle. I washed dishes, which was not so glamorous.

For generations, the formula was simple: you would take an entry-level, often low-paid job, learn about punctuality and working with the public and take the first step on to the rung of the ladder. However, that ladder is being cut away. [*Interruption*.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Sorry, but can we not have conversations in the chamber while members are speaking, please?

Angela Ross: During the election campaign, I met a 19-year-old on a doorstep who said to me that he had applied for more than 200 entry-level jobs and had not received a single response. He is living at home with his parents, who are equally worried. Because young people cannot get their foot on the ladder, a staggering 30 per cent of those aged 20 to 34 in Scotland are now living at home with their parents, and that figure has increased under recent Scottish Governments.

Young people have lost trust and hope. Our education system hands out participation trophies and tells them that everyone is a winner, but when they step into the real world, our broken economy treats them like an invisible statistic. When challenged, the Government will point to its annual participation measure—as I pointed out earlier, it is not comparable to the NEETs figure—and claim that only a small percentage of young people are out of work or education. However, it has truncated its statistics and it ignores a proportion of the 20 to 24-year-olds who are left stranded and out of the workplace.

Alan Milburn's interim report shows that, across the UK, 1 million young people—a lost generation—are not in education, employment or training. In Scotland, the figures are harder to find, but Office for National Statistics data shows that thousands of young Scots aged 16 to 24 are completely disconnected from the system, and some state that they do not want to work. However, they are not workshy. They are completely demoralised. They have looked at a housing market where they can never buy a home and a corporate job market that ghosts them hundreds of times and they have rationally concluded that the system is rigged. They have not given up on work; they have given up on a system that breaks its promises.

Why has that happened? Our youth are trapped in a political pincer between two failed Parliaments. First, Westminster has artificially priced inexperienced young workers out of the market, hiking the minimum wage without a thought for productivity. Secondly, the Scottish Government has created an economy with low growth and low productivity, where we have an issue with scale-ups that is limiting our jobs.

We need deep-rooted options. We need adequate pathways into work for our young people. A recent programme for international student assessment figure that came out states that some 43.5 per cent of 15-year-olds feel that their school did not prepare them for adult life. That is at the heart of an issue that we need to resolve. We need dynamic gateways that transition young people from education directly into purposeful vocations. Whether that path goes through university or college, straight into a modern apprenticeship, or directly into a brilliant career—perhaps in the military, the police or retail—the pathway must be there.

We must build opportunities directly into schools—not just tokenism, but projects that have meaning and value to communities, so that young people can feel that they have a purpose. We need robust work experience, opportunities to see real businesses operating locally, and practical lessons on how enterprise functions. We need placements that build confidence and test soft skills.

Work must always be rewarding, and it must be more rewarding than not working. We need opportunities that will help young people to monetise and commercialise their ideas, showing them that they have real meaning and purpose and that they can contribute effectively to the wider world. Once they have that purpose,

we must ensure that they have financial independence. A young person cannot build a proud adult life if they are trapped in their parents' house in their 30s.

Hard work must bring a physical reward. We will couple our employment pathways with aggressive housing and planning reform. We need a progressive rent-to-buy housing model. We must turn a young person's monthly rent into automatic blocks for a deposit. We will give them realistic, stable ways to own their own home.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): The member must come to a conclusion.

Angela Ross: We will build youth trust and we will be honest with young people. We need to build a real world where work arrives for young people who have been through the education system in a more direct manner. Let us give Scotland's young people their future back.

I move amendment S7M-01838.4, to leave out from first "welcomes" to end and insert:

"is concerned that thousands of young Scots remain detached from employment, education or training, despite years of Scottish Government promises; expresses concern that the Scottish Government has been unable to produce comparative not in education, employment or training (NEET) figures for all 16- to 24-year-olds in Scotland, instead relying on more favourable data from a narrower age range; notes that the Annual Population Survey indicates that one in six 16- to 24-year-olds in Scotland has NEET status; believes that a generation is being failed by a system that too often leaves young people without purpose, direction or hope for the future; recognises that work must be the surest route to financial independence and prosperity for young people, and believes that people should keep more of the money they earn and that every young person should have a clear pathway from education to productive employment, financial independence and economic security."

16:09

Iris Duane (Glasgow) (Green): What a speech to follow. I start by thanking the Government for lodging the motion to be debated in its own time. It is an incredibly important debate for us to have, given the scale of the crisis that we face. Although I promise not to continually harp on about being the chamber's youngest member, the matters that we are debating today are not just close to home but reflect the everyday experiences of so many people of my age, including some of my friends who are currently NEET—a circumstance that I could have found myself in.

In the chamber, we often speak about the perils of poverty, lowering the welfare bill and the need for better mental health support—things that I think we all support. However, today, I genuinely challenge every party at the table to answer how, if we truly believe that those things matter, we can allow the NEET crisis to continue. It is about time that we internalised the fact that the very nature and foundations of the labour market have changed. As Daniel Johnson pointed out, the number of college places has fallen and many of our students feel priced out of higher education. As if it was not already hard enough to secure jobs, we have seen the graduate market collapse by 50 per cent and the advent of artificial intelligence remove a litany of entry-level jobs.

Just yesterday morning, BBC Scotland broke the story of Casey Smith, a young person who has been applying for jobs since she was 16—she is about to turn 20. She believes that she has made more than 1,000 job applications only to get five interviews and no offers. Casey's story is that of thousands of young people who have the drive, skills and know-how but not the opportunity to do. These are the people at the core of the NEET crisis. The very idea that we are slightly meritocratic seems to have evaporated, and nobody seems to have internalised the effects of what is happening.

As the previous speaker mentioned, a 24-year-old man is 26 times more likely to live with his parents than with a partner. One in four 16 to 24-year-olds live in poverty, and, for the first time in almost a century, it is being reported that the level of hope in young people is so dangerously low that it is having an effect on their morale and their ability to find work.

As a 24-year-old, I know that, too often, my generation feels as though we have fallen through the cracks. We were born too early to really reap the benefits of the new tech-emboldened economy but too late to set our roots in a career that will help us to weather the storm of change. That situation is leaving so many young people lost in a sea of no work or bad work. It is not enough to simply get us into jobs if the work is unreliable and low paid. Work must pay.

Like many young people across the country, I was incredibly disappointed that the workers' rights promises were watered down by the UK Government. I should be clear that the Employment Rights Act 2025 included really good mechanisms, such as banning the immoral practice of fire and rehire, but those measures have not gone far enough, and many of my constituents feel that Holyrood would have gone further.

As the chancellor confirmed last week, the Government has abandoned its pledge to equalise minimum pay bands across age groups, which is a betrayal of the promise that the same Government made to young

workers two years ago and perhaps suggests why many of us are looking for political representation elsewhere. I urge colleagues across the chamber to join me in condemning that failure to act. Rent is not cheaper if you are younger, food is not cheaper if you are younger, petrol is not cheaper if you are younger, and heating is not cheaper if you are younger. Once again, the very idea of the social contract between the state and its future is being abused and young people are being asked to pay for it.

When I was born, my single mum had been 18 for two months. We lived in insecure housing and grew up together, both feeling the cold grip of poverty. Things were incredibly tough then and they are even tougher now. The UK Government is telling countless young parents out there, across our country, that they are worth less and that their attempts to put food on the table and to keep the lights on and beds warm should be even harder. That is not acceptable. We must ensure that work pays.

If we want our young people to be in work, we must also ensure that work pays and is fair. Of course, alone, that will not stop the crisis, but it is a tangible act that the chamber can call for and something that the southern chamber can do, and it would feasibly support our young people's participation in the labour market. However, it is not the only thing. Specifically, if I may—although I chose not to include it in my amendment, because it was outside the scope of the motion—I suggest to Alyn Smith, the Minister for Innovation, Technology and Tertiary Education, that, in order to tackle the crisis together, we could look at the systems that feed into that.

I am sure that many would welcome the implementation of student support recommendations to bring college and university student support levels up to the real living wage. With more and more students entering full-time work during their full-time studies—something that I was doing recently—there is real concern on the part of students and those not in education that inadequate student support is pushing people out of the jobs market. I admit that the evidence picture for that is still quite blurry, but we know definitively that students in higher and further education are suffering in poverty, with one third having considered dropping out—becoming NEET—because of that and two thirds having stated that it has made them feel mentally unwell. Many young people expect that, if the Government is serious about their concerns, it will tackle that issue as well, and I would welcome the chance to work with the minister on that.

We have seen young people and students mobilise across the world, most recently in France. They are right to be angry. Young people feel that we are constantly being slapped in the face by the painful realities of our countries' failings, from soaring rents to people being forced into insecure employment, all while the cost of living crisis makes our simple necessities unaffordable. All of that is due to no fault of our own but to the compounding failures to create an equitable system for us.

Can we seriously blame the millions of young people outside this chamber who are fed up with the system and feel as though it was designed to make us fail? In his opening, the minister spoke about how many have looked outside mechanisms such as organised politics to find solutions. We, in Parliament, can provide them with hope that there are the means to make things better.

All of us in Parliament need to make it a priority to ensure that young people are supported. It is our duty to do everything that we can to afford every young person the opportunity to follow their ambitions and dreams and to build a stable future for themselves and their potential future families. Doing any less will leave a ticking time bomb at the feet of those of my age, for us to claim when many who sit here today might be gone.

I move amendment S7M-01838.2, to insert at end:

"; agrees that the UK Government must act immediately to end age-based minimum wage discriminatory bands to ensure that young workers are paid a fair wage, and notes the need to establish a minimum standard for apprenticeships to ensure effective quality control and fair treatment for apprentices."

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I call Rachael Hamilton to speak to and move amendment S7M-01838.3.

16:16

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I have noticed during the debate that the minister was very keen to celebrate the Scottish Government's record on positive destinations, but I know that that is not the real experience of the people in my constituency and across Scotland who are NEETs and are applying for hundreds and hundreds of jobs but are getting turned back. The reflections that everybody has shared in the debate are spot on—it is a pretty desperate situation.

I want to look behind some of the figures that the Scottish Government has provided when it points to a 95.7 per cent positive destination rate, which includes further education, higher education and training. It is disingenuous to suggest that there is progress, because the Government's own figures show that the proportion of school leavers who enter employment within nine months of leaving school has fallen by 28.8 per cent to 26.5 per cent. Also, the number of modern apprenticeships that started in 2025-26 was down 658

compared with the previous year, and there was a reduction of almost 40,000 in the college student head count between 2022 and 2023.

We can look at some of the things that stakeholders are saying about the situation. Skills Development Scotland has warned that rising costs for businesses restrict the recruitment of young people. Fiona Hodgson of the Scottish and Northern Ireland Plumbing Employers' Federation—SNIPEF—has warned that employers could stop offering apprenticeships, so we

"risk losing apprenticeship opportunities and skilled capacity that could take years to rebuild."

Charandeep Singh of the Scottish Chambers of Commerce has called for a test of every economic decision. Sara Thiam of Prosper has highlighted the unmet apprenticeship demand that exists in key sectors. Gavin Donoghue of Colleges Scotland has warned that student losses are damaging the skills pipeline. Finally, Professor Mairi Spowage has warned that businesses are sacrificing investment to survive.

I agree that there is no silver bullet for the problem and that a suite of challenges are stacking up, but the Government must do more. The Government committed to funding at least 150,000 apprenticeships over this parliamentary session, as the minister stated. That averages 30,000 apprenticeships annually, but through different apprenticeship routes. The question is how many additional opportunities that commitment will create, particularly when modern apprenticeship starts have been declining and only 25,500 of them have been delivered, which is 8,500 fewer starts than providers requested.

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