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

Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 11 November 2026

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

Portfolio Question Time

Social Justice and Housing

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): Good afternoon, colleagues. Our first item of business is portfolio questions, beginning with social justice and housing.

Indefinite Leave to Remain

1. **Jamie Langan (South Scotland) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the United Kingdom Government's recently proposed changes to the rules governing indefinite leave to remain, what assessment it has made of the potential impact of these changes on Scotland's communities. (S7O-00471)

The Minister for Equalities and International Development (Simita Kumar): The Scottish Government strongly opposes the UK Government's proposed settlement reforms, which will extend the qualifying period for indefinite leave to remain potentially up to 30 years for some refugees. Extending timelines for settlement undermines integration and prolongs insecurity for individuals and families who are recognised as being in need of protection from war and persecution. These proposals undermine the vital contribution migration makes to Scotland's economy and communities.

Jamie Langan: I thank the minister for her response, but the recent watering down of these much needed reforms means that 1.4 million people, the vast majority of whom are well below the threshold of being net financial contributors, will settle in Britain by 2030. That could mean 120,000 people—almost the equivalent of a city the size of Dundee—settling in Scotland in the next three and a half years. Is the Government really saying that that will not have an impact on housing, public services and community cohesion?

Simita Kumar: I thank Mr Langan for his question, but I want to offer an alternative view to some of the things that he has presented. The Institute for Public Policy Research estimates that skilled migrants contribute up to £115 billion to UK public finances under the current settlement arrangements. Our migrant workforce helps with our healthcare, our social care and our agriculture, and I ask the member to determine those things before he brings alternative facts to the chamber.

Thomas Kerr (Glasgow) (Reform): The minister is very quick to throw out petty insults and to lay out the welcome mat for any and all in the name of progressive politics, without taking any responsibility for the decisions being made through the Government's policies in working class communities. Does she not understand that the biggest threat to social cohesion is not Reform raising concerns, but the Government's inability to put the people of Scotland first over those strangers who have come here illegally? Will she finally reintroduce local connection for social housing?

Simita Kumar: I thank Mr Kerr for his supplementary, but my values and those of the Scottish National Party Government are without a doubt to do with integration and the contribution that our migrant communities make to Scotland. The member's question about social cohesion is almost laughable, given that colleagues in Reform have done nothing except create community tension and use divisive language.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): The talk of strangers reminds me that there is nothing stranger than the Reform party.

Unlike Reform, I believe that it is positive that the Labour Party has scaled back somewhat on its crackdown on health and social care workers, but the UK Government's immigration proposals are set, nevertheless, to damage Scotland's economy and our public finances, making us all worse off. Can the minister tell us what assessment the Scottish Government has made of Labour's approach to immigration, and its impact on Scotland, including demographic and depopulation challenges?

Simita Kumar: I thank Mr Brown for his supplementary. The Scottish Government has consistently highlighted the importance of migration to Scotland's long-term economic and demographic sustainability. In both our response to the UK Government's earned settlement proposals and our paper "Migration: supporting the future of Scotland's economy and communities", which was published in August as part of the Scottish Government's 100-day commitments, we set out evidence of migration's positive contribution to Scotland's communities and economy. I would also repeat that skilled migrants contribute up to £115 billion to UK public finances.

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Energy and Environmental Building Standards (Consultation)

2. **Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government, regarding its stage 2 consultation on proposed changes to energy and environmental building standards, what consideration it will give to supply chain capacity alongside the consultation responses when developing the final standards. (S7O-00472)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Supply chain capacity is being considered through the impact assessment process that informs changes to building regulations and guidance. Consultation responses, together with ongoing engagement with industry and other stakeholders during development of the Passivhaus equivalent standard, are helping to inform that assessment.

The Scottish Government is committed to supporting industry readiness and workforce development, and is already working on the preparedness of the construction sector with stakeholders. We also intend to provide a two-year period between publication of the final guidance and implementation of the new standard, allowing sufficient time for industry to prepare.

Alan Brown: In the recent consultation on the building regulations, there were two options for the thermal value for windows. Scotia, an important employer in my constituency, has advised that if the lower value of 0.8 is chosen, no Scottish firm can supply the products to that specification. Given what the minister said about considering the supply chain, will that be factored in? Will consideration be given to reverting to the high-performance standard thermal value of 1.2, which will provide better value, avoid imported products and protect Scottish jobs? Will that be taken into account as part of the decision-making process?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I thank Alan Brown for raising that important issue. I reassure him that the impact on the Scottish supply chain is an important consideration and will be carefully weighed alongside the other benefits of the changes.

The consultation on alternative window U-values was specifically intended to gather evidence on those matters and to better understand the practical implications for the industry, as the member has mentioned. During the consultation period, my officials met the Glass and Glazing Federation and its members. We will continue to engage constructively with the sector and to consider all the consultation responses and supporting evidence before reaching a final decision on the standards.

Willie Rennie (Fife North East) (LD): In the middle of a housing emergency, we should not be making perfect the enemy of good. We should be going for standards that are good, but which allow houses to be built at volume in order to deal with this emergency. I do not favour schemes such as, for instance, Passivhaus, which is low volume.

I favour factory build, local timber use and making sure that we can produce houses at pace. Is the minister considering that, when she is considering the regulations?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Willie Rennie raises another important point. I stress that we are looking at a Passivhaus equivalent, not Passivhaus. That is a very important distinction to make.

Willie Rennie rightly points to a number of innovations. They are happening not only in Scotland, but we have some really good suppliers in Scotland that are looking at different types of housing that can be built, particularly, but not only, in rural and island areas, to assist with the housing challenges that they have. I will certainly keep the point that Mr Rennie has raised in mind.

Craig Hoy (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Is the cabinet secretary aware that, this morning, the Social Justice, Housing and Local Government Committee took evidence from a wide range of stakeholders who, it is safe to say, are no fans of the Passivhaus standard? Will the cabinet secretary now commit to doing what is happening in the rest of the United Kingdom and putting a pause on any further heat in building efficiency standards, in order to assist this Government to meet the target for new house building, which it is so clearly failing to do, partly as a result of the regulations that it itself has put in place?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We will always consider the impact of regulations. Again, I note that it is about a Passivhaus equivalent. We need to be very careful about the language that we are using.

The reason that we bring in regulations around building safety and standards is that we want people to live in safe, secure, warm and affordable homes. That includes, for example, assessing the amount that people are having to spend on their energy in Scotland. It is also about ensuring that we have housing that fits the needs of the population, which includes disabled people and people who, as they age, may require different types of housing. It is about them not requiring to move house in order to be able to have a home that satisfies their needs.

Regulations have an impact on the people who use the housing. I appreciate that they also have an impact on the construction industry and developers, which is why I regularly meet developers and their representatives to discuss those impacts.

Homelessness Prevention

3. **Mark Griffin (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of Shelter Scotland's recommendations in its "Building Hope" route map and the calls from Crisis for investment in measures to reduce the number of children living in temporary accommodation, how much funding it has allocated to homelessness prevention pilots and other homelessness prevention activity. (S7O-00473)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing (Shirley-Anne Somerville): We are investing £218 million in 2026-27 in a range of actions to prevent and end homelessness. We have extended the funding for the homelessness prevention pilots to the end of the financial year, and we are providing £117 million in discretionary housing payments, which includes £8.7 million to mitigate the freeze to the local housing allowance brought about by the United Kingdom Government.

We are using £15.5 million to mitigate the benefit cap that the UK Government has kept in place, which has affected twice as many families this year because of the UK Government's decision to end the two-child limit but keep the cap. We are also investing £4 million to help women who are experiencing domestic abuse to leave an abusive partner, and we are using our £50 million homelessness prevention fund, for example by providing £1 million for tenancy sustainment in Glasgow.

Mark Griffin: Further to the details that the cabinet secretary has given, how will the Scottish Government ensure that the prevention duties in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2025, which we passed in the previous session, including the really crucial ask and act provisions, are fully funded and implemented? Independent research from Crisis has shown that it will cost the wider public sector—not only councils, because we are looking at a wider range of organisations to comply with ask and act—around £100 million to be ready for commencement in two years. What is the Government's commitment to meeting that estimated cost?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I welcome the report that Crisis published. I had the privilege of attending an event in Wester Hailes, where we discussed the ask and act pilot that is happening there and the publication of the Crisis report. The report raises important points that we need to look at, some of which could help us not only with housing but with wider public service reform. For example, the report quite rightly put to us a challenge around how we could data share so that we are making the best use of the information that we have across the public sector to help not only with housing but with other crises—preferably before a family hits a crisis—and how we could develop our services to assist. We will consider the report by Crisis, which I welcome, and I welcome the time that it has spent talking me through it.

Jack Middleton (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): The Labour Government has frozen local housing allowance, which has pushed a number of Scottish households into hardship. I welcome the commitment from the Prime Minister to end rough sleeping, but does the cabinet secretary agree that, to make that a reality, the UK Government will have to end its freeze on local housing allowance? Does she have any statistics on the impact that that is having on Scottish households?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: That is one of the most genuinely puzzling areas in the UK Government's recent budget. The Prime Minister has made great claims about wishing to end homelessness, particularly rough sleeping. One of the simple things that he could do—which he did not have the power to do as mayor of Manchester and which he knows from his time as mayor is an issue—involves the local housing allowance, yet he continues the freeze on it. We are having to pick up the tab to try to protect people from that local housing allowance freeze, as we know that it pushes people into homelessness because they cannot afford the rents in the private sector. As I said, £117 million continues to be available in discretionary housing payments, £8.7 million of which are to help people with that freeze, which could help up to 15,000 families.

Holly Bruce (Glasgow Southside) (Green): One of the key issues raised in Shelter Scotland's report, "Building Hope: A route map to ending the use of unsafe and harmful temporary accommodation for children", is that housing benefit is not a qualifying benefit for the Scottish child payment. Children in temporary or supported housing deserve the same support as all children, but many are currently locked out of that vital support based on a technicality. I joined the Child Poverty Action Group and Shelter in calling on the Scottish Government to immediately add housing benefit as a qualifying benefit to support an estimated 3,700 children. Will the cabinet secretary commit to doing just that?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The Scottish child payment was able to be delivered as quickly as it was because it looks at the UK benefits to which a person is entitled—it is based on universal credit. If we were looking to change that, we would need to change the legislative basis of the Scottish child payment. Although Holly Bruce might think that the matter is simple, it is not.

I have heard calls from organisations and stakeholders and I am quite happy to recognise that there is an issue around temporary accommodation. Although the solution to that is not simple or quick, I am happy to provide the member with further details on the matter in writing.

The Presiding Officer: Question 4 has been withdrawn. An explanation has been given.

Misogyny (Education Programmes)

5. **Holly Bruce (Glasgow Southside) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of its commitment to introduce misogyny education programmes in all schools as part of its strategy to address violence against women and girls, what substantive update it can provide on the delivery of these programmes, including an expected timeline. (S7O-00475)

The Minister for Equalities and International Development (Simita Kumar): There is absolutely no place for misogyny or gender-based violence in Scotland's schools, and education plays a vital role in tackling the root causes. Work is already under way to deliver our commitment to expand anti-misogyny education in Scotland's schools. An additional £1 million through the new respect fund will support this work from 2027-28, building on effective programmes that are already being delivered in schools, including equally safe at school and the digital discourse initiative. Development work is under way and will be taken forward through the gender equality task force in education and learning.

Holly Bruce: Although guaranteed misogyny education is very welcome, I am concerned that one-off or time-limited inputs from third sector experts represent a severely limited approach. Many young people feel that what is provided is inconsistent and uncomprehensive and does not meet their needs.

Does the minister agree that, although the recent overhaul of relationships, sexual health and parenthood education was a necessary and positive step towards meeting the First Minister's aspirations to tackle violence against women and girls, all schools and local authorities must ensure that children and young people have equitable access to education about healthy relationships, consent and safety?

Simita Kumar: The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic has met young people, and ministerial colleagues have engaged in dialogue with local authorities on how best to implement that work. I absolutely agree that we should teach our young people—boys and girls—about healthy relationships, so that those conversations can happen from the outset.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): Almost one in five female teachers have been subjected to physical violence, verbal abuse and sexual harassment, while less than 20 per cent of girls say that they feel entirely safe in their schools. I previously called on the Scottish Government to ensure that there is a cross-campus strategy to tackle violence, sexism and misogyny in our schools. Is the Scottish Government now looking at implementing such a strategy?

Simita Kumar: Our ambitions to address violence against women and girls are cross cutting and cross portfolio. We are looking at the issues of sexism and misogyny and at enabling girls and boys to feel safer in our communities. Education is part of that, and those are some of the actions that we will take forward.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I am proud that the Scottish National Party Government is taking a stand against sexism and giving every school the resources to tackle misogyny. Will the minister expand on the wider work that the Scottish Government is taking forward to challenge harmful cultural norms, including through its "Don't be that guy" campaign?

Simita Kumar: Sexism has absolutely no place in our vision for a modern Scotland, and we remain determined to take a range of measures to tackle it. In addition to the work to tackle misogyny in schools, our impactful campaign aimed at highlighting how online sexism can negatively harm girls is running until mid-December. We are also supporting Police Scotland's "Don't be that guy" campaign—Ms Adam mentioned it—which is working to challenge harmful attitudes and behaviours towards women and girls.

Family Poverty in Glasgow

6. **Monica Lennon (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the Centre for Civic Innovation's seventh annual family poverty in Glasgow report, which was published last month. (S7O-00476)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Eradicating child poverty and supporting families with the cost of living is this Government's defining mission. The report makes clear the challenges that households in Glasgow and across Scotland face, and the importance of taking a joined-up approach to those challenges.

Our tackling child poverty delivery plan sets out how we are tackling those challenges head on, from record investment in affordable homes to new investment in skills, as well as through our £20 million whole family support third sector delivery fund, which is providing support in every local authority. We will go further, including with the transformation of our childcare offer for families.

Monica Lennon: When I read the report, one of the things that really moved me was that hundreds of families in Glasgow are falling back into poverty within six months of escaping it. The revolving door of poverty is trapping around 360 families in Glasgow every month. That is unfair, unjust and unacceptable. Tackling poverty requires more than short-term financial support. What targeted longer-term interventions will the Government take to help the people behind those numbers to achieve financial security—particularly single-parent families and those in low-paid or insecure work?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I very much recognise the point that Monica Lennon is making about the families who fall back into poverty, which might be because of a variety of issues in their life and circumstances. It is why the Government is considering an approach that looks at not only direct income through social security but areas in which we can systemically improve the life chances of families, whether through work that is done in education around attainment funding, whole family support, employability measures or the transformation of childcare. All those things can make a difference to provide support for families.

It is important to recognise the number of families who are in work but remain in poverty and who can fall back into poverty through no fault of their own. It is very important that we never judge the people who are in poverty or the reasons why they are there. It is our responsibility to give them support, and I have given examples of how the Government is looking at providing support that will be transformational, not only in the short term but in the long term.

Landlords (Private Rented Housing)

7. **David Smith (West Scotland) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government how many private landlords have exited the private rented sector since 2021 and what assessment it has made of the impact of this on the availability and affordability of housing for tenant families. (S7O-00477)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The Scottish Government has records from the Scottish landlord register since 2022. The register shows that the number of private landlord registrations decreased from 239,600 in January 2022 to 230,400 in September 2026, which is a reduction of 9,200. However, it also shows that the number of properties increased by 3 per cent over the same period.

A well-functioning and well-regulated private rented sector benefits both tenants and landlords. We recognise the vital importance that private landlords have in providing homes for individuals and families across Scotland, which is why we monitor the impact of policy on the supply of private rented sector stock.

David Smith: Does the cabinet secretary appreciate that, every time a private landlord leaves the sector, a family who were living in that property become homeless and will struggle to find alternative housing due to the housing crisis? If the Government's policy is not all about punishing single-property landlords and driving them out of the market, what has gone wrong?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I said, there was an increase in the number of properties over the period from 2022 to 2026. We are of course very concerned about anything that is putting private landlords off being in the market, but we must also pay attention to the impact of policy on tenants in the private rented sector. We have to look at what is happening with both tenants and landlords.

On the specific area that David Smith mentioned of someone becoming homeless if a landlord wishes to move out of the private rented sector, I am sure that he will welcome the Government policy to give the first option to the tenant to buy a property if it goes on the market.

Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP): It is crucial that there is affordability across all housing tenures. How is the Government working not only to assist those who wish to own their own home but to help others across the affordable housing supply programme?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Patricia Gibson is quite right to point out that we need affordability across all tenures, whether in the private rented sector, social rent or mid-market rent or through low-cost home ownership, which is why the Government has a commitment to deliver 110,000 affordable homes by 2032. Part of that ambition is about social rent, but it is also about ensuring that other options are available, such as MMR and low-cost home ownership, so that we have an all-tenure approach to the housing challenges that exist in different parts of Scotland.

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am not sure that the Scottish National Party truly understands the implications for the private rented sector and its vitalness in supporting our economy. I know of young people, doctors, dentists and businesses all seeking private rented accommodation—homes—in rural Scotland. Will the cabinet secretary help them by changing direction and finally realising that the private rented sector is what we need?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I have said all along that it is very important that we look at all tenures, which includes the private rented sector. That is why I was delighted to attend the Scottish Association of Landlords conference only last week, to hear directly from private sector landlords about concerns about Government policies but also, importantly, to talk about the opportunities for the sector in rural and island areas and across the country.

Registered Social Landlords (Inverclyde)

8. **Stuart McMillan (Inverclyde) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government when it last met with registered social landlords operating in Inverclyde, and what was discussed. (S7O-00478)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing (Shirley-Anne Somerville): My officials have regular discussions with registered social landlords and Inverclyde Council to discuss the delivery of affordable homes within the local authority. The most recent meeting took place in mid-October, with Larkfield Housing Association, its development consultants and the council. Discussions focused on current priorities and future programme planning. This financial year, we are making available £10.4 million for affordable housing in Inverclyde.

Stuart McMillan: I recently visited Inverclyde Women's Aid, which told me that a local RSL's policy is to assign rent arrears to a tenant if they sign a tenancy halfway through a month, even though the RSL requires a month's rent up front. That policy affects not only women but other vulnerable groups in the community. Does the Scottish Government agree that RSLs that put at a disadvantage tenants such as women who are moving on from abusive relationships should review their policies to ensure that tenants are not penalised for taking on a tenancy halfway through a calendar month?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Stuart McMillan has raised an important issue. I would be pleased if he provided further information, either directly or through Inverclyde Women's Aid, about that practice, so that I can ask my officials to work on it directly.

The Government is undertaking work—for example, through our fund to leave—to support women who are leaving an abusive relationship. I would not want anything to get in the way of our determination to support women at such an exceptionally difficult time. If Stuart McMillan provides me with further details, I will be happy to look further into the matter and respond to him in due course.

VAT (Home Safety Equipment)

9. **David Linden (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding VAT on home safety equipment, including the impact of VAT costs on housing associations fitting this equipment. (S7O-00479)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing (Shirley-Anne Somerville): VAT is a reserved matter for the United Kingdom Government. Although the Scottish Government has not discussed the specific issue with the UK Government, I will be happy to write to HM Treasury to highlight the member's concerns, if he provides me with further details.

David Linden: I will give the cabinet secretary further details now, in a live example. Gardeen Housing Association, which is based in the Barlanark area of my constituency, takes tenant safety incredibly seriously. When it installs fire alarms, there are costs for VAT for the fire alarms and for the contractors.

I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for the invitation on taking that up with the UK Government. I ask her to cite that particular example as to why housing associations should not be subject to the prohibitive VAT regime but should be able to invest that money elsewhere—in tenants and in building new homes.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I thank David Linden for bringing up that important issue, because those policies have an impact on our housing associations across the country. He gave the example of Gardeen Housing Association, but the issue will also have an impact on others. If Mr Linden has further information to provide, I would be happy to include that in my letter to the Treasury. I will also ensure that my officials reach out to the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations on whether it would like to comment before any correspondence is sent.

Care-experienced Young People (Housing)

10. **Gary Bouse (Falkirk West) (SNP):** I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, as I am a Falkirk councillor.

To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with local authorities regarding the provision of housing for care-experienced young people. (S7O-00480)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing (Shirley-Anne Somerville): It is essential that the housing needs of care-experienced people and families are considered, to support improved outcomes. We are testing that through our funding for homelessness prevention pilots.

Local authorities are responsible for assessing housing need and demand and setting out how that need will be met, through their local housing strategies and strategic housing investment plans. The Scottish Government recently published refreshed local housing strategy guidance, which makes clear that local authorities should explain how the housing needs of care-experienced people will be considered and met. That work supports our commitment to keep the Promise, recognising the importance of safe, stable and affordable housing and support for care-experienced people.

Gary Bouse: The Promise plan 24-30 requires all public services to work together on the needs of children and young people, rather than in silos. To ensure that young people do not leave care only to face homelessness, housing insecurity or lengthy periods of temporary accommodation, what assurance can the cabinet secretary give to Parliament that housing, homelessness and children's services are working together so that every young person leaving care has the option of a safe, settled home and does not have to navigate the homelessness system at the point that they leave care?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Gary Bouse is quite right to point out the responsibility that we all have to ensure that we are there collectively, in all parts of Government, for care-experienced people. We know, from the work that we do on homelessness in general, that preventing homelessness before it occurs is the best way of dealing with any situation, but that is perhaps particularly the case for care-experienced people, as we do not want them to have to navigate the homelessness system at any point.

The ask and act duties in the new Housing (Scotland) Act 2025, for example, will be exceptionally important, as is the work that has been undertaken as part of the Promise to ensure that those young people are being looked out for and looked after, in respect of any requirements that they have around housing, to prevent a crisis and prevent homelessness from happening in the first place.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes questions on social justice and housing.

Economy, Tourism and Transport

Whisky Tourism

1. **Laura Mitchell (Moray) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting the growth of whisky tourism in rural communities, including in Speyside. (S7O-00483)

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport (Stephen Flynn): I commend Laura Mitchell's work on this key issue, as she is a fierce advocate for the whisky sector in her constituency. Like me, she will know that the whisky sector accounts for around 72 per cent of Scotland's exports, or it did so in 2025. More than that, however, it is about how we attract people to the sector's visitor centres in Moray and elsewhere in Scotland. I am pleased to say that the Scottish Government, through its many agencies, works closely with the whisky sector in that regard and will continue to do so as part of the Scotland outlook 2030 tourism strategy.

Laura Mitchell: As the cabinet secretary set out, the Scotch whisky industry is hugely important to Scotland's economy and particularly to the communities that I represent, and it is vital that we do all that we can to support the industry's growth. That is especially important following the further blow of another increase in spirits duty in the recent United Kingdom budget.

On devolved responsibilities, can the cabinet secretary outline what discussions he has had with the industry on its calls for a joint Scotch whisky tourism promotion plan, which could deliver real benefits for Scotland's distillers and for the wider rural economy?

Stephen Flynn: The points that Laura Mitchell raises are incredibly important, and I assure her and members in the chamber that I stand ready to work closely with the whisky sector in Scotland to take forward any action in that regard, or indeed any other proposals that the sector seeks to bring forward, to ensure that there is continued growth in the sector.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Scottish whisky distilleries are unique and world renowned and they create magical drams across Scotland, but especially in Argyll and Bute, attracting visitors from around the

world. With regard to that tourism experience, does the cabinet secretary agree that the geographical indication that the UK Government has introduced for English whisky is yet another example of where decisions that the UK Government makes water down and undermine the integrity, culture and worth of Scotland and our whisky tourism offer?

Stephen Flynn: I do, and what a stark contrast we can all see between the efforts of the First Minister of Scotland in helping to ensure that we got over the line with regard to tariffs in the United States of America and the decision of the UK Government in respect of whisky duty in the budget, which followed consecutive failures in budgets from consecutive UK Governments.

Of course, the UK Government's decision to give GI status to English whisky is ridiculous. It does a disservice to the Scotch whisky sector and, I think, to the Labour Party as a whole.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests in relation to hospitality received from the Scotch Whisky Association.

Talking of undermining the sector, can the cabinet secretary give us an update on where the Scottish Government is now in relation to its previous plans to clamp down on the marketing and advertising of spirits, including whisky, which would have been devastating for the ability of whisky producers and distilleries to advertise and promote their products?

Stephen Flynn: Mr Fraser will be acutely aware of the fact that that proposal did not proceed during the previous session of Parliament. I assure him that I am a keen advocate of the Scotch whisky sector—and, at certain points, a keen consumer of its products, as I am sure that many members are—and I am not aware of any proposals to return to what was undertaken in that session.

Craig Hoy (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Is the cabinet secretary aware that Dumfries and Galloway was recently named as one of National Geographic's 25 "Best of the World" destinations for 2027? Local attractions include the Annandale Distillery, which is a multimillion-pound investment led by David Thomson and his wife Teresa Church. Following the securing of that wonderful accolade for Dumfries and Galloway, does the cabinet secretary have any plans to visit my constituency of Dumfriesshire, where we can share a dram at the Annandale Distillery and discuss what more can be done to support local tourism and the whisky industry?

Stephen Flynn: Mr Hoy always comes to the chamber and invites me to spend some time with him. It is a very generous offer, although I might have to pass on this occasion. However, I take this opportunity to congratulate his constituents on their formidable work. They should be very proud of that and I am sure that, as their constituency MSP, he is very proud of them.

Renfrew Bridge Closure

2. **Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the current closure of the Renfrew bridge. (S7O-00484)

The Minister for Business and Fair Work (Tom Arthur): I am aware that the Renfrew bridge is currently closed due to damage from storm Boelo, and I sympathise with all those who have been impacted by the storm. Renfrewshire Council has reported that it is undertaking a review to determine the most appropriate solution. Local authorities have responsibility for the management and maintenance of all local roads, including bridges, in their areas. Any remedial work that is required to reopen the Renfrew bridge falls under the responsibilities of Renfrewshire Council, which would be best placed to provide an update.

Marie McNair: I have been contacted by a number of constituents about the issue. The bridge is a vital link for my constituency, and the closure will cause real disruption and increase pressures on alternative routes, especially as we approach Christmas. The closure is having a serious impact on students' access to college and those who need to go over to the hospital.

Bridge safety is paramount, but it is not ideal that the bridge has been closed without an expected completion date for the work. Will the minister engage with Renfrewshire Council on when it is estimated that remedial works will take place?

Tom Arthur: I recognise the impact that the situation is having on the member's constituents in Clydebank and Milngavie and on people in Renfrew and the wider Renfrewshire area, as I recognise that the bridge is an important transport link. By way of an update, I note that Renfrewshire Council recently advised that investigations into the cause of the water ingress remain ongoing and that contractors are undertaking assessments to establish the extent of the damage and the remedial works that are required before the bridge can safely open. As the member recognised, safety is paramount.

I recognise the disruption that has been caused by the closure. As I said, responsibility for such operational matters remains with Renfrewshire Council, which has committed to keeping elected members and the public updated as its investigations and assessments progress.

MV Glen Rosa

3. **Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government for what reason the delivery of the MV Glen Rosa has been further delayed, having initially been scheduled for completion in 2018. (S7O-00485)

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport (Stephen Flynn): This is an incredibly important and serious matter. It may be helpful for me to outline to the Parliament that the decision was a simple one: it was to ensure that the new propellors can be fitted. As part of the timeline associated with that, the liquefied natural gas will have to be commissioned only once, which will avoid the fuel systems having to be emptied and the new propellers then having to be fitted before the ship could be returned to service. The process will ensure that the Glen Rosa is operational more quickly and that it can provide the reliable services that islanders deserve.

Carol Mochan: The cabinet secretary will accept that the Glen Rosa was supposed to be delivered eight years ago but, yet again, communities are facing another delay. Meanwhile, there is a £100 million cost overrun and thousands of sailing days have been lost.

Why should the public have any confidence in the Government's ability to deliver a return on our public investment? Will the cabinet secretary give an assurance that the costs of the delays will not be clawed back out of the pay packets of hard-working Caledonian MacBrayne staff through any pay restraint or other measures?

Stephen Flynn: I respond to the member's question and the islanders' concerns about resilience by noting that the MV Isle of Lewis will still be operational and there will still be resilience on the route. It is worth reminding the Parliament that, as well as the Glen Rosa, which is due to be out on the seas in the not-too-distant future, we have three vessels from Turkey that will be coming into service. We also have seven small vessel replacements, with the work taking place in Poland, and we have two new vessels that will increase tonnage for the northern isles. We are putting substantial capital investment into our various fleets because, ultimately, that is the only solution to the problems that we have encountered in recent years.

Willie Rennie (Fife North East) (LD): Following the gas leak on the Glen Rosa's sister ship, the Glen Sannox, it has been operating on diesel only. As the Glen Rosa is also a dual-fuel vessel, what confidence does the cabinet secretary have that there will not be a gas leak on that boat, especially as the Glen Sannox's gas facility has not been regularly tested?

Stephen Flynn: As Mr Rennie knows, when the gas leak was identified, actions were taken by CalMac to ensure the safety of the vessel. The works that were required for the Glen Sannox have been undertaken on the Glen Rosa as well, which is a positive step in the right direction. It has allowed us to mitigate any concerns that there may have been.

It is also worth outlining to the Parliament that, over the course of 1,644 sailings by the Glen Sannox, only 14 were missed. The vessel is delivering for the people in our island communities, and the Glen Rosa will do likewise.

Manufacturing Businesses (Economic Benefits)

4. **David Kirkwood (South Scotland) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the economic benefits of innovative manufacturing businesses that increase production and supply chain activity in Scotland. (S7O-00486)

The Minister for Business and Fair Work (Tom Arthur): The Scottish Government is keenly aware of the economic benefits of innovative manufacturing businesses in Scotland. An up-to-date briefing on the manufacturing sector is available on the Scottish Government's website under its industry statistics publications. That briefing demonstrates, among other things, that manufacturing accounts for 182,000 jobs and almost half of Scotland's international exports. The gross domestic product quarterly national accounts show that, in 2025, the manufacturing sector accounted for £17.7 billion or 8.8 per cent of Scotland's gross value added.

David Kirkwood: I thank the minister for his response, which described the assessment at a macro level.

A particular example of innovative manufacturing is happening in Dumfries. VASO opened its new industrialised construction factory in September and it will demonstrate its first house to be produced from scrap glass on 9 December in Annan. The manufacturing method promises to reduce the construction time

and the cost of housing while greatly increasing economic activity and enhancing the circular economy in south-west Scotland.

Will the minister ask the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing, the Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform and the Minister for Innovation, Technology and Tertiary Education to visit VASO to fully assess the potential benefits to the Scottish economy from this truly global technical advance?

Tom Arthur: I thank the member for bringing the success and the innovative approach of that business to the Parliament's attention. I will ensure that that invitation is passed on to ministerial colleagues.

The member's question highlights the interaction between our objective for economic growth in an innovative economy and delivery across a range of other important policy areas. Through economic innovation and economic growth, that opportunity can help to support our agendas on net zero and a circular economy, and it can help to address the housing challenges that we face in this country.

Winchburgh Train Station

5. **Amanda Lindsay (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government when it will publish an update on progress towards the construction of Winchburgh train station. (S7O-00487)

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport (Stephen Flynn): The proposed station at Winchburgh has been raised in the chamber on many occasions over the course of recent weeks and months. As members will be fully aware, West Lothian Council's funding application remains very much under consideration. Once advice is put to me, I will be able to make a definitive decision.

Amanda Lindsay: Can we expect the necessary funding to be forthcoming in the budget next month? If not, can the Scottish Government give a definitive date for when the necessary funding will be made available?

Stephen Flynn: The funding of all capital infrastructure projects requires the Government to put capital resource in place. If Winchburgh station is approved, we will of course ensure that there is capital there to deliver the project.

Pauline Stafford (Bathgate) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, as a sitting councillor in West Lothian.

The Scottish National Party may have been the only party to make an explicit manifesto commitment to support the delivery of a station for Winchburgh, but I welcome the interest of members across the chamber at this advanced stage. [*Interruption*.]

Following the Scottish Government's welcome removal of peak rail fares to reduce costs for passengers and encourage more people to choose rail travel, can the cabinet secretary advise what impact that has had on the cost benefit ratio and the business case to support the delivery of a train station in Winchburgh?

Stephen Flynn: There was a lot of chatter there, as Pauline Stafford was rightly highlighting that only the SNP committed to deliver a new station at Winchburgh during the election campaign—despite the belated interest from members across the Parliament at various transport discussions. That indeed applies to many other topics, too.

On the overall business case, a number of different factors are taken into account, and we will ensure that, prior to making a definitive decision in the period ahead, all of them are considered in full.

Women's Participation in Entrepreneurship

6. **Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of progress made in addressing barriers to women's participation in entrepreneurship, as identified in the report, "Pathways: A new approach for women in entrepreneurship". (S7O-00488)

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport (Stephen Flynn): I thank Claire Baker for raising this very important question. We can all be proud of the pathways work that has been undertaken, including the pathways fund, support for a female founders growth summit and the South of Scotland Enterprise pathways pre-start programme, which has helped to create more than 350 businesses, 84 per cent of which are female led.

There is still a lot more to be done, however, and I look forward to working with Claire Baker and others in that regard.

Claire Baker: New research from the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor found that female entrepreneurial activity in eastern Scotland—which includes my region of Mid Scotland and Fife—came to just 4.6 per cent of the total, compared with 8.7 per cent for working-age women nationally. The rate for women in eastern

Scotland was the lowest in the country, and the report highlights concerning regional disparities. What targeted action is the Scottish Government taking to address those regional inequalities and ensure that women in Mid Scotland and Fife and across Scotland have access to the support that they need in order to start and grow businesses?

Stephen Flynn: Claire Baker is absolutely right to highlight those figures. Looking at those for the east and the north-east of Scotland, we can see that the gap is far too big. Both of us can agree on that.

I work closely with Ana Stewart, our chief entrepreneur, who is one of the many people who has helped to ensure that the pathways programme can be delivered.

If Claire Baker has any suggestions that she would like to bring forward to me, I am more than happy to work with her, as I am sure others will be, to ensure that we improve the numbers.

Quite frankly, there is a lot more work to do, and doing that work would be of benefit to a whole host of women and of significant benefit to our economy. We can all recognise that women entrepreneurs contribute substantially more to economic growth than would otherwise be the case, and all members in the chamber should encourage that.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): In Orkney, the connect to grow course and women in business scheme provide valuable support to women in entrepreneurship, but their future is not certain. A number of challenges still exist for women doing business in the islands, from the limited availability of childcare to difficulties in accessing mentoring and networking opportunities.

Will the cabinet secretary outline what the Scottish Government is doing to support the delivery of women's entrepreneurship programmes in the islands and to address practical barriers such as childcare, travel costs and caring responsibilities?

Stephen Flynn: A number of barriers underpin the question that Liam McArthur outlined. He will be fully aware of the Government's commitment to, and delivery of, two and a half days of free childcare across the nation for many years. That allows people to enter work and start businesses.

There is, of course, much more work to be done. If there are specific opportunities that he feels could be realised that would help to increase the numbers of women entrepreneurs, and Claire Baker has quite rightly highlighted that the gap between regions is too large, I am more than happy to work with him in that regard.

Nationalised Rail Services (Performance)

7. **Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the performance of rail services that have been nationalised since 2022. (S7O-00489)

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport (Stephen Flynn): I have some excellent news for Mr Kerr, who was one of the biggest opponents of the nationalisation of Scotland's rail network. He will be glad to know that it massively outperforms the Great Britain average. That is good news, and I am sure that he will welcome it.

Liam Kerr: I welcome the fact that Mr Flynn has informed himself, because in August, when I asked him about the Caledonian Sleeper's performance targets, he did not know and referred me to Scottish Rail Holdings, so I put the question to it.

The figures for 2025-26 make grim reading. Just 10 of 20 performance targets were met, cancellations more than doubled from 32 to 82, and complaints were up 32 per cent, from 589 to 775. That is not the transformation that ministers promised, but precisely what I warned about.

Ministers chose to nationalise the service, so they cannot now wash their hands of its performance. Does the cabinet secretary accept responsibility for that? What will he do about the situation?

Stephen Flynn: Mr Kerr is so cynical when it comes to nationalisation. He could, of course, have stood up and welcomed ScotRail's successes, but he chose not to do so, as everyone in the chamber will be aware. He did not talk about the record 8.5 million journeys that took place on ScotRail trains in July, which is a very positive story. He did not talk about the scrapping of peak rail fares or the fact that, in the north-east, where we both live, the high-speed trains will be replaced by refurbished class 222 trains. He did not talk about the 66 new suburban trains for the west coast.

Mr Kerr does not want to talk about Scotland's success stories. He simply wants to talk Scotland down.

The Presiding Officer: That has livened everyone up. Katy Clark has a supplementary.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): ScotRail staff must ensure that passengers receive a high level of service. Transport Focus recently found that personal security on trains and at stations is increasingly

important to passengers, reinforcing the vital role that staff play in supporting passenger safety. Will the cabinet secretary provide a reassurance that the pay and conditions of ScotRail staff will be protected and improved in any public sector reform process? He will appreciate that public sector workers are worried about what might lie ahead.

Stephen Flynn: When I was on a train to Balgray for the opening of the new station, I had the opportunity to speak first hand with a whole host of ScotRail staff, whether they were the good folk who keep the trains clean, the folk who sell the tickets or some of the folk in the back offices. They all do a phenomenal job to keep our railways running. We should be incredibly proud of the work that they do. I will continue to support them in this role and will work very closely with the unions over the period ahead to ensure that our staff are given the respect that they rightly deserve.

David Green (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD): Last week, ScotRail confirmed to the Transport Committee that it stands to lose £750,000 a year as a result of the bus fare cap in the Highlands. That follows confirmation from Transport Scotland, following a freedom of information request, that no assessment was undertaken on the potential impact of the bus fare cap on the far north line. What lessons have been learned? Will the cabinet secretary allay fears that the Government's policy will lead to fewer services on and less investment in the far north line?

Stephen Flynn: There is absolutely no suggestion that there will be a reduction in services on the high north line. David Green's question affords me the opportunity to outline that two things can be true and good news at the same time. It is good news that we have introduced a £2 bus fare cap to ensure that people can afford to travel on buses during a cost of living crisis, and we should recognise that it is good news that we have removed peak rail fares. We have provided the investment to deliver both, because we recognise that, during these tough times, people in the high north of Scotland and elsewhere across our nation deserve support from their Government. That is exactly what we have provided, and I am very proud of that fact.

Tourism (Rutherglen and Cambuslang)

8. **Clare Haughey (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it supports the promotion of tourism in the Rutherglen and Cambuslang constituency. (S7O-00490)

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport (Stephen Flynn): VisitScotland works closely with South Lanarkshire Council in that regard. I know that Ms Haughey's constituency has a significant amount to offer, and I hope that, through partnership working, those opportunities can be realised for people in the constituency and for the rest of us, who can go to spend some time there.

Clare Haughey: The cabinet secretary is, of course, always welcome to visit my constituency.

It has been fantastic to meet many visitors from across Scotland and further afield who have attended events and venues in my constituency this year. For example, people have visited the David Livingstone Birthplace museum in Blantyre, they have attended competitions at the rapidly expanding Clyde Cycle Park in Cambuslang, and they have attended events throughout the year as part of the wide-ranging programme to celebrate Rutherglen's 900th anniversary as a royal burgh.

At the same time, South Lanarkshire Council has delayed the publication of a refreshed tourism strategy. Does the cabinet secretary agree that delaying all and any progress on that strategy risks delaying investment and the promotion of tourism in communities in my constituency and that the council should bring forward the strategy without further delay?

Stephen Flynn: It sounds as though Ms Haughey's constituency is the place to be, with all those wonderful things going on. I will certainly take her up on her offer when I get a moment to visit.

Craig Hoy (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Oh!

Stephen Flynn: I thought that Mr Hoy might be upset that I am keener to spend time with Ms Haughey than I am to spend time with him, although that should not come as a surprise to him.

On the substance of Ms Haughey's question, it is important to recognise that, ultimately, tourism strategy is a matter for the local authority, but I encourage it to work at pace with partners to ensure that things can be taken forward as quickly as possible.

Business Rates

9. **Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the changes to business rates thresholds and small business rate relief announced in the United Kingdom budget, whether it will introduce equivalent changes for businesses in Scotland. (S7O-00491)

The Minister for Public Finance (Hannah Mary Goodlad): Ministers were considering the details of the UK Government's announcement just weeks ago, and we will set out our decisions in the normal way on 3 December, when we announce our budget.

Jackie Baillie: I look forward to hearing the details. I extend an invitation to the minister to visit my constituency—I hope that she can find a way to do that—to talk to businesses in my local community.

I welcome the additional funding from the UK Labour Government, which will make a significant difference to my high street and to hospitality businesses in my area. Surely the Scottish Government will want to provide the same support as businesses in England will receive. The cabinet secretary and the minister have at their disposal £97 million from the UK Labour Government over the next two years. What does the minister intend to do with that money to support local businesses and our high streets?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: There seem to be many invites coming out. I would be delighted to visit Ms Baillie in Dumbarton, as that would help me to increase my knowledge of the central belt, which, as I am an islander, can of course be increased. Of course, central belt MSPs are always welcome to come up to the islands as well.

When it comes to looking at our business support, we have been clear that we are wrapping our arms around that. Both the Deputy First Minister and I are using our respective two ears and one mouth as we go round in political listening mode having conversations with businesses right across our country, from Aberdeen to Shetland, down to Dumfries and Galloway and in St Andrews. I therefore ask members to hold on for a couple more weeks and let us see where we get to on 3 December. I will be delighted to come down and visit Jackie Baillie.

Gleneagles Railway Station (Footbridge)

10. **Helen McDade (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government, given that temporary footbridges over the A9 are often erected at Gleneagles for golf spectators, what consideration it has given to building a permanent footbridge to improve pedestrian access to the railway station for local residents in Auchterarder. (S7O-00492)

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport (Stephen Flynn): The issue has been looked at in detail. Ultimately, it was concluded that safety improvements to the existing at-grade pedestrian crossing were the most appropriate option to take forward, and that has involved the installation of pedestrian warning signs on both approaches.

Helen McDade: Ministers rejected the most recent proposal for a temporary bridge on accessibility grounds, so will the cabinet secretary publish the cost of a fully accessible permanent crossing, considering what has been spent on temporary bridges? Will he visit Auchterarder and walk the crossing with residents? I will maybe wave to him from the other side.

Stephen Flynn: Another invite! I do love Auchterarder—the chippy there is a favourite of mine.

It is an important point. I outlined in my initial answer that options have been looked at, and it was considered that the improvements that have been taken forward were the best course of action.

It would be remiss of me not to say quite gently to Ms McDade that she comes to this chamber as a member of a party that repeatedly calls for us to reduce the money that is available to Government to spend while, at the same time, asking me to spend more money. That is simply irresponsible and it is not compatible with the good governance that we will take forward through the budget process.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on economy, tourism and transport. We will have a brief 30-second interlude to enable a changeover on the front benches before we move to the next item of business.

Education (Improving Attainment, Tackling Inequality and Strengthening National Standards)

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is a debate on motion S7M-01963, in the name of Katherine Sangster, on improving attainment, tackling inequality and strengthening national standards. Members who wish to speak in the debate should press their request-to-speak button now.

15:03

Katherine Sangster (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab): Scottish Labour has always believed that education has the power to change lives and that a child's future should never be determined by where they

are born or how much their family earns. Our ambition is to break the link between family circumstances and attainment for good.

I recognise that there is much that Scottish education gets right. In particular, there is the extraordinary commitment of our teachers, support staff and those who work tirelessly every day to support children across our schools. However, celebrating what works must never mean ignoring what does not. The question that we should ask is not simply whether pass rates have increased but whether our education system delivers for all.

We know that the poverty-related attainment gap remains stubbornly wide, that care-experienced children continue to leave school with fewer qualifications than their peers and that progress in literacy and numeracy has been inconsistent. We need to understand where progress is being made, where children are being let down and what needs to change, and that starts with having the right information. That is why Scottish Labour is calling for much greater transparency in education data.

We cannot improve what we are unwilling to measure, and we cannot close the attainment gap if we do not properly understand it. Our proposals are practical and pragmatic, and they are designed to give the Parliament, parents, pupils and teachers the information that they need.

The debate on this year's programme for international student assessment results highlighted precisely why the existing measures are not enough. PISA is a valuable assessment, but, when we have so few other consistent national measures, it inevitably carries too much weight in the debate.

The 2025 results showed that, compared with in 2009, Scottish 15-year-olds lost the equivalent of eight months in their reading ability and an alarming 19 months in their mathematics ability. Those figures are nothing short of appalling, and they are what should have dominated our discussions. Instead, we had arguments about international comparisons, the limitations of PISA and the fact that it provides a snapshot only every three years and at one particular age. I accept those limitations, but that is precisely my point: PISA becomes such a significant event because it is one of the few objective comparable measures that we have available in an otherwise opaque system.

That is why Scottish Labour is proposing five practical measures. First, we want to reintroduce the Scottish survey of literacy and numeracy. That survey gave us an independent, nationally representative picture of literacy and numeracy across Scotland, helping us to track standards and understand the impact of deprivation on attainment. Bringing back that focused, anonymous survey would give us that picture again without placing unnecessary pressure on pupils or schools. Most importantly, it would show where our children are falling behind, where support is needed and how we close the poverty-related attainment gap.

Secondly, we need to look beyond exam results and understand what children actually experience at school. Attendance is not participation, and we need a national picture on what they are taught, the opportunities that they get and the support that they receive, along with a national report to share best practice.

Thirdly, we need a longitudinal study that follows children from school into their working lives so that we can understand where inequalities emerge, what makes a difference and what support leads to better outcomes in the long term.

Willie Rennie (Fife North East) (LD): Katherine Sangster rightly talked about the reintroduction of the Scottish survey of literacy and numeracy. Is she in favour of scrapping the national testing that was brought in under the previous regime?

Katherine Sangster: I would be open to having that discussion. The important point is that we return to the data that I have been talking about.

Fourthly, we need standardised education data from across Scotland. Differences in definitions, collection methods and reporting can make it difficult to have meaningful comparisons. We need consistent standards across local authorities and schools, which I note is a point that is also referenced in the Government's amendment. That would allow us to properly identify trends, understand inequalities and measure progress. Without consistency, we cannot build a reliable national picture or properly understand why outcomes differ.

Finally, we want to establish a Scottish education data dashboard—a central, accessible resource that parents, pupils, teachers and researchers can use to see at a glance what is and is not working. When taken together, those five proposals would help to create a culture of openness and accountability in Scottish education.

Better data is not an end in itself; the important point is what we can achieve with it. It is about building an education system that is worthy of Scotland's young people, in which we understand what is working, recognise where children are being let down and target support where it is most needed.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): I have listened carefully to what Ms Sangster is saying, and I think that there is much that we agree on. Internationally, we are part of PISA, the trends in international mathematics and science study and the progress in international reading literacy study. We also collect achievement of curriculum for excellence levels data, have standardised assessments, do behavioural research and monitor attendance. Does she agree that rather a lot of data is being collected, but that we could work to bring it together in a much more coherent way? Does she also agree that, if we do that, we need to ensure that it will not put more pressure on our teaching workforce?

Katherine Sangster: Yes, I accept that we do not want to put more pressure on the workforce. However, our recommendations have not come out of nothing; they came from the expertise of people from whom we have heard evidence about what they need in the education system. We need the measures that we are asking for, but the data needs to be in one picture.

Education has the power to transform a child's life chances. It can break the cycle of poverty within a generation and it is one of the most important ways in which we can deliver on the Promise. We must be honest about the reality facing some of our most vulnerable children. After all, one in seven care-experienced children leaves school without a single qualification. Such figures should concern every member of this Parliament. Education is fundamental to keeping the Promise, but we cannot claim to be delivering for care-experienced children if we are accepting such outcomes. Our children deserve a Government that is prepared to face uncomfortable truths, not shy away from them.

I also want to acknowledge the extraordinary sacrifices that our young people made during the pandemic. Those who were at the lowest risk from the virus gave up much of their everyday lives to protect those who were more vulnerable. Their education was one of those sacrifices. We all recognise the profound impact that the pandemic had on learning and the particular challenges faced by children whose education was disrupted, but those young people deserve more than our thanks. They deserve action and an education system that understands the impact of that disruption, recognises where children have fallen behind and provides the support needed to help catch them up. That is what better evidence can help us deliver.

I want to be absolutely clear what this is not about. It is not about criticising our schools, undermining the incredible work of our teachers or collecting information for the sake of it. Instead, it is about giving our education system the tools that it needs to improve. It is about ensuring that parents are not left in the dark about their children's education; that teachers have the evidence that they need to identify challenges and target support; that pupils' experiences are heard and understood; and that this Parliament has the information necessary to hold the Government to account.

Those are practical and pragmatic steps towards a more transparent and accountable system, and I do not see why we have to wait to implement them or why, as the Government amendment suggests, public sector reform is required. Childhood is short and too important for political point scoring. Surely we can all agree that parents deserve transparency, pupils deserve to have their experiences understood and teachers deserve proper evidence. Scotland's education system has a proud history. Our ambition should be to be world leading again, but that ambition must be matched by honesty about where we are succeeding and where we are falling short.

As I said at the beginning of my speech, Scottish Labour believes that education has the power to change lives and that it is one of the greatest tools for tackling poverty, improving life chances and delivering on the Promise. Let us be led by the evidence to understand what works and be prepared to change what does not. Better data will not solve every challenge in Scottish education, but it will help us make better decisions about how we tackle them. Ultimately, our children deserve an education system that sees their potential, meets their needs and gives every single child in Scotland the chance to thrive. I therefore urge the chamber to support the motion.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises that the international performance of Scottish education has declined; further recognises the need to improve the experience and attainment for all young people in Scotland; believes that achievement in education is a key factor in breaking the cycle of poverty; agrees that Parliament must do more to break the link between family income and educational achievement; believes that, in order to address issues within the education system, they must be better understood, and calls for the reintroduction of the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN) and standardised reporting across all local authorities to ensure consistent reporting on absences, behaviour and additional support needs and enable the education system to get it right for every child.

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

15:12

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): I will begin my remarks by addressing the hoax threats that have been made to schools across Scotland today. Police Scotland has been investigating the threatening messages that were sent to a number of schools this morning. The messages were very rapidly assessed by Police Scotland as not being credible and are being treated as hoaxes. As a parent and as a constituency MSP, I understand just how concerning this will be for parents, pupils, carers and school staff, and I take the opportunity to repeat Police Scotland's advice that there is nothing to suggest any threat to the public from the content of those emails, which have been received widely across the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland.

That said, parents need the highest levels of assurance when it comes to their children, and I want them to have that. I have just come from an urgent meeting that I convened with Police Scotland, councils and wider partners across Scotland to ensure that the response is co-ordinated and that communication is as smooth as it can be. I will remain in close contact with Police Scotland and councils. In the meantime, I want to reassure parents, once again, by highlighting Police Scotland's advice that there is nothing to suggest a threat to the public and the robust procedures that have been followed by Police Scotland and our education authorities.

Adam Harley (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD): I thank the cabinet secretary for the clarity that she has provided. She will be aware that this is the second time that this has happened in the space of a month. I know that she is aware of the alarm that it causes to many parents and the impact that it is having on the education of many children, so I thank her for providing that reassurance in a timely manner. Can she provide any additional context and information as to why this keeps happening?

Màiri McAllan: I very much understand Mr Harley's close interest in the matter. However, I hope that he will understand that, along with Police Scotland's assurance that there is no threat to the public, a considerable amount of work is ongoing across Police Scotland and in counterterrorism right across the United Kingdom and—as members will have seen from press reports—Europe to understand the motivations and the individuals behind the hoaxes. It would not be appropriate for me to say more at this point, except to assure members that the authorities have the matter very much in hand.

Moving to the substance of the debate, I thank Katherine Sangster and Scottish Labour for bringing the motion to the chamber. There are few more important things than the success of our young people, and we all agree that education is the cornerstone of that. There is much that I agree with in Ms Sangster's motion and her remarks this afternoon. I agree, to quote her motion, that

"achievement in education is a key factor in breaking the cycle of poverty"

and that, as a Parliament, we

"must do more to break the link between family income and educational achievement".

I also appreciate how she grounded her motion in GIRFEC—getting it right for every child—and I agree with her on the need to

"improve the experience and attainment for all young people in Scotland".

I also agree that data is a really important part of that. There is much that we are aligned on, and I hope that she will see that reflected in the Government's amendment, in which I have deliberately used much of her wording. There are, however, some reasons why I cannot support the Labour motion today, which I will come back to.

First, I want to be clear about what the Government is seeking. At times, we can be guilty of getting into the detail, as we must on a whole range of issues, and forgetting to be clear about what we are seeking to achieve. In education, which is a broad remit, I am seeking excellence and equity.

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): In answer to a question that I asked the cabinet secretary's predecessor about another issue, which had to do with racism in schools, Jenny Gilruth volunteered that she accepted that

"broader issues in relation to our education data"—[*Official Report,* 19 February 2026; c 52.]

were lacking. What issues of education data does the cabinet secretary believe Jenny Gilruth was referring to, which will command her priority attention if we are to fill the gaps that undoubtedly exist in data collection?

Màiri McAllan: That was a somewhat convoluted question, to which I will try to give a straightforward answer. Rather than speaking to what my colleague was referring to, let me be clear that, as I said in my intervention on Katherine Sangster, I agree that, although a significant suite of data is collected on educational performance across Scotland, it can be done differently between councils, which can make it difficult to co-

ordinate and assess. As I will come on to say, and as I said to Ms Sangster, we could collect that data more effectively and in a more aligned way, which would help us to have a clearer picture.

However, I was talking about excellence and equity. I want to stress that, when it comes to education, we should never be afraid to talk about excellence. We should be proud to talk about excellence, and we should challenge our young people to achieve their very best. Of course, excellence for one child will be different from excellence for another. That is where the second part—equity—comes in. It demands that we tear down the barriers to an excellent education. From my perspective, to achieve both excellence and equity, we need to get the basics right and we need to be prepared, at the same time, to seize the considerable opportunity for change that is coming for this Parliament in the four and a half years ahead. My motion makes it clear that the Government believes that change is required, and I have made it clear that, as the education secretary, I intend to oversee that reform.

I want to talk about those reforms. However, before I do, let me address some of the fundamentals, because, as I said, those things go hand in hand with reform. Our programme for government made it very clear that we will be focused on the ABCs of education: attainment, attendance, additional support, behaviour and curriculum.

On attainment, I had the pleasure of overseeing results day 2026 for the Government, and our learners outdid themselves. We saw increases in academic attainment across the board, in national 5, higher and advanced higher. We saw a narrowing of the poverty-related attainment gap and a surge in vocational awards. Subjects such as journalism, personal finance, childcare and construction are preparing our young people for the world of work. Amazingly, awards in those areas are up 121 per cent since 2019. It is worth saying that that mix of academic and vocational excellence is, to me and my colleague Alyn Smith, the hallmark of an education system that is working well and seeking to get it right for every child.

It is interesting that that balance, which we have been pursuing for many years, is what UK Prime Minister Andy Burnham is now working to create in England, with technical qualifications. In fact, it is because of the pursuit of that balance that we have, on the one hand, a joint record-high number of young people in positive destinations in education, training or work and, on the other hand, a record number of young Scots from our most deprived backgrounds going to university. Those are examples of excellence of different kinds, and, to me, they are equally valuable.

Jenny Young (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Lab): Will the cabinet secretary reflect on an exchange that I had with the minister last week around positive destinations? Those measurements are taken only three and nine months after a young person has left school, and it strikes me that a wee gap exists in the data when we hear about the 18 to 24-year-olds who are not in education, employment or training. Will the cabinet secretary consider extending that study?

Màiri McAllan: I make no bones at all about the fact that we measure the immediate destination and the follow-up destination. In much of the discussion that I know Mr Smith is leading on 18 to 24-year-olds, we must be very clear about what they are doing. However, we are clear about that—indeed, we monitor employment rates and other things that those young people are doing. It does not take away from the fact that that is an incredibly positive result for our young people.

Attainment is improving, but we must strive for more, particularly to overcome the Covid setbacks that Katherine Sangster was absolutely right to acknowledge. The significant reform of our curriculum that is under way will support that. It will clarify the role of knowledge and the progression that each young person ought to be making while still giving flexibility to our teaching workforce.

Covid also affected attendance, and, as a society, we need to accept that it has changed the way that some people see their obligation to attend. Although attendance has been up for two years in a row, which I am happy about, I want it to continue to improve.

It is also important that we create an environment that enables each and every young person to learn, with particular focus on those who require additional support. I have said in the chamber previously that we will implement the McManus review and the national staged intervention model.

Behaviour in relationships is another fundamental issue. I want to be clear that we should expect the very highest standards in our schools. I state unequivocally that violence, aggression and bullying of any kind are unacceptable. Ultimately, poor and disruptive behaviour must be dealt with. All of that is true; nonetheless, it is still true that the vast majority of our young people are conscientious, kind and respectful. We must address poor behaviour, but we cannot allow our young people to be written off.

Stephen Kerr: Will the member give way?

Màiri McAllan: I am conscious of the time, Presiding Officer, but I am happy to take another intervention.

Stephen Kerr: I hear what the cabinet secretary is saying about behaviour, but a vital element of correcting behaviour will be the sanctions that are available to teachers and headteachers. Will the Government take a lead in that area and get behind our teachers in specifying those sanctions and the consequences that can flow from bad behaviour?

Màiri McAllan: I am absolutely behind our teaching workforce. I will say a few things about that. First, we need to monitor incidents and there needs to be certainty of follow-up. I want to support our teaching workforce with that.

Secondly, this morning I was in a discussion with the First Minister about his intention that every school in Scotland should teach anti-misogyny. That is important not only for pupils, because teaching is a largely female workforce and I want to support teachers in that way, too. However, I will not subscribe to what I think is quite a Victorian notion that we should just throw young people on the scrap heap by readily excluding them from school, with all the damage that that brings them later in life.

I have run out of time a bit, but, having looked at the fundamentals, I will turn to the opportunity for reform. Notwithstanding the very many strengths of Scottish education, our attainment, our poverty-related attainment gap and our performance data have not improved enough over the past decade. There remains significant variation in learning outcomes across Scotland. As we are in a three-month period of dialogue with national Government and local government on local government and public service reform, there is a question about education, which, for me, is this: "If you had the opportunity, after 25 years of devolution, to do more of what is working well but to change the systems that we have developed that are not serving our learners well, what would you do?"

I have been thinking very carefully about what reform in education needs to look like. We commissioned a report from John Wilson, with his decades of experience, to draw on and to inform that work. I want to see better use of data, I want performance information to support earlier intervention where improvement is needed, and I want us to be able to properly monitor whether improvement is happening. I have been having discussions with stakeholders across the board about what needs to be done, and I can confirm to colleagues today that I will be reaching out to spokespeople across the chamber to engage with them on what they believe is needed. I hope that there is a clear consensus on the need to drive reform.

Members will not, for a moment, hear me say that change is not required. Indeed, I believe that it is integral to our continued success, and it is a core part of my plans. I will work with anyone across the chamber who seeks that, too, because the Government does not have a monopoly on good ideas and I am interested in members' views.

Let us not allow this debate about how we move forward and improve to turn into the running down of young people's achievements or the concerted efforts of our teaching and local authority staff. I speak to many teachers, and they are fed up with the way in which teaching is characterised. That is not to say that they do not want scrutiny or change, but they want the positive work that they are doing across Scotland to be recognised.

I look forward to hearing contributions from members across the chamber. I will leave them with the thought that change is coming and I want to work with them all to shape that.

I move amendment S7M-01963.3, to leave out from first "recognises" to end and insert:

"celebrates the achievements of Scotland's young people, as reflected in the 2026 National Qualifications results with academic passes up at every level and a 121% increase in vocational awards since 2019; notes that there is a joint record number of young people in positive follow-up destinations such as college, work and apprenticeships, and more young Scots gaining a place at university, including a record number from deprived backgrounds; recognises the contribution of Scotland's dedicated and hardworking teaching and school staff; notes the need to improve the experience and attainment for all young people in Scotland and believes that achievement in education is a key factor in breaking the cycle of poverty, and affirms that, in the pursuit of excellence and equity, the Scottish Government should drive meaningful reform across the education system, including by working with parties across the Chamber to identify priorities for school assessments such as the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy and Scottish National Standardised Assessments, and embrace the opportunity of public sector reform to enhance performance, reduce unwarranted variation and empower school leaders across Scotland."

15:26

Laura Moodie (South Scotland) (Green): I, too, thank the cabinet secretary for her timely reassurance on the matter of the hoax bomb threats in our schools.

Education should be about opportunity. It should be the means through which every young person can fulfil their potential, regardless of their family income, their postcode or their background. That is why I begin by thanking Katherine Sangster for bringing the debate to the chamber. There is much in her motion that I agree with. We should be concerned when educational outcomes are unequal. We should be concerned when too

many children face barriers to achievement because of poverty. We should be willing to have an honest conversation about how we measure progress and how we hold ourselves accountable on improving outcomes.

It is also important that we recognise the successes in Scottish education. Behind every set of statistics are thousands of dedicated teachers, support staff and school leaders who are working hard every day for Scotland's young people. There are real achievements to celebrate, and no one is served by talking down the efforts of those who work in Scotland's schools. However, recognising success and pursuing improvement are not contradictory objectives. If we are serious about raising attainment and tackling inequality, we need good evidence, proportionate assessment and policies that support children and families.

Jenny Young: Will the member give way?

Laura Moodie: I would like to make a little bit more progress, but I will take a pause in a moment.

At a time when many families continue to face financial pressure, we know that expensive and restrictive uniform requirements can create unnecessary costs. Uniform policy should support inclusion and not place further burdens on parents and carers. Making such guidance statutory is a practical step that would help to ensure consistency and fairness across Scotland. I am proud of the work that Scottish Greens did with the Government to deliver new guidance for schools and councils. The recommendations that were introduced in 2024 included allowing generic, low-cost uniform items that families can buy from a range of shops, rather than forcing them to purchase expensive branded clothing from specialist suppliers. Although most councils are following the spirit of that guidance, putting it on a statutory footing would mean that every family could feel the benefit of it, wherever they live. That is what my amendment calls for, and I encourage members to vote for it.

I am happy to give way to Jenny Young now.

Jenny Young: The member talked about the need for more data. In that spirit, will the Scottish Greens support Scottish Labour's motion and the call for the immediate reintroduction of the Scottish survey of literacy and numeracy?

Laura Moodie: I will come on to that in more detail. I have some concerns about it, because it would bring in an extra layer of bureaucracy for teachers, given that it would sit on top of the standardised assessments rather than being done instead of them. Our argument is that we need to reform and review instead of adding more testing.

Reform of Scotland's education system has been on the agenda since devolution, but the time for review is over and the time for implementation is now. Critical independent reports—those of Louise Hayward, James Withers, Angela Morgan, Ken Muir and more—have been left unread or their recommendations only partially delivered.

The success of this Parliament will be determined by what it does and not by how much it reviews, thinks or ponders about the future without securing it. We have already seen where system reform has worked. The success and transformation of Qualifications Scotland are the result of the Parliament coming together to deliver change for the better.

Reform cannot exist in silos. We cannot reform the organisations that deliver and inspect qualifications and assessment without revisiting the qualification and assessment methods at the core of the system. I respect the views of those, including the Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic, who favour the retention of exams in principle. What I am talking about, and what Louise Hayward recommended, is not the abolition of exams but the creation of a system that supports the rounded progress and development of pupils.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Con): I understand where Laura Moodie is coming from in relation to assessments, but does she not believe that the evolution of artificial intelligence presents a risk to what she is laying out in her argument?

Laura Moodie: I think that everybody is concerned about the potential risk of that, but I believe that we should trust our teachers, who have the required skills and knowledge. They know their pupils—and their pupils' voice—better than others, and we should trust them to make the judgments on that basis.

When we speak to young people, employers and parents about what a successful learner looks like, we use words such as "creative", "resilient" and "adaptable". However, there is no higher in creativity, no nat 5 in resilience and no Scottish credit and qualifications framework in adaptability. A Scottish diploma of achievement would value transferable skills, capturing the diverse achievements of every learner in Scotland. That would require a cultural change that no longer measures Scotland's education system on narrow academic pathways and, instead, celebrates success across the network of paths that lead to a fulfilling life.

In that regard, I fear that we will look back at the end of this parliamentary session or the next and regret that we did not take one of the boldest reforms in education for generations.

There are direct issues being faced in our classrooms right now that we cannot afford to wait to address. I am glad that the Government's amendment recognises the contribution of Scotland's dedicated and hard-working teaching and school staff, and not forgetting the lecturers and staff across Scotland's colleges and universities. However, for most of those people, that recognition will not be felt in their day-to-day life. Teaching unions rightly raise workload as one of the key issues that contribute to unsustainable pressures in Scotland's classrooms and on outcomes.

In looking at outcomes, we must review how we measure them. Scottish national standardised assessments, or SNSAs, are widely regarded as an additional layer of bureaucracy. Research conducted by the Scottish Greens found that teachers think that SNSAs create unnecessary work, add little to the development and learning of pupils and are irrelevant to their teaching.

In my view, the way forward is to scrap SNSAs and, instead, bring back the Scottish survey of literacy and numeracy. Doing so would make the workload of teachers that bit lighter and reflect the trust that we place in our teaching workforce, all while we ensure that we consistently monitor progress and attainment. The £3.5 million that is spent annually on delivering SNSAs could be reallocated to supporting literacy rates among pupils. The same amount of money could provide the 25 per cent of primary schools in Scotland that do not have access to books with furnished and fully stocked libraries. That proposal from the National Literacy Trust offers a cost-effective opportunity to invest in the next generation, so that they can discover a love of reading, reach their full potential and develop the skills that they need to thrive.

Although my position on SNSAs is slightly firmer than that of the Government, I am pleased to see in her amendment that the cabinet secretary acknowledges the need to

"identify priorities for school assessments such as the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy and Scottish National Standardised Assessments".

The challenge before us is not to choose between excellence and equity; Scotland's education system must deliver both. We should celebrate achievement wherever it occurs, while remaining relentless in our determination to break the link between poverty and educational outcomes. Today's debate provides an opportunity to move that agenda forward. By improving how we gather evidence, by reducing unnecessary burdens on schools, by making uniform guidance statutory and by reconsidering assessment arrangements, including SNSAs, we can take practical steps that benefit learners across Scotland.

I move amendment S7M-01963.1, to insert at end:

"; recognises that, where data collection on pupil performance across local authorities is standardised, it should be done in a way that supports both the progress and attainment of pupils and tackles the bureaucracy placed on teachers; welcomes guidance on school uniforms that includes key recommendations to limit costs, and calls for this guidance to be placed on a statutory footing as soon as possible."

14:34

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Con): Let us go back to August 2015, which was when Nicola Sturgeon asked us all to judge her on her education record. Those words will continue to haunt this Government's corridors, unless it changes course.

I welcome this debate on Labour's motion. All too often, Opposition parties are forced to bring to the chamber debates on education while the Government responds with an all-too-familiar message of "nothing to see here". The motion that is before us, rightly, argues for the need to improve attainment, tackle inequality and strengthen national standards. I disagree with little in it. However, the Government's amendment seeks to paint a picture of Scotland's education system as being world leading, a beacon of excellence and a shining example for other countries to follow. I wish that that were the truth. We used to be proud of our education system, but, today, we find ourselves having to challenge a Government that seems more interested in defending its record than in improving it.

I do not like the cabinet secretary's portrayal of anyone in the chamber who challenges the Government on our education system as talking down our educational professionals. I blame not them but the Government's lack of action over many years, because it has been more interested in gimmicks and headline-grabbing announcements than in the hard graft of getting the basics right.

We have seen that in the form of free laptops and bikes—undelivered; laminated behaviour cards; the muting of school bells; and welcome-to-school bags. [*Interruption*.] Does someone want to intervene?

Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I was speaking, from a sedentary position, about the repeated talk about laptops. No child in any school in Scotland who knows how to work a laptop does not have access to one. Perhaps Meghan Gallacher should temper her remarks.

Meghan Gallacher: Giving access is different to promising to give all pupils a funded laptop, so I ask the member to reflect on her party's policies in that respect.

Parents do not want gimmicks; neither do teachers. They want classrooms in which children can learn, teachers can teach and every young person can fulfil their potential.

That brings me to the challenge that I put directly to the cabinet secretary today. We could spend our time on listing every educational failing, every missed target and every broken promise, but that would achieve nothing. After a productive meeting this morning with educational experts, I know that calling out the Government will not bring change. I do not want to waste more years in this Parliament on trading political blows while generations of children miss out. We need to work together on education reform. Here, therefore, is an idea for the cabinet secretary—

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Meghan Gallacher: No, as I wish to make some progress.

I want us, as a Parliament, to look at the work that was undertaken by Michael Gove and Nick Gibb during their time in office. The mention in this chamber of a Conservative Government is uncomfortable for some members; however, the education of our children should surely matter more than which political party developed a successful strategy. Does the cabinet secretary really want to be remembered as the one who had the opportunity to improve Scottish education but refused to consider proven approaches because they were associated with a different political party?

The cabinet secretary knows that I am putting together a round table to examine the reforms that were undertaken in England and what Scotland can learn from those. She can still be part of that discussion if she wants, and I put that challenge to her today.

The reforms that were introduced in England were not about simply changing the name of a quango or announcing another review but about challenging the culture of low expectations and putting knowledge, standards and evidence back into education.

We need only look at phonics. Learning to read is the gateway to almost every other area of education. If a child cannot read confidently, how can they access mathematics, science, history or geography? Phonics gives children the tools to decode words, build fluency and develop the confidence to read independently. Those reforms are best associated with Nick Gibb and the work that was undertaken during the Conservative Government.

Màiri McAllan: I am listening to what Meghan Gallacher is saying, and there is no one with whom I will not discuss the opportunity to improve education; I have been clear that that is what I want to see. I wonder, however, whether she has had the opportunity to read the first published draft of the new curriculum—I appreciate that it is a large volume of documents—and how far she finds that it meets the challenge that she sets out today, in particular in respect of knowledge in the curriculum.

Meghan Gallacher: Here we go again—we have a lot of things in draft, and we have had a lot of reviews. I am done with that. I just want the Government to get on with doing what it needs to do, and part of that is about learning lessons from other parts of the United Kingdom.

I welcome the cabinet secretary's approach of reaching out and having discussions across various parts of our United Kingdom, but that has to be heartfelt. Again, if the new curriculum is already in draft, why are we not getting on with it? I think that everybody will want to know the answers to those questions.

I know that I have gone past my time, Presiding Officer, so I will finish by quoting Keir Bloomer, a former director of education, who spoke about the lack of data. He said:

"We know far too little about how the Scottish system is actually performing. The lack of data is a serious matter in Scottish education. We used to be better informed than we are now."—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 11 March 2026; c 6.]

I agree, so let us do something about it.

15:41

Duncan Dunlop (South Scotland) (LD): I thank Katherine Sangster and Labour for bringing this important debate to the chamber. The Scottish Liberal Democrats will be supporting the motion.

The SNP has had almost 20 years of governing our education system. It has, to be frank, taken what was once the envy of the world and overseen continuous decline. Now here we are, left asking why children from poorer backgrounds are still more likely not to achieve their potential; why additional support needs are going unmet; why attendance is reducing among pupils across Scotland; why we are struggling to recruit secondary school teachers; and why teachers are facing increased disruption in classrooms.

That decline is starkly illustrated in my own family. According to the PISA results, my 15-year-old daughter is now statistically likely to be academically a full year behind her cousin of a similar age in England in both maths and science. For me, that is unacceptable and sad to hear.

All of that is why Labour's motion matters. We have to have trackable data to enable us to understand the problem and learn how to fix it. The motion's call to bring back the Scottish survey of literacy and numeracy is one that the Scottish Liberal Democrats have made previously, and we will support it.

However, there are other, more fundamental questions that we should be asking in this debate about what is going on in education today. Why is the Government spending time on things that are nice to have—and which, to be frank, can be considered gimmicks—rather than focusing on what will make the biggest difference to children's lives? Those in staffrooms are literally laughing in disbelief at the SNP's spending £2.7 million on a schoolbag scheme that nobody has asked for.

We have also put thousands of Chromebooks and iPads in front of pupils as young as five. Scottish Borders Council alone has a contract with Apple that is worth £16 million. That is despite the director of public health at NHS Borders, and 70 general practitioners, urging against the practice on health grounds. I understood why that came in post Covid, but when we realise that something is not working, we should be fleet of foot enough to pause it and change practice. Many teachers there do not want to use those devices but feel compelled to do so because of a top-down policy from distant management in a far-too-large local authority.

In addition, at a time when we have an acute teacher shortage in secondary schools, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has estimated that it will cost up to £310 million to implement reduced class contact time for teachers. There were only 28 trainee physics teachers in Scotland last year, when the national target was 131. That means that the SNP is training only 21 per cent of the teachers that we need in a crucial STEM—science, technology, engineering, and mathematics—subject. Just last Thursday, Fraserburgh academy had to send secondary 1 pupils home due to a lack of teachers to supervise them, and this week it is the S2 pupils who are being sent home.

Giving teachers an extra 90 minutes out of the classroom to plan and prepare or recalibrate is a "nice to have". However, with the pressures facing schools, I question how removing teachers from classrooms will improve learning and pupil regulation, particularly in the parts of Scotland where subject specialists are already scarce.

Patricia Gibson: Mr Dunlop has gone past the point that I wanted to ask him about—that is because I could not get my button to work, which is entirely my fault.

Mr Dunlop talked about the lack of physics teachers—I think that those are the ones that he singled out. Does he realise that there is a shortage of STEM subject teachers across the United Kingdom, because the public sector cannot compete with industry, which offers lucrative careers and lucrative salaries that the public sector cannot meet? Does he not at least acknowledge that, and that the problem of having a shortage of STEM subject teachers predates even my days as a teacher, which began more than 40 years ago?

Duncan Dunlop: I totally recognise that. As we have discussed in the Education and Gaelic Committee, there are ways around that, and we have to look at them. The point that I was making is that removing those few physics teachers that we have from the classroom will only reduce the ability of our students who want to study physics and learn. That is the reality. We have not got anyone to replace those teachers.

It is not unsurprising that the Scottish National Party's plan is half-baked, because, let us remember, it was agreed only with the threat of strikes and an election looming—that is why the SNP rushed it through. Ministers have made a mess of the policy from the start, and doubts are being raised about how it can be implemented.

Meanwhile, pupil support assistants—who are less vocal than the teachers, are on the lowest pay for highly skilled jobs, and support children with complex physical disabilities and additional support needs—are seeing their jobs cut. We have 12,000 hours a week less of PSA support in classrooms than we did in 2023. That is despite a 710 per cent increase in additional support needs since 2007.

Even children with less severe needs are going without help, as we have a host of non-attender pupils who are unable to get into the school building at all. Indeed, a focus group of primary school leaders that I led this week told me:

"A significant part of the problem is the ongoing lack of support staff, coupled with the poor levels of pay for what is an incredibly

demanding and essential role. Additional support needs of learners are exploding. It is creating a ticking time bomb for Scotland. At its heart, it feels like we are failing the future of these children."

Màiri McAllan: I am grateful to Mr Dunlop for focusing on additional support needs. The issue is important to me, which is why I listed it among the fundamentals that we must get right.

I hope that Mr Dunlop will welcome the fact that we have nearly 17,000 pupil support assistants in Scotland, which is the third-highest level on record. Further, since 2012-13, the sums that local authorities are spending on additional support for learning have increased by about £540 million to reach more than £1 billion. The story of additional support needs in Scotland has not been one of disinvestment but of investment. We are, of course, seeing that Lucy Powell is also starting to consider that that level of investment is required in the rest of the UK.

Duncan Dunlop: I welcome that, but I think that our statistics are different, because there has been a drop of 12,000 hours a week in PSA support that is actually being provided in the classrooms. Pupil support assistants are no longer dedicated to specific schools and classrooms, so the important continuity of relationship with children is being lost. That is why the Scottish Liberal Democrats have consistently called for an additional 2,000 pupil support assistants. That would be a tangible investment in children's education, helping teachers to manage the workload, regulate classrooms and ensure that pupils get the additional support that they need.

My final point is on the cabinet secretary's remarks on public sector reform. If we want to make the increasingly scarce resources work, we also need to return trust to our teachers and the community around schools, give headteachers the power and resources to make decisions that best suit their pupils, and give real powers over governance and engagement to parents and the community, unleashing their skills and support to help the whole community thrive. If local government reform is going ahead—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member must wind up.

Duncan Dunlop: Okay. If local government reform is going ahead, let us place high schools and the catchment areas at the centre of properly localised government.

In conclusion—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): No, the member must wind up.

Duncan Dunlop: Sorry, but I was just making up my time from the interventions that I took. I have one more—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member got his time back and has gone considerably over his time. He must wind up.

Duncan Dunlop: So, I will conclude now—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): No, the member must wind up.

Duncan Dunlop: Okay, I will wind up. I hope that we can be ambitious for the futures of our children because that is the future of Scotland.

I move amendment S7M-01963.4, to remove from "and enable" to end and insert:

"; believes that pupil support assistants provide essential support to children with additional support needs and teachers; calls for education funding currently directed towards initiatives such as the Welcome to School Bag and digital screens in primary school classrooms to instead be invested in the recruitment of, and better pay for, pupil support assistants; agrees that continuity in relationships specifically between pupil support assistants and pupils must be prioritised, and calls for headteachers and the community to have more devolved powers to choose the interventions that best meet their school's needs and enable the education system to get it right for every child."

15:49

Amanda Lindsay (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform): I welcome the motion's focus on improving attainment, tackling inequality and strengthening national standards. We will support it, along with the Conservative and Liberal Democrat amendments. I also welcome the cabinet secretary's willingness to work with other parties.

After nearly two decades of Scottish National Party control of education, the evidence of decline is clear. The Parliament is right to demand better data so that the system can be held to account. The latest PISA results make the scale of the problem plain. In mathematics, Scotland scored 467 against England's 492, which is a 25-point gap. In science, the gap is also 25 points. In reading, Scotland sits at 488, while England reaches 497. As Duncan Dunlop said, a 20-point gap is roughly equivalent to a year of schooling. Scotland's

mathematics performance in 2025 was significantly lower than in every PISA cycle between 2003 and 2018. Reading and science scores also remain well below the levels that were achieved before curriculum for excellence was introduced. Although England has improved its position, Scotland has slipped, and parents, teachers and employers see the consequences. There are weaker foundations in literacy and numeracy and there is a greater variation between schools, while young people are leaving the system less prepared than they should be.

Achievement in education is a key factor in breaking the cycle of poverty, yet the link between family background and outcomes remains too strong. If we are serious about addressing that, we must first understand what is happening in our schools. That is why the motion's call for the reintroduction of the Scottish survey of literacy and numeracy and for standardised reporting across all local authorities on absences, behaviour and additional support needs is both timely and necessary. Without consistent, comparable data, we cannot identify where progress is being made, where problems are concentrated or whether resources are reaching the children who need them the most. Too often, we are asked to accept that the system is getting it right for every child, while the evidence that we have is incomplete or inconsistent.

The Government's proposed response—an evolved curriculum for excellence under the curriculum improvement cycle, with new frameworks due from 2028—does not inspire confidence. The papers that are meant to provide the evidence base for those reforms have been shown to contain fabricated sources and basic factual errors. An academic at the University of Edinburgh identified around 20 references to articles, books and reports that do not exist. One citation was for a book that was supposedly published in 2025—a date that was impossible when the documents were written. Another claim asserted that more than 200,000 pupils had studied higher physical education, when fewer than 150,000 pupils sat national five, higher and advanced higher qualifications combined that year. Education Scotland has acknowledged that artificial intelligence was used to edit the reports. That does not reassure; it raises further questions about oversight and the integrity of the process. If the evidence base for curriculum reform cannot get simple statistics right and invents sources that do not exist, it is difficult to have confidence that the resulting frameworks will address the problems that PISA has identified.

The SNP has had nearly 20 years in power. Curriculum for excellence has been in place for most of that time. The results speak for themselves. Our children deserve a curriculum that specifies clear knowledge, rigorous standards and honest evidence. They also deserve the consistent national data that the motion calls for, so that the Parliament and the public can see what is working and what is not. Reintroducing the Scottish survey of literacy and numeracy and requiring standardised reporting on absences, behaviour and additional support needs would be practical steps towards that.

Until the Government confronts the real causes of falling standards and equips us with reliable data, rather than papering over problems with flawed documents, parents will have every reason to question whether this latest exercise will succeed where previous ones have not.

Meghan Gallacher: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I was so keen to speak in the debate that I forgot to move my amendment earlier. I therefore do so now.

I move amendment S7M-01963.2, to insert at end:

"; expresses serious concern that the Scottish Government has failed to reverse declining school standards, close the attainment gap or adequately support the rising number of pupils with additional support needs (ASN); notes that around one in four primary pupils is not achieving expected literacy levels and one in five is not achieving expected numeracy levels, and that Scotland recorded its poorest Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results to date with pupils falling behind their counterparts in England in reading, mathematics and science; condemns the Scottish Government's focus on headline-grabbing policies, including the proposed £2.7 million Welcome to School Bag, and its failure to deliver promised funded bikes and laptops; believes that the Scottish Government has failed to collect and publish reliable, comparable information on school performance and that positive destination statistics are wholly inadequate as a measure of educational success; calls for consistent annual reporting, publicly available and comparable over time and across all local authorities, on attainment, the attainment gap, attendance, persistent absence, exclusions, classroom violence, disruptive behaviour and ASN; questions the effectiveness of Education Scotland in driving improvement, and calls on the Scottish Government to deliver a credible and comprehensive plan to raise attainment and restore confidence in Scotland's schools, to prioritise a knowledge-based, evidence-led curriculum with literacy, numeracy and subject knowledge at its core, and to establish clear national standards, measurable targets and robust accountability for educational outcomes."

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Thank you. That is now on the record.

We now move on to the open debate.

15:55

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I welcome the debate, because education is one of the subjects where I genuinely believe that there is more that unites us across the chamber than divides us. I welcome the tone of

the debate. Perhaps the debate does not unite everyone, but I hope that I can still continue that tone, and it is my intention to do so.

We were reminded during a recent evidence session at the Education and Gaelic Committee by those who are involved in the education of our young people that education should stop being used as a political football. I agree, because we get nowhere if the debate becomes a rammy all the time. Having spent a fair bit of time involved in the education debate over the years, I know that we need to continue to challenge ourselves to keep an eye on the prize and deliver for our young people.

My oldest grandson, JJ, has his birthday today. He has hit double figures—he is 10 years old—so, happy birthday, JJ! It is because of him and his three sisters that I see education in Scotland from the perspective of a grandparent, as well as that of a parliamentarian. With that in mind, there is quite a lot in the Labour motion that I agree with—and there are parts of it that I do not agree with, but that is political discourse, not a rammy. We only have to look at the absolute riot of the Education, Children and Young People Committee in the previous session of the Parliament to see the way we need not to go. That culture was created by the former convener and, because of that, we achieved nothing as a committee. That is not the way to go.

As I have said, however, I welcome the tone that most of the political parties have taken today, and I want to continue that positive discussion. We all want our young people to achieve their potential, and we all want to improve attainment. Surely every member of the Parliament wants to break the link between the circumstances that a child is born into and the opportunities that they have in life.

One thing that we should start recognising and which sometimes gets lost in these debates is that Scotland's young people are achieving remarkable things. We should be proud of them. The 2026 exam results showed pass rates increasing at every level of national qualifications, with a record number of national 5 passes. There has been a 121 per cent increase in vocational and technical awards since 2019. A joint record number of young people are moving into positive destinations after leaving school. Perhaps most importantly, talking about tackling inequality, a record number of young people from the most deprived areas have secured places in universities.

Stephen Kerr: Will George Adam give way on that point?

George Adam: I will later on.

Every one of those achievements is a young person who has worked hard, a family who have supported their child, and teachers and school staff who have helped them along the way. Sometimes that is all lost when we get caught up in a political debate on education.

I am not saying that everything in Scottish education is perfect; it is not. I know that there are challenges with attendance, behaviour, additional support needs and attainment. There are children who are not achieving what they should, and we have a responsibility to do something about that. However, recognising those challenges should not mean ignoring the progress that is being made.

For me, education is all about opportunity—one that I personally did not take up myself, because, as a younger person, I believed that I knew better than anyone else. Thank goodness I got rid of that part of my personality. As I say, it is about opportunity; in many cases, it can be life changing.

Coming from Paisley, I know that talent and ability are not determined by the income that is generated by your family. A child growing up in Ferguslie Park with as much potential as a child growing up in one of the wealthiest parts of Scotland needs that opportunity. As someone who grew up there, I know what that is like.

Our job is to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to fulfil their dreams and aspirations. That is why the Scottish attainment challenge matters; around £1.75 billion has been invested in that over the past decade, with up to £200 million being invested this year alone. It is why free school meals, breakfast clubs and support for families matter, too, because we cannot separate what happens in the classroom from what happens in a child's life outwith the school environment. A child who arrives at school hungry, worried about what is happening at home or struggling because their family is under financial pressure, is already facing barriers before the first lesson has even started.

No amount of testing, measuring or reporting will remove those barriers on its own, and that is why the Scottish Government believes that its approach is the way forward.

That brings me to the question of assessment. I understand why Labour wants further information and I agree that we need reliable evidence to identify where improvements are necessary, but I am not convinced that simply bringing back the Scottish survey of literacy and numeracy is the answer. Indeed, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development had previously raised concerns about the limitations of the old survey.

That does not mean that our current arrangements are perfect, but surely the sensible approach is to look at what information we collect, identify what is missing and work with those in education to improve it. I believe that simple solutions tend to work—that is the type of guy I am.

We need to be careful that our enthusiasm for collecting more information does not end up giving teachers further administration, because I suspect that most teachers would rather spend their time teaching children than filling out another form to tell someone that they have been teaching children.

Stephen Kerr: Will the member give way now?

George Adam: I will.

Stephen Kerr: I agree with George Adam—I know that he always hates to hear those words—when he says that some things in our education system are good, some things are not so good and there are other things that we simply do not know. When he says that we should collect and use the data that we have, I think that that happens. However, the former Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills said that there were gaps in data collection. Does he not acknowledge that? Fundamentally, surely that is data that is relevant to the literacy and numeracy attainment of Scotland's children and young people.

George Adam: It always sends a shiver down my spine when Stephen Kerr says that he agrees with me. That said, I previously stated that, where there are issues and we need to fix the problems, we should do so. I am not saying that we should go back to a process that did not work in the past—the OECD said that it did not work, too.

My next point is crucial. More than 1,500 teachers and practitioners have already been involved in developing the Scottish Government's proposals, because that is where the change can be made. The curriculum improvement cycle, which is the biggest thing that has happened for the past 10 years, will make it clearer what young people should know, understand and be able to do, and how they can progress. That gives us the opportunity to make a difference in education.

Jenny Young: Will the member give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member will not be able to take an intervention. He should be winding up.

George Adam: With regard to what is happening currently, a number of individuals who have come to the Education and Gaelic Committee have stated that we are going in the right direction.

I started by saying that there is much that I can agree with in Labour's motion, and I mean that. We have to talk about the issue and depoliticise the debate—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member will need to wind up.

George Adam: —because delivery is more important. This is about the young people, children and families we serve.

16:03

Joe Long (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests.

Labour's motion recognises the need for better data. I want to spend a few minutes focusing particularly on additional support for learning in Scotland and improved understanding of the needs of young learners in Scotland.

Last year, Audit Scotland identified that 40 per cent of pupils in publicly funded schools were recorded as receiving additional support for learning, with the proportion in Scotland's most deprived areas almost double that in the least deprived areas. However, the briefing paper also noted that it was simply

"not possible to determine the scale, complexity and nature of additional support needs across Scotland due to inconsistencies and gaps in data recording."

The subsequent McManus review, which reported this year, similarly recognised the problem, stating that a

"clearer national picture of children and young people's needs, support and progress must inform decision-making and improvement."

It is precisely that clarity that the motion calls for.

Although we all recognise the growth and increasing complexity of need over the past decade, those who have been around additional support for learning for longer will remember the hope that was attached to the Doran review of 2012, the Morgan review of 2020 and other reviews. Those reports highlighted a gap between

Scotland's commitment to inclusive education and the reality that is faced by children, families and teaching staff. Now we have had the McManus review, further recognising the continuing pressures across schools and variation in provision across Scotland. Professionals in the sector could be forgiven for wondering whether the latest review will gain the traction that its predecessors did not.

Armed with better data, the Scottish Government and local authorities could better evaluate how additional support for learning is being planned for, funded and staffed.

In my former role with an autism charity, I was often concerned to hear of neurodivergent young people missing out on their education because they found it hard to cope in mainstream classrooms. That might have been because of sensory overwhelm or the social pressures of the classroom, or it might have been because the young people needed more processing time and communication that met their thinking style. I mention that because, all too often, such absences were not recorded as formal exclusions. However, when a parent is regularly asked to collect their dysregulated child after an hour or so in the classroom, or when a child disconnects from education because they cannot face that level of stress, we are talking about below-the-radar exclusion.

Therefore, I recognise and welcome the cabinet secretary's commitment to better data recording on absences, as she has set out in previous answers to me in the chamber, and to the staged intervention model, as outlined in the McManus review. That must be actioned effectively if we are to gain a true picture of need and respond appropriately.

We also need to have a nuanced conversation about absences and behaviour that recognises that, in some cases, those are signs of unmet learning needs. At the same time as identifying and addressing the scale of disengagement from education, we need to recognise that inclusive education is not about whether a young person is in the same room as their peers; it is about whether they are in an environment where they can learn effectively and whether they feel that they belong.

Let us be clear: the need for consistent data does not mean that we should move to a one-size-fits-all approach. Although we need national measures of literacy and numeracy, educational attainment—particularly for learners with greater support needs—must be understood, recognised and celebrated on an individual basis, which might require a different pace of learning and a different measure of outcomes. We need to consider carefully how we define and measure outcomes for that group of young people, so that we can more accurately assess whether the support and the learning that are being provided are effective.

Every child has the right to an education and the opportunity to learn, but every child does not learn in the same way or thrive in the same environment. As the McManus review recognises, that needs to be reflected in curriculum design, not just in the staged intervention model that is under development.

No one doubts the commitment or ambition of schools, teachers and classroom practitioners in relation to young people with additional support needs. However, education professionals are being asked to meet increasingly significant and complex needs without the capacity, resources and learning and development opportunities that they require to do so. With robust data to hand and adequate resources to meet identified needs, schools and teachers could more accurately allocate the required resources for additional support for learning, whether it is for well-trained learning support assistants, environmental adjustments, communication aids or other accommodations.

We can develop a deeper understanding of the needs of our young people who require additional support. Fundamentally, we can better determine what is working and where we need to do more. We need shared learning on progress and impacts, as the McManus review called for.

The sector will need greater resourcing. Teachers are under considerable pressure to deliver in classrooms that include learners with diverse and specialist needs, and they require the training, support and staffing resources to meet those needs. This year, the Scottish Government has received more than £0.5 billion as a result of increased spending on special educational needs in England. I hope that the Scottish Government will take the learning from the McManus review and the increased resources at hand to grasp the nettle, so that we have an education system in Scotland that is truly inclusive.

16:08

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): Every child in Scotland deserves the opportunity to fulfil their potential, and every child should have the chance to succeed regardless of the circumstances into which they were born. Having looked at the motion, I can see that there is a clear connection between educational achievement and tackling poverty. Education can transform lives, open doors and give young people opportunities that might otherwise remain out of reach.

However, if we are serious about breaking the relationship between family income and educational achievement, we must look more closely at the earliest years of a child's life in education. It will come as no surprise to colleagues that I want to use my time in the debate to again make the case for the introduction of a kindergarten stage for children who are currently in primary 1. The cabinet secretary knows well my interest in that area, as did her predecessors in the previous parliamentary session, and I look forward to our meeting in early December.

Two weeks ago, I hosted a successful event that brought together experts, practitioners and people with a deep understanding of early childhood development. There was a shared recognition that Scotland has an opportunity to rethink its approach to the education of our youngest children. The expertise is there, the evidence deserves serious consideration, and I believe that the time has come for us to move the discussion forward.

At present, Scotland expects children to begin formal primary education at around four and a half to five and a half years old—an idea that is based on the thinking, cultural and societal needs of the mid-1800s. Internationally, that is a very young age to introduce the expectations and structures that are associated with formal schooling, and it is much younger than in most other countries.

Children develop at different rates. As we know, their emotional, social, physical and cognitive development does not follow a uniform timetable, yet we often expect children of the same age to meet the same expectations regardless of their individual development or circumstances. That is a huge factor in educational inequality. A child growing up in a household experiencing poverty might have fewer opportunities for outdoor play, to explore their surroundings and to experience the language-rich environments that support early development. Those differences can become apparent before a child even walks through the doors of primary school.

By the time that children begin primary 1, some of those inequalities are already established. We then spend considerable time and public money trying to close gaps that have been developing since the earliest years. Surely, we should be asking whether we can do more to address those inequalities before they become embedded. That is where the kindergarten proposal offers a real opportunity. Organisations such as Upstart Scotland have made a compelling case for a distinct relationship-centred and play-based stage covering approximately the ages of three to seven.

That would be an educational approach with a clear purpose. Play is central to how young children learn. Through imaginative play, outdoor activity, storytelling, music and practical experiences, children develop the foundations that support their later academic achievement. They develop language and communication. They learn to co-operate with others, manage their emotions, solve problems and build confidence. Those are essential foundations for successful learning throughout their lives.

It is vital to stress that a kindergarten stage would not mean abandoning literacy and numeracy. Children who show an interest in reading, writing and mathematics should be encouraged and supported at their level. The difference is that learning would respond to children's individual development and we would not place the same formal academic expectations on every child at the same age.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): The round-table event that the member held on the issue was extremely positive and good. From the evidence that he has and his expertise in the area, can he say whether we could make the proposed change within the current structures or whether we would need a change in legislation or in buildings and so on? I suppose that I am asking whether it would be expensive, because it certainly seems to be a very positive approach.

Fulton MacGregor: I will come on to that.

I believe that there is valuable international experience for Scotland to consider. Countries such as Finland, Estonia and Switzerland have established play-based approaches to early education. Most strikingly, the evidence is clear that there is no detriment to children from starting formal schooling later. Indeed, PISA scores and other measures often demonstrate that there are greater academic as well as emotional benefits. We should be willing to learn from that experience and consider what could work in Scotland.

Meghan Gallacher: I assume that the member is talking about guided play, because young people would need to be at a certain level when a young person enters official school. There would need to be a basic understanding of literacy and numeracy, otherwise it would be very difficult for teachers to pick that up.

Fulton MacGregor: There are already great examples of the approach in Scotland, and I will come on to that.

If we want to improve attainment, we must consider the foundations on which attainment is built. If we want to tackle the poverty-related attainment gap as well as the issues with behaviour and neurodivergence, we

must give children from all backgrounds access to experiences and relationships that support their development. A universal kindergarten stage could help to achieve that ambition and meet the challenges that our educators face. It would give children across Scotland access to high-quality play, outdoor learning, supportive relationships and language-rich environments. Those opportunities should never depend on the income of a child's parents.

I appreciate that introducing a kindergarten stage would require proper planning and consultation but, to go back to Carol Mochan's point, I reassure the cabinet secretary and other members that it would not be a start from scratch; it would be more of a natural transition from good work that is already in place. To go back to Meghan Gallacher's point, many schools are already implementing play-based approaches in P1 and sometimes in P2. We would be making that the standard and learning from good practice across the country. We would not need new buildings, and there would be no need to disrupt the good work in early learning and childcare that the cabinet secretary is driving forward.

Laura Moodie: Will the member give way?

Fulton MacGregor: Maybe in two seconds.

The kindergarten phase could simply replace the current primary 1. Staff training would be required, and the current standardised testing in primary 1 would need to be moved back by at least one year, but I still think that it is a very achievable goal.

The recent event that I hosted demonstrated that there is growing cross-party support and enthusiasm for taking the idea forward and that there is considerable expertise to do so. There is a growing recognition that Scotland should examine whether our current approach reflects what we know about how young children develop and learn.

We have an opportunity to be ambitious for Scotland's children. We frequently talk about raising attainment and closing the poverty-related attainment gap. Those ambitions must begin with the experiences that we provide in the first years of a child's education. Covid and the lockdowns had a detrimental impact on our young people, and our response needs to be dynamic and something that can help all our young children. Kindergarten would offer just that response and allow us to right a Victorian-era policy.

16:15

Amanda Bland (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Ind): As a former teacher, I welcome this debate, and particularly the recognition that we must do more to improve educational attainment, tackle inequality and break the link between family income and a child's educational achievement.

I acknowledge the tremendous work that is already being undertaken by teachers across Scotland. Every day, dedicated teachers work hard to support children with different abilities, backgrounds and learning needs. They show an enormous commitment, often in challenging circumstances, to giving every child the best possible start in life. This debate is not about criticising that work; it is about building on it, supporting our teachers and ensuring that every child, wherever they live in Scotland, has access to the same strong foundations for learning.

One of the most fundamental building blocks of education is learning to read. I will therefore focus on that aspect, and I was delighted to hear that the cabinet secretary welcomes all ideas. Reading underpins almost every aspect of a child's education. Without secure early reading skills, children can quickly fall behind, and those difficulties can become increasingly difficult to overcome.

That is why I believe that Scotland needs a stronger, more consistent national approach to the teaching and assessment of systematic synthetic phonics. Scotland already recognises the importance of systematic synthetic phonics in early reading instruction. However, recognising its importance is not the same as ensuring that every child receives a consistent approach, wherever they live or whichever school they attend.

Unlike England, Scotland does not have a statutory national phonics screening check to assess children's early decoding skills, and I believe that we should seriously consider introducing an equivalent. In England, children undertake a phonics screening check in year 1, usually at the age of about five or six. That assesses their ability to decode words using phonics, including unfamiliar and made-up words. Children who do not meet the expected standard receive further support and are assessed again in year 2. The principle is simple: identify difficulties early, intervene promptly and give every child the best possible chance to succeed.

I would like Scotland to establish systematic synthetic phonics as the consistent foundational approach to early reading, supported by a compulsory national screening assessment at an appropriate age, potentially in primary 2. That would provide an early identification tool in order to secure appropriate support. That does not mean imposing one commercial programme on every school or undermining teachers' professional

judgment. Teachers should retain flexibility over the resources that they use, but there should be clear national expectations about the skills children must develop and how their progress is assessed.

That brings me to the call in the motion to strengthen standardised national reporting. We need to have a range of comparable data—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member will need to wind up.

Amanda Bland: Okay, I will just finish up.

If we are serious about breaking the cycle of poverty, closing the attainment gap and getting it right for every child, we must build on the excellent work that is already happening in our classrooms and ensure that every child in Scotland gets every opportunity to become a successful learner.

16:19

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Not much has been said across the chamber that I disagree with. It is heartening to know that we have our young people and our learners' interests at heart, and I encourage members across the chamber to take the cabinet secretary up on her offer to talk to and have discussions with her, because I know that she has a genuine desire to do the best for education in Scotland.

I praise Joe Long for his speech. It is incredibly important that we give voice to the voiceless in this chamber, and I agree with much of what he said.

I congratulate Scotland's young people on their achievements. There are so many things to be proud of. Examination passes have increased at every level, more than 120,000 vocational and technical qualifications have been awarded, and a joint record proportion of young people are going on to positive destinations after leaving school. I take the point that has been made about ensuring that we check the data and the sustainability of that situation, but I still want to celebrate that achievement. We have also seen record numbers of young people from our most deprived communities securing places at university.

It is important that we recognise all those achievements, because they represent different young people with different abilities, ambitions and ideas about what they want to do with their lives. Behind the figures are young people who have worked incredibly hard alongside the teachers, support staff and families who have encouraged them.

It also makes me think about how we recognise achievement and whether the value that we place on different types of learning has kept pace with the opportunities that are now available. When we talk about raising attainment, we need to consider what we mean by "achievement", how we measure it and what it looks like for different children. I absolutely want children to achieve the best possible results in literacy, numeracy and across their education. Those foundations are essential, and they will open up plenty of opportunities throughout their whole lives.

I also want us to think about the messages that children receive throughout their time at school and what success looks like. For some, university will be the right path, but for others it will be an apprenticeship, college or vocational learning. Those things should be seen not as lesser options but as different routes by which young people can develop their knowledge, skills and abilities.

James Withers has raised interesting questions about how we describe qualifications and whether the different names and titles that we give them contribute to a hierarchy in how they are perceived. Some qualifications that sit at the same level within the Scottish credit and qualifications framework involve different types of learning, but do young people, parents and employers always understand and know that? We can change qualifications and introduce new pathways, but if the surrounding culture does not change, too, we risk continuing to judge young people against a very narrow idea of success.

That question about culture also applies to how we deliver education in our schools.

Jenny Young: On the member's point about qualifications sitting at the same SCQF level, I point out that there is also an issue with colleges and, in particular, employers not necessarily knowing what some of the qualifications mean. What is her response to that?

Karen Adam: I agree. We have much to do to ensure that those things are well known to business and industry. We could all do a bit more and play our part in ensuring that we have a culture change in that respect and that people know and understand that those options are as valid as a university education.

I have met headteachers who are doing some remarkable things, and what has struck me is their willingness to challenge the way in which things have traditionally been done. That takes bravery, especially

when they are working within a system that still measures their success against long-held established expectations.

Stephen Kerr: I am glad that Karen Adam has mentioned headteachers in particular, because it is their leadership capabilities that often define a school's merits. Does she agree that we should be investing more effort in providing headteachers, or potential headteachers, with the leadership skills that they need to be that type of leader?

Karen Adam: Absolutely. We should be supporting our headteachers with anything and everything that they need. A lot of them already have those leadership skills, but we need to create a pathway for them to be able to do things. I will come on to talk about that, as part of the Government's amendment highlights that very issue.

A headteacher might recognise that, before a child can properly engage with learning, they need to feel safe, supported and understood. That can mean investing time in relationships, emotional development, family engagement and understanding what is happening beyond the school gates. It is about nurturing our learners and helping children to develop emotional intelligence so that they can communicate their needs and build healthy relationships. We are not preparing children for a life where nothing goes wrong; we are helping them to become capable of dealing with difficulties and knowing when and how to ask for help.

Schools are still accountable for attainment, attendance and educational outcomes, and the benefits of that work beyond the school gates may not appear immediately in the figures. However, that does not mean that attainment does not matter; it just means that the route to improving attainment may not always look as we have traditionally expected it to. I welcome the Scottish Government's amendment, which mentions the opportunities that we have with public sector reform, including in particular to empower school leaders.

Some of our young people face barriers that have very little to do with their ability to learn. We have to ask whether we are gathering the information that helps us to understand what is happening behind the figures. If a child is persistently absent, do we understand what is preventing them from attending? If they are struggling to achieve an expected level, have we understood why, and what support might make a difference? Better information should lead to better support for children, rather than simply giving us another way to measure the difficulties that they face. We need to understand those barriers. However, the focus must be on what schools can do to help children to overcome them. What does that delivery look like? That brings me back to how we recognise success.

A child who spends years believing that they are not very clever may carry that belief well into their adulthood, even when they have abilities that could take them further than they ever imagined. I do not want our education system to be a place where children learn what they supposedly cannot do. I want it to be a place where they discover what they can do.

16:27

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this Scottish Labour debate on education. Improving the life chances of our children and young people is not only an ambition that is shared by pupils, parents and teachers; as Michael Marra made clear, it should be a national priority for Scotland.

As the father of two primary school-aged children, I join many other members across the chamber in paying tribute to all the excellent teachers and support staff who work in our schools. I know very well from my children's school how dedicated our educational professionals are to supporting our children to succeed. I also acknowledge the innovative work that is going on in our schools to equip our children for the future. There are many examples of that, but I highlight in particular the recent appointment by Mearns Castle high school in East Renfrewshire of the first principal teacher of AI literacy anywhere in the UK.

In acknowledging the positives and strengths in Scottish education, however, we owe it to our pupils, parents, teachers and other school staff to have an honest assessment of and debate about what needs to improve and, crucially, to have a plan to improve it. The truth is that the PISA statistics that were published in September were the worst ever for Scotland. Reading ability has declined yet again, as have standards in maths, and our score for science is again way behind England's. It is little wonder that the chairman of the commission on school reform said that it was the poorest set of results that Scotland has achieved. However, the Scottish Government's response to those statistics has focused mostly on denying that there is a problem. As other members have said, if the Scottish Government does not even acknowledge that there is a problem, what hope is there of the same people fixing it?

A key problem on which we need urgent action, which has been mentioned time and time again, is the issue of school attendance. What hope do we have of improving attainment if kids are not turning up at school? Attendance by school pupils is lower than in England, and absences have remained significantly

higher after the pandemic. We are now approaching seven years since the first lockdown and the current cohort of pupils have attended school less and had less time in class than their pre-pandemic peers. I think that the cabinet secretary said that she was happy about something, but I do not think that there is anything to be happy about in relation to the attendance figures.

Related to that, during my advice surgeries last week, parents and carers came to me for help in two separate cases and raised with me that their child had been bullied for a sustained period. I am talking not just about verbal insults but about physical assaults and violence. I raised the issue with the local authority. However, that is happening across Scotland, and it is important for the Scottish Government to hear that. The cabinet secretary is not in the chamber, but I am sure that the minister will pass that on to her. We are seeing such incidents more and more. Given the level and frequency of violence in our schools, it is clearly inadequate that the Government lacks a strategy to tackle the issue. At the very least, parents and children should expect schools to be safe environments.

Stephen Kerr: Will the member take an intervention?

Neil Bibby: Do I have time, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Yes.

Stephen Kerr: Can I tempt Neil Bibby to agree that, as I said in my earlier intervention, there need to be clear consequences for poor behaviour and that the range of sanctions that are currently available to teachers is very limited? Does he agree that we should back our teachers and headteachers by spelling out to them that they will have the backing of policy makers and lawmakers if they exercise their right to make those sanctions stick in the case of persistent, very poor behaviour?

Neil Bibby: I agree with the member, but that is only part of the solution and not the whole of it. There is also an issue about resourcing—to make our schools safe environments requires resources as well as consequences.

Katherine Sangster set out Scottish Labour's plan for an overhaul in relation to data transparency, which is a sensible and pragmatic proposal that is aimed at improving our education system. Something that I do not think will help to improve things for our children is the education secretary's—or should I say "the secretary for cutting education's"?—announcement that she will give the green light to two extra in-service days being taken out of school pupils' education. I am not against teachers having extra in-service days if they need them, but the Scottish Government should be paying for those days, and not Scotland's school children through a reduction in their education.

First, there are clear childcare issues for parents. What are working parents meant to do with their kids on those extra days? Will the cabinet secretary or the Scottish Government provide childcare support for parents on those days? Secondly and more importantly, why should this generation of children, whose education has already been affected by the pandemic, have two days of education taken from them? Those children have a legal right to 190 days of school education each year, but the cabinet secretary seems quite happy to make that 188 days next year. Outside the Queen's platinum jubilee and Covid, I am not aware of a case since 1987, when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister, in which the number of school education days that a pupil in Scotland could expect has been below 190.

Màiri McAllan: The reason why we need in-service days is to give our teaching workforce the time that it needs—which it has clearly communicated to me that it needs—in order to acquaint itself with the new curriculum and be ready to implement it for our young people. I strongly suggest to the member, first, that he reflects on his opposition to teachers having time to navigate the new curriculum and, secondly, that he takes that up with the Educational Institute of Scotland, which has been crystal clear to me that that time is needed.

Neil Bibby: Teachers might require in-service days. I said that when the cabinet secretary was at the back of the chamber. I am not against teachers having extra in-service days, but why is she taking them out of children's education? Why will children lose out on two days of education to provide those in-service days? The Scottish Government should be paying for those days, and not Scotland's children. Maybe the cabinet secretary should reflect on that and the implications for families who will have to find childcare for those extra days.

Màiri McAllan: [*Made a request to intervene*.]

Kate Campbell (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Neil Bibby: The EIS might support the proposal, but how many of Scotland's parents does the cabinet secretary think support her proposal to cut the number of education days that children will receive? I am happy to give way to her if she wants to clarify that point.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Kate Campbell has also tried to intervene but, unfortunately, we do not have time.

Neil Bibby: Okay. Maybe the cabinet secretary will reflect on the matter, because for her to give that proposal the green light is outrageous and unacceptable. In my opinion, it is the start of a slippery slope. It is not fair on Scotland's parents, who are juggling childcare, or on Scotland's pupils, who will lose out, nor will it do anything to improve children's education, which is what this debate and Scottish Labour's plan are all about.

16:34

Emma Roddick (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): This is an important debate. I have been genuinely interested in the breadth of contributions that we have heard so far this afternoon, which I think reflects the complexity of what we are talking about.

I struggle with talking about the attainment gap as though it is unique to education, because growing up in a low-income household is something that impacts people in many ways, including their physical health, their lifespan and their likelihood of success in all kinds of areas. It should not be that having a family who are on low incomes means that people cannot succeed in education, but, sadly, that still seems to be the case for many.

There is an idea, which has been repeated by members from across the parties today, that education breaks the cycle of poverty. I understand why people say that, but I worry that, structurally, that is an oversimplification. I do not want to inadvertently claim that poverty is in any way a result of poor education. There are well-educated people who are struggling out there, and often the reasons for somebody struggling in school have nothing to do with what is happening in the classroom. A lot of the time, I feel as though the cause and the effect are being mixed up. If people are well off, they can afford to go to university. It is not that going to university necessarily made them well off. Even if a young person in poverty succeeds in getting into university, like I did, they might have to drop out due to the cost. Those from the most deprived areas who go to university are more likely than their peers not to return after the first year.

Willie Rennie: I appreciate the member's nuanced and considered approach to the issue, because it is not black and white. However, I am puzzled as to why, 10 years ago, the former First Minister said that her defining mission would be about closing the poverty-related attainment gap in education. Why did the then First Minister say that if the member so strongly disagrees with that assessment now?

Emma Roddick: I am grateful to Willie Rennie for his strong belief in my persuasion skills, but, as I was not here at the point when the former First Minister said that, she might not have got the message as to what my nuanced approach is. I do not necessarily say that hers was the wrong approach; I am responding to some of the comments that have been made today and am trying to squeeze a different point into the debate.

We know that children who live in poverty often struggle in lessons, however well crafted those lessons might be and however skilled the teacher is, because they are arriving hungry, tired or traumatised. Their parents or carers might be less available to help with homework, and they might not have access to the same after-school groups or experiences that their more well-off peers have.

I am not denying that educational attainment can help somebody into highly paid work or support them to be a more adaptable employee in the future, which are both very important issues, but I urge caution over this overreliance on the idea that we can break the cycle of poverty through education. Income is not wealth. Many high-earning professions, regardless of someone's qualifications, are looking for a history of unpaid internships, expensive extracurriculars and family connections. Much of what will close the attainment gap will sit in the cabinet secretary's colleagues' portfolios, be they social security, health or housing.

I turn to education itself. It is really good that developing an understanding of vocational education is increasingly being reflected in Government publications and arguments.

When I was little, I always liked learning. I did not enjoy the social aspect of school, and I would quite often spend lunchtime in my history teacher's classroom watching "Doctor Who", but I loved reading and taking quizzes. My little sister was what my family called "not academic", but she was very intelligent. She approached school differently from me. That often led to unfair comparisons between us from folk who seemed to think that there was one way to learn, one way to be smart and one way to succeed. There is not. I do not know how many qualifications my sister has at this point. She is doing visual communication, she is

thinking of taking paramedicine, and she has skills in photography, hospitality and social care. If we want to get it right for every child, we have to get it right for those who are just not suited to a rigid school timetable and written exams. Everybody has something different to offer.

Despite our differences, one thing that my sister and I had in common was the struggle of being young carers. I had 100 per cent attendance at school for years, but that changed when I was in secondary school. Mam's health was getting worse, mornings were difficult and I was often late. My own health was deteriorating as a result, and sometimes I missed school. The school insisted that Mam come in for a meeting before school one day, to discuss that. Given that the lateness was linked to getting Mam ready in the morning, that was difficult and, predictably, we were late for the meeting. Mam was in a lot of pain, I was upset and we were both stressed. We ended up getting an apology.

When I spoke to young carers last year, I found that the position has not universally improved. Better understanding of home situations is needed to ensure that young people who are struggling to do the best that they can with the hand that they were dealt are not put in even worse situations or are not discouraged by their school's response.

According to the Scottish index of multiple deprivation, young carers are more likely than other unpaid carers to live in the most deprived areas. They are more likely than other young people to be working part time while at school, to try to keep their family going. They are more than twice as likely as their peers to experience food poverty. Those are just the young carers that we know about. They are not the ones who have been told to say nothing, because social work might take them away; not the ones whose parents react to the stigma that still exists and try to hide the fact that their child is helping out at home; and not those who do not even realise that what they do is caring. We will never close the attainment gap without schools becoming much better at dealing with, supporting and educating young carers.

We need to look at the groups that are struggling the most. There is a huge overlap between low-income households and those with disability, neurodivergence, caring responsibilities or other inequalities. Each group has distinct needs. Public services must be flexible enough to respond to—and not overreact to—those needs. Young people with challenges are too often the ones who are expected to adapt—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member will have to wind up.

Emma Roddick: —and are then criticised for being unable to do so. They should be met with support instead.

16:41

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP): One of the things that I—and many others, I am sure—think about a lot at the moment is the breadth of the challenges that we face together as a democracy and a society. The fact that we face those together in a situation in which the pressure—[*Interruption*.] Sorry, Presiding Officer, there was just a mild distraction there. I will start again.

In a situation in which we face so much together as a society, and in which the constraints on us collectively are so large, the issue of educational improvement in a world that is changing so rapidly should be something that brings us together. What has been good in today's debate—I commend the drafting of all the amendments and the leading proposition in the motion—is that this should be an issue that we can come together around and seek common solutions for our constituents.

Given the pressure in the current era, we as a Parliament need to get better at agreeing certain things collectively and working towards them in the medium and longer terms, instead of seeing short-term political opportunities. There can be almost no area that is more important than education. We come at this with a collective determination to help our young people, but we are in a world that is moving so rapidly in terms of technology and our economic competitiveness. Much of what we consider normal in our education system, as well as in others, will face challenge in the period ahead, in a way that we have not yet anticipated. We need to be cohesive in our adaptability to that.

Some of us—I mean those of us in the chamber and beyond—value the wisdom of people who have been in certain disciplines for a long time. We should respect their experience. However, we must also be cognisant and mindful that things are changing at pace and that our systems will need to flex and bend.

Further, we must hear from our young people. The younger generations in Scotland and elsewhere are remarkable. When I was at school at the turn of the century, there was a sense of optimism in the air. The world was getting better and things looked brighter. Our young people who are growing up now have gone through really challenging times and have had to build their resilience due to a massive financial crisis, huge

changes in the constitutional set-up following Brexit, a pandemic, a war in Europe, continuing challenges from existential crises such as climate change, and the emerging challenge of artificial intelligence.

While we try to create greater excellence and equality in that situation, although the old necessities of numeracy and literacy are extremely important in our education system, aspects such as critical thinking, creativity, technological understanding and more vocational skills will become increasingly important.

Stephen Kerr: Will the member take an intervention?

Ben Macpherson: I will, if I have the capacity.

Stephen Kerr: As usual, Ben Macpherson is giving a very thoughtful speech. However, is he not also making an argument for the importance of the establishment of building blocks of knowledge in our education system? Context is necessary in order to apply critical thinking. If the contexts of the basic building blocks of knowledge are not there, we can sometimes drift.

Ben Macpherson: I respect individuals and experts who argue strongly from their viewpoint of a need for more knowledge content in our education system. However, I also respect the position that adaptability, flexibility and the ethos of the curriculum for excellence were right for an emerging and changing world in the 21st century. Rather than the either/or situation that is sometimes presented, the truth is, as is so often the case—albeit not necessarily as much as it should be at the heart of our politics—in the middle, in the grey and the nuance. If we as a Parliament can get to that position on the issue of education, we, our debate and our society will be all the better for it.

The curriculum improvement cycle that is coming up presents an important opportunity, and I commend the Government for its leadership on that. We should all seek to feed into that constructively, as the profession and others have done. Constituents have brought me a number of points for feeding into that process, and I would be grateful if the Government would be open minded in hearing their positions. For example, one constituent, who is the youngest member of the biggest endometriosis support group in Scotland, seeks the placing of a greater focus on women's health issues. I cite that as a small example—there are many others.

One area that others have, rightly, emphasised relates to some of the work of the Criminal Justice Committee. Although the cabinet secretary is absolutely right—and I could not agree more—that the vast majority of our young people are good and hard-working people who are achieving remarkable things, unfortunately, a minority of them are engaging in really challenging behaviour in our classrooms and streets. I fear that that minority is growing. We must work cohesively and collectively to address that issue before it continues to grow, because its consequences in our society, for those young people and those whom they affect, including teachers in our classrooms, are serious.

Duncan Dunlop: [*Made a request to intervene*.]

Ben Macpherson: I would take an intervention, but I do not think that I have the capacity to do so.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Unfortunately, the member does not have time.

Ben Macpherson: I will just say that that is one example. We used to assume that we could rely on good discipline in our classrooms. It is an example of the several things in our system—and in our society—that we cannot take for granted and on which we need to work together to make sure that they are improved.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): We move to closing speeches. Any member who wishes to make such a speech on behalf of their party should press their request-to-speak button.

16:48

Willie Rennie (Fife North East) (LD): I like the new freedom that Ben Macpherson is showing in the chamber. Free from the whips, he is able to bring new thoughts and views.

Although I recognise what Emma Roddick said about complexity and the nuanced roles of education and poverty, it would be wrong of members not to recognise that we are 10 years on from when Nicola Sturgeon promised to close the poverty-related attainment gap. That was not our promise—it was hers. Although the cabinet secretary made no reference to Nicola Sturgeon's commitment of 10 years ago, we should recognise that, when First Ministers make promises in the chamber, they should be held to account for those, because education plays a role in lifting the opportunities of everyone in society.

Màiri McAllan: I would not, for a moment, suggest to Willie Rennie that there is not a great deal more work to be done, but I hope that he will welcome just three examples of the poverty-related attainment gap having closed. The gap has been reduced by almost two thirds since 2009-10 for initial leavers; the Scottish Qualifications Authority exams this year showed a narrowing of the gap across the academic board; and a

record number of young people in Scotland from the most deprived backgrounds are going on to university. That is hard evidence of a poverty-related attainment gap being eaten away at.

Willie Rennie: On the Government's own SNSA-inspired assessments, the figures have hardly changed at all. There has been up and there has been down, and the cabinet secretary will choose other statistics, but the Government's own teacher-related assessments show hardly any difference. She should recognise when the Government has failed to deliver on its promise of 10 years ago.

Nonetheless, I give her credit for not mentioning the iconic free schoolbag policy that was in the SNP manifesto. It is almost as if she is embarrassed by the policy, because she knows that it makes not a jot of difference to educational performance in Scotland. That is why she did not mention it in a speech on education.

I welcome two measures where things have changed, because I want to be positive. The curriculum review cycle is a positive development, and the increasing role of knowledge in that review is equally welcome. I also like the approach and attitude of the new Qualifications Scotland body, which is embracing partnership across the education sector to change the way that we develop qualifications. Those are two positive developments.

I liked Joe Long's contribution, and his commitment to meeting additional support needs is commendable. Just last week, I visited Newburgh primary school, in my constituency, together with the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, to see for myself the use of the fun with phonics approach to make a difference for young people. That early intervention to help with additional support needs is incredibly important.

I agree with Fulton MacGregor on the kindergarten stage, for which Scottish Liberal Democrats have advocated, together with others, for some time.

On the Hayward review, we should be accelerating work to ensure that vocational and technical qualifications get the long sought-after parity of esteem. The way to change that is to change the way that we measure success in schools. The insight programme has to change so that we place greater emphasis on those qualifications. There was furious agreement between Laura Moodie and Katherine Sangster on the abolition of SNSAs and the reintroduction of an improved SSLN in order to get a proper survey-based approach to measuring progress in our schools.

I agree with Neil Bibby and Stephen Kerr on the issues around behaviour. We need what I would call micro consequences so that young people know where the boundaries are, because that is the way that society works. I am not for punishment; I am for making sure that we can use modern techniques to encourage people. However, what is most important is that, if everything else fails, micro consequences need to be in place. I also agree with Duncan Dunlop, who addressed issues around underemployment and shortages in school teaching positions. It is incredibly important that we get the implementation of the reduction in teacher contact time right, otherwise we will further undermine performance in our schools.

I will say one final thing to the cabinet secretary. I do not think that she should use pupils to defend herself against criticism from those in the chamber who question the Government's performance on education. They deserve better than that, and I think that the cabinet secretary can do better than that, too.

16:54

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I would almost stand to say amen to what Willie Rennie just said. Ultimately, I know that there are always pleas from those on the Government benches—in particular, the front bench—that we remove some issues from party politics, but we cannot and must not remove political accountability, and SNP ministers cannot run away from the consequences of 20 years of their education policies.

We are where we are, and they would be wise to occasionally do what Alyn Smith seems to have begun to do, which is to do a little bit of a mea culpa and begin to say that things are not good enough and that they can improve. When ministers begin to be as honest as Alyn Smith appears to be starting to become, there will be scope and space for Opposition parties to believe that we can engage with the Government on a positive basis. Alyn Smith will not thank me for citing him as an example, because that will probably ruin his political prospects in the SNP.

I agree with something that the cabinet secretary said but did not expand on. Given that we have 32 local authorities and various forms of measurement, of course we do not have all the data in the form that we need it in, in order to be able to create policy. I do not know how we can create policy on anything, in any sphere of life, if we have not collected evidence that is consistent enough that we are able to use it to come up with

some form of marker. I am amazed that the cabinet secretary can talk about the need for standardisation of data when we are 19 or 20 years into an SNP Government.

Right at the end of her time as education secretary, Jenny Gilruth was finally prepared to admit that there are aspects of education data that are completely blank. She was right to say that, and that situation needs to be resolved. That is the point that I tried to make to George Adam.

Jenny Young was absolutely right when she made her point about positive destinations, which she mentioned in a previous debate. The Government should stop using that measurement as a cover-all or a defence, because it is an inadequate measurement. If ministers are aware of what that measurement means, they will know why we object to the use of that term as a defence against issues with educational outcomes. If we look at the definitions of positive destinations—noting how short-term they are, how broad they are and how flexible they are—we can see that they are not of any use to us in measuring the positive outcomes that we all want to see from education.

Jenny Young: I agree with the point that Stephen Kerr is making. Would he agree that a zero-hours contract is not a positive destination?

Stephen Kerr: Of course, but neither are some of the voluntary positions that are mentioned.

I want our young people to pursue their life's dreams. A number of members mentioned not dreams but aspirations. In that respect, I thought that Karen Adam spoke well. The truth is that, when we are small, we dream big. I have a number of grandchildren, as some members will know, and, when I ask them what they would like to do when they get as old as grandpa, they do not mention being politicians, which is interesting, but they mention grand ideas about where they would like to be and what they would like to do, including being an astronaut—in my day, it was a train driver. However, the reality is that, as they get older and go through the education process, children lose that aspiration. That is a sin that we commit against young people.

Ben Macpherson was on to something in his speech, which was a typically thoughtful one—I agree with Willie Rennie that he has been liberated from his ministerial shackles and is now able to say what he really thinks. We need a combination of knowledge blocks—those vital elements of knowledge—and the skills that Ben Macpherson spoke so highly of. However, we need to add aspiration to those two elements. We should be teaching and exemplifying aspiration to our young people. A number of speakers referenced that, including Karen Adam. We should inculcate aspiration in our young people.

In the time that I have left, I want to mention some of the other comments that were made in the debate. I cannot remember how long I have to speak, so I will just keep speaking.

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): You have about 30 seconds left, Mr Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: I have how many minutes, sorry?

The Presiding Officer: Thirty seconds.

Stephen Kerr: Oh, my goodness.

I agree with what Duncan Dunlop said. As a proud Scot, it pains me to think that, in certain subject areas—he mentioned science—our pupils are a year behind the same age group in England. That should surely motivate us to say, "Come on, ministers. Face up to the failings and the reality of what we have here after your time in office. Stop defending the indefensible and start making the changes that we can all support, which will bring Scotland back to the front of the queue when it comes to educational excellence."

16:59

Iris Duane (Glasgow) (Green): I start by recognising what a good debate we have had. There has been consensus across the chamber and we have agreed that we need to be doing better for our young people. I ferociously agree with a few speakers. My speech will cover many of the themes about what ambition looks like that Karen Adam covered. I furiously agree with Emma Roddick's view that, although education can be a pathway out of poverty, we cannot look at it as the only pathway: many people who get an education still find themselves trapped in poverty. As Jenny Young said, zero hour contracts can also trap people in poverty.

In fairness to Stephen Kerr's grandchildren, I am still working out what I want to do when I am his age, but I am sure that I have plenty of time to get there. [*Laughter*.] My apologies to the member.

I thank Katherine Sangster for securing the motion for debate on Labour's time, and I agree with the premise of the motion. The areas of concern are astute, and her speech clearly set out where the Government could make significant progress. I am happy with Labour's new approach to cross-party working. If we had had

more time, we could have been able to come to a consensus and we could have supported the motion, but I thank Labour for the opportunity for that cross-party work. I welcome the clarification that Labour is open to getting rid of the current testing regime; it is good to see the party coming to the Greens' position on that. As members will know, I am keen to work cross-party on many of the issues. Perhaps there will be further opportunities down the line to do so.

Meghan Gallacher asked my colleague Laura Moodie an interesting question about assessments and AI, which is absolutely something that members will have to face, and we will have work to do on that. I do not believe that that means that we have to focus on the issue with regard to exam assessments, but we need to recognise that it is a problem. Meghan Gallacher knows that I like to work cross-party, so this is in no way a criticism of her and I say it kindly. I was at high school when Michael Gove introduced his education reforms in England. They were not well received in England and were overcomplicated at times.

Meghan Gallacher: Will the member take an intervention?

Iris Duane: I will let the member in in a second.

His reforms widened the attainment gap between the poorest students and their peers. I would not go forward with that model, and I think that reports have shown that it was not as successful as she would like to portray.

Meghan Gallacher: No education reform will be perfect, but the evidence shows that there were real improvements in educational outcomes for young people. I hope that we can all agree and come to a consensus on the evidence. I think that we should open the door and learn from our UK counterparts, who have been through substantial education reform.

Iris Duane: To be clear, I am more than happy to open the door and I think that we should be looking at all ideas; I was simply spelling out my concerns with Michael Gove's approach.

I cannot believe that I have had three minutes already, so I will move on.

Although I will not be able to support Duncan Dunlop's amendment, I thank the member for continuing to show leadership on students with additional support needs, as others in the chamber, such as Joe Long, who gave a fantastic speech, have done. Duncan Dunlop will know that I have raised that issue in the chamber many times. Many young people look to the chamber, so it is fantastic to see various parties showing leadership.

I do not have much time, and I will be closing. It was not mentioned nearly enough that, when we talk about inequality in our education system, we need to recognise that inequality is not spontaneous. We need to be looking at reducing inequality outside the classroom in order to reduce it inside the classroom. Children who are going home to damp, overcrowded homes will never achieve at the same level as children who have private tutors. That is a wider conversation, and I understand that it is not the subject of the motion. [*Interruption*.] I lost my sheet of paper.

I am happy that we have had such a wide conversation. It is unfortunate that I am unable to support Labour's motion unamended, but I am keen to continue to work cross-party to ensure that we are getting the best outcomes for our young people, because they are looking to us to create a future for all of us.

17:03

Senga Beresford (South Scotland) (Reform): I welcome the general consensus around the chamber. It is great to hear that everyone is looking towards the same path. Every child in Scotland, regardless of where they are born, their family circumstances, or how much their parents earn deserves the opportunity to receive the best education and fulfil their potential. However, we need to be honest about where we are. We know that Scotland's education system is not performing as it should be. Our international standing has declined, there are persistent attainment gaps and there are growing concerns about standards, attendance, behaviour and discipline.

Education should be the great leveller, breaking the cycle of poverty and giving every child an equal chance to succeed. Equality of opportunity must never become an excuse for lowering expectations, however. Children should dream big and have the confidence to believe in themselves.

We need to get back to the fundamentals of reading, writing and arithmetic. Every child should leave school able to read confidently, write clearly and manage basic numeracy. Recently, I spoke to a college lecturer in the south of Scotland who told me that, after 11 years in education, some pupils still struggle with reading and writing. That is why I welcome the call to reintroduce the Scottish survey of literacy and numeracy.

We cannot fix problems that we are unwilling to properly measure, but collecting more data is pointless unless we act on the findings. We need consistent national reporting on attendance, behaviour and additional support needs, alongside greater transparency and accountability.

Attendance must be taken seriously in our schools. Children cannot benefit from an education if they are not in the classroom. We need to consider how we help children by understanding their concerns. We must stop being afraid to talk about discipline. Teachers should not have to spend more time managing disruptive behaviour than delivering lessons. We need to restore authority in our classrooms and make it clear that unacceptable behaviour has consequences.

I have spoken to long-serving teachers who cannot wait to leave, and I have spoken to new teachers who struggle with the lack of support.

We must address the pressures within additional support needs provision. I recently spoke to a mother whose 10-year-old child had been recommended for assessments for autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and oppositional defiant disorder—ADHD and ODD—yet faced a two-year wait.

Families and teachers cannot be left struggling without the support that children need in order to thrive. Our children and their futures must come first. After all, they are the adults of the future.

Attainment, attendance, behaviour, mental health and properly resourced support services are all connected, yet young people are being failed. Our teachers feel unsupported, and there are not enough classroom assistants—every teacher I have spoken to has told me that. Having more of them would provide vital support to our teachers and for our children.

I represent rural communities, where access to services and opportunities can differ significantly from those in towns and cities. Just recently, I visited one community where children were doing a project on democracy. I said, “Why don’t you come to the Parliament for a visit?” They told me that they could not afford to do that, as they could not afford the bus.

A child’s postcode should never determine the quality of education that they receive, nor should success be measured solely by whether someone goes to university. Scotland needs skilled tradespeople, engineers, technicians and professionals. We are severely lacking in them all, as I know from running businesses. We must place greater value on apprenticeships, vocational qualifications and practical skills, giving young people different pathways to successful careers. That is another area where people are struggling, and I know that personally. Surely if young people leave school without understanding debt, loans, mortgages or pensions, we have failed to prepare them properly for adult life.

Schools cannot solve every problem caused by poverty or family circumstances, but they can provide stability, aspiration and a route to a better future. We need higher expectations, consistent national standards, greater accountability and properly resourced schools. Above all, we need an education system that puts children first and gives every young person the chance to succeed, regardless of their background. The greatest injustice that we can inflict on a child is to allow their circumstances at birth to determine their circumstances in adulthood.

17:09

The Minister for Innovation, Technology and Tertiary Education (Alyn Smith): I commend members on a genuinely useful and impressive debate today. I refer to my entry in the register of members’ interests: my husband is a secondary school teacher. I can assure members that I get lobbied on the issue almost daily.

There is a lot of common ground between the Labour motion, the Government amendment and a number of positions held across the chamber. I will highlight the last few words of the Government amendment, because we accept a lot of the premise that the Labour Party has brought forward. It says that Parliament

“affirms that, in the pursuit of excellence and equity, the … Government should drive meaningful reform across the education system, including by working with parties across the Chamber to identify priorities for school assessments such as the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy and Scottish National Standardised Assessments, and embrace the opportunity of public sector reform to enhance performance, reduce unwarranted variation and empower school leaders across Scotland.”

Jenny Young: I do not disagree with any of that, but could the minister identify what is a higher priority in our education system than literacy and numeracy?

Alyn Smith: That is a very high priority. Indeed, it is a priority for the Government, which is what we are talking about in the debate, and there is common ground across parties on how we measure that.

As members know, I am new to this role and to this Parliament, so I did not know why the Scottish survey of literacy and numeracy had been replaced. I dug into it, and it was not scrapped. It is not like we scrapped

it and are not doing anything else. It was replaced in 2016, following concerns about just how much it dug into the system. We have the achievement of curriculum for excellence levels data, and the national improvement framework has 16 relevant measurements.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I am grateful for the explanation, but the minister must acknowledge that the key difference is that the SSLN was a statistically robust data set; its replacement was not as statistically robust and, critically, that disrupted the continuous data set, which means that we can no longer make comparisons with previous cohorts.

Alyn Smith: I would take that point, but it was a survey and it was insufficient.

Daniel Johnson: It was a statistic.

Alyn Smith: There was a very different debate when it was abolished, as members might remember.

It is not that we are not measuring things. We have 16 measures in the national improvement framework and the ACEL data. For international comparisons, we have PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS. We are not lacking data in this field.

I accept the point, particularly on a regional basis, that local authorities might be collecting things differently. I was drawn to Joe Long's excellent speech about how we need to have a proper discussion about absence and participation, because I think that local authorities record that in different ways.

However, I must refer to our amendment. We are reaching out to parties to work with us to assess whether what we are doing is adequate. Simply positing the return of the Scottish survey on literacy and numeracy is not sufficient.

Stephen Kerr: The minister must acknowledge that Jenny Gilruth has already accepted that there are inadequacies, so we do not need to conduct many more discussions and reviews on whether we have the data. She is already saying that we do not have the data. If she concluded that after a lengthy spell as the education secretary, surely the Government should know where the gaps are; otherwise, she would not have said what she said. Surely that is logical.

Alyn Smith: I suspect that the Deputy First Minister might take issue with that version of her comments. I am aware that she said that there were gaps in the data, but I think that she was talking about the regional aspect of how different local authorities apply different things.

As is clear in our amendment, we are seeking to reduce unwarranted variation, empower school leaders and work with parties towards this common aim. That is a genuine offer on our part.

I am grateful that Stephen Kerr did not praise me again, However, as he said, I am willing to accept that we are not doing as well as we need to do, and to work with other parties. I can say genuinely that that applies to the whole of the Government. We are willing to take this forward.

We have had a number of good speeches across the parties today. Katherine Sangster made a very thoughtful speech. I would take issue with her saying that the statistics system is "opaque". My sense of it is that we are analysing too much, if anything. We need to clarify what we are doing, standardise it on a national basis and ensure that we do not overload the system with analysis paralysis, which was one of the concerns about the previous regime.

Laura Moodie made an excellent speech, particularly on the point of making uniform guidance statutory. That is a very sensible point for a lot of people, and we accept that analysis.

Meghan Gallacher also made a thoughtful speech, but she accused the Government of having a "nothing to see here" attitude. She knows me better than that. I am not here to justify things that are not working, and the same attitude is taken across the Government. We have embarked on the public sector reform processes because we are looking to do things differently by changing health boards, education systems, regional government and regional economic partnerships. All of that is on the table, because we know that we need to do better. The world around us and the skills landscape are changing at pace, and we need to keep up.

From the Liberal Democrats, Duncan Dunlop made a strong point about STEM, with which I, as innovation and technology minister, fully agree. He and other members will be hearing a lot from me about the Scotland does science programme. I have been working with the chief scientific adviser to raise awareness of the fact that we do brilliant science in Scotland, but not enough young people are being enthused about it early enough in their education. I take on that challenge as my responsibility.

George Adam made the strong point that the circumstances of a child should not be a barrier to their options and chances in life. We are all working towards making that the case.

As well as making the point about better assessing participation and absences, Joe Long mentioned the McManus review. He will be aware that the Government accepted and is implementing all the review's recommendations. There is a lot of common ground on that. I also strongly agree on his point about ASN data varying locally. There is variance in how such data is collected, so we are comparing apples with pears.

For many years, Fulton MacGregor has been a strong advocate of the kindergarten stage of education. I can say, safe in the knowledge that I am not responsible for schools, that he makes a very interesting proposition. He is meeting the cabinet secretary because we are not closed to new ideas about how to do things differently.

Laura Moodie: I want to make a brief intervention about the kindergarten stage. As the minister and the cabinet secretary are aware, the expanded learning through play in the curriculum for excellence already goes beyond P1, but a big barrier to implementing a kindergarten-stage approach to learning is the fact that there are P1 SNSAs. That encourages teachers to teach to those assessments rather than provide play-based learning, which we know makes the biggest difference. As we take a cross-party approach in considering the assessments, let us bear that in mind and seize the opportunity to embed play-based learning.

Alyn Smith: Laura Moodie makes a strong point. There is a wider conversation to be had. Perhaps we are talking about the same things with different names, but there is a lot of common ground. I am very drawn to the idea of play-based learning.

As a former teacher, Amanda Bland has a very interesting perspective on the subject. She made a strong argument on the need for consistent national reporting, which is mentioned in the Government's amendment. We are strongly working towards that.

Karen Adam gets a gold star from me for mentioning the Withers review. Members know that I am very much a fan of the Withers review and approach. I believe that that is a case of work undone, so I am strongly pushing us to, I hope, reject the idea that there is a hierarchy of routes—the idea that the only route to success involves a bucket of highers and a university degree. I reject that outright. We need real parity of esteem, so we must provide different ways into the system.

Neil Bibby mentioned the AI literacy teacher at Mearns Castle high school. I am aware of that development, and it has a lot to be said for it, because we, as a nation, need to upskill our knowledge and understanding of AI as a technology, with all its potential and all its risks. We need to have a realistic assessment of that, and I do not think that knowledge of the technology is sufficiently widespread outside of some tech specialists. The development that Neil Bibby mentioned is really interesting, and I am looking to update members on something like that fairly soon.

Emma Roddick made a powerful speech about the impact of poverty on attainment. How we measure that is one part of the process. I accept that, if there are things that we need to change, we can change them, but poverty is driving the lack of attainment, which is why we are investing so much in closing the attainment gap, as we have heard, and in fighting poverty.

In a thoughtful speech, Ben Macpherson made a point that I have made many times: the world around us is changing at pace. The skills landscape is changing, and the economy of the future will be markedly different from the economy right now. My wee nieces, who are aged 11 and 14, will have jobs that do not exist yet, and I am not convinced that we are sufficiently ahead of the pace of change.

Willie Rennie mentioned the curriculum review cycle as a positive development. I was glad to hear that, because we are serious about changing what is happening. I was pleased to hear Willie Rennie refer to Qualifications Scotland's new attitude. I have been working with Qualifications Scotland a lot to try to simplify and declutter the skills landscape. It is not just school attainment that we are talking about; it is attainment right the way through into the lifelong learning journey. I think that we have an overly cluttered landscape in that space, and Qualifications Scotland is working on that at pace.

We have had a good debate, and there is a lot of common ground.

Willie Rennie: I like the fact that the minister picked out the things that I agreed with him on. Is there any chance that he could reflect on the issues that we disagreed on, so that we can make some progress?

Alyn Smith: Willie Rennie knows very well that I reflect on a lot of things that are not going as well as they need to go. I am not here to justify things that are not working or to justify the status quo; I am working hard to make sure that it changes.

It has been a good debate, and there is a lot of common ground across the parties. I am very glad to close it for the Government and to put forward the Government amendment. I hope that members will back it and

that we can work together on the issue, because it is too important for us not to do that. We cannot allow our young people to be let down, and we need to work together to make sure that that work goes forward.

17:20

Jenny Young (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Lab): I direct members to my entry in the register of interests, which shows that I am currently a fully registered teacher with the General Teaching Council for Scotland, representatives of which I met this afternoon to discuss teacher recruitment issues.

I echo the point that other members have made that there has been a fair amount of consensus in the debate. That shows that we all want the best for our young people, but there might be shades of grey around how we think the outcomes can best be achieved. However, there has been a good degree of consensus, and I thank everyone for their contributions.

I was particularly struck by contributions from a number of members who touched on the hugely disruptive impact that the Covid pandemic had on education. I was a teacher during that time, and I saw that at first hand. I also saw the long-term impact on young people who went through transition points during those years, which underlines the point that was well made by several members.

I am slightly concerned by the conflation of public sector reform and education reform. To me, those are two very different things. Yes, we need public sector reform and we also need education reform, but they are very different. I caution against viewing education reform through the lens of cost cutting or rationalisation.

Joe Long made a powerful speech on support for people with additional needs, and a number of other members raised important points about that.

I thank Karen Adam for her contribution, in which she talked about how we recognise a range of achievement and the different paths that people follow. That is important, and it is also important that it does not get lost in talk about how we close the attainment gap.

Emma Roddick also made a powerful contribution, and her reflection on the experience of a young carer is really important. In my time as a teacher, I saw the additional burdens on young carers, which often go unseen by schools. It is very important to recognise that.

Amanda Bland made another good contribution, with helpful reflections on how we might improve the teaching of reading. I was not a primary school teacher, but I agree that that is certainly a worthwhile issue and one on which the Government seems to be listening.

Duncan Dunlop touched on the important issue of teacher shortages, which I discussed with the GTCS earlier today. There are huge difficulties, particularly in rural areas, but then there is an overheating of the sector, particularly in the central belt, with many teachers struggling to find work.

Overall, there are a huge number of issues, and there is no shortage of work for the Government to do.

This morning, I met a group of P6 pupils from Linlithgow primary school who were visiting the Parliament and who had plenty of suggestions as to how we might improve Scottish education, most of which revolved around having more PE and there being more pizza in the canteen. However, one of the pupils asked me why I became an MSP, which is a question that I sometimes ask myself. I told them about the boy in an S1 French class who I taught about eight years ago and who could not read a word of English. He was a native speaker of the language, but he could not read. Seeing that boy being failed by our education system was what lit a spark in me—a determination that things could and should be better.

The promise of Scottish education should be that, no matter who someone is or where they come from, if they go to school and work hard, school and education are a passport to a better life. However, with an attainment gap between rich and poor that has barely budged in 10 years, that promise is being broken for far too many of our young people. That is not to say that there are not good things happening in Scotland's schools—of course there are. Every day in our schools, hard-working staff go above and beyond, and young people achieve great things. I totally and utterly reject the accusation that I am talking down our teachers and pupils—nothing could be further from the truth.

My argument is that we are still failing too many young people from deprived backgrounds, care-experienced young people, young carers, neurodivergent young people and young people with a range of additional needs that are not currently being met. Meanwhile, there are hundreds of teachers in insecure work or out of work altogether. Probationers do not get jobs and the supply list continues to grow, while teachers and schools feel that they are being stretched more and more thinly every year.

I will turn to the question of data. We certainly should not rely on PISA as the only empirical data about the state of Scottish education, but that is the situation that successive SNP education secretaries have put us

in. It was John Swinney who, as Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, scrapped the Scottish survey of literacy and numeracy in 2017. If the minister is going to question the validity of statistical surveys, the ONS will be in for a bit of a shock.

Màiri McAllan: We can engage on this issue when I meet Scottish Labour members about it. However, the changes that were made to the data in relation to the SSLN were informed by recommendations made by the OECD. Those recommendations reflected that the survey approach was not giving us the specificity that was needed to allow us to drive improvement work. That is something that we can pick up on. I get the feeling that Labour wants specificity in data that can be measured and worked on, but that will not be provided by moving back to the SSLN.

Jenny Young: I do not think that the OECD said to scrap the data altogether. We could certainly enhance the data but, at the moment, we do not have it, and what replaced it was wholly inadequate.

The Government should be questioning—as I know that many teachers and parents across Scotland are also questioning—the significant gap between the PISA results and the rest of the data that is currently available on Scottish education. How can we be confident in the data that we currently have available when there is such a disparity? That is not to question the professionalism and the dedication of our teachers, nor the hard work and ability of our brilliant young people. However, the current system appears designed to say that things are always getting better, even when they are clearly not. It says that 95 per cent of 2024-25 school leavers went on to positive destinations, yet we know that a growing number of young people aged 18 to 24 are not in employment, education or training. I welcomed the minister's comments last week that he is open to looking at a different measure, and Labour certainly stands ready to work with the Government to make that happen.

I have long felt that this Government's rhetoric on the importance of education has not matched the seriousness with which it has treated the issue. Alarming PISA results and NEET figures have not yet provoked an adequate response. The cabinet secretary has pointed to the curriculum improvement cycle, and we are hopeful that that will bring the changes that are required. I know that teachers stand willing to engage with the process, but, so far, that process has amounted to their being sent AI-generated PowerPoint slides that are littered with errors and having two further in-service days. We support further reform, but it needs to be done in the proper way; there has not been significant reform in the past 10 years.

There is nothing to stop the Government reintroducing the Scottish survey of literacy and numeracy and enhancing the process. Frankly, I cannot fathom why members across the Parliament would want to kick the issue into the long grass. I urge all colleagues to back Labour's motion this evening.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on improving attainment, tackling inequality and strengthening national standards in education.

Business Motion

17:28

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S7M-01982, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 17 November 2026

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by General Questions

followed by First Minister's Questions (Backbench Members)

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Energy Prices and the Cost of Living

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

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

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.30 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 18 November 2026

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Deputy First Minister Responsibilities, Finance and Local Government, Parliamentary Business and Veterans; Public Service Reform, Europe, External Affairs and Energy

followed by Scottish Green Party Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.30 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 19 November 2026

1.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

1.30 pm General Questions

2.00 pm First Minister's Questions (Party Leaders)

followed by Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body Questions

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Prevention and Preventative Budgeting

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Tuesday 24 November 2026

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by General Questions

followed by First Minister's Questions (Backbench Members)

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.30 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 25 November 2026

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Justice; Health and Care

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.30 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 26 November 2026

1.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

1.30 pm General Questions

2.00 pm First Minister's Questions (Party Leaders)

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 16 November 2026, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motion

17:28

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is consideration of a Parliamentary Bureau motion. I call Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motion S7M-01983, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Budget (Scotland) Act 2026 Amendment Regulations 2026 [draft] be approved.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

The Presiding Officer: The question on the motion will be put at decision time.

Motion without Notice

17:29

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 11.2.4 of standing orders, that decision time be brought forward to now. I invite a member of the Parliamentary Bureau, or the Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans, to move such a motion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time be brought forward to 5.29pm.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

Motion agreed to.

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