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

Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 17 November 2026

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

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): Good afternoon, colleagues. The first item of business is time for reflection, which will be led today by Dr David Strang CBE QPM, from prisoners week Scotland.

Dr David Strang CBE QPM (Prisoners Week Scotland): Presiding Officer, and members of the Scottish Parliament, thank you for the opportunity to address you this afternoon.

I want to take you back to when you woke up this morning. This very same morning, 8,500 people woke up in prison in Scotland. Why are they there? There are four reasons why people are sent to prison—as punishment, to protect the public, as a deterrence, and for rehabilitation.

This week is prisoners week across Scotland—a week to celebrate the work of chaplains in supporting the most vulnerable people in prison and their families. During prisoners week, activities are organised to link local church groups and other community groups with local prisons and raise awareness of key issues.

It is not just the people serving a sentence who experience the impact of imprisonment; the lives of many other people who are close to them are also deeply affected. A child whose parent is in prison certainly feels the consequences of an absent parent. Can you imagine the impact on a child of their parent being in prison—the stigma and bullying they experience at school?

Partners—wives and husbands—and other family members, including parents, brothers, sisters, and cousins, also feel the pain of imprisonment. Surely, no one designed the outcome of a sentencing and penal policy to be broken relationships, poor mental and physical health, loss of employment, homelessness, or addiction, yet all of those are common results of imprisonment for both the people in prison and their relatives and friends—the unintended consequences.

The theme of this year's prisoners week is show mercy, which recognises the human being behind the mask and behind the labels. Mercy does not ignore harm or pretend that wrongdoing does not matter but it chooses to see the person, not just the worst thing they have ever done. Justice and mercy go together—no one benefits from a system in which injustice prevails. Mercy is expressed through kindness, forgiveness and understanding; through giving someone a second chance—refusing to write them off and, instead, nourishing hope. Mercy does not minimise the impact of crimes on victims, but reduces the harm and pain for everyone in the justice system and produces better outcomes for the benefit of everyone in Scotland.

The next time you see a prison van on the road on its way to or from prison, remember not just the person inside the tiny cell, but their families and friends and the victims of crime.

Business Motion

14:05

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is consideration of motion S7M-02079, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on a revised business motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revision to the programme of business for Tuesday 17 November 2026—

after

followed by First Minister's Questions (Backbench Members)

insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: NHS Grampian—[*Jamie Hepburn*.]

Motion agreed to.

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

General Question Time

14:05

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is general question time. A lot of members are keen to ask supplementaries, so I would appreciate short, sharp questions and answers.

Housing Supply

1. **Gary Bouse (Falkirk West) (SNP):** I refer members to my registered interest as a Falkirk councillor.

To ask the Scottish Government what progress is being made towards addressing Scotland's housing emergency, including what discussions it has had with all stakeholders to increase house building across all tenures. (S7O-00507)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The Scottish Government has taken action to address immediate pressures by delivering a co-ordinated national response that is helping families to access permanent homes and helping to increase the housing supply across Scotland. Housing remains a key priority for the Government, and that ambition is supported by investment of up to £4.9 billion over the next four years, including a record £4.1 billion of public sector funding to support the delivery of around 36,000 affordable homes.

We continue to work closely and collaboratively with a range of housing partners, including councils, housing associations and the house building industry, to deliver more homes across Scotland.

Gary Bouse: Over the past four years, as housing portfolio holder at Falkirk Council, I became acutely aware of the financial challenges in bringing forward housing projects such as the 137 social homes that are currently being built in Denny. Those financial challenges will affect all tenures of housing. With recent news that general inflation is likely to rise to 5 per cent and remain there, does the cabinet secretary agree that action has to be taken by the United Kingdom Government as a matter of urgency to support house building across Scotland? Can she outline any further steps that the Scottish Government can take to support private and social housing in Scotland?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I agree with the member that rising costs and wider economic pressures present significant challenges to the delivery of homes across tenures. That is the context that we are in, and the example that Gary Bouse gives from Denny is an important one.

The Scottish Government will continue to do all that it can within its powers and resources to support housing delivery. Obviously, the Government will work with the Scottish National Investment Bank and support private investors to find opportunities in Scotland. However, the UK Government must also take action to provide greater economic stability—indeed, any economic stability—and tackle inflationary pressures. That will create the conditions that will support housing investment across Scotland and the UK.

Andrew Baxter (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD): Across the west Highlands, a significant hurdle to small rural housing developments is the cost of essential infrastructure, including improving road junctions and water and sewage connections. What will the cabinet secretary do to provide additional support to overcome those costs and help to get much-needed rural homes built?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The Government has a number of rural and island housing support grants that can assist with provision in rural and island areas. Obviously, we have benchmarking in the affordable housing supply programme, but that is there as a benchmark and not a ceiling, because we recognise the additional costs of building in rural and island communities. The planning minister is very conscious of the challenges that are faced in rural and island communities. As she is doing her work to see what can be done to simplify and assist house builders and others, that issue is another area that will be taken into consideration.

Calum Kerr (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I recognise the ambition and the progress that the Government is making in addressing the housing emergency, but what reassurance can the cabinet secretary offer areas such as mine that rurality will be given sufficient weight as a factor when designing schemes through more homes Scotland to reflect the increased costs and difficulty of building in areas such as Midlothian and the Borders?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Calum Kerr raises an important point. Recently, I had a useful meeting with South of Scotland Enterprise to discuss the issues that he touched on regarding his constituency, which of course apply across the Borders and also Dumfries and Galloway. I also had an exceptionally useful meeting recently with Mull and Iona Community Trust, which was attended by the constituency member, Jenni Minto, and I also attended the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations rural and islands housing conference to

talk about how we can use our new agency, more homes Scotland, and the specific workstream that it is developing on rural and island housing to support greater levels of house building in those areas.

Holly Bruce (Glasgow Southside) (Green): There are more than 180,000 pending applications for social housing across Scotland, with 19,000 households in temporary accommodation and more than 4,000 people sleeping on the streets. How is the Scottish Government working to increase social housing availability to meet that need, and how will households who are in temporary accommodation and sleeping rough be supported into long-term accommodation, so that we can finally eradicate homelessness in Scotland?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I will provide some examples of how we are looking to ensure that we make the best use of our current stock. The Scottish Government is working to support the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership to ensure that empty homes across different communities in Scotland are brought back into use, and it will be even better if that can be done in a way that provides affordable housing. The number of applications to and starts in the affordable housing supply programme is also increasing, which is welcome as we build up the pace to support the provision of new homes and do more work to support the current and existing stock.

Inquiry into White Working Class Educational Outcomes

2. **Thomas Kerr (Glasgow) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the first phase of the independent inquiry into white working class educational outcomes, including whether there are any comparable themes in Scotland. (S7O-00508)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): As I wrote on 24 July in response to Mr Kerr's very similar written question, we do not measure attainment or educational outcomes by class in Scotland. However, we measure them by deprivation using the Scottish index of multiple deprivation, and we use several key policies, not least the Scottish attainment challenge, to mitigate the impact of poverty on educational outcomes. Those policies have collectively resulted in important progress being made in closing the poverty-related attainment gap. Notably, that includes reducing the gap for young people who leave school and go on to a positive initial destination by almost two thirds since 2009-10.

Thomas Kerr: Today's long-awaited Milburn report, which shows that almost 1 million 16 to 24-year-olds across Britain are being left behind, will make for a sobering read for countless Labour, Tory and Scottish National Party politicians. We already know that Scotland's attainment gap is wider than it was before the pandemic, and the cabinet secretary must surely recognise that there is a systemic problem with educational outcomes for white children from working-class backgrounds. Will the Scottish Government therefore commit to a dedicated inquiry to specifically examine the educational attainment of white working-class pupils in order to understand why they continue to be left behind, or will the cabinet secretary continue to leave a generation of young Scots on the dole with no hope, aspiration or opportunity?

Màiri McAllan: I care about white children as much as I care about working-class children and every young person and child in this country regardless of their social or demographic background and regardless of their race or ethnicity. Alan Milburn's report is extensive, and the Government will take our time to consider its recommendations as they pertain to education and skills and social security.

For my part, which is in the education portfolio, I can see that a great deal of what Mr Milburn is recommending for England is aligned with what the SNP has been pursuing in Scotland for many years. We have pursued a strong mix of vocational and academic qualifications and pathways from school, a broad general education in the early years and close alignment between schools and colleges, and it now looks as though recommendations are being made for England to follow suit. Young people have been waiting an awful long time for a UK Government to realise that such action is required.

Amanda Bland (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Ind): The independent inquiry highlighted the importance of early identification of literacy difficulties. In light of those findings, will the Scottish Government consider introducing a statutory national phonics screening check for all primary school children in Scotland, similar to the phonics screening check that is used in England, to identify children who might be falling behind at an early stage and ensure that they receive the right support at the right time, in keeping with the principles of getting it right for every child?

Màiri McAllan: I welcome Amanda Bland's reference to and endorsement of getting it right for every child. It goes to the heart of what I said to Mr Kerr, because it is about every child and not only those that he would pick and choose to care about from one moment to the next.

Amanda Bland knows, because we have had exchanges on this before, that our curriculum is undergoing the biggest update since the inception of curriculum for excellence, and that includes literacy, including in the earliest years, and consideration of phonics. That work is under way. Education Scotland has just published the first extensive draft of the new framework, and I encourage Amanda Bland to engage with that process.

Early Learning and Childcare (Expansion of Eligibility)

3. **Martyn Day (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what progress it has made in considering extending eligibility for funded early learning and childcare from age two to children from multiple births. (S7O-00509)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): We recognise that childcare costs can be a challenge for families and that they can have a particular impact on families with multiple births. As the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise, Siobhian Brown, set out in a response to Monica Lennon in the chamber in October, we are developing a blueprint for childcare transformation, which will be published and consulted on next year. I assure Mr Day that the question of the extra costs that accrue to families with multiple births will be part of that work, and I encourage everyone with an interest to participate in the consultation.

Martyn Day: I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to expanding childcare to support family incomes and help parents across employment. However, that transformation will take time. Meanwhile, families with twins, triplets or other multiples face the immediate costs of paying for several childcare places at once. Ahead of the wider expansion, will the cabinet secretary consider making multiple birth status an eligibility criterion for funded early learning and childcare from the age of two? Will she set out when a decision on that could be reached?

Màiri McAllan: I affirm that, as I said in my earlier answer, the extra costs that accrue to families with multiple births will be taken into account, along with rurality and families with children who have additional support requirements and disabilities. The experience of all those families in accessing the 1,140 hours offer, which was significant and which we have successfully rolled out, is being taken into account as we consider the transformation and the Government's commitment to extend the childcare offer from the age of nine months until primary 7. As I said, the minister is developing that blueprint and will set it out for consultation.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Although consideration of that expansion is welcome, providers across Scotland continue to raise concerns that the funding rates do not accurately reflect the costs of delivery. The National Day Nurseries Association has noted that 93 per cent of providers say that the sustainable rates do not cover delivery costs. Will the cabinet secretary give a commitment to review the sustainable rates setting process before introducing any further childcare expansion?

Màiri McAllan: Alongside the question of who may access the provision and how, the minister will consider the rates and a range of other matters as part of the transformation. However, it is worth putting on the record that, under the jointly agreed funding follows the child framework—we believe strongly in that principle—local authorities are responsible for setting rates that reflect the costs of delivery. Sustainable rates have increased by more than 87 per cent during the 1,140 hours expansion, with more than 90 per cent of workers who deliver funded ELC now being paid more than the real living wage.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Con): I will welcome the opportunity to scrutinise the blueprint when it arrives. However, the cabinet secretary will be aware of other issues with the current provision of funded childcare, such as the workforce; rates per child, which have just been mentioned; cross-boundary arrangements; and term-time start dates—and the list goes on. In order to give confidence to nursery providers and parents, will she update Parliament on the work that is being undertaken right now to resolve the issues before any announcement is made about the expansion of childcare?

Màiri McAllan: The member knows and, I think, understands that the Government's expectation is that local authorities should be putting in place cross-boundary arrangements. I emphasised our funding follows the child principle in my response to Claire Baker. That is our expectation, and a number of local authorities manage that very well.

I understand that the question whether children start at the age of three is difficult for parents across Scotland. We have committed to looking at that as part of the transformation. I have said on the record before that there can be practical difficulties, such as having new starts every Monday, as some providers have put it to me. Rates, wages and workforce availability are being closely considered by the Government.

Tenement Buildings (Maintenance)

4. **Graham Simpson (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government when it plans to introduce legislation on tenement maintenance. (S7O-00510)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing (Shirley-Anne Somerville): I remain committed to taking action to deliver the changes that are needed to support owners and ensure that common property is protected and preserved for the benefit of future generations. The Government is in the early stages of the work and will explore the issues that have been raised in the Scottish Law Commission's report, as well as

engaging with key stakeholders on potential next steps. I am not in a position to provide a timetable for that work yet, but I commit to updating the Parliament as the work progresses.

Graham Simpson: The tenement maintenance working group was established in March 2018, which was more than eight and a half years ago. Its final recommendations were published in June 2019 and the Scottish Law Commission reported on compulsory owners associations in December 2025, which was almost one year ago. This parliamentary session will end in 2031. If it takes until then for legislation to be passed, it will have been 13 years since the group was established. It could take even longer than that for any action, which is little comfort to the owners of a crumbling tenement block in Glasgow's south side. The cabinet secretary knows all about that; those residents have been out of their homes for more than a year.

The Presiding Officer: The member needs to ask a question, please.

Graham Simpson: Given the length of time that has elapsed, will the cabinet secretary agree to meet me and other interested members in order to see how we can move the issue forward collectively?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I hope that Graham Simpson will be pleased to know that I have met officials in the past couple of weeks to discuss how that work can be taken forward. In that meeting, I discussed how important it was that we linked with the members of the working group on tenement maintenance, as well as new members who may not have been involved to date but have a particular interest in the issues.

I am always delighted to meet Mr Simpson to discuss housing issues. We will endeavour to ensure that members who wish to take part can provide their views in a timely manner so that they are taken into consideration as I develop the work.

The Presiding Officer: Lots of members are keen to come in, but time is running away from us. I will take one more supplementary.

Steven Bonnar (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): We know that tenement and four in a block-style properties can have multiple owners and often struggle to organise and finance shared repairs, maintenance and enhancement work. Can the cabinet secretary tell us more about the work that the Scottish Government is taking forward to enable repairs, maintenance and environmental enhancements to such properties?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The Government is looking at the work that was undertaken by the SLC and the recommendations in its report, as well as the work of the working group, which I referenced in my answer to Graham Simpson. It is important that we look at the legislative changes that are required, as well as noting that there would be a change for property owners. It is important for us to recognise that issue so that we get the work right, which is why I will keep members up to date.

M8 Woodside Eastbound Viaduct

5. **Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the progress of the M8 Woodside eastbound viaduct. (S7O-00511)

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport (Stephen Flynn): Extensive and essential concrete repairs are required to joints. We anticipate that the eastbound carriageway will reopen in early 2027 and we expect the westbound works to be completed in the second half of next year.

It is opportune that I update the Parliament that we expect the costs of the completed project to be in the region of £175 million to £185 million. I thank Pauline McNeill for her continued interest in the matter and I thank residents, businesses and commuters for their continued patience while the essential works are undertaken.

Pauline McNeill: I hope that the cabinet secretary shares my disappointment, because the road was supposed to be opened in autumn 2026 after five years of work. I was not aware, but I now know, that the road will be opened in the early part of 2027.

Will the cabinet secretary commit today to giving the public and my constituents better engagement with Transport Scotland on the progress on this very important road? I know that he shares my view on the critical importance of the M8 for the east and west of Scotland, but it is about time that we had more up-to-date information on when the road will be complete.

Stephen Flynn: Like me, Pauline McNeill has been under the viaduct and seen the extent of the essential works that have been required. She will be cognisant of the issues that relate to the existence of a sewer in a place that was not anticipated, the proximity of the Strathclyde Partnership for Transport subway and the need to ensure that that remains safe, and the procurement challenges that undoubtedly exist because of global matters. If there is more work to be done, I will be quite happy to engage with the member. I share her disappointment, but we anticipate the eastbound carriageway being opened in early 2027. I hope that that is

some comfort to road users, residents and businesses, who I know want the work to be completed as quickly as possible.

School Assessments (Priorities)

6. **Katherine Sangster (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government when it will produce a plan on priorities for school assessments, including the reintroduction of the Scottish survey of literacy and numeracy. (S7O-00512)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): During our debate on education on 11 November, it was clear that there is a great deal of common ground across the chamber, and I was very pleased that Parliament backed a position that means that we are not tied to one approach, including the Scottish survey, but instead agreed to engagement on those matters. I will reach out to members across the chamber to have those conversations shortly.

Katherine Sangster: Scottish Labour is very clear that the change is needed now, so will the cabinet secretary outline when the cross-party talks will start, so that we do not see reforms being kicked into the long grass?

Màiri McAllan: There is no sense whatsoever from this Government of reforms being kicked into the long grass. As a Government, we are poised and taking forward reform across the public sector under the First Minister's public service reform agenda.

We do not agree that the Scottish survey is the best route. That would involve returning to something that, at the time, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development was clear did not offer specificity, and I want specificity on the data in our education system. I will reach out to members shortly, and we can have a full discussion about the right approach.

Community Health Services (NHS Lanarkshire)

7. **Alex Kerr (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on plans to expand community health services across NHS Lanarkshire as part of its wider shift towards preventative healthcare. (S7O-00513)

The Minister for Community Care (Alison Thewliss): Our programme for government sets out a clear commitment to shift the balance of care closer to home by strengthening community support and bringing services together around people and places. Our community first preventative approach will be supported by investment in community health and care hubs and the improved use, maintenance and sustainability of community assets, including general practitioner premises, community hospitals, community centres and the wider public sector estate. That will be nationally enabled but locally designed and delivered, ensuring that services reflect the specific needs of local areas, such as Lanarkshire, to reduce inequalities and support the sustainability of community health and social care services for the future.

Alex Kerr: Like the minister, I note that more community facilities are key to reducing the pressure on acute services in our national health service and across our public sector. In my constituency, there has been a commitment for investment in a community health hub and GP walk-in centre in Hamilton. Can the minister provide an update on progress towards delivery of that development?

Alison Thewliss: Although there are not currently plans for a walk-in service in Hamilton, I am sure that Alex Kerr will be very vociferous in lobbying for one. NHS Lanarkshire is taking forward plans to expand walk-in services across Lanarkshire, including new services in East Kilbride and North Lanarkshire.

Care Homes (Emergency Preparedness)

8. **Helen McDade (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government, with regard to recent United Kingdom Government advice that households should prepare for emergencies with three days of supplies and for power outages, what assessment it has made of the preparedness of care homes in Scotland. (S7O-00514)

The Minister for Community Care (Alison Thewliss): Scotland already promotes emergency preparedness through Ready Scotland, which provides advice and guidance to help individuals, communities and businesses to prepare for and respond to emergencies and disruption. Care homes are expected to have appropriate emergency preparedness, business continuity and contingency arrangements in place to support the safety and wellbeing of residents during disruptive events, including severe weather, power outages and other emergencies. Relevant national resilience and preparedness guidance is available through Ready Scotland and wider Scottish resilience arrangements.

Helen McDade: I have personally asked care homes what their arrangements are, and they have said that the power providers would bring in generators. However, what will care homes be expected to do if there is a major power outage? The power companies would not have enough generators. If the Government does not know the percentage of care homes that have their own arrangements, will it ask the Care Inspectorate to look into the situation before the worst of winter comes?

Alison Thewliss: I appreciate Helen McDade's concerns. However, Scottish care homes are expected to have robust business continuity and emergency plans that address power outages and ensure that residents can continue to receive safe care. The health and care standards are expected to be maintained at all times, and the Care Inspectorate, as the independent regulator, is responsible for the inspection and enforcement of those standards.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes general question time. I apologise to the many members whom I was unable to take this afternoon.

First Minister's Question Time

Back-bench Members

14:30

Milburn Report

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): With an estimated one in eight young Scots neither earning nor learning, does the First Minister welcome the Milburn report, especially given its wide-ranging and cross-portfolio nature? Although the Scottish Government will not yet have considered the report in detail, do any ideas jump out at the First Minister as being a good idea, such as the youth opportunity service, which I think could make a real difference to young people in Scotland?

The First Minister (John Swinney): There is a great deal in the Milburn review that the Government will consider. It is a substantial contribution to the debate. A number of elements in the Milburn review call for the application in England of the approach that we take here, in Scotland, which is very much characterised by the no one left behind approach that the Government takes. The focus on developing a range of vocational qualifications in our school education system, which I am very proud of, has grown substantially, enabling young people to enter the labour market.

The Government will consider all the issues. There are potentially some significant financial implications, which could be negative, for the Scottish Government, and we need to explore those in great detail. That depends, of course, on the reaction of the United Kingdom Government. I assure Mr Johnson that the Scottish Government will consider carefully all the contents of the Milburn review and will relate it to the substantial and effective practices that are being taken forward in Scotland.

Hyperscale Data Centres (Public Opposition)

Laura Moodie (South Scotland) (Green): Over the weekend, an estimated 6,000 people took to the streets in an attempt to have their voices heard on hyperscale artificial intelligence data centres. Meanwhile, the proposed Chapelcross data centre in Dumfries and Galloway has attracted more than 15,000 objections in the public consultation period, which has now passed. With five weeks to go until Christmas, there is still no sign of any guidance from the Scottish Government on data centre applications. Does the First Minister think that it is right that the only way that communities can have their voices heard is by taking to the streets? Does he expect communities to make representations without knowing what the Government's guidance on data centres will say? How will he ensure that the public have a further opportunity to comment once that guidance is published?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The first thing that I want to say is that I agree that members of the public should have the opportunity to set out their views and that their views should be listened to with respect. If members of the public choose to express their views by taking part in demonstrations, I respect entirely their desire to do so. I have taken part in a few demonstrations in my time, so I understand the importance of expressing our views in that way.

The Government is considering the formulation of the guidance on hyperscale data centres, as we promised to Parliament and as Parliament resolved. That will be published before the end of the year. The Government has already put in place substantial additional constraints and conditions that have to be applied in the consideration of such developments. I will ensure that there is wide and active debate around the contents of the guidance that the Government brings forward.

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

Neurodivergent Young People (Self-directed Support)

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Yesterday I met the fantastic Better Lives Partnership in Stranraer, which supports neurodivergent young people to achieve their full potential and move into education, employment and independent living. It told me that access to self-directed support, including to access the courses that are on, is increasingly being restricted to support deemed to be for critical need. Can the First Minister explain what the Government means by "critical need and how denying preventative support until there is an emergency can be compatible with the Government's commitment to early intervention?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The work that Finlay Carson has recounted is very much at the heart of the Government's approach to early intervention, which is to provide support that enables individuals to overcome any challenges that they face, in order that they have fulfilling lives. If that creates the opportunity to enter the labour market, it is all the better.

Many of those issues will be associated with some of the decisions that are required in connection with the Milburn review, which could well have an effect on some of the provision that we put in place.

Decisions on the provision of support at a local level will, I imagine, have been taken by health and social care partnerships, and we encourage all public bodies to support and develop early intervention mechanisms such as preventative interventions. The Better Lives Partnership, which Mr Carson mentioned, sounds like a very good example of that.

Built Heritage (George Cinema, Portobello)

Kate Campbell (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP): The owners of the B-listed George cinema, an art deco former cinema in Portobello, are applying for consent to demolish it. Having owned the building for almost a decade, during which time it has fallen from regular use into disrepair, they are applying on the basis that the building is unsafe. That is happening across Scotland. Can more be done, through the national planning framework, to protect our built heritage from that type of neglect and, ultimately, from destruction?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I have a lot of sympathy with the point that Kate Campbell has put forward. As she has correctly indicated, a number of properties in that situation, of which the George cinema in Portobello is an example, are important for our built heritage but are in private ownership and are not being cared for in the way that we would all want.

In March this year, the Government published updated guidance on dealing with listed buildings that become dangerous. That guidance makes it clear that responsibility for the maintenance and upkeep of such buildings rests with their owners, who must comply with relevant legal requirements, and local authorities are responsible for taking enforcement action where appropriate.

Kate Campbell's point, which has significant validity, is that, if an owner is not doing that but the building does not quite pass the test for being a dangerous building or posing a risk to the public, there is scope for us to explore what further intervention could be taken forward by local authorities. I am very happy for the Government to explore the issues that Kate Campbell has raised about whether any gaps in that provision could be filled by further guidance or legislative change.

Accessible and Adapted Social Housing (National Framework)

Thomas Kerr (Glasgow) (Reform): In a response to a written question, the First Minister's Government has confirmed to me that there are no plans for a national framework for recording accessible and adapted social housing.

One of my constituents, Tony Pearson, is in the public gallery this afternoon. Tony's young daughter, Grayce, has spinal muscular atrophy, which is a progressive and life-limiting condition that affects her mobility and independence. The family is in desperate need of being rehoused, and I am assisting with that. Will the First Minister explain to Mr Pearson why his Government will not make the necessary changes to ease the burden on families such as the Pearsons, who already have to navigate a complex housing process? In addition, will he meet me and Mr Pearson to hear at first hand why Grayce's register is so much needed?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am sorry to hear about the circumstances that Mr Pearson and his family are experiencing. The Government has increased the resource that we make available to local authorities to support the adaptation of properties so that they meet the needs of individuals and families, in recognition of the changing circumstances that individuals can experience.

Fundamentally, however, the issue is about local authority action and intervention. The Government makes available resources to support adaptation. That is an essential tool for the Government in ensuring that people

are accommodated properly and effectively, and that we reduce the need for them to be accommodated in hospital because their home situation is not suitable.

Ministers will certainly address Mr Pearson's specific circumstances, and I encourage Thomas Kerr to take up with the local authority the advancement of the issues around proper housing support for Mr Pearson.

Blythswood Care (Shoebox Appeal)

David Green (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD): I recently visited Blythswood Care's depot in Evanton, where its shoebox appeal is well under way. Last winter, more than 80,000 shoeboxes were distributed across eastern Europe. Will the First Minister join me in paying tribute to Blythswood? Will he also ensure that the Government fulfils its role by front-loading the welcome increase to the international development budget, as was recommended by the Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee?

The First Minister (John Swinney): First, I will convey, through Mr Green, my appreciation for the work of the Blythswood charity in Evanton. Its shoebox appeal has been an essential part of the support for many individuals and families, and the contribution of members of the public in Scotland to it is deeply appreciated.

In relation to international development, the Government has been increasing the funding available for that work, which is one of the issues that we are wrestling with in relation to the budget process. We look forward to engaging with Mr Green and his colleagues on that question.

Having seen the positive benefits of the Scottish Government's investment in projects in Malawi and Zambia, I am certainly convinced of the significant obligation and benefit of our being involved in international development activity. I am glad that that position commands the support of the Liberal Democrats.

Legal Services (Consumer Protection)

Stuart McMillan (Inverclyde) (SNP): The First Minister will be aware of the proposed group proceedings being pursued by Addleshaw Goddard on behalf of the former clients of McClure Solicitors, which was formerly based in Greenock. Following the conclusion of those proceedings, will the Scottish Government review whether the current legislative and regulatory framework concerning the provision of legal services provides adequate consumer protection? If it does not, what further reforms will the Scottish Government consider?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am very conscious of the distress that the collapse of McClure's has caused so many individuals. I express my sympathy and support for them, as I know of the difficulties that have been faced.

We are currently implementing the Regulation of Legal Services (Scotland) Act 2025, which introduces the authorisation of legal businesses. That will bring benefits such as greater consistency in the regulation of legal firms, enabling the Law Society of Scotland, as the regulator, to identify and address deficiencies early. I suspect that, had we had that, that would have helped the situation with McClure's, which Mr McMillan has pursued with such tenacity over a number of years.

The 2025 act includes measures that are designed to strengthen consumer protection. However, the Government remains open to considering additional measures, should the ones that we are taking not provide adequate protection as sought by Mr McMillan on behalf of his constituents and many others who are affected by the McClure's case.

Hydropower Schemes (Business Rates Valuations)

Joe Fagan (South Scotland) (Lab): The vast majority of the United Kingdom's hydropower potential is in Scotland, yet industry leaders warn that more than 400 small hydro schemes here are at risk because our business rate valuations for small hydropower schemes are so much higher than they are for comparable wind and solar projects. Assessors are being legally challenged. I do not expect the First Minister to comment on that, but I would ask him to address Government policy. I cannot believe that it is the Government's policy intention that rateable values should deter investment in renewables at that scale, so will the First Minister intervene?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Mr Fagan correctly identifies that a legal challenge to the valuations is under way, so I will steer clear of commenting on that particular issue. I will say that we deliver the most generous non-domestic rates relief in the United Kingdom for renewable generators, including small-scale hydro generators, and the vast majority of hydro schemes benefit from the relief in full.

We will always engage in making sure that Scotland's renewable energy resources can be developed in that way. I am very familiar with the issues that Mr Fagan raises—a number of schemes in my constituency are affected by those issues—and I want to make clear how much the Government values the hydroelectric

foundations of the renewable energy journey that we are enjoying in Scotland. That is a central part of how we take forward the means of developing that potential.

General Practice (Information Technology)

Adam Harley (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD): Susan Murray MP and I recently met general practitioners in Bishopbriggs who told us that, since their practices were moved to the Vision information technology system in September, the number of patients that they have time to see has been cut in half, because the system is so difficult to use. One GP described it as like trying to eat a bowl of soup with a fork. Since I raised the issue with the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care a fortnight ago, hundreds of GPs from across Scotland have contacted me, describing the system as demoralising and unsafe.

With patients already waiting too long and doctors under huge pressure, the last thing that our national health service needs is failing IT. Will the First Minister commit to fixing that as a matter of urgency, and will he meet GPs to hear their concerns at first hand?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The health secretary engages in a great deal of dialogue with GPs, and she will be happy to discuss the questions that there are on the GP IT reprovisioning programme. Due to supplier withdrawals, Vision 3 is currently the only GP IT system that is available under the national framework. We are working closely with the GP community to ensure that the system works effectively in order to support patients. The health secretary will be happy to engage with general practitioners on that important issue.

Asylum Processing (European Union Member States and Rwanda)

Craig Hoy (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Given that the Scottish National Party wants Scotland to remain at the heart of Europe and that his Government's position is to remain aligned with European Union member states, will the First Minister join me in welcoming the new EU policy of processing failed asylum seekers in Rwanda?

The First Minister (John Swinney): From what I have seen, it is not an EU policy. I think that it is the policy of a few EU member states, which is a completely different proposition. Allow me to point out that the Conservatives are always going on at me about ensuring that my statements to the Parliament are accurate, so let us ensure that the Conservatives' statements to the Parliament are accurate.

The other thing to note is that the policies that are connected to transporting people to Rwanda were tried by the Conservative Government. With the usual Conservative effectiveness, the Government failed completely. It spent a huge amount of money, achieved absolutely nothing and had nothing to show for it, and we are all now paying the price. That is just typical of the Conservatives.

Police Custody Facilities (Kilmarnock)

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): The closure of holding cells at Kilmarnock means that, when police make arrests, they can be off the streets for up to three hours, due to the need to travel to Saltcoats and the increased processing time there. If Saltcoats is full, officers from Ayrshire have to travel much further afield.

A ministerial response has stated that that is an operational matter for Police Scotland, but we cannot ignore decisions that front-line police are raising concerns about. Will the First Minister intervene as part of the budget discussions with Police Scotland?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The issues that Mr Brown has raised about the custody cells at Kilmarnock are important. I understand the significance of ensuring that police resources can be used efficiently in localities. Police Scotland will make judgments about the most appropriate locations for such provision to meet its service expectations. However, I will take from the exchange today the importance that Mr Brown has attached to the custody suite being available in Kilmarnock. We will consider that as part of the budget process that will progress in the weeks to come.

Water Quality (Kinghorn Harbour Beach)

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): This morning, Kinghorn harbour beach received its fifth consecutive poor water quality report and now faces losing its bathing water designation. That is devastating for the community and all those who love the place. Although I welcome Scottish Water's and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency's commitment to solving the problems at Kinghorn, it is clear that a change in the law is needed to deal with rogue sewage connections and many other pollution issues that affect our coasts.

When will the First Minister's Government introduce a clean water bill to protect the beaches that we love?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The general point that I will make is that this morning's water quality report demonstrates the extensive strength of water quality in Scotland. If my memory serves me right, 96 per cent of beaches are designated as meeting the standard. I think that that is the right number, but I am saying that from my recollection.

In relation to Kinghorn, I am aware that extensive investigations have been conducted in order to identify a number of pollution sources, but the evidence suggests that sources of sewage pollution remain, and further explanation will be required to identify those sources.

I do not agree with Mr Ruskell that there is a weakness in the legislative framework. The legislative framework identifies the conditions that need to improve and informs the investigations that are carried out. I completely accept Mr Ruskell's frustration that it is taking a long time. Issues are sometimes not readily identifiable, but the general pattern for water quality in Scotland is encouraging, which I welcome. Where there are problems, we should address them, and I believe that we have the legislative framework to do so.

Colleges (2027-28 Budget)

Amanda Lindsay (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform): What action will the Scottish Government take in the upcoming 2027-28 budget to prevent campus closures, compulsory redundancies and potential insolvencies across Scotland's college sector, following warnings from Colleges Scotland that "a below-inflation settlement" will push further education into a "crisis state"?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The work of our colleges is very important in Scotland, and in the previous budget, we significantly increased the budget available to colleges.

Amanda Lindsay asked me about the importance of an above-inflation settlement. I have to point out to the Parliament that the Government has not had an inflation-based settlement from the United Kingdom Government. Indeed, we are dealing with an erosion of our budget to the tune of £650 million because there has not been a real-terms settlement.

These are some of the difficulties that the Government is having to wrestle with. I understand the strength of Amanda Lindsay's point about a real-terms settlement for the college sector, but the Government is wrestling with these issues because we have had a settlement below inflation. That will apply across a range of different policy areas in the budget, and the Parliament will have the opportunity to consider the budget when it is set out on 3 December.

Nurses (Employment)

Helen McDade (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): Does the First Minister agree that Scotland cannot continue to talk about nursing shortages, safe staffing and investing in the future of the national health service while it is failing to provide employment opportunities for the very people who could help to address those problems—specifically, newly qualified paediatric nurses who cannot find positions? What will the Government do to ensure that we do not waste our money on helping people to get trained, only for them to discover that they cannot get a job?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government takes forward an approach to workforce planning in relation to the identification of the number of trainees who we wish to support, with the objective of creating opportunities for those individuals to participate in the national health service. We work to make sure that the appropriate opportunities are available to be filled by the skilled personnel who undertake their training in Scotland.

Home Heating Support Fund

Steven Bonnar (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): Families in Uddingston and Bellshill who struggle to afford to top up their pre-payment meters can find themselves without heating, in particular during the winter months. The home heating support fund previously provided vital emergency assistance to help households experiencing fuel poverty, but that support is no longer available. What consideration is Scottish Government giving to reinstating the heating support fund or introducing an equivalent emergency support scheme to ensure that families who are facing an immediate energy crisis can access the help that they need when they need it most?

The First Minister (John Swinney): We have in place a range of different interventions to support families who face challenges with their costs. We have the best cost of living package across the United Kingdom, and the work that is undertaken through some of the emergency support and the discretionary housing payments is designed to support families at that particular time.

It would also have helped us if the freeze on the local housing allowance had been removed; that would have helped enormously to lift families out of poverty and to help them to deal with the energy costs that they

are wrestling with. Nonetheless, I assure Mr Bonnar of the range of interventions that the Government has in place to meet the needs of members of the public.

Councils (Funding)

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): Councils across West Scotland are to face significant financial challenges yet again when setting their budgets for next year. North Ayrshire Council is facing a budget gap of more than £8 million, East Dunbartonshire Council is facing a gap of £7 million and Inverclyde Council is facing a gap of up to £22 million by 2030; while West Dunbartonshire Council's gap could be almost £45 million in the same period.

Does the First Minister accept that councils have not been getting their fair share of funding and that they need increased and sustained funding to protect jobs and services? Will the budget deliver that?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government has, just in the most recent financial year, given a very significant increase to local authority funding, and we aim to support local services to the greatest extent possible.

As I have just recounted in my answer to Amanda Lindsay, the Government's budget is not increasing in real terms. We can distribute only those resources that are under our control, and we must live within our resources.

We are engaging with local authorities on those questions. I will be addressing the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities conference on Thursday, and we will discuss those issues. I simply make the point that the Government must live within the resources that it has available to it.

Of course, there is scope for us to engage with the Labour Party on the specifics of the budget. We have to secure agreement in the Parliament on the terms of the budget, and I am sure that the Deputy First Minister will look forward to those discussions to ensure that common ground can be established on this and many other important questions.

St Abbs Lifeboat

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Since 2016, St Abbs Lifeboat, which is based in my constituency, has operated an independent service. Thanks to the dedication of local volunteers, it has continued to protect and save lives. Will the First Minister whole-heartedly join me in congratulating volunteers and crew after they received the prestigious King's award for voluntary service, and will he recognise the remarkable contribution that they provide to saving lives at sea?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am absolutely delighted to acknowledge the success of the St Abbs Lifeboat crew and the support team on receiving the King's award for voluntary service. It is a commendation of the highest standard of achievement and commitment, and it is very well deserved.

The Royal National Lifeboat Institution is a magnificent organisation, funded by volunteers, that undertakes life-saving work the length and breadth of the country. I must say that some of the commentary that has been directed at the RNLI in recent times for carrying out the important and generous task of saving other people's lives is absolutely reprehensible. I know that Rachael Hamilton and I will very much agree in our tribute to the magnificent work of the RNLI and its volunteers around the country, especially those in St Abbs, who put their lives at risk to protect others.

Men's Sheds

Dawn Black (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): Will the First Minister say what consideration has been given to increasing funding for the Scottish Men's Sheds Association, given the contribution that men's sheds make to tackling social isolation, improving mental health and supporting community wellbeing across Scotland, which consequently reduces costs elsewhere?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Scottish men's shed movement is an important part of supporting men's health, and Dawn Black rightly pays tribute to that organisation. On Friday, I had the privilege of joining the team at the men's shed in Aberfeldy to see at first hand the outstanding work that is undertaken there.

The Government has invested nearly £1 million in the Scottish Men's Sheds Association since 2016, and we will be considering those issues as part of the budget. Some of the work is spread across community mental health and wellbeing support and social isolation and loneliness support.

I take this opportunity to commend the Scottish Men's Sheds Association on the excellent work that it and its member organisations around the country have done.

Status of Scotland's Ports

Amanda Bland (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Ind): Following the United Kingdom Government's decision not to grant ports critical national priority status, will the First Minister make representations to Westminster to ensure that strategically important port infrastructure around the Forth, including Grangemouth in my Central Scotland and Lothian's West region, receives appropriate national recognition, given its importance to Scotland's energy security, economic resilience and skilled jobs?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I will explore that interesting point. Ordinarily—certainly in my view—Grangemouth and the Grangemouth port, as well as other ports at Leith and Rosyth on the River Forth, are absolutely fundamental to the critical national infrastructure of the country.

I will take away Amanda Bland's point to satisfy myself that the appropriate approach is being taken. However, for the record today, I view the port at Grangemouth, as well as the ports at Rosyth and Leith, as central to the critical national infrastructure of the country, and I will make sure that the issues are properly addressed.

Project Esperanza (Support)

Kate Nevens (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green): Over the past few weeks, Project Esperanza—an incredible grass-roots initiative based in my region, which offers support to families and women of African heritage—has faced some awful threats and intimidation after some members of this Parliament attempted to disrupt its access to funding. Will the First Minister join me in condemning those attacks on Project Esperanza and in reiterating the right of Project Esperanza, and all charities, to conduct advocacy work to advance the aims of the organisation and the people that it supports? Will he set out the specific measures that his Government is taking to ensure that specialist black and brown-led organisations can access crisis support when they receive such threats and intimidation, so that they can continue their vital work?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Kate Nevens raises a number of important issues. Distinctively, the issues in relation to the operation of charities are regulated by the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator—OSCR—and it would be wrong for me to intrude on that regulatory function. However, I make it clear that I value the work that Project Esperanza is doing to advocate for individuals and I am appalled that it has suffered intimidation and been undermined as a consequence of comments made by members of this Parliament. It is important that the Government's approach, which is set out in the community cohesion measures that I explained in the programme for government, are designed to reach projects of that nature, to make sure that individuals who need their support can attract it. I give that commitment today.

National Emergency Briefing

David Barratt (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I understand that, on Friday, the First Minister attended a screening of the national emergency briefing. Does he have any reflections on the film and has he given any consideration to the campaign's call for a televised Government briefing?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I had a busy day in Aberfeldy on Friday—I also saw the screening of the national emergency briefing film. I had an excellent discussion with local representatives who are engaged in the campaign. Mr Barratt was involved in hosting the screening of the national emergency briefing here in the Parliament a few weeks ago and I welcomed his intervention, supported by other members of the Parliament, to make that happen.

The film was a powerful explanation of the climate crisis that we face and the necessity of taking action. I welcome many of the initiatives and measures that the film sets out. On the issue of a televised Government emergency briefing, I am sympathetic to the aspirations that the national emergency briefing team sets out. We have to take steps to strengthen public awareness of the challenges that we face and the need to take action to address the climate and nature emergency. I would be happy to discuss those issues with Mr Barratt and those involved in the briefing in due course.

Historic Environment Scotland (Governance)

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Historic Environment Scotland is in crisis. The Auditor General has warned of continuing failures in governance, staff have lost confidence in the leadership and, now, three senior officials have been suspended. Angus Robertson failed to get a grip on the situation and, so far, Màiri McAllan has failed to get a grip on it. Will the First Minister tell the Parliament when his Government intends to take responsibility for sorting out this mess?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government takes responsibility for all the issues that happen in its name. I answer questions here twice a week and, at all times, I accept the responsibility of the Government—so there is no need for Mr Kerr to be concerned about that.

New leadership has been appointed to Historic Environment Scotland and we expect that leadership to deliver on the necessary steps to improve the operating culture. I will not speculate on any issues about staffing matters—it would be completely inappropriate for me to do so. However, I can say to Mr Kerr that the Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic, Màiri McAllan, is in active dialogue about the necessary improvements at Historic Environment Scotland. The new leadership that is in place will take forward that agenda.

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): That concludes First Minister's questions from back-bench members.

I have to say that, although I apologise to the many members whose questions I was unable to take, some members submitted excellent questions that I was willing to take but they did not press their request-to-speak buttons. Those included members of more than one political party, and we were unable to catch their eye. If you are going to go to the bother of writing a good-quality question, please make sure that you press your button, to enable you to speak. Thank you.

NHS Grampian

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is a statement by Angela Constance on NHS Grampian. Questions will be taken at the end of the statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

15:05

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care (Angela Constance): Healthcare Improvement Scotland's independent "NHS Grampian Responsive Diagnostic Review", which was published last week, left me with a profound sense of concern. The findings will be distressing for everyone across the north-east. Behind the findings are people who placed their trust in the national health service and had every right to expect safe, high-quality care, and they deserved better.

On Friday, I visited Aberdeen to hear directly from management, the board, staff, trade unions, patients and the public. It was important to me to do that, and I thank everyone who took the time to meet me. My door will remain open.

I reiterate my commitment to transparency. By the end of November, I will write to the Health, Care and Sport Committee, setting out a detailed timeline of the Government's activity and correspondence with NHS Grampian over the past year, alongside the milestones that I expect to be demonstrated. I know that some MSPs had the chance to speak directly with the interim chair during the cross-party briefing that I organised yesterday, but I want to begin by setting out some important context.

The HIS review was formally commissioned by the chief executive in May 2026, eight months after she took up her post, and she was right to do so. As the review outlines, although there were some clear failures within the past year, many of the issues are long standing and systemic. I have seen from the review and from my time in Grampian that the chief executive has held up her hands and apologised where she has made mistakes, and she has shown a commitment to dismantling the poor organisational culture that led to many of the issues. Importantly, both the chief executive and the interim chair know that they have until the end of the year to provide evidence of urgent improvements. The board requires stability to do that.

I have been asked what role the Government has played. HIS operates independently of the Government and is responsible for monitoring the quality of care that is provided across our NHS. HIS raises issues directly with health boards and with the Government. When it does, I am clear that the learning should always be applied across our entire NHS.

In the case of NHS Grampian, the relevant period began in February 2025, when HIS first raised concerns with the board that, ultimately, contributed to the board's escalation. In April 2025, HIS wrote to the Government regarding cardiology services at Dr Gray's hospital. By 22 April, there was clear cross-party concern about NHS Grampian's performance and financial position, with members questioning whether further escalation was necessary.

In response, on 12 May, we took the decision to escalate NHS Grampian to stage 4, specifically in relation to finance, leadership and governance, and the assurance board was established. Later that month, we commissioned the KPMG review that HIS referenced. In October 2025, the Government lodged in the Parliament a Government-initiated question that referred to that report. Thereafter, NHS Grampian agreed an improvement plan to take forward KPMG's recommendations. The HIS review notes that some recommendations were not followed through.

My predecessor chaired the board's annual review in October 2025. At that point, it was stated by NHS Grampian that clear progress was being made in making improvements, including for significant adverse event reviews. That raises serious questions about the accuracy of the information that was being scrutinised by the board and shared with the Government.

The HIS review notes that, although surgeons were instructed in late June 2026 to cease paediatric surgery at Dr Gray's, that instruction was not implemented until August. That is an extremely serious and wholly unacceptable failure.

When I became aware of the paediatric service cessation in August, through media interest, I acted immediately by speaking to the chief executive, setting clear expectations for safe and rapid restoration, and visiting Dr Gray's within days to meet the chief executive and staff.

In August, the board chair announced that she was stepping down. The Government took steps to appoint a new interim chair of the board, John Connaghan CBE, who started in October. John has my utmost confidence because he has a clear track record of delivery within the NHS. As the report highlights, information was not being openly or properly shared or escalated to or by the board, so it is vital that change happens now.

On leadership, I welcome that the board has already taken immediate action to change senior medical leadership. The new interim medical director, who took up post yesterday, is one of the Government's deputy chief medical officers, Dr Graham Ellis, who has an outstanding record. That is how seriously I take these issues at Grampian.

On accountability and oversight, the report points to disturbing failures of governance, along with passivity and a lack of curiosity from the board. We have a new interim board chair and the board membership is changing significantly, with four new non-executives currently being appointed, replacing almost 50 per cent of the board.

The seriousness of the issues demands a decisive response from ministers. Although accountability for driving sustainable change remains with the board, it is our responsibility to ensure that NHS Grampian has both support and challenge to deliver rapid and sustained improvement. NHS Grampian will therefore remain within a strengthened stage 4 framework, with a new focus directly on patient safety, clinical governance, leadership and delivery of the review's recommendations. The option to move to stage 5 remains, and I will reassess the situation in six weeks' time.

I can announce that we have established an external intervention support team, comprising experienced senior NHS leaders who are entirely external to Grampian, with expertise in organisational and operational recovery, clinical governance, patient safety and performance improvement. Working alongside NHS Grampian, the team will provide intensive turnaround support. I have today published details of that team.

We are enhancing independent assurance through Healthcare Improvement Scotland, including an early review of Grampian within three months to assess progress. That will be followed by ongoing assurance reviews, which will be published. I intend to offer regular and ongoing briefings to MSPs so that Parliament can continue to scrutinise progress.

On patient safety, I met the Patient Safety Commissioner for Scotland last week and I have asked for her assistance in providing external scrutiny of NHS Grampian. I am open to any further options that she considers necessary to restore confidence and I very much welcome the commitment that she has shown to date.

Taken together, these measures are designed to support improvement, strengthen accountability and rebuild trust and confidence, while ensuring that NHS Grampian is judged by the pace and substance of the improvements that it delivers.

That is our response to the wider challenges laid out in the review in relation to governance and accountability. However, the review also speaks directly to specific concerns and vulnerabilities at Dr Gray's hospital. I have heard some commentary in the press in recent days about what public service reform might mean for the future of Dr Gray's. What is evidenced in this report is that the status quo is not working. That is due to a failure of leadership, governance and accountability, but it also lays bare both the geographical and service isolation of Dr Gray's and the challenges that it has faced in terms of workforce recruitment and retention.

My intention through public service reform is to ensure much better integration between services—particularly for rural communities—and a sustainable future for Dr Gray's. That will be essential. Let me be categorical: Dr Gray's hospital will remain a key asset for the care of patients in the north and will be a primary focus of our work to recover Grampian.

Finally, and of significant concern to me, there are the issues in relation to organisational culture. I find it completely intolerable that the review found a culture of "us" and "them". That will not be tolerated going forward and I have written to the staff side and trade unions to make clear that staff who raise concerns have a right to be heard without fear of detriment.

I have also written to Scotland's independent national whistleblowing officer to invite them to engage with NHS Grampian's work. There can be no lasting improvement in patient safety, organisational culture or public confidence unless staff are confident that their voices are heard and their concerns addressed.

The HIS review and the three inspection reports highlight the professionalism, compassion and commitment of NHS Grampian staff. The evidence is clear that the principal challenge lies not with front-line staff but with leadership. I welcome that NHS Grampian has established a dedicated helpline for patients and their families. It is important that patients continue to access their local services. They are safe, and that is evidenced by the HIS reports on the professionalism of staff who are delivering services directly on the ground.

I recognise that it will take time to rebuild trust and confidence and to embed lasting change, but people should expect to see early evidence of progress. The review's findings fall far short of the standard that patients have the right to expect from their health service. In the months ahead, I am committed to maintaining regular engagement with staff and local communities to ensure that recovery is informed by those who are most affected.

Before I conclude, I place on record my thanks to the Healthcare Improvement Scotland review team for this thorough review. Addressing the issues that are identified in the report is not the responsibility of any one organisation or of NHS Grampian alone. As the HIS report states, this must be a catalyst of change. The findings are too serious and the issues that have been identified have persisted for too long. The people of Grampian deserve better, and that is the shared task that is before us.

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

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

The failure of governance and oversight at NHS Grampian potentially has very serious consequences, with harm caused to patients, including children. The Healthcare Improvement Scotland report identified serious safety issues that were ignored by the board.

The inspection was in April this year, and red flags were raised with the Scottish Government's deputy chief medical officer in May this year. Why were ministers not alerted to the issue in May, given the substantial safety issues at stake? Why did the cabinet secretary say to the press that she found out only a few weeks ago when, in her statement, she said that she visited in August because of her concerns? Was the previous cabinet secretary told? Is it not beyond belief that those who should be held accountable have all mysteriously left their posts?

We know that there was at least one serious adverse event review when a patient died in theatre. Will the cabinet secretary instruct a thorough review of all patient cases since the safety issues were first identified about which there are potential concerns?

Angela Constance: I am grateful to Ms Baillie for her scrutiny on this serious matter. I for one do not demur from one word in the Healthcare Improvement Scotland diagnostic review of NHS Grampian, as it is a substantial and thorough piece of work. As I said in my statement and have said elsewhere, I was sighted on the Healthcare Improvement Scotland report at the end of October—the precise date is 29 October. I was aware of some of the issues around Dr Gray's in August, and I was also aware that the HIS report would be forthcoming.

As I said in my statement, I am committed to transparency and will outline the Government's engagement on the issue over the past year. I will do that to the Health, Care and Sport Committee, as it is important. However, as the HIS report says, we need to move beyond describing the problems and get on with the action, and that is the focus right now.

On Ms Baillie's question on serious adverse event reviews, she will recall from the briefing yesterday that the interim chair said that he was prepared to change the priority that is given to any individual adverse event review. I will make sure that her comments are passed to the interim chair and the board and given all due consideration.

Max Bannerman (Highlands and Islands) (Reform): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement. In it, she said that

"the option to move to stage 5 remains"

and that she will

"reassess the situation in six weeks' time."

Will that reassessment take account of the findings of the external intervention support team that has been set up to work alongside NHS Grampian in order to provide "intensive turnaround support"?

Will the cabinet secretary also commit to coming back to the Parliament with a new statement in early January, once those findings have been made?

Angela Constance: That is an eminently sensible suggestion; any decision that I make on further escalation should be informed by the external intervention support team. As always, I am more than happy to come to the Parliament to make statements. I stress that I will review the decision on escalation within six weeks and that all options remain on the table. I am focused on actions that are meaningful—not cosmetic actions, but actions that will lead to lasting change now and in the future. I will, of course, keep the Parliament updated on how we are ensuring that there is accountability at every level in NHS Grampian.

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