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

Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 18 November 2026

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

Portfolio Question Time

Deputy First Minister Responsibilities, Finance and Local Government, Parliamentary Business and Veterans

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

The first portfolio session is on finance and local government, parliamentary business and veterans. I remind members that questions 3 and 10 are being grouped together. I will take any supplementaries to those questions after both have been answered.

"Veterans' Homelessness Prevention Pathway"

1. **Amanda Bland (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Ind):** To ask the Scottish Government what progress has been made in implementing the recommendations of the "Veterans' Homelessness Prevention Pathway", including what timetable has been set for their implementation and the measures that are in place to ensure that veterans can access safe, secure and suitable housing. (S7O-00517)

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Jamie Hepburn): Scotland has the strongest housing and homelessness rights in the United Kingdom. Anyone, including veterans, who is at risk of or experiencing homelessness is entitled to help to secure a permanent home or temporary accommodation.

We accept, in principle, all 24 recommendations in the "Veterans' Homelessness Prevention Pathway". Successful implementation requires continued collaboration between all partners, including Veterans Scotland, housing providers, the Ministry of Defence and a range of partner organisations.

Scottish Government officials have worked with the Veterans Scotland housing group to identify the top five priorities from the pathway recommendations. We will ensure that appropriate governance and oversight arrangements are in place before the end of the year, to support implementation of the pathway recommendations.

Amanda Bland: The Scottish Veterans Commissioner's 2026 progress report highlights limited progress in improving employment opportunities for veterans and their families, noting the "lack of strategic leadership" and direction in this area. What specific action is the Scottish Government taking to work with employers, colleges and training providers across Central Scotland and Lothians West to ensure that veterans can transfer their military skills and qualifications into meaningful civilian employment, access appropriate retraining opportunities and secure sustainable incomes, helping to prevent financial hardship and the risk of homelessness?

Jamie Hepburn: I take the point that it is not just important to ensure that people have a safe and secure home; we, of course, want to support them in their wider activities, including employment. Work is under way on the veterans action plan, which will respond to the various recommendations from the commissioner.

We already support a range of organisations through our veterans fund, which aims to support people in areas of their life such as employment. One example is the Sacro veterans mentoring service, which supports those who have been in prison. Money advice is provided by Money Advice Scotland, and specific employability initiatives are funded through the same funding source.

Veterans Strategy (Healthcare)

2. **Jack Middleton (Aberdeen Central) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking under its veterans strategy to ensure that veterans have timely and appropriate access to healthcare in their communities. (S7O-00518)

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Jamie Hepburn): Ensuring that veterans and their families have timely and appropriate access to healthcare is a key commitment in Scotland's strategy for our veterans and the veterans action plan. We continue to work with national health service boards and partners to improve veteran identification, referral pathways and awareness of available support. That

includes the veterans in-service injury network, which provides expert clinical reviews and recommendations for veterans with service-related injuries through existing NHS services.

The mental health and wellbeing framework supports a nationally consistent pathway to care. Since October 2026, a new wraparound service delivered by Combat Stress, Help for Heroes and the Defence Medical Welfare Service has helped veterans to access local support. In addition, the armed forces covenant standards framework will support consistent, high-quality healthcare for veterans across Scotland.

Jack Middleton: The armed forces and veterans recognition scheme was designed to improve veterans' access to healthcare. In England, the equivalent scheme has been adopted by around 75 per cent of general practices; in Scotland, the figure sits just above 5 per cent. What work is under way to close that gap, and what further steps will Mr Hepburn, as veterans minister, take to drive up participation in the scheme in the long term?

Jamie Hepburn: We are funding Veterans Scotland's activity to increase uptake of the recognition scheme, and we are providing funding for its general practitioner acceleration scheme. I recognise that there is more to be done, and I will actively engage with veterans' organisations, the commissioner and relevant parts of the health service to ensure that we do better.

Public Services (Funding)

3. **Kate Campbell (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to protect public services in Scotland from the impact of the United Kingdom Government's anticipated £650 million real-terms reduction in the block grant. (S7O-00519)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Jenny Gilruth): Ms Campbell is correct to say that our budget next year will be cut, in real terms, by around £650 million. There will be less money to invest in the day-to-day public services and infrastructure that people across Scotland rely on.

I will set out our spending plans for 2027-28 in the Scottish budget on 3 December 2026. As the programme for government makes clear, we are focused on ensuring that public services are sustainable for the future while continuing to meet the needs of people across Scotland. The funding settlement from the UK Government makes achieving that objective significantly more challenging.

Kate Campbell: Andy Burnham has said that he believes in devolution, yet he has undermined Scotland's resources and is threatening our public services with a significant real-terms cut. What representations has the Deputy First Minister made to the UK Government since the budget announcement, to ensure that Scotland's interests are not completely ignored by the British Prime Minister?

Jenny Gilruth: Ahead of the UK Government's budget, I wrote to the chancellor, calling him to reverse the planned real-terms cut to our funding. I also asked him to end austerity policies such as the bedroom tax, the benefits cap and the local housing allowance freeze.

The chancellor did not choose to do so, which means that the Scottish Government continues to foot the bill to protect our constituents against policy choices that have been taken elsewhere. The failure to reverse the real-terms cut by £650 million means that our fiscal position in Scotland is even more challenging than it might have been. I will shortly write to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury about the missed opportunities in the UK Government's budget and what they mean for Scotland.

Scottish Block Grant 2027-28

10. **Clare Haughey (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the United Kingdom budget, what assessment it has made of changes to Scotland's capital block grant for 2027-28. (S7O-00526)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Jenny Gilruth): In the UK budget announcement, the chancellor confirmed that our funding for capital investment would be cut, in real terms, next year by around £100 million, which is equivalent to 1.5 per cent. That comes at a time when costs are rising and when our funding from the UK Government is failing to keep up with inflation and falls short of what is required to build and maintain the infrastructure that Scotland needs. That leaves us facing a highly challenging Scottish budget next year and limits our capacity to deliver the infrastructure investment that is necessary to support economic growth and thriving communities. As I previously mentioned, ahead of the budget I called on the chancellor to reverse the planned real-terms cut. It is regrettable that he chose not to do so.

Clare Haughey: That money could be spent on building more homes at a time when we know that more homes are needed. If the Scottish Government were to transfer resource funding to plug the capital reduction,

it would be money that could have been spent on tackling waiting times in our national health service. The Scottish Government is facing the challenge not only in this financial year. Can the Deputy First Minister provide more details of the discussions that she has had with her UK Government counterparts about our capital funding for future years?

Jenny Gilruth: The member makes a helpful point in highlighting the challenges that the UK Government's funding decisions have created for our ability to invest in Scotland. Funding certainty is also creating challenges. We have limited fiscal levers, and, as Ms Haughey has rightly pointed out, switching funding from resource to capital would take money away from our hard-pressed public services, with our resource budgets already facing a real-terms cut.

As I mentioned in my previous response, I will soon write to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury about the missed opportunities in the UK Government's budget. The upcoming fiscal review will, I hope, be an opportunity to revisit and make contributions on some of the challenges that Clare Haughey has rightly highlighted.

Craig Hoy (Dumfriesshire) (Con): The Government's plan to raise £1.5 billion for capital spending through Scottish bonds, or kilts, appears to be in serious doubt due to surging borrowing costs and fears about what might happen if—God forbid—Scotland ever became independent.

One expert told *The Times* that it was

"clearly not a good time"

for the Government to launch such a risky and unnecessary plan, and another said that Scottish bonds would have to be repaid on "day one" should Scotland ever leave the United Kingdom. Does the Deputy First Minister agree that the issuing of Scottish bonds is an entirely unnecessary process and that the Government should stick with borrowing through the tried and tested means of using the national loans fund?

Jenny Gilruth: I am always pleased to hear Conservative members mention independence.

To answer the member's substantive question, the plans are not in doubt. We have made it very clear that any decision on the progress of the bonds programme will be subject to the necessary requirements, taking account of the market conditions at the time. Mr Hoy would expect the Government to be prudent on such matters. It would be a necessary requirement for us to look at the market conditions at the time as part of our engagement on these matters.

Council Tax Reform

4. **Paul McLennan (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it has taken to progress council tax reform since the 2026 Scottish election. (S7O-00520)

The Minister for Public Finance (Hannah Mary Goodlad): Since the election, we have published the independent analysis of our joint work with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on the future of council tax reform. That analysis provides strong evidence of a need and a desire for reform across the board. Eighty-two per cent of respondents to the consultation supported such reform and 67 per cent called for a full revaluation.

We have also consulted on two new, high-value bands for homes that are worth more than £1 million, continued the targeted valuation work and confirmed that the new bands will be introduced from April 2028. As we set out in the programme for government, we will introduce a bill to deliver that change from 1 April 2028.

In addition, this month, the Deputy First Minister announced an action plan to make council tax debt recovery fairer, particularly for victims of domestic abuse.

Paul McLennan: Will the minister set out what approach the Government will take to progressing discussions with other parties and external stakeholders in the future?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: We are committed to having constructive dialogue across the Parliament. This afternoon, the Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform and I will take part in the debate on council tax reform. There will be opportunities for further discussion through the budget process and the passage of the council tax bill. As I mentioned, ministers and officials have already been involved in engagement, including with local government, assessors—with whom I had a call just this morning—and a wide range of stakeholders. We will continue that discussion.

Marmot Places

5. **Irshad Ahmed (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with local authorities regarding extending the Marmot places approach beyond Aberdeen City, North Ayrshire and South Lanarkshire. (S7O-00521)

The Minister for Public Finance (Hannah Mary Goodlad): The collaboration for health equity in Scotland—or Marmot places—is a key action in the population health framework of the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, which is focused on improving population health and reducing inequalities.

Public Health Scotland and the Institute for Health Equity lead that work, and the Scottish Government is a member of the strategic advisory group that is supporting development of the Marmot places strategy, approach and delivery. PHS is continuing to work with existing CHES places and is exploring opportunities to extend the approach to other areas. Insights from the three collaborating areas that Paul McLennan mentioned are being shared through the CHES learning system, which is open to anyone with an interest in improving health equity in Scotland.

Irshad Ahmed: Public Health Scotland's chief executive described the pilot as a building block for further action, but efforts are clearly being limited by longer-term funding challenges. Will the Government commit to taking action to build on that work? What new powers can be given to community leaders to make it more effective?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: As the Deputy First Minister has outlined, the financial situation that we find ourselves in, whereby we are providing extensive supplementary benefits in relation to the bedroom tax and housing allowance, along with the real-terms fiscal cuts of £550,000 in resource and £100,000 in capital to this year's budget, makes the upcoming budget exceptionally challenging. Therefore, I cannot commit today to providing extra funding for the roll-out of the Marmot places initiative.

However, I take Irshad Ahmed's point. Three areas of the country have benefited. We are reviewing the feedback and analysis just now, but Mr Ahmed should be in no doubt about the fact that the current fiscal situation that we find ourselves is incredibly challenging.

Homelessness Prevention Funding (Glasgow)

6. **Holly Bruce (Glasgow Southside) (Green):** I declare an interest as a sitting councillor on Glasgow City Council.

To ask the Scottish Government what support will be allocated to Glasgow City Council, following the Deputy First Minister's commitment to make a meaningful contribution towards addressing the city's financial pressures related to homelessness prevention and temporary accommodation costs, including when this will be received. (S7O-00522)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Jenny Gilruth): I have confirmed to Glasgow City Council that the local government settlement will include a meaningful contribution towards Glasgow's particular homelessness challenges, the details of which will be set out in the usual way in the budget on 3 December 2026.

The Government continues to work closely with Glasgow City Council on solutions to create additional housing capacity and address homelessness pressures. The streamlined asylum decision-making process that has been implemented by the United Kingdom Government is exacerbating financial pressures, placing an enormous pressure on local authorities and driving record homelessness levels across the UK. I am extremely disappointed that the chancellor missed yet another opportunity to use his budget to address those harms.

Holly Bruce: Our public services need to be truly preventative, in order to provide the support that the people of Glasgow deserve, but Glasgow City Council has been forced into taking a reactive role in tackling homelessness, which is failing all vulnerable people across the city. Just as the Home Office is part of the problem, it needs to be part of the solution, too. We need proper funding to reflect our collaboration with it, rather than relying on expensive, privately contracted housing. What conversations has the Deputy First Minister had on that issue?

Jenny Gilruth: I recognise the unique challenges that exist in Glasgow. I met the council leader over the summer recess and my cabinet secretary colleague, Shirley-Anne Somerville, has engaged with the local authority directly on those issues. I am not able to give further details about the quantum that will be associated with Glasgow's unique position, but I can provide the clarity that we will look favourably at the position in Glasgow, which is deeply challenging for all the reasons that Holly Bruce has rightly set out.

Scottish Veterans Commissioner (Progress Report 2026)

7. **Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the Scottish Veterans Commissioner's progress report 2026. (S7O-00523)

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Jamie Hepburn): I am grateful to the Scottish Veterans Commissioner for her work, and I welcome her latest progress report, which recognises the positive progress that has been made across a range of areas and reflects the efforts of organisations that support veterans and their families, while also setting out concerns and challenges. We take those findings seriously and recognise that further progress is needed in several important areas. We are working closely with partners across the veterans sector, public services and local government to address those issues and improve outcomes for veterans.

Veterans make a significant contribution to communities across Scotland, and we remain committed to ensuring that they are supported, valued and able to access the services and opportunities that they need. Our response to the commissioner's report will be set out in an updated veterans action plan, which we intend to publish next year.

Paul Sweeney: I share the minister's commendation of the Scottish Veterans Commissioner and her work.

There have now been 14 reports from the commissioner. Ministers tend to accept each recommendation, and implementation enjoys cross-party support, but it must be noted that the pace of implementation has slowed down.

One area that needs to be focused on is employment. Many businesses are already stepping up to hire veterans and their spouses, yet the commissioner has said that the Scottish Government is failing to provide "strategic leadership and direction" in that area. What national strategy and incentives will the minister propose to ensure that public bodies match the ambition that has already been shown by private employers? I am thinking particularly about reservists, as well as those who have served in the regular armed forces.

Jamie Hepburn: I touched on some of those points in my response to Amanda Bland's question. We are already supporting various initiatives through our veterans fund, some of which I mentioned earlier.

In that respect, I should also have mentioned the NOVA Scotland programme. I will be speaking at a reception in the Parliament this evening to mark that programme's achievements, and I am sure that Mr Sweeney will be in attendance, too. I recognise that we need to do more in that regard, and it will be a key area of focus in the action plan that we intend to publish soon.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I, too, commend the commissioner for her progress report. There are 5,000 veterans in the Scottish Borders community, many of whom face additional barriers in relation to transport, for example, and the fact that their services are spread thinly across that rural area. What action is the Scottish Government taking to recognise the challenges that veterans face in rural areas and to improve their access to services?

Jamie Hepburn: I recognise that as a challenge, as I recognise the challenges that many people face in rural areas. In respect of veterans who live in rural parts of Scotland, I refer back to the fund that we have put in place. A range of initiatives support rural Scotland, such as Combat Stress and the defence gardens scheme in the Highlands. In September, I visited Rothiemurchus Lodge, in Aviemore, to see the support that it gives to veterans.

In Ms Hamilton's area, we provide funding directly to Roxburgh and Berwickshire citizens advice bureau for the specific purpose of supporting rural veterans. The bureau has a project adviser to provide additional physical outreach and financial advice to veterans in the rural community and to build capacity across local organisations and groups regarding issues that affect veterans and their families. Of course, there is always more to be done, and we will look at that in our report.

Local Government Reform (Island Councils)

8. **Kristopher Leask (Highlands and Islands) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government, regarding its local government reform agenda, whether island councils will have the option to remain distinct local authorities rather than being incorporated into wider regional structures. (S7O-00524)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Jenny Gilruth): Ministers are clear that island authorities, instead of being part of a larger region, will require bespoke governance arrangements due to their unique geography. As part of the ongoing local governance reform dialogue, we are actively engaging with our partners in Orkney, Shetland, the Western Isles and Argyll and Bute. That recent engagement builds on previous locally led work, including the single authority models, and includes consideration of additional powers for those island councils that want them.

Kristopher Leask: I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, which states that I am a sitting councillor in Orkney.

I thank the Deputy First Minister for that answer and confirmation. The Scottish Greens and I believe that local government reform is a chance to empower our island communities and to deliver on long-standing calls, particularly in Orkney and Shetland, for greater autonomy. Does the Deputy First Minister agree that the agenda before us could do just that? Will she reassure me that measures such as the point of entry levy and the devolution of Crown Estate Scotland income will be fully considered in that work?

Jenny Gilruth: I very much agree with the sentiment behind the member's question that this is about delivering greater autonomy to our island communities. On the substantive point about extra powers, we are still in a period of consultation with local government and I do not want to prejudge its outcome. However, I look forward to our arriving at a shared position at the end of the consultation on all those matters, so that we can move ahead at pace on those issues.

The starting point needs to be agreement on how responsibilities should be divided between future governance structures, which will inform the most appropriate level and methods of funding. I will not comment on the specific powers that the member has asked about today, because I am mindful of the consultation process, but I look forward to attending the national conference of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities in St Andrews on Friday.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): As the cabinet secretary knows, Argyll and Bute Council is a mainland council with more inhabited islands than the island-only councils. As Kristopher Leask and the Deputy First Minister have highlighted, benefits could be achieved if islands were given more powers; however, funding would need to follow to make that process transformational. What conversations are being had with islanders to ensure that their views are taken into account?

Jenny Gilruth: I am aware of Ms Minto's many islands. It is important that, through our consultation, we engage directly with islanders. The Minister for Public Finance launched a public consultation last Friday, and I encourage Jenni Minto's constituents to engage in that process. It is so important that we hear from the public about what matters to them with regard to their council and the services that they experience and ultimately pay for.

Argyll and Bute Council, NHS Highland, and Argyll and Bute integration joint board all attended an islands dialogue event, which was held last week, on 13 November, and that discussion will help to set some of the future direction on local governance. Moreover, ministers are clear in our expectation that our local partners will work together to undertake that widespread engagement over the course of next year with communities and staff groups, including our island communities.

Cara McKee (West Scotland) (Green): Local bodies on Arran, including the existing community council, have developed a local governance proposal and have offered to act as a practical demonstrator for the Government's proposed approach to island and community governance. Will the Scottish Government take Arran up on that offer and encourage innovation and iterative learning?

Jenny Gilruth: I would be more than happy to engage with Cara McKee on the specifics of the Arran proposal. My granny was from Arran, Presiding Officer, so I feel a keen attachment to the island—I know that you represent that part of the country, too.

The Presiding Officer: I had a meeting about the proposal on Monday.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I echo the comments from Kristopher Leask and Jenni Minto in relation to the conferring of additional powers, particularly Jenni Minto's point about the funding that would need to go with that. The cabinet secretary will be aware that, through the Scotland Act 1998 and the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018, the constituencies of Orkney Islands, Shetland Islands and the Western Isles are protected and are not subject to review by the Boundary Commission for Scotland. Does she believe that local authorities in those three island groups would welcome such protection?

Jenny Gilruth: I confirm to Mr McArthur that that protection will—absolutely—remain. The Government has taken a bespoke and unique approach to our engagement with island communities, recognising not only their different needs but the legislative requirements that sit alongside those, as the member has quite rightly pointed out, which give them protection. That will help to frame some of our conversations with island authorities as we move forward.

Public Service Reform (Budgetary Provision)

9. **Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what estimate it has made of the cost of voluntary redundancy and other exit packages arising from its proposed public service reform programme, and whether provision for this expenditure has been made in the Scottish budget. (S7O-00525)

The Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform (Ivan McKee): As part of our public service reform programme, we continue to develop plans for the consolidation and reform of public bodies, including the associated workforce implications and the fiscal benefits that can be realised. Where workforce changes or exit schemes are required as a consequence of those reforms, we expect them to be managed in line with established best practice and to deliver value for money. Our expectation is that the bulk of the savings associated with any exit scheme should be realised in-year, wherever practicable.

Any proposals will also be subject to the appropriate governance and approval arrangements, including the requirements of the Scottish public finance manual. Funding requirements for the 2027-28 budget will be considered as part of the normal Scottish Government budget process.

Jackie Baillie: Earlier this month, it was reported that, following the merger of NHS National Services Scotland into Public Services Delivery Scotland, the former chief executive of NHS National Services Scotland had received a redundancy payment of £378,000, which is equivalent to 11 newly qualified nurses. Given the planned public sector reforms in health and in local councils, and the obvious public disquiet about that, how many more golden handshakes can the taxpayer expect to pick up the cost for?

Ivan McKee: I indicated in my answer that we are very focused on achieving value for money. Situations will be treated on a case-by-case basis, bearing in mind any contractual obligations that might be in place. However, Jackie Baillie can rest assured that the Government is focused on ensuring that we deliver value for money as we move through the process.

Colm Merrick (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): What risks might arise to essential front-line service delivery if we do not first achieve long-term fiscal sustainability?

Ivan McKee: Colm Merrick is absolutely right: our approach to public service reform is about securing the long-term sustainability of our public services while protecting the essential services that people rely on.

We recognise that workforce change needs to be carefully planned and managed with appropriate engagement. That is why, as we take forward proposals for public service reform, we will consider workforce, financial and service delivery implications together. Our focus is on delivering reform that works while managing risks and protecting essential front-line services for communities across Scotland.

Max Bannerman (Highlands and Islands) (Reform): The Government says that it can shrink the workforce through attrition and voluntary severance alone. If that is true, it should be easy to prove. Will the cabinet secretary publish, body by body, the modelling that shows that natural turnover and voluntary exits deliver the reduction that is needed at the pace—and in the right places—that the Government wants?

Ivan McKee: I can tell the member that, in the core Scottish Government, there has been a reduction of more than 1,000—about 11.5 per cent—in the head count over the past three and a half years. That has been achieved solely through non-replacement of civil servants who have left the organisation, through the natural attrition process and through recruitment control. We have absolutely demonstrated that the process works at the heart of Government, and that is the approach that we would roll out, together with voluntary exit schemes, where appropriate, across wider public sector bodies.

Craig Hoy (Dumfriesshire) (Con): In a response that I have just received from the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government, she says that the £10.3 million of workforce savings in the local government portfolio from 2026-27 are being managed through

"natural attrition, workforce planning measures and a range of in-year financial controls".

Is the reality not that, as the Government looks forward, unless it is prepared to make redundant those people whose roles become redundant, it will never hit its bold targets to reduce overall spending in the public sector in Scotland?

Ivan McKee: I find this quite bizarre—I have just gone through an example. Craig Hoy will know, because I have talked about this previously, that we have delivered significant head count reductions through precisely the measures that the Deputy First Minister has outlined in her answer to him. As I have said, we will continue with that approach, supplemented with voluntary exit schemes where appropriate. We have already demonstrated that such an approach can, and does, deliver the head count reductions that we are targeting across the wider landscape.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes questions on finance and local government.

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

Public Service Reform, Europe, External Affairs and Energy

Public Service Reform (Use of Artificial Intelligence)

1. **Zen Ghani (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP):** I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests. I am a councillor on Glasgow City Council.

To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to use AI to improve decision making and increase efficiency as part of its public service reform agenda. (S7O-00529)

The Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform (Ivan McKee): Public service reform is about redesigning services around people's needs. Digital services, data and technology are key enablers of service transformation through a dedicated workstream of the public service reform strategy. Through the strategy, we are scaling intelligent automation across core Government and key public bodies, to help to redesign services and improve productivity. That includes identifying opportunities to pilot AI technology in public sector processes. In the Scottish Government itself, we are scaling responsible and ethical AI and automation, including through the roll-out of Microsoft 365 Copilot premium and by developing AI agents to reduce administrative burden and to support better decision making while retaining professional judgment.

Zen Ghani: The recent report "Spotlight on AI: How AI is changing work in Scotland", by Skills Development Scotland and CBI Economics, shows that, although 87 per cent of businesses in Scotland now use AI in their daily practices, 74 per cent of businesses have reported no change to staff head count. How does the Scottish Government intend to ensure that AI is used to streamline governance and not used as a tool to replace workers?

Ivan McKee: Our approach is to use AI to support our workforce by reducing routine administration and freeing staff to focus on work that requires human judgment, expertise and empathy. Responsible adoption of AI is supported by guidance in the digital Scotland service manual, transparency through the mandatory Scottish AI Register and our developing AI ethics and assurance framework, alongside safeguards on data protection and security, responsible procurement and investment in AI skills. Those measures will help to ensure that AI delivers better and more efficient public services, while maintaining public trust.

Craig Hoy (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Given how poor some Scottish Government ministers are at answering questions—particularly the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport—does the Government have any plans to replace ministers with AI technology? I think that it could do a far better job than some of Mr McKee's colleagues.

Ivan McKee: That question comes from a party that used AI to generate and submit thousands of irrelevant and trivial questions to the Government, running up an enormous bill in the process—money that could have been better spent serving the people of Scotland.

As I indicated in my earlier answers, the use of AI is to support workers, including ministers, so that they are freed from routine administration and are able to focus on tasks that require human judgment, expertise and empathy.

The Presiding Officer: Question 2 has been withdrawn. The member has given an explanation.

European Union Re-entry (Benefits for Scotland)

3. **Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what analysis it has carried out or plans to carry out of the potential benefits to Scotland of the United Kingdom rejoining the EU. (S7O-00531)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Energy (Stephen Gethins): Leaving the EU has increased trade barriers with our largest trading partner and has imposed costs on businesses, as well as increasing red tape and costing the taxpayer. We have lost rights that other European citizens take for granted. Modelling by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research estimates that Brexit reduced UK gross domestic product by 3.2 per cent in 2025, and that reduction will have risen to 5.7 per cent by 2035. That equates to a reduction in Scottish public revenues of around £3.3 billion in 2025. Bluntly, leaving the EU has been catastrophic. We knew that. It is time to rejoin.

Neil Bibby: Clearly, Brexit has involved many damaging costs, and there would be many benefits to closer integration with Europe and membership of the EU for Scotland and, indeed, the whole of the United Kingdom. Will the minister therefore commit to joining trade unions, businesses, universities and civil society to take part in the summit that is proposed by Michael Marra and Scottish Labour, to develop the case for the UK to rejoin the European Union?

Stephen Gethins: I have been making the case for the UK to rejoin the EU for years, because Scotland never voted to leave. I have worked with universities and trade unions, and I will work with anybody to undo

that extraordinary damage. I will say briefly that I am delighted that, after years of devastation, Scottish Labour has now returned to making the case in that regard, and I hope that UK Labour is listening to it.

David Green (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD): I add my voice to Neil Bibby's on the summit and working collectively together.

As the minister will know, Liberal Democrats have long called for the creation of an EU-UK youth mobility scheme. Ahead of the summit this weekend, will the minister join me in underlining the importance of securing such a deal for young people, and will he ensure that the Scottish Government plays its full role in building a closer relationship with the EU by going further and faster on dynamic alignment?

Stephen Gethins: On dynamic alignment, David Green will already know the legislation that was passed by the Scottish Government. We will see what comes from Friday's summit—I hope that it comes, but, frankly, without rejoining, we would just be tinkering.

The point about youth mobility is important. We are, possibly, the first political generation since the war to leave fewer opportunities for those that come after us than we ourselves have enjoyed. Every member of the Parliament should reflect on that fact.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP): Scotland should never have been dragged out of the EU against our will, and it is welcome that the Labour Party is now admitting that it was wrong. However, the Prime Minister needs to stop dithering and get on with it. It is absurd that Scotland is still waiting for Westminster. Does the cabinet secretary share my view that Scotland's future is as an independent country and a member of the EU in our own right?

Stephen Gethins: When it comes to the rights that we have lost, the huge cost to the Exchequer, and the cost of living, the case for rejoining has been made—including, just yesterday, by Hamish Falconer. However, I am sure that Paul McLennan will agree that that has underlined the fact that we have an 18th century model of union that is outdated rather than the 21st century model that most other democratic western European countries have embraced.

The Presiding Officer: I call Colin Beattie.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North) (SNP): I am sorry, Presiding Officer, but I wanted to speak on question 10.

The Presiding Officer: Right. Well, Colin, you have been here for long enough to know that you should press your button only when we come to the relevant question.

Duncan Massey (North East Scotland) (Reform): On the subject of modelling, has the Government modelled the alignment with the EU emissions trading scheme, and the impact that that would have on our heavy industry—in particular, on our world-class petrochemicals industry, especially the petrochemical plant at Grangemouth?

Stephen Gethins: We will need to see what comes out of the summit on Friday. The UK Government is leading on that. We have a huge opportunity in that Europe is moving towards closer energy alignment. There is a fantastic opportunity for Scotland when it comes to pan-European energy security. Members opposite might refute that, but we embrace it.

External Affairs and Overseas Aid (Expenditure)

4. **Senga Beresford (South Scotland) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government how much taxpayer money was spent through its external affairs and overseas aid programmes in the most recent year for which figures are available. (S7O-00532)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Energy (Stephen Gethins): The most recent published outturn figures for 2024-25 show that the Scottish Government spent £25 million through its external affairs budget, which includes our international development fund. When that is taken together with spending on international climate change, the total expenditure in that year was £37.1 million.

Scotland's international engagement supports economic growth, promotes trade and investment, strengthens relationships with key partners and helps to address shared challenges such as climate change—which we believe to be happening—energy security and global health, all of which have implications for people, businesses and communities across Scotland. That is a good investment in our collective future.

Senga Beresford: There has been £113,091 spent on "Zambian Education School-based training" in Zambia; £142,527 spent on "Rural energy access" in Malawi; £100,000 spent on a "Global Renewables Centre" in Malawi, Rwanda and Zambia; and £36,000 spent on "African Lakes" in Malawi. I could go on and on—

The Presiding Officer: We would like a question. [*Laughter*.]

Senga Beresford: Sorry. Does the minister think it right that that taxpayers' money went to such overseas programmes when around 17 per cent of Scots are living in relative poverty, or does he agree that charity should begin at home?

Stephen Gethins: I embrace this Parliament because it is international and outward looking, and it takes its responsibilities on issues such as climate justice seriously. I will tell members something else—it is our responsibility as a Government to do so, and I am proud to be part of a Government that is outward looking and tackles climate change and promotes climate justice, because we believe that that is having an impact. It is great to see that Scottish expertise is being used elsewhere, too.

Reform UK is a party that is costing the taxpayer in the UK £250 million every day because of its isolationism and the Brexit that it backed and endorsed.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Last week, I attended a Christmas craft fair in Dunoon in my constituency, where one of the stalls was run by the charity Malawi Kids. On 3 November, we celebrated 21 years of the fabulous Scotland Malawi Partnership, which has brought many benefits to both countries. Will the minister outline how the Scottish Government intends to build on that relationship in the current session of Parliament?

Stephen Gethins: I thank Jenni Minto for her question and for illustrating that those local connections also play an important role. We see that in Argyll and Bute, and I know that they exist in Dundee as well. The Scotland Malawi Partnership is important, and my colleagues in Government will continue to build on it in relation to issues such as education and climate justice, which are shared challenges.

David Green (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD): Will the minister agree that international development is not only the morally right thing to do but important for our national security? When we withdraw from the world, we are replaced by China and by Russia, which is dangerous to our national security. Reform might be happy with that, but we should not be.

Stephen Gethins: David Green makes an excellent point that international development is an investment. I have made the case previously with regard to places such as Libya that, if we do not invest in international development, there is a cost to our own security. Also, to be frank, it is about building a good world with international partnerships, which helps to deliver jobs back here at home.

Oil and Gas (Exploration)

5. **Duncan Massey (North East Scotland) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the First Minister's comments during First Minister's questions on 5 November, whether it has changed its previous policy of a presumption against new oil and gas developments and now supports new exploration drilling. (S7O-00533)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Energy (Stephen Gethins): I am sure that Duncan Massey will not be surprised to learn that decisions on oil and gas licensing and consenting remain, I am afraid, reserved to the United Kingdom Government. Our position is that the UK Government must make all decisions on North Sea oil and gas on a case-by-case basis, with climate compatibility and energy security as key considerations, because any perceived failure in the statutory process could lead to potential future legal challenge.

Duncan Massey: The minister has an opinion on everything else, so why does he not have an opinion on that? The First Minister's comments seemed quite clear, but the minister's answer seems to contradict them. It makes abundant sense to maximise our own oil and gas resources. Will the Scottish Government confirm whether or not it supports new oil and gas drilling?

Stephen Gethins: The Government—unlike Reform, as we hear—thinks that it is important to base decisions on the evidence and the facts. That aspect got Jackdaw and Rosebank and other decisions into trouble in the past, not through Reform but through the Conservatives, although I believe that the member was a Conservative at the time—it is difficult to tell who is who at the moment. These decisions must be based on evidence, especially in relation to a quasi-judicial process. I take that part of my job incredibly seriously, because the last thing that anybody wants, whether they are for or against an outcome, is to end up in the courts again.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): The cabinet secretary is right: facts and evidence are important. Over the past three years, 46 foreign investment projects in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire did not proceed, with more than 3,300 projected jobs being lost. Reasons given to the regional investment forum for that include North Sea uncertainty and policy uncertainty.

Since the cabinet secretary's earlier answers were ambiguous, spad-generated civil-service speak, will he take this opportunity to give certainty on his Government's position? Does it officially maintain a presumption against oil and gas—yes or no?

Stephen Gethins: First, on the points that the member has raised, the issue relating to those projects is a matter for the Government that was previously in power in the United Kingdom.

The member will also know that a 92-page document was produced when Jackdaw was approved. I do not have access to that document. I would be delighted if the member were to join me in believing that devolution over energy should take place.

Thomas Kerr (Glasgow) (Reform): We have heard the minister's answers and opinions on Brexit, Gaza, Zambia and wasting money abroad but nothing on oil and gas, so I will try a third time. Does the Scottish Government back the idea of more oil and gas drilling in the north-east? Will the minister give a commitment to what the First Minister said about using our own resources here in Britain—yes or no?

Stephen Gethins: We are about to have a debate on the matter this afternoon, so I will be setting out the position in greater detail. However, when a quasi-judicial process is under way, I have a responsibility to respect that process and—Mr Kerr will find this astonishing—to try to base positions on the facts that are presented to me.

Public Service Reform (Vacancies on Public Bodies)

6. **Donald MacKinnon (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what guidance it has provided to ministers on when vacancies on public bodies should be filled, left vacant or abolished as part of its public service reform agenda. (S7O-00534)

The Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform (Ivan McKee): The work that we are taking forward on public service reform aims to deliver sustainable, high-quality public services for everyone across Scotland. There is currently no central guidance through the public service reform programme on whether ministers should fill positions on public bodies or leave them vacant, and that includes decisions on appointments to public body boards. Ministers will consider vacancies on a case-by-case basis, being informed by the needs of each body and the opportunity, where appropriate, to support our wider reform objectives.

Appointments to public body boards are a matter for the relevant portfolio minister.

Donald MacKinnon: This morning, Scottish National Party, Reform and Tory members of the Rural Affairs Committee voted against my motion to annul a statutory instrument on the Scottish Government's plans to reduce the number of members of the Scottish Land Commission from five to four. The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Rural Affairs made it clear to the committee that the decision to not fill the vacancy that arose on the Land Commission board earlier this year was taken in the context of public service reform.

Is it the view of the cabinet secretary that such decisions should be taken in an ad hoc way in the name of public service reform, and should we expect to see that approach applied to other public bodies?

Ivan McKee: As the member rightly identifies, the decision was taken by the cabinet secretary who has responsibility for the public body in question. Earlier today, I met the Ethical Standards Commissioner, who has oversight in relation to appointments to public body boards. We spoke at length about how to manage the process as we move through what might be a range of public body consolidations and mergers over the coming period. We recognise that there is a need to have oversight, to work through such cases collectively as they arise and to understand best practice in that context, but it is important to recognise that the member's specific example concerns a decision that was taken with regard to that particular public body.

Michelle Campbell (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP): Can the cabinet secretary speak further on how findings from the functions-based review that was undertaken during the summer are informing efforts to restructure the public body landscape?

Ivan McKee: The work that took place identified further opportunities to reduce duplication, improve efficiency and reshape Scotland's public body landscape. That includes greater use of shared services, digital transformation, structural reform and bringing together functions where there are clear connections and opportunity. That review informed the programme for government and will help to shape legislation and the further work that we are bringing forward in relation to the implementation plans that are needed to progress our reform ambitions in a timely manner.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): If the Scottish Government is to meet its ambitious workforce reduction targets across the public sector, there will need to be redundancies, including in public bodies. If the Government maintains its policy of no compulsory redundancies, which we believe is misguided, considerable additional sums will need to be paid as voluntary severance schemes are negotiated. What is

the Government's assessment of the overall quantum of the voluntary severance schemes that will be required as a direct result of its workforce reduction policy?

Ivan McKee: I have already answered that question, but I am happy to answer it again.

Murdo Fraser: How much?

Ivan McKee: As Murdo Fraser should be well aware—if he had been listening and not shouting from a sedentary position—the core Scottish Government has made significant reductions in its head count over recent years through a process of managed attrition and restructuring, without the need for any redundancies. In addition, a voluntary exit scheme is now in place, with costs paid back within a reasonable period. As Murdo Fraser should understand, when somebody leaves an organisation, there are up-front costs but then consequent savings.

Our policy on no compulsory redundancies remains in place, and we will continue to deliver savings in head count, as planned, through the processes that I have identified.

Public Service Reform (Third Sector Organisations)

7. **Yi-pei Chou Turvey (North East Scotland) (LD):** I remind members that, as set out in my entry in the register of members' interests, I am a trustee of a couple of charities in the north-east.

To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to ensure that third sector organisations, including in North East Scotland, can participate sustainably as equal partners in its planned public service reform. (S7O-00535)

The Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform (Ivan McKee): The third sector plays a vital role in delivering better outcomes for people and communities, and its contribution is central to our approach to public service reform. Through the PSR programme and wider engagement with partners, we are working with third sector organisations to shape, design and deliver reform. Our aim is to create simpler and more person-centred services, with communities and delivery partners involved as equal partners in improving outcomes. That includes ensuring that the voices and expertise of third sector organisations across Scotland, including those in the north-east, inform implementation of the reform proposals.

Yi-pei Chou Turvey: Third sector organisations across the spectrum, from Rape Crisis Scotland to Penumbra Mental Health, have shared with me how difficult it is to run fit-for-purpose provision within the current funding system of single-year awards. They struggle to commit to future planning because they do not know what funding they will receive from one year to the next. How will the cabinet secretary support third sector organisations, which the Government describes as essential but which, in reality, face budget shortfalls, insecure employment contracts and year-to-year uncertainty?

Ivan McKee: The member makes a valid point. I hear the same message from third sector organisations when I meet them. My Cabinet colleague with responsibility for communities is taking forward work, through the third sector partnership agreement, to deliver fairer funding mechanisms for the third sector, in recognition of the critical role that it plays not just in delivering services for individuals and communities but in shifting resources to more preventative investment across the public service landscape. I take on board the member's points, and I note that the Government is progressing that work.

Public Service Reform (Redundancies Policy)

8. **Max Bannerman (Highlands and Islands) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to make savings from public sector reform without reducing head count through redundancies. (S7O-00536)

The Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform (Ivan McKee): There is a bit of an obsession with talking about head count today. I have given clear answers, and I will give them again, with more numbers and more data, to the member's heart's content.

Head-count reductions can be delivered through a variety of means, including vacancy management of staff turnover, voluntary exit schemes and restructuring, when appropriate. The core Scottish Government has been reducing its workforce in that manner. Its total workforce, including the contingent and directly employed workforce, decreased by 8 per cent between March 2024 and March 2026. The latest estimate of core Scottish Government staff costs is £730 million for 2025-26, compared with £724 million for 2024-25, which represents a 2.5 per cent reduction in real terms over that period.

In addition, our portfolio efficiency and reform plans include a range of non-head-count-related savings, including through work on operational and programme efficiencies, shared services, estates, procurement and wider service reform.

Max Bannerman: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer, but my point is that the First Minister has committed to maintaining the no compulsory redundancy policy. Meanwhile, the Fraser of Allander Institute's analysis shows that workforce savings are a fraction of the £500 million that the Government needs. Economists are already warning that compulsory redundancies will be needed to hit that target. Both promises cannot survive contact with the fiscal reality, so which one will it be? Will the Government drop its no compulsory redundancies pledge, or will it admit today that it will miss its savings target?

Ivan McKee: I do not know why Reform and Conservative members have such an obsession with firing people. It seems to be the only thing that they want to talk about this afternoon. However, I suppose that is no surprise.

I have already outlined this, but I will go back through the numbers for the slow of listening. We have delivered an 8 per cent reduction—that is 4 per cent per year—during the last two years, in the core Scottish Government. That has been done not only without compulsory redundancies but without even a voluntary redundancy scheme during that period. That shows what can be done when we implement effective means of vacancy management through attrition, et cetera. We are now implementing voluntary exit schemes that will reduce the head count further. There was a real-terms reduction of 2.5 per cent in staffing costs during that period.

That is before we even look at the other half of our spending, which is not head count related, in shared services, estates, procurement, operational aspects and so on, on which we have also delivered significant savings.

There is scope to deliver the savings within the mechanisms and processes that we are using. I ask members to go and look at the data and stop obsessing about firing people.

Public Service Reform (Multiyear Funding for Third Sector Organisations)

9. **Joe Long (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what role multiyear funding for third sector organisations will play in delivering its public service reform objectives in the forthcoming budget. (S7O-00537)

The Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform (Ivan McKee): I will reiterate the points that I made in answer to a previous question. We hugely value the third sector and its unique role in delivering for our communities. Through the public service reform strategy, we are committed to partnering with the sector and strengthening and building on its dedication, skills and expertise.

We recognise the clear benefits that multiyear funding can provide for our third sector partners, including in supporting the shift to prevention. Our work to deliver a fairer funding approach has made significant progress in broadening its availability. Our ambition is to go further on multiyear funding, while ensuring that public spending is sustainable.

Joe Long: I refer to my entry in the register of interests, as I am a former third sector director.

The Scottish Government's feedback survey from November 2025 showed that 86 per cent of organisations that participated in the pilot on fairer funding reported a positive impact. We therefore already know the benefits. Will the cabinet secretary commit to a clear timescale for when multiyear funding for third sector organisations will become the norm?

Ivan McKee: I recognise the importance of such work to the broader public service reform and preventative agenda. My colleague the cabinet secretary with responsibility for communities is leading on that work, but I undertake to engage with her on it and work through what we need to, to allow us to put a timeline on it. Clearly, that work has to be managed within the existing fiscal constraints, but we recognise the huge importance of the work that the third sector delivers.

Renewable Energy (Workforce Skills)

10. **Colin Beattie (Midlothian North) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it will ensure that the workforce has the skills required to support the expansion of renewable energy. (S7O-00538)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Energy (Stephen Gethins): The Scottish Government is working with the energy sector to plan for a multiskilled workforce that can benefit from opportunities across the energy system.

Our offshore wind skills programme will support industry and public sector partners to build the workforce that is needed to support the delivery of Scotland's offshore wind pipeline. That aligns demand with training provision and helps to unlock long-term, high-quality jobs across Scotland. Our transition training fund also

supports oil and gas workers with careers advice and funding for training to build the skills that are required for a range of sectors, including sustainable energy.

Colin Beattie: If we are to unlock the economic and social potential of renewable energy, we must ensure that our skilled workforce is properly trained. With that in mind, can the cabinet secretary outline the steps that will be taken to ensure that our skilled workforce, including electricians, is effectively regulated and qualified?

Stephen Gethins: The Scottish Government is working with the energy sector to plan for a multiskilled workforce that can benefit from opportunities across the energy sector.

Construction apprenticeships, including electricians, are important to Scotland's economic success. Assessment arrangements for apprenticeships must be robust, proportionate and deliverable. Apprentices completing qualifications must demonstrate the competence required to work safely and effectively, and Qualifications Scotland has an important role to play in assessing that.

Steven Bonnar (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): There has been significant investment in renewable energy in Scotland. In Lanarkshire, we have the artificial intelligence investment zone. I want young people in communities such as Uddingston and Bellshill to have a fair shot at the skilled jobs that that investment will create. What is the Scottish Government doing to help them to access the apprenticeships and the training that they will need to secure skilled jobs in those sectors?

Stephen Gethins: Mr Bonar raises a good point. In working with some of the organisations that I referred to earlier, it is important that we give people opportunities to undertake apprenticeships. I am keen to see that happen.

I talked earlier about ensuring that young people have more opportunities than we enjoyed. As we make that transition, that is uppermost in my mind.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): The Robert Gordon University Energy Transition Institute has identified a Goldilocks zone over the next five years, during which the decline in oil and gas jobs must be matched by growth in renewables employment if we are to avoid permanently losing the skills and supply chain capacity that the north-east has built up over decades.

Given that more than 90 per cent of existing offshore energy skills are transferrable, does the minister recognise that the biggest challenge is not necessarily developing new skills but securing the investment in renewable energy projects, infrastructure and supply chains that will create jobs to retain those workers? If so, what additional public investment is the Scottish Government prepared to make to unlock that private investment?

Stephen Gethins: That is an important question, and Maggie Chapman is absolutely right to ask it. I am aware of the work at Robert Gordon University to which she refers.

We can do much with our transition training fund and other skills programmes, but we need that investment, and I am working as hard as I can to bring it in. However, the member will be aware that we are still waiting for significant decisions at United Kingdom Government level, such as the strategic spatial energy plan, which the industry has raised with me as being important. She is right that there is massive opportunity in our energy sector and the jobs that it can produce, not least for our young people.

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): That concludes questions on public service reform, Europe external affairs and energy.

I had 21 requests for supplementaries this afternoon, and I took 20 of those. My apologies to Craig Hoy for not taking his fourth supplementary, but he still gets a gold star with three.

Rosebank Oil and Gas Field

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is a debate on motion S7M-02068, in the name of Mark Ruskell, on Rosebank and upholding the Paris climate agreement.

Members who wish to speak should press their request-to-speak button now. I call Mark Ruskell to speak to and move the motion. You have six minutes, please, Mr Ruskell.

15:03

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): In 2015, the world came together to sign the Paris agreement at the 21st UN climate change conference of the parties—COP21. It was a moment of hope after

decades of indecision and inaction. Hundreds of thousands of people gathered on streets around the globe, including here, in Edinburgh, demanding the breakthrough.

The United Kingdom pledged, alongside other nations, to keep the climate within safe limits and to strive for a world that is liveable, not just for us but for all generations to come. Keeping the world to well below 2ºC of temperature increase while keeping on track for 1.5°C is not an abstract calculation; it is about saving lives.

As Nicola Sturgeon said at COP26, in Glasgow:

"every fraction of a degree above that intensifies the catastrophic nature of what we face. If we allow it to happen, we do risk life on this planet becoming unrecognisable.

Every single leader … without exception … knows that. No-one can pretend otherwise.

And each and every country gathered round the negotiating table also knows the action that is needed to prevent it. So there is no excuse for failing to act."

Nicola Sturgeon was right, and she is still right.

There have been so many warnings. Opening up new oil and gas fields, including Rosebank, would be completely incompatible with the Paris agreement goals. The International Energy Agency has repeatedly said that, in order to keep the 1.5°C global warming limit on track, there must be no new investment in oil and gas. Research shows that burning oil and gas in existing fields, never mind at Rosebank, would blow the 1.5°C global carbon budget by a long way. Nicola Sturgeon was right: there is no excuse for failing to act.

However, five years on from COP26, in Glasgow, all that I hear from political leaders across the UK is excuses for inaction. They say that the time is not right, that the lights would go out and that we need fossil fuels to fund renewables. Those myths are perpetuated by an oil and gas industry that is quite prepared to extract every last drop, throw its North Sea workers over the cliff edge and then move its capital somewhere else while blaming governments for daring to tax its profits.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Energy workers in my region have repeatedly felt let down by failed promises to develop a plan to shift from oil and gas to renewables. The oil and gas industry clearly has no interest in securing long-term sustainable jobs for those workers.

Does Mark Ruskell agree that we need a coherent strategy for investment in renewables, which would leverage investment from the private sector alongside state support, to ensure that workers have the certainty that such a strategy would provide instead of having to rely on a mythical failed promise such as Rosebank?

Mark Ruskell: Maggie Chapman is absolutely right. Workers in the north-east have been continuously failed. Even at times in the past 10 years when we saw record profits, we saw record job losses. The time for a plan is long overdue, as is the time for this Government to come up with an energy strategy that shows how public and private investment can work together.

This year, we have seen the Government's commitment to a green energy transition slip. Ministers have already met with one of the developers behind Rosebank four times to discuss how projects can be brought on stream. In the past month, cabinet members welcomed the approval of Jackdaw and signed off on a new gas-fired power station at Peterhead. Last week, the First Minister confirmed that his party opposes UK legislation that would ban new oil and gas exploration. That is reckless, especially given that it comes from the same party that welcomed the world to COP26, in Glasgow, only five years ago. This is disaster capitalism. It is a headlong rush to maximise profits in the face of energy insecurity. It gives not a thought to the impact on the generations that will come after us.

Last week, the secretary general of the United Nations said at COP31 that

"fossil fuel interests keep making a killing while killing our planet."

Let us be clear about Rosebank. The field would produce six and a half times more climate pollution than Scotland's annual emissions. The suggestion that Rosebank will improve the UK's energy security is a fantasy. Ninety per cent of its reserves are oil and will be sold to the highest bidder in the international market.

Monica Lennon (Glasgow) (Lab): Mark Ruskell will be aware of reports that around £200 million of profits could flow from Rosebank's oil to the Delek Group and that the Scottish Palestine Solidarity Campaign has written to the Prime Minister about its concerns, calling on the UK Government to carry out a comprehensive assessment of the risks that are linked with a decision on Rosebank. Mark Ruskell made the case about the climate risk, and Rosebank would be a climate disaster, but does he recognise that it is also a serious human rights issue?

Mark Ruskell: Yes—100 per cent. I applaud Monica Lennon's leadership on that issue. It is hugely important for this Parliament, which has committed to a boycott, divestment and sanctions policy, that the Government follows through on that enormous commitment.

If most of the oil that is being burned is to be burned outside the UK, Rosebank must be assessed against the remaining global carbon budget for 1.5°C, not just the UK's and Scotland's domestic carbon budgets. That points to a major flaw in the Scottish National Party's amendment, because the issue is not only about ensuring that we are compatible with domestic net zero targets set by climate legislation; it is about a broader failure to act in line with global advice. Given everything that we know and all the warnings and advice that we have received from scientists and independent bodies such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the IEA and the UK Climate Change Committee, the only climate-credible decision is to reject Rosebank.

There is also the cost. Far from reducing the burden on taxpayers, Rosebank would ramp it up. Researchers at Uplift have uncovered that, in effect, 80 per cent of its development costs would be paid for by generous tax reliefs. With the end of the windfall tax—wilfully cheered on by some members—Rosebank's developers could get even more money in reliefs than they pay into the UK Treasury. While the profits of Equinor and Shell soared in the third quarter of this year, everyone else is facing skyrocketing energy bills. I know of no other sector of the economy that has been given such a forest of magic money trees. Ed Miliband was right when he said that Rosebank would be a

"Colossal waste of taxpayer money and climate vandalism".

Approval would send a message from the North Sea that states around the world should double down on fossil fuel exploration and licensing. Bullied by Donald Trump, the world is at a dangerous point where the goal of not surpassing 1.5°C degrees is barely alive. With no binding international agreements to manage the decline in fossil fuels in an orderly way, approving Rosebank could spark a free-for-all—a race to develop more oil and gas and a race towards climate breakdown.

Remember Nicola Sturgeon's words:

"there is no excuse for failing to act."

There is no credible excuse for MSPs not to vote for our motion at decision time.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that new oil and gas exploration licences and the proposed Rosebank oil and gas field are incompatible with the UK's commitments under the Paris Climate Agreement to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees, and opposes the development of the Rosebank oil and gas field.

15:11

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Energy (Stephen Gethins): We have lodged a straightforward amendment, such that any new decisions on oil and gas must be made in accordance with the law, including any climate legislation. It was a failure to take that into account in the past that led to years of court action. I am sure that colleagues here can agree that we should, at least, not be repeating those mistakes of the past.

We will continue to rely on fossil fuels for years to come, so, given that domestic production has a lower carbon footprint than imports, that resource should be utilised.

All of that is within the context of reaching our net zero targets, as set out in law, by 2045. I want to be clear on that and on the importance of the amendment in my name, which I will shortly move, in reaffirming the Scottish Government's commitment to Scotland's climate legislation and to achieving net zero by 2045. Our statutory carbon budget framework requires sustained action to reduce emissions, and our climate change plan sets out more than 150 actions to deliver the first three carbon budgets up to 2040. I acknowledge the work that is being done on that by Gillian Martin. That commitment underpins how the Scottish Government approaches the debate.

Mark Ruskell: Will the minister give way?

Stephen Gethins: I will make some progress first, if I may.

Much as I might not like it, decisions on oil and gas licensing and the consenting of individual offshore fields are reserved to the UK Government. I would much rather that they were made here, but, unfortunately, they are not decisions for this Government or Parliament at the moment. The majority of us obviously want to see that changed.

We believe that the benefits of Scotland's energy wealth cannot be fully achieved within the current devolution settlement. It is vital that powers over Scotland's energy are in Scotland's hands. We will continue to make that point to the UK Government, asking it to transfer responsibility for energy powers to Scotland, as this democratically elected Parliament has overwhelmingly voted in favour of that.

We are also clear about the energy future that we want for Scotland and about the purpose that the remaining resources of the North Sea should serve in making the transition. I welcome the opportunity that Mark Ruskell's motion provides to debate those questions today. They are important questions.

The Scottish Government is absolutely committed to tackling climate change. Climate change exists—we know it in the science. We need to keep repeating that.

Mark Ruskell: I ask the minister to reflect on how his amendment refers to legislation from this place. It relates to net zero targets, which are about domestic production and domestic emissions. However, some 90 per cent of what comes from Rosebank will be exported: it will be burned in other jurisdictions. That does not impact on the net zero targets that the minister is talking about.

Stephen Gethins: I hope that Mr Ruskell will forgive me, but I cannot pre-empt the decision on Rosebank. As I set out earlier regarding Jackdaw, which was the subject of a 92-page report, any decisions that we make must be within the law, and any decisions that the UK Government makes must be within the law. I would have thought that we would have taken that for granted. Indeed, we all take that very seriously.

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