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

Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 25 November 2026

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

Portfolio Question Time

Justice

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

Burglaries and Housebreaking Incidents (Glasgow)

1. **Amanda Lindsay (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports that 80 per cent of reported burglaries and housebreaking incidents in Glasgow do not result in an identified suspect or formal charge. (S7O-00576)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Kirsten Oswald): I recognise the significant impact that housebreaking can have on victims and their sense of safety at home. Housebreaking in Glasgow city has fallen by 84 per cent since 2006-07—from 5,285 crimes to 859 in the year ending September 2026. Over the past decade, it has fallen by 69 per cent. Both of those reductions were greater than the reductions across Scotland as a whole. Official recorded crime statistics also show that, in 2025-26, around 33 per cent of housebreaking crimes in Glasgow city were cleared up, which means that there was sufficient evidence to justify consideration of criminal proceedings.

Police Scotland is taking targeted, intelligence-led action to tackle housebreaking, which involves identifying emerging patterns of offending, targeting repeat offenders and sharing intelligence on suspects and their methods. That is supported by the Police Scotland-led Scottish partnership against acquisitive crime, which brings together partners specifically to prevent and deter crimes, including housebreaking, thereby reducing opportunities for offending and protecting individuals.

Amanda Lindsay: Does the Scottish Government consider it an appropriate use of Police Scotland's time and resources for a constituent in my region to be charged with a racially aggravated offence for muttering words under his breath in his car, with the windows closed, which were picked up on his dashcam, after he had reported a dangerous driver? Will the minister instruct the chief constable to prioritise—

The Presiding Officer: Sorry, but I am not sure that that has much to do with housebreaking in Glasgow and reported burglaries. It is quite well off the topic of the question that you originally asked.

Amanda Lindsay: I think that it is relevant, because, despite the background of the rise in burglaries, police resources and time are being spent on that, so—

The Presiding Officer: Okay. Minister, do you want to have a stab at that?

Kirsten Oswald: As members will understand, it is not appropriate for me to direct Police Scotland in its operational duties, and nor do I intend to do so.

Jamie Langan (South Scotland) (Reform): The convener of the Criminal Justice Committee recently stated that the justice system is "stretched to breaking point" but, in 2025-26, Police Scotland still found time to charge 115 people under the Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Act 2021 for so-called speech offences. Does the minister agree that Police Scotland should focus on tackling violent crime rather than prosecuting people for speech crimes?

The Presiding Officer: Again, that is a bit of a segue.

Kirsten Oswald: At the risk of repeating myself, it would not be appropriate for me to direct the police in their operational duties. That would be inappropriate. However, it is for the police to uphold the law, and that is what they are doing.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP): My supplementary is on housebreaking.

Is it not the case that the statistics show that 859 housebreaking incidents were recorded in Glasgow city, which was down from 1,015 in the previous year, and that that equates to 12.9 incidents per 10,000 people, which is roughly in line with the Scottish average of 12.6? Will the minister set out the challenges for the police with regard to housebreaking, given that there is often a lack of direct witness or forensic evidence?

Kirsten Oswald: Paul McLennan's characterisation is right. We should recognise the particular challenges that such offences present for policing. Housebreaking frequently occurs when no one is present, so there might well be no eye-witness evidence and, in some cases, forensic or closed-circuit television evidence might be limited. That makes intelligence-led policing—linking offences and identifying repeat offenders—particularly important.

As I pointed out, there has been substantial progress over the longer term, with housebreaking in Glasgow city down 84 per cent since 2006-07. However, I must say that the statistics in no way diminish the experience of anyone whose home has been broken into. We expect Police Scotland to continue to use intelligence, forensic opportunities and preventative action to tackle those who are responsible.

Specialist Support Services for Women and Girls (Access)

2. **Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the 2026 United Nations' 16 days of activism theme, "Ensure justice, protect survivors, end impunity", what steps it is taking to ensure that women and girls are able to access specialist support services like Women's Aid and Rape Crisis. (S7O-00577)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Kirsten Oswald): I am grateful to Katy Clark for her continued focus on this area. The 16 days of activism is an important reminder of the need to tackle violence against women and girls and ensure that survivors can access specialist support. Organisations such as Women's Aid and Rape Crisis Scotland provide a lifeline to survivors, and we recognise the pressures that they face. We are investing almost £46 million through the delivering equally safe fund throughout 2026 to 2028, alongside £12 million through the victim-centred approach fund between 2025 and 2027. Our programme for government commits to strengthening support for specialist services, and we remain focused on delivering that commitment as quickly as possible.

Katy Clark: Nearly 70 per cent of local Women's Aid services have experienced a real-terms cut to their income throughout the past five years, while demand has significantly increased. Scottish Rape Crisis Alliance has warned that, without additional funding, more than 2,000 women and girls in Scotland could be stuck on waiting lists by 2028. Will the minister confirm whether the Scottish Government will deliver the promised £0.5 million in emergency funding for services such as Women's Aid and Rape Crisis Scotland in next week's budget?

Kirsten Oswald: Katy Clark will appreciate that I will not pre-empt the budget, and I do not think that she would expect me to. I know that her question and her focus on this area come from her interest in ensuring that we have a laser focus on preventing and tackling violence against women and girls. The Scottish Government has brought forward the strongest set of proposals yet to tackle and prevent violence against women and girls. For instance, I point to our multiyear investment in the delivering equally safe fund, which stands at almost £46 million throughout 2026 to 2028. I could go on and expand on other funds, but I am sure that we agree that violence against women and girls is an extremely serious issue and that it deserves all our focus.

Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP): The "Breaking Point" report that was published yesterday shows that Women's Aid services are struggling to cope with financial pressures. I should have prefaced my remarks by saying that I speak as the chair of North Ayrshire Women's Aid. The report highlights that funding sourced from local authorities was the most frequent source of funding to be impacted by real-terms cuts, leading to

"redundancies, service delivery pauses or reductions, and increased pressure on remaining staff."

Will the minister give any consideration to discussing ring fencing local funds for Women's Aid services, in order to mitigate the ongoing financial pressures that the services are experiencing, so that they can get the funding that they require to support extremely vulnerable women?

Kirsten Oswald: Again, I am grateful to Patricia Gibson for her continued focus on an area of critical importance for us all. It would not be helpful or appropriate for me to direct local authorities on where they should spend their funds, but I appreciate and understand the point that she makes about the pressures that are being experienced, and we are reflecting on that. I welcome further conversations with her on that point.

The Presiding Officer: I call Tim Eagle for question 3.

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): [*Inaudible*.] My apologies, Presiding Officer—I did not put my card in. I should not be the one who does that—

The Presiding Officer: If you had not been chuntering to Murdo Fraser quite so much, you might have remembered to put your card in.

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Wildfire Strategic Action Plan (Review)

3. **Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I am in trouble with the Presiding Officer, but I will carry on.

To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its review of the wildfire strategic action plan, including when it is expected to be completed. (S7O-00578)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Neil Gray): Tim Eagle's misfortune prompted me to ensure that my card is in place.

The review prioritises four areas in which accelerated action and arrangements in the wildfires strategic action plan could strengthen Scotland's wildfire preparedness and response. Those are preventative communications, wildfire danger assessments, aerial firefighting support and strengthened multi-agency arrangements.

Of course, we are not waiting for the review's conclusions before making improvements, and good progress has already been made across all four areas. For example, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service now has arrangements to engage directly with commercial helicopter providers and place assets on standby during periods of heightened fire risk. Those arrangements have been incorporated into operational planning, while officials continue to engage with the United Kingdom Government on emerging military aerial firefighting capability.

The review, which is in its final stages, will bring together progress against the priority actions, findings from the Cairngorms multi-agency debrief and wider stakeholder evidence. I anticipate that it will conclude in the early part of 2027.

Tim Eagle: At this morning's meeting of the Criminal Justice Committee, Stephen Kerr tried desperately to get the assurances that I believe that communities across Scotland need. When a fire breaks out, will we have immediate access to aerial support? This is a matter of life and death. Having assets on standby is meaningless if that is not backed up by priority access when fire breaks out. It is a yes or no question. When a fire breaks out, will that standby provision mean that the provider of aerial support, no matter where it is, will stop what it is doing immediately and make its way to the fire?

Neil Gray: Having that provision on standby means that it is available for response and deployment. That is what we have negotiated. We want to ensure that, following the experience of the Dava wildfire and of this summer's wildfire in the Cairngorms, our resilience with regard to aerial firefighting capability is improved. More work needs to be done to ensure that the UK-wide resilience that we were unable to call on in the summer can be strengthened. That is a key component of the concerns of stakeholders, which I am sure that they will speak to Tim Eagle about.

We are also supporting the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to ensure that it has the personal protective equipment and the wider capability that it requires in order to continue to modernise its service in response to emerging threats.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Eagle just wanted a yes or a no, and he got a yes.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): At this morning's meeting of the Criminal Justice Committee, Mike Bruce, chair of the Scottish Wildfire Forum's review and analysis group, told the committee that the water-bombing helicopter capacity for dealing with wildfires is generally paid for by the landowner, even though the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has a contract for the service.

Given what the cabinet secretary announced in his recent statement, can he confirm that those costs will now be borne by the public purse and not by landowners? That is one of the reasons why there might have been a delay.

Neil Gray: As Pauline McNeill is aware, we have contractual arrangements through the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service as well as through landowners, including public landowners, to ensure that we are able to contract aerial capability from private operators. That is the same basis on which we are providing the standby capacity. We want to ensure that deployment is readily available earlier, should there be a heightened fire risk and should such deployment be required.

Laura Mitchell (Moray) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary provide an update on what discussions the Scottish Government has had with the UK Government regarding the provision of aerial firefighting capabilities and the steps that are being taken to ensure that Scotland has the resources that are needed to respond effectively to wildfires?

Neil Gray: Laura Mitchell asks a very pertinent question. We have continued to engage with the UK Government on aerial firefighting capability, including through four-nations discussions, as there is clearly a

gap in UK resilience, as was evident from the wildfires across the UK this summer. That work is looking not simply at the provision of additional aircraft but at the resilience of UK-wide arrangements, including availability, capacity, existing contracts, prioritisation during concurrent incidents and the potential role of military capability.

We are looking to ensure that we improve our own capacity, but our stakeholders on the wildfire strategic oversight group are clear that we must consider a co-ordinated UK-wide approach as well. We will continue to pursue that with the UK Government, and I will keep Parliament updated as that work develops.

Police Scotland (Violence against Women and Institutional Misogyny)

4. **Kate Nevens (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the international day for the elimination of violence against women, what specific measures are being taken to address reported police-perpetrated violence against women and institutional misogyny within Police Scotland, including how progress and outcomes on these measures will be independently monitored and publicly reported. (S7O-00579)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Neil Gray): I am grateful to Kate Nevens for asking that question today, as we mark the start of 16 days of activism on violence against women and girls with the debate on the subject that the First Minister will lead later this afternoon.

Violence against women and institutional misogyny have no place in policing or society. Victims must have confidence that allegations will be investigated without fear or favour, including when they concern police officers. I am pleased, therefore, that the Criminal Justice Committee agreed to strengthen the police conduct regulations and rejected a proposal to annul them.

Those regulations, which will come into force tomorrow, will enable the chief constable to act more quickly when there is clear evidence of gross misconduct, including sexual violence and domestic abuse. The chief constable has been clear that officers who are convicted of serious offending should be dealt with more quickly.

The regulations will also strengthen support for victims and witnesses and require the publication of misconduct outcomes, thereby increasing the transparency and accountability that Ms Nevens has asked for.

Kate Nevens: At present, eight officers convicted of offences against women and girls remain employed by Police Scotland, with some remaining in post for over a year following conviction. Although I, too, welcome the proposed changes to the police conduct regulations, which will hopefully make it quicker to dismiss officers following criminal convictions and in certain serious cases of gross misconduct, will the cabinet secretary outline the steps that will be taken to address the underlying culture that allows misogyny and violence against women to persist in policing? Will he say a bit more about what can be done to support victims and survivors of police-perpetrated abuse?

Neil Gray: I thank Kate Nevens for her question. The intolerable situation that she recounted at the start of her question is part of the reason why I am so pleased that the police conduct regulations have gone through. They will ensure that we are able to remove from post officers who have been convicted of offences, including violence against women and girls, much quicker than the year that she has just mentioned on the record.

As for how we can prevent this from happening in future, I am clear that the leadership of Police Scotland, in its identification and prosecution of individuals accused of this type of misconduct, is showing that there is nowhere to hide, and that these individuals are no longer being hidden either within the police or any other part of society. That is giving women the confidence to come forward and report these crimes in the first place, which is something that I am pleased about.

Hawick Fire Station

5. **Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what plans the Cabinet Secretary for Justice has to meet with firefighters and campaigners in Hawick, in light of the decision to downgrade Hawick fire station. (S7O-00580)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Neil Gray): The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service board took the decision on Hawick following an extensive public consultation and a thorough review of risks and historic deployment data across the Borders area. The service has concluded that the change can be introduced safely.

Hawick will continue to have two operational fire appliances, which will respond to all emergency incidents. On-call firefighters do a fantastic job in keeping our communities safe, and the SFRS has assessed that the system is safe and effective for the level of demand faced by Hawick fire station.

The SFRS is now focusing on delivering those changes safely, responsibly and transparently, and it remains in negotiations with the Fire Brigades Union on a day shift duty system collective agreement, which will support the implementation of a crewing model being introduced at Hawick and other selected locations.

Rachael Hamilton: The cabinet secretary's response is extremely disappointing. Residents now think that he is running away from the Hawick community that will be most affected by this decision. More than 1,200 local residents have signed another petition, which they will bring to the Parliament in January. Will the cabinet secretary reconsider meeting local residents when they deliver the petition, or is he just letting down rural communities again?

Neil Gray: I have already set out what the SFRS board intends to deliver for Hawick, which is to continue with two appliances on an on-call basis to ensure that the risks being faced by the community can be met safely. I am, of course, more than happy to meet individuals at any point, and I hope that such a meeting can additionally be informed by the presence of a member of the fire brigade to set out the risk assessment process. I know that Rachael Hamilton will have been furnished with that information in her correspondence with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, and I am sure that it is providing her, and the community, with assurance on the thorough and transparent process that has been followed.

No-fly Zone Regulations (Prisons)

6. **David Linden (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of recent discussions with the United Kingdom Government, what progress there has been with a view to extending the application of no-fly zone regulations to prisons in Scotland. (S7O-00581)

Neil Gray: Unauthorised drone activity presents a significant security risk to prisons, particularly through the conveyance of illicit items, which is why the restrictions are so necessary. Although no-fly zones will not prevent all such activity, they will provide an important additional protection alongside the security measures that are already being taken forward and enhanced by the Scottish Prison Service. That is why the Scottish Government has been clear that prisons in Scotland should benefit from no-fly zone protections equivalent to those in place in England and Wales.

As this is a reserved matter, my predecessor, Angela Constance, wrote to the UK Government seeking support to extend those arrangements. The UK Government has confirmed its support, and my officials continue to engage with the Ministry of Justice, which needs to bring forward the necessary regulations.

David Linden: I urge the cabinet secretary and, indeed, the UK Government to get a move on, given that the number of drone detections at HMP Barlinnie, which is in my constituency, increased by 245 per cent during the 2025-26 financial year.

I urge the cabinet secretary to make the case to the UK Government that this urgent issue is posing real difficulties for prison officers at HMP Barlinnie and across the Scottish prison estate.

Neil Gray: I share Mr Linden's impatience, because the story that he recounts about HMP Barlinnie is similar to those that we are facing across our prison estate.

I can confirm that there has been constructive engagement at official level with the UK Government. Scottish Prison Service officials, alongside my own, continue to work with UK Government counterparts and the Civil Aviation Authority on the practical and technical requirements that are needed to support implementation.

Although that commitment is welcome, we have not yet received a firm timetable for the introduction of the regulations. Airspace regulation is reserved, which means that the UK Government must progress any legislative changes. Given that equivalent protections have been in place in England and Wales since 2023, we are clear that Scottish prisons should also benefit from them. We will continue to press for that work to be completed at the earliest possible opportunity.

Emergency Early Release (Prison Overcrowding and Reoffending)

7. **Kim Schmulian (Glasgow) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government what quantitative assessment it has undertaken of the impact that emergency early release has had on prison overcrowding or the deterrence of reoffending. (S7O-00582)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Neil Gray): In August, the Scottish Prison Service published data on release numbers and veto levels for the emergency early release process that took place between November 2025 and April this year. That was alongside data on return to custody for individuals who were released during the first three tranches of the process between 11 November and 18 December 2025. Data on returns to custody for the full emergency early release process will be published once all individuals released have passed the date on which they would have originally been released.

The emergency early release process was a necessary and proportionate action to support the safe operation of prisons. As we made clear at the time, the process will deliver only a temporary effect on the prison population, as it brings forward the release of prisoners who are already approaching their scheduled release date.

I would add that the measure was one of a number of actions that were taken to achieve a sustainable prison population.

Kim Schmulian: I spent Friday evening with defence lawyers in Glasgow who told me that High Court cases are now routinely being organised for spring 2028 and that some clients are choosing to plead guilty because the remand period is longer than any likely eventual sentence following a trial.

Will the minister not concede that prison populations remain high, courts remain overwhelmed and the emergency regulations, which were nine months in the making, are, in fact, catastrophe regulations?

Neil Gray: I do not agree with that characterisation, although I understand the member's point about the pressures that we are facing in the High Court system. An additional 10 High Court venues will be operational from the start of next year to assist in reducing the backlog. In recent months, we have seen a reduction in the remand population as High Court business has increased.

I intend to set out to Parliament in due course how we will take further steps to achieve a sustainable prison population and ensure the full functioning and greater efficiency of our justice system.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Clearly, the Government has failed to assess the impact of reoffending on deterrence. However, the statistics tell their own story: recorded crime is up by 9 per cent, violent crime is up by 8 per cent and crimes of dishonesty are up by 16 per cent.

Police Scotland, the Scottish Police Federation, Victim Support Scotland, the Scottish Retail Consortium and many others warned of the consequences of the legislation, yet the Government pressed ahead with it. How many more victims must pay the price for the Government's failure to plan its prison population properly before the cabinet secretary finally accepts that public protection must come first?

Neil Gray: Of course public protection comes first, which is why we must ensure that we have a safe and sustainable prison population.

The figures that were released demonstrate that the level of reoffending among prisoners released through the emergency release process is no higher than that among short-term prisoners in general. It has not had an additional consequence, but is part of the fact that short-term prison sentences are ineffective at reducing reoffending compared with other measures in the justice system.

That is why we want to move to a more preventative model, which would ensure that we prevent people from entering criminality in the first place and that we reduce the social, economic and other drivers of criminality. That is why we are taking forward steps through the programme for government to do just that.

Dawn Black (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary tell me what steps he is taking to tackle reoffending and prevent crime through early intervention and prevention?

Neil Gray: Diversion from prosecution and arrest, referrals and other forms of early intervention can allow individuals to address underlying causes of some offending, including substance use, mental ill health and social exclusion, which can help to increase stability in people's lives, reduce reoffending and keep our communities safe. Significant progress has already been made to support the greater use of early interventions, and their use remains at a high level. More than 3,000 diversion from prosecution cases were commenced in 2025-26, which is the second-highest level in the past 10 years. The Scottish Government will continue to partner with agencies to support implementation of the recommendations in the joint review of diversion from prosecution, including the new guidelines, which recently went live in June.

Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (Impact of Climate Change on Funding Requirements)

8. **Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the capital investment required by the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service in 2027–28 to address its estate, fleet, equipment and firefighter health and safety requirements, in light of reports regarding a growing demand for its services due to climate change. (S7O-00583)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Neil Gray): There have been year-on-year increases in the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service capital budget, with this year's capital budget of £48.4 million being £15.9 million more than the amount allocated in 2024-25. For 2026-27, we increased the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service capital budget by £1.4 million to improve facilities for firefighters and invest in its assets base across property, fleet, operational equipment and information and communications technology.

Audit Scotland and His Majesty's Fire Service Inspectorate are conducting a joint audit and review of Scottish Fire and Rescue Service capital investment, and I look forward to seeing their findings in the spring. Decisions on how that budget should best be spent across buildings, fleet and equipment are matters for the SFRS board.

I have been in close contact with both the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and the Deputy First Minister ahead of the budget next week, when the Deputy First Minister will set out our allocations.

Maggie Chapman: We know from Professor Anna Stec's excellent work that having decontamination facilities would save lives. Without them, firefighters between the ages of 35 and 39 face more than 300 per cent higher incidence rates of cancer, as well as mental health, cardiovascular and musculoskeletal impacts.

This morning, the Criminal Justice Committee heard from the Fire Brigades Union that appropriate decontamination facilities that keep firefighters well are simply not possible with the current approach to wildfires. We also heard from the SFRS that not all stations have had investment in personal protective equipment and training, although more stations will get that in the coming year.

How can we expect our firefighters to keep running towards danger to keep us, our communities and our landscape safe, when they do not have the basic safety gear to keep themselves safe and well?

Neil Gray: I recognise the consistent advocacy that Maggie Chapman has provided on behalf of firefighters and the Fire Brigades Union on this area over a period of time.

Following the studies by Professor Anna Stec, the SFRS has fundamentally changed its policies and procedures to minimise the risks of contamination. It continues to invest in refurbishing fire stations and building new ones with properly separated zones to minimise contamination from firefighting activities. Procedures are also in place in other fire stations that do not yet have clearly separated zones. It has also invested more than £3 million in additional sets of PPE so that they can be cleaned more often. There are clear guidelines for SFRS to ensure that firefighters operate from fire stations without full decontamination facilities in a way that ensures their safety and the safety of others.

Alleged Domestic Abuse Cases

9. **Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what recent engagement and collaboration it has had with the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service regarding the management and handling of cases involving alleged domestic abuse. (S7O-00584)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Kirsten Oswald): The Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service has operational independence in carrying out its functions, including decisions in individual cases. The Scottish Government engages regularly with COPFS and justice partners on domestic abuse, including through the domestic abuse justice partners round table and the equally safe joint strategic board. Those forums bring together key partners, including COPFS, to support a co-ordinated response to violence against women and girls in all its forms.

Officials also engage with COPFS and Police Scotland on domestic abuse and homicide, including the development of Scotland's domestic homicide and suicide review model, while respecting the Lord Advocate's independent prosecutorial functions.

Patricia Gibson: I draw members' attention to my role as chair of North Ayrshire Women's Aid. Too often, women who have suffered alleged domestic abuse at the hands of their partner or former partner report that more robust risk assessments are needed before those who are charged with such offences are released on bail, and that, too often, those who are charged suffer little or no consequence for bail breaches. What discussions has the Scottish Government had with the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service regarding the provision of much more robust guidelines to the courts to ensure that victims of domestic abuse are safer and feel more protected from their abusers?

Kirsten Oswald: I think that we all agree on the abhorrent nature of the situations that Patricia Gibson has talked about. Although decisions on bail are for the courts, I want to be clear that the Scottish Government engages with the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service and other justice partners on strategic and systemic issues relating to domestic abuse, including through the domestic abuse justice partners group, which I referred to, and the equally safe joint strategic board. Decisions on whether individual cases are prosecuted are, of course, for the Crown Office, which acts independently of the Scottish ministers—it would not be appropriate for ministers to seek to influence in that regard.

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): Question 10 has been withdrawn, so that concludes portfolio questions on justice.

Health and Care

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

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): We move to portfolio questions on health and care. I ask members for short, concise questions and ministers for short, concise answers—more in hope than on the basis of experience, I have to say. We have a lot of interest in asking supplementary questions and I will try to get in as many people as possible.

I call the jovial Murdo Fraser to ask question 1.

Emergency Departments (Winter Pressure)

1. **Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** Thank you, Presiding Officer.

To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking in response to reports from the Royal College of Emergency Medicine that 92 per cent of emergency department clinical leads in Scotland are very or extremely concerned about the pressure their departments will experience over winter. (S7O-00588)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care (Angela Constance): I recognise the Royal College of Emergency Medicine's concerns. Let me be clear that protecting accident and emergency services and ensuring that capacity is available for those people who need emergency care is a key priority that requires action across the whole health and social care system to improve hospital flow, prevent avoidable admissions and support timely discharge. Our improving flow plan is driving that work, which includes reducing long stays, maximising seven-day discharge, strengthening alternatives to admission and expanding hospital at home. Alongside that, the Scottish Government's know before you go campaign supports people to access the most appropriate service for their needs.

Murdo Fraser: As the cabinet secretary will have seen, this week's A and E statistics paint a deeply worrying picture, with fewer than three in five presenting patients being seen within four hours, and nearly 2,400 patients waiting more than 12 hours. That is before we get to the peak of the winter season, when pressures will be at their highest. It is no wonder that the Royal College of Emergency Medicine is so concerned. I heard what the cabinet secretary said, but we hear that every year, and every year the statistics get worse. What realistic hope can we have that this year will be any better?

Angela Constance: As I outlined to Parliament around a month ago, different enhanced procedures are in place with regard to winter preparedness. It is my very clear expectation of national health service chief executives that there must now be a strong and energetic focus on delivery against the four-hour A and E target through collaboration as well as efficiency. I also underscore the importance of the national hospital flow plan, which was published in the autumn. I want the whole range of interventions that are proven to work to improve, and I want them to be more consistently implemented across the country.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Just two weeks ago, we heard that A and E consultants at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital had warned of patients coming to harm as a result of delays in care. The service is now escalated to a code purple, and elective surgeries have been cancelled to cope with the pressure.

Can the cabinet secretary tell the Parliament what immediate additional support is being provided to NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde to alleviate those pressures and prevent further delays in elective procedures?

Angela Constance: Very clear interventions for support are delivered, often via subnational planning partnerships to ensure that resources and capacity are shared beyond geographical boundaries.

In relation to the Queen Elizabeth university hospital, I will certainly discuss the matter with Healthcare Improvement Scotland and the chief executive of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde to ensure that all appropriate action is being taken to reduce pressure on A and E and to support staff, as well as in relation to the other consequences of high pressure.

Pauline Stafford (Bathgate) (SNP): I welcome the Scottish Government's new public awareness campaign to help people to access the right care in the right place at the right time, which launched last month. How does the cabinet secretary expect the campaign to help to alleviate pressures on A and E departments this winter?

Angela Constance: The purpose of the campaign is to ensure that the public remain very well informed about where best to access care, depending on their needs. We can all play a part in reducing pressure on A and E and other precious hospital services. We launched the new right care, right place marketing campaign, which is called know before you go, in October. The aim of the campaign is to promote use of the wider range of services that exist in our communities.

Helen McDade (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): The cabinet secretary gave a statement a month ago in which she told us about the situation, but in the month since then, the situation has got worse. The time for giving the various health boards a stern talking to is gone. We need an emergency fund for emergency medicine to get us through this winter. Will the cabinet secretary commit to that?

Angela Constance: There are undoubted pressures on our accident and emergency departments because of the activity that goes on prior to people pitching up at hospital and, arguably, the lack of activity in getting people through and out of our hospitals. We invest in social care, in dealing with delayed discharge and in our hospitals. There are proven interventions that should be implemented, and discharge without delay is one important example. There are interventions that work, and they need to be applied consistently, without unwarranted variations, the length and breadth of Scotland. That will make a difference.

Musculoskeletal Hydrotherapy Service (NHS Ayrshire and Arran)

2. **Senga Beresford (South Scotland) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide additional funding to NHS Ayrshire and Arran to enable the re-introduction of its musculoskeletal hydrotherapy service. (S7O-00589)

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs (Maree Todd): We are investing a record £22.5 billion in health and social care in 2026-27, including £100 million through the national health service operational improvement plan. That includes £17.6 billion in core funding for the territorial NHS boards. It is the responsibility of each territorial board to design and deliver services to meet the needs of their local populations and to take decisions on funding for specific services in their areas.

Senga Beresford: I note the minister's response, but the loss of the service continues to have a significant impact on constituents across Ayrshire and Arran who rely on hydrotherapy to manage pain, improve mobility and maintain their quality of life. Given the clear benefits of the service, what support will the minister give the council to make it available to constituents?

Maree Todd: The member is correct. Many hydrotherapy services operate as charities, with some underpinning funding from both councils and the NHS. It is important that providers of those local services have an input to how they are delivered.

Hydrotherapy is a really helpful but resource-intensive intervention. As facilities age and need upgrading, they might become less available, and the provision of some hydrotherapy services might move to council facilities.

I am keen to hear more detail from Senga Beresford, because I am not aware of a particular issue. Hydrotherapy provision in Ayrshire and Arran has not been flagged with me, so it would be good to hear more detail, and I will see whether there is anything that we can do to support it.

Stuart McMillan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I have previously raised the issue with the minister in correspondence. Will she outline how the Scottish Government will improve the experience of people across the country who are living with chronic and long-term conditions such as arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions?

Maree Todd: In March 2027, we will publish our long-term conditions strategy for adults, which will include arthritis and wider MSK conditions. It will set out how we will make the vision for health and social care reform that is described in our health and social care renewal framework a reality for people who are living with one or more long-term conditions in Scotland, in order to improve people's experiences of health and care.

The strategy will support a shift towards prevention, which has been reaffirmed in our programme for government. It will enable us to take a more strategic approach to long-term conditions, recognising the impact of multimorbidity and the fact that an increasing number of people in Scotland are living with one or more long-term conditions.

Specialist Dental Treatment (Rural Areas)

3. **Andrew Baxter (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD):** I have just realised that I do not have my substantive question in front of me to be read out—apologies, Presiding Officer. It is just as well that my party whip is next to me and can provide a copy.

To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to improve access to specialist dental treatment for patients in rural areas. (S7O-00590)

The Minister for Community Care (Alison Thewliss): I thank Andrew Baxter for his question. I did have it written down, but that was very helpful.

Specialist dental treatment is provided outwith the scope of high street primary care dental services, and some more advanced specialist dental care services are currently provided at secondary care hospital sites. The public dental service, which has wide representation in rural areas, provides many specialist services for more complex cases.

Andrew Baxter: Sue Lovell is a 78-year-old constituent who was born with a cleft palate and needs specialist dental treatment. She has been without suitable dentures for so long that she struggles to chew her food. Last December, Raigmore hospital agreed to refer her elsewhere, but, almost a year on, she still has no confirmed referral and no idea when she will be treated. In September, NHS Highland told my office that it had approached a specialist in England, but, despite repeated follow-ups, we still do not know whether that referral will go ahead. Sue told me:

"This is the sort of thing they have been doing all along—padding it out, perhaps waiting for me to die."

Will the minister intervene today, to ensure that NHS Highland tells Sue who is responsible for her care, where she will be referred and when she can expect to be seen?

Alison Thewliss: I thank Andrew Baxter for raising Sue Lovell's case. I would be more than happy to look into that in greater detail for him, to see whether more support can be provided. My understanding is that there are particular pathways for people who have a cleft palate, so that they can get the specialist care that they need, but that has clearly not happened in his constituent's case. I am more than happy to take up the issue if he wants to write to me.

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I know that there are challenges with dentistry across rural Scotland, but will the minister join me in commending Hiranya Fadia and Dorothy Sinclair, who have just opened their fourth dental practice in Moray, this time in Elgin? They are exceptional people who have gone above and beyond in providing dental care to Moray communities, bringing in new young dentists and supporting literally thousands of patients. What more could she do to support people such as Dorothy and Hiranya to expand their practices into other parts of rural Scotland?

Alison Thewliss: I thank Tim Eagle for that helpful question, and I congratulate Dorothy and Hiranya on their efforts to ensure that more people get access to dental services in Moray. We are reviewing the financial incentives that are available to the sector, to see how we can better support patient access in rural and island areas. We expect the outcome of that review to be announced in this financial year, so more information will be coming.

Queen Elizabeth University Hospital (BREEAM Certification)

4. **Thomas Kerr (Glasgow) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government whether any additional payments were made, or offered, to individuals or contractors in connection with the incorporation of Building Research Establishment environmental assessment method certification for the Queen Elizabeth university hospital. (S7O-00591)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care (Angela Constance): Information that is available through the Scottish Hospitals Inquiry includes reference to £250,000 being added to the contract sum in connection with the project's energy targets and BREEAM requirements. The Scottish Government was not party to the contract and does not determine the BREEAM rating for individual national health service hospital projects. The inquiry is considering matters that relate to the design and construction of the Queen Elizabeth university hospital, and it would not be appropriate for the Scottish Government to pre-empt its findings.

Thomas Kerr: I am slightly disappointed with that answer. As the minister said, the Scottish Hospitals Inquiry has exposed the fact that a £250,000 bonus was given to Brookfield Multiplex, a developer, specifically for the achievement of environmental targets to meet BREEAM standards. NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde later sued Brookfield, saying that BREEAM standards had

"impacted on the seamless delivery of safe and effective healthcare".

Why has the Scottish Government paid a £250,000 bonus for environmental features in the Queen Elizabeth university hospital that, we now know, killed people, and why does it continue to pursue BREEAM standards for all new hospital builds across Scotland?

Angela Constance: Those are very serious matters that need to be determined from the evidence, and that will be done by the Scottish Hospitals Inquiry.

Documentation can record various events and actions without there necessarily being a causal link. However, it is simply not for me to opine, judge or speculate, given that those matters are within the scope of the Scottish Hospitals Inquiry, which I believe will report next year.

It is crucial that lessons are learned. The Government has strengthened its arrangements for the assurance of the healthcare built environment.

Walk-in Mental Health Hubs

5. **Cara McKee (West Scotland) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the expansion of walk-in mental health hubs across Scotland. (S7O-00592)

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs (Maree Todd): As part of our programme for government commitment, we provided £400,000 to support the development of Scottish Action for Mental Health nook walk-in wellbeing hubs in Glasgow and Aberdeen. That investment complements our wider support for mental health in communities. Since 2020, we have invested more than £194 million in community-based supports for children, young people and adults, including funding for walk-in support such as the Lighthouse and the Neuk in Perth. We continue to strengthen Scotland's 24/7 mental health emergency support services, including NHS 24's mental health hub, mental health paramedic response units, and the national distress brief intervention service, which facilitates quick access to support.

Cara McKee: Getting people immediate help is one of the most important things that we can do while Scotland is in a mental health crisis. Mental health hubs such as the nook, Thrive in Edinburgh and Hope Point in Dundee play a vital role in that regard. As of last week, SAMH's nook network has had 13,132 visitors. The demand is clearly there. However, too many people across Scotland cannot access 24/7 walk-in support. Will the Scottish Government commit to including in its forthcoming budget the roll-out of mental health hubs across Scotland?

Maree Todd: I absolutely recognise the value of those services and the need that they meet where they are provided. The member has talked about several different services, all of which have slightly different models and cater for slightly different populations. However, the message is very clear that, when people need support, they need to be able to access it quickly in their communities, from the right person, in the right place and at the right time. We are keen to meet that need with our investments.

Mental Health Doctors

6. **Alex Kerr (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland's report "Mental Health at the Fault Line" regarding the experience of mental health doctors working within Scotland's integrated health and social care system, and its calls for mental health to be given equal priority within national health service reform, with psychiatry sitting firmly within the national health service. (S7O-00593)

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs (Maree Todd): The Scottish Government welcomes the Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland's report, which examines the impact of integration on secondary mental health services and provides helpful recommendations for consideration while we continue to engage with the workforce and set out our path towards public service reform.

Mental health is, and will remain, a priority for the Scottish Government as we reform public services. We recognise the vital role of psychiatry and the wider mental health workforce, and we will ensure that their experience and expertise helps to shape our plans. I met with the Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland to discuss the report, as we need to agree an approach to integrating the findings of the report into public service reform.

Our refreshed "Mental Health and Wellbeing Delivery Plan", which was published jointly with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities earlier this year, sets out our priorities for the next three years. A skilled, diverse and sustainable workforce, including in psychiatry, will be essential for the delivery of our ambitions.

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): To be frank, minister, that answer was unnecessarily long. A lot of members are trying to come in with supplementaries and are not able to do so because of lengthy responses.

Alex Kerr: Given that people with severe mental illness die, on average, between 15 and 20 years earlier than people in the general population, primarily from preventable physical health conditions, does the Scottish Government agree that extending national standards and accountability arrangements to adult psychiatry would help to support the Scottish Government's commitment to parity between mental and physical health?

Maree Todd: The Government's commitment to publish a mental health and wellbeing blueprint next year provides an opportunity to set out how Scotland's mental health system should operate across the full continuum of care, from prevention and community support to acute services, including adult psychiatry. It will set out the types of services and support that should be available, how they should work together, and the experience that people should be able to expect when accessing support.

Edinburgh Eye Pavilion

7. **Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government when it last met with NHS Lothian to discuss the replacement for the Edinburgh eye pavilion. (S7O-00594)

The Minister for Community Care (Alison Thewliss): Scottish Government officials met with NHS Lothian's deputy chief executive on 28 September 2026 to discuss the replacement.

Daniel Johnson: The eye pavilion has an estimated required capital budget of more than £120 million, and an opening date of 2031 has been mooted. While the minister will obviously not be able to confirm what is in the budget, can she confirm that the required budget for the coming financial year to commence the work was discussed? I presume that, in order to keep the 2031 date realistic, the capital expenditure will need to begin in the coming financial year.

Alison Thewliss: Our "Infrastructure Delivery Pipeline", which was published on 13 January, sets out the projects and the programmes that can be funded over the four-year period from 2029 to 2030. For health, that would include projects such as the eye pavilion, the Belford hospital and Monklands hospital replacements, Barra and Vatersay community campus, primary care walk-in centres, and our primary and community care infrastructure investment programme. The member understands that I cannot confirm what will be in the budget.

Rural Health Inequalities (South Scotland)

8. **Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to develop a co-ordinated and focused approach to tackling rural health inequalities in South Scotland, in light of the findings in the "Economic, social and cultural rights in the South of Scotland" report, published last month by the Scottish Human Rights Commission. (S7O-00595)

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs (Maree Todd): Economic, social and cultural rights are of vital importance to enable everyone across Scotland to live a life of dignity, and the report from the Scottish Human Rights Commission demonstrates the importance of sustaining progress to advance how people experience their human rights in the south of Scotland

We know that as much as 80 per cent of what shapes our health lies beyond healthcare services and is influenced by where we are born, grow, live, work and age. That requires co-ordinated action across Government in health, housing, education, transport and the economy, and working in partnership with our public services, including local government, businesses and the community and voluntary sector.

We will update Parliament before the end of the year about the work that we are doing just now to deliver that, and, as we committed to in last year's population health framework, we will publish a healthcare inequalities action plan in 2027

Carol Mochan: I am sure that the minister will agree that the findings in the report are deeply concerning. It is made absolutely clear that basic minimum standards on access to healthcare are not being met and people are suffering as a result. No significant improvements have been made to the enjoyment of the right to health in the past decade, and progress on the effective implementation of strategies, reviews and policies has been very slow, to say the least.

Does the minister recognise that immediate action is urgently required? How will she demonstrate that any action that is taken is tailored specifically to services in the south of Scotland?

Maree Todd: I recognise that there are challenges in delivering services equitably across Scotland. I, too, represent a rural area, and I regularly state that there is no one-size-fits-all approach in Scotland. I live in the rural west Highlands, and I would not expect healthcare services to look the same where I live as they do in Edinburgh or Glasgow. It is a challenging situation, but I am determined to reduce health inequalities, including those caused by geography and topography. I am very keen to continue working with the member on those issues. I know that it is a passion that we share.

Dr Gray's Hospital (Specialist Transport for Patients)

9. **Max Bannerman (Highlands and Islands) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government what the total cost has been of airlifting or otherwise providing specialist transport for patients from Dr Gray's hospital to other hospitals over the last five years. (S7O-00596)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care (Angela Constance): There is no specific charge to NHS Grampian for core ambulance services including airlifts, which are provided by the Scottish Ambulance Service.

The Scottish Ambulance Service and NHS Grampian have worked together to provide additional ambulance resource in Elgin to support interhospital transfers for patients requiring specialist care, while

maintaining local ambulance capacity for emergency and urgent calls. That arrangement was formalised through the provision of an additional double-crewed ambulance, funded by NHS Grampian through an annual service level agreement. The cost of the arrangement was £2.3 million from 2021-22 to 2025-26.

Max Bannerman: In a recent ministerial statement, the cabinet secretary said that Dr Gray's would remain a deliverer of primary care in the Moray area. Now we know part of the financial cost of hollowing out healthcare at Dr Gray's hospital, but what about the human cost of diverting ambulances from being able to respond to local 999 calls for local people in need of urgent help? Instead of investing that £2.3 million and being able to offer some healthcare at Dr Gray's that is otherwise provided elsewhere, we are spending it to transfer people to receive care in other hospitals.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that it would be much better to spend that money on delivering as many services locally as possible?

Angela Constance: In very broad terms, the Government is fully supportive of the community first approach, which is about pushing out as much healthcare to be delivered as close to people's homes as possible. We also have to recognise that we will always require hospitals, and we need appropriate coverage. Not all of the more specialist services can be provided in every community.

On Dr Gray's hospital specifically, I expect to see that plan for Dr Gray's, following the recommendations in the Healthcare Improvement Scotland report, because it is a valuable and necessary asset to the people of Moray.

Laura Mitchell (Moray) (SNP): I am very grateful to the cabinet secretary for her engagement with me on Dr Gray's hospital, both prior to and since the publication of the recent Healthcare Improvement Scotland report. Since the report was published, I have written to the cabinet secretary to invite her back to Moray. Will she today accept my invitation to visit Dr Gray's as soon as possible to engage with front-line staff and the wider community on the need to deliver a sustainable plan for the future of the hospital?

Angela Constance: I will do my best to visit Dr Gray's again as soon as is practicable.

If I may build on the point that I made to Mr Bannerman, NHS Grampian must develop a credible, respectful and sustainable plan for Dr Gray's, with clarity on its future role, workforce, services and infrastructure, as well as ensuring that the hospital has a much stronger relationship with the Aberdeen royal infirmary.

Paramedics (Rural Scotland)

10. **David Green (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to support the training, recruitment and retention of paramedics across rural Scotland. (S7O-00597)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care (Angela Constance): The Scottish Ambulance Service recognises the challenges of recruiting and retaining paramedics in remote and rural communities and is taking targeted action to build a sustainable workforce. Measures include flexible contracts allowing ambulance technicians to train as paramedics while remaining employed, targeted local recruitment, increased rural placements and opportunities for newly qualified paramedics.

David Green: In 2021, the long-standing earn-while-you-learn apprenticeship model was replaced, so my constituents now need to travel long distances to train while facing a significant drop in income. I have casework on that. More than half the respondents to a survey by the pay student paramedics campaign said that they were likely to leave their course due to financial pressures. Does the cabinet secretary recognise that the new model makes training less accessible in rural areas? Will she explore an equivalent earn-while-you-learn route to tackle the recruitment challenges that we face?

Angela Constance: I understand the value, more generally, of earn-while-you-learn routes. The decision was taken by the Scottish Ambulance Service in the past year or so—I will double check the date. There is substantial recruitment of students to the paramedic degree programme, in which there is much interest. There are various ways in which technicians can apply for the degree programme. That can be supported by contract changes to allow additional flexibility.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Presiding Officer, 90 per cent of people who need the most urgent care—for example, those who are having a heart attack—are seen by a paramedic within about seven minutes. However, in the past month, the figure for NHS Grampian has been more than double that: between 17 and 25 minutes. Does the cabinet secretary share my concern that we need to do much more to recruit and retain paramedics in the north-east of Scotland? Will she outline what the Scottish Government is doing to support that?

Angela Constance: The Scottish Ambulance Service was allocated additional resources in this financial year to support the workforce and increase the fleet. Over the past decade, there has been a 60 per cent

increase in the number of paramedics. However, there is always much more that we can do, because, like our accident and emergency departments, the Scottish Ambulance Service is coping with increased pressure.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes questions on health and care. I apologise to the many members I was unable to call due to time constraints.

Supporting Young People into the Labour Market

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is a statement by Alyn Smith on supporting young people into the labour market and the Milburn review. Questions will be taken at the end of the statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions. I will allow a minute for the minister to take his place.

We are ready to rock and roll. I call Alyn Smith.

15:02

The Minister for Innovation, Technology and Tertiary Education (Alyn Smith): I am ready to go—whether I am ready to rock and roll remains to be seen.

I welcome the opportunity to update the Parliament following the publication of Alan Milburn's review of young people and work. The review sets out a 10-year programme that is aimed at tackling what it describes as a crisis of "youth detachment" across the United Kingdom. At its heart is a simple ambition: every young person should be learning, earning or participating. The Scottish Government shares that ambition. Every young person in Scotland should have the opportunity to fulfil their potential and access education, training or fair and sustainable work. Their future should not be determined by their background, their health, their disability or where they live.

The review highlights the significant challenges that young people face, including poor mental health, poverty, fragmented services and difficult transitions between education and employment. Crucially, it recognises that the problem is not a generation that lacks ambition; it is that too many young people lack opportunity.

Let me be clear about what the review is and is not. Alan Milburn identifies challenges that are relevant across the UK, and I do not underestimate them. However, many of the solutions that he proposes are designed for England, as the review recognises. It acknowledges that the institutional answer will be different in Scotland, and it asks devolved Governments to consider how its principles fit with our own services. That distinction matters.

Scotland does not start from the same place, nor do we operate the same systems. Many of the reforms that are being proposed for England reflect approaches that Scotland has been pursuing for more than a decade. However, we will carefully consider the review's findings and whether we can take further action to improve opportunities for Scotland's young people.

First, I will set out the context in which young people are growing up. Young people who are reaching adulthood today face unique challenges in the economy—ones that my generation did not. They have grown up in the nearly 20 years since the global financial crash, through years of Westminster austerity and the economic and social catastrophe of Brexit, and now they are grappling with the challenges of rapidly changing technology.

It is the role of Government to help young people find their way in the world. Through our programme for government, we are already committed to improving labour market outcomes for young people. Scotland is well placed to make further progress in that area. Many of the approaches that are recommended for England have been established in Scotland for more than a decade. Our approach is based on prevention, early intervention and joined-up, person-centred support. Through the no one left behind policy, Skills Development Scotland, Developing the Young Workforce and local employability partnerships, we seek to organise support around the needs and circumstances of individuals rather than expecting a young person to navigate disconnected services.

The Milburn review proposes a youth opportunity service for England, which would bring careers advice, employment, health and other support together around the young person. That principle is already central to Scotland's approach. Skills Development Scotland, the no one left behind policy and local employability partnerships already seek to co-ordinate support around individual young people, rather than that support being separated by organisational boundaries. I accept that there is more that we can do to ensure that our ambition always translates to a joined up service for young people across Scotland. That takes sustained effort and consistent focus.

The review also highlights the importance of identifying young people who are at risk of disengagement and intervening early. We are working from a strong foundation on that, but I accept that we can do more. Scotland already has established arrangements through our Skills Development Scotland annual participation measure and our 16-plus participation portal. Indeed, the review positively references Scotland's approach to participation data and tracking.

In 2026, 93.6 per cent of Scotland's 16 to 19-year-olds were participating in education, employment or training, and 95.7 per cent of school leavers now enter a positive destination three months after leaving school, which is the joint highest rate on record. For 16 to 24-year-olds, the employment rate is higher in Scotland than it is in England.

However, we are not complacent. There is more that we must do, particularly for young people who are not currently being reached. We are exploring how we can improve our understanding of participation among 20 to 24-year-olds so that we can better identify where support is needed. Our focus is on increasing participation and ensuring that every young person can access the education, training, employment and support they need. No young person should be defined simply by a label.

The Milburn review places considerable emphasis on vocational education, apprenticeships and stronger pathways into employment. Most secondary schools in Scotland already provide vocational and training learning alongside traditional academic qualifications. That means working with colleges, training providers and employers to create flexible pathways that meet learners' aspirations and labour market needs.

Since 2019, achievement of vocational and technical qualifications has increased by 121 per cent. Courses in construction, personal finance and childcare demonstrate a growing demand for and confidence in pathways that combine knowledge, skills and real-world experience.

We also have comprehensive modern and graduate apprenticeship offers. From 2026-27, we will support about 25,500 new modern apprenticeship starts alongside more than 38,000 apprentices who are currently in training. Alan Milburn's report notes that around 40 per cent of apprenticeship starts in Scotland are made by people aged 16 to 19. That is compared to around 20 per cent of 16 to 18-year-olds in England.

We have committed just under £9 million to deliver a 10 per cent uplift in modern apprenticeship contribution rates for 2027-28 across all frameworks. We are now taking action to grow graduate apprenticeships, and we are working alongside the university sector and delivery partners to expand and strengthen provision.

During the current parliamentary session, we will fund at least 150,000 apprenticeship opportunities and we will develop a new apprenticeship accelerator grant that will be focused on supporting business—small and medium-sized enterprises, in particular.

We want to—and I want to—transform apprenticeships in Scotland by making them more flexible, accessible and responsive to the needs of learners and employers. Employers are fundamental to that work. They provide young people with their first opportunities and experience, and they open routes into sustainable careers. Through Developing the Young Workforce, we are connecting young people in every mainstream secondary school in Scotland directly with employers. We are giving them access to workplace experiences, career insights and vocational pathways, including apprenticeships, to support successful transitions from education into work. We will, therefore, look carefully at the review's proposals for strengthening further employer engagement and we will consider where we can go further.

One of the most significant barriers that are identified by the review is poor health, particularly poor mental health. Ill health is the single largest reason for people aged 16 to 64 in Scotland being economically inactive. We need to tackle the barriers that are preventing young people from participating rather than simply dealing with the consequences after they have disengaged.

Scotland's approach is already based on early intervention and joined-up education, health and employability support. The Scottish Government is taking a range of actions through our mental health and wellbeing strategy to support mental health for all ages. That includes providing £16 million a year to local authorities to support access to counselling in secondary schools. Alongside that, we are investing in community mental health and wellbeing services to help young people to access support closer to home.

We know that meaningful employment is a protective factor for people's mental health and that employers and employability services play a vital role in supporting that. Embedding a supportive culture in workplaces where good mental health is valued and recognised is key to sustaining secure and productive employment. As such, we are working with employers to help them to promote mentally healthy workplaces and to ensure that they can access advice on wellbeing and know where to signpost people for wider support. Our population health framework includes a focus on good work and income, which is a key building block of health, and on the need for preventative action across the whole system, with each sector playing its part in helping people to stay in work.

One area of the review on which the Government has serious concerns is welfare reform. Supporting young disabled people into sustainable employment is absolutely the right ambition, and it is a shared ambition, but it must be achieved through tailored support and genuine opportunity, not just by cutting the essential support on which those young people rely. Disability benefits should not be treated as a barrier to work. Adult disability payment is an extra-cost benefit. It can be received alongside work, education or training and it helps disabled people to meet additional costs, including for transport, aids and adaptations.

We will strongly oppose reforms that would jeopardise essential support for young people with health conditions and disabilities. Young people need practical support, genuine opportunities and financial security if they are to participate fully. Any changes to UK Government social security or employment support spending will have significant consequences for Scotland's people, our devolved services and the Scottish budget. As the UK Government has already cut Scotland's budget by £650 million in real terms this year, further cuts as a result of the review would be wholly unacceptable.

Where there is opportunity to work with the UK Government and others for the benefit of young people in Scotland, we will engage constructively. However, any proposals must respect devolved responsibilities, complement rather than duplicate Scottish provision and avoid serious consequences for those who already face the greatest barriers. Scotland must not be financially disadvantaged as a consequence of changes to reserved welfare or employment support arrangements.

The Milburn review relates important issues, and we will consider them seriously. Its emphasis on prevention, participation, early intervention, vocational learning, apprenticeships, better use of data, employer engagement and joined-up support reflects much that is already at the heart of Scotland's approach, which has been embedded for many years.

However, there is more to do. We all agree that growing the economy is key to creating opportunities for our young people. I call on the UK Government, to which the report is principally addressed, to take action to reverse decisions that are actively harming the economy, starting with a full return to the European Union and the single market.

Our Government will build on what works and will focus relentlessly on the young people who we are not yet reaching. We will work with local government, Skills Development Scotland, employers, colleges, schools, health services, the third sector and, importantly, young people. We will oppose reforms that seek to create opportunity for one group of young people by removing essential support from another.

Our ambition is clear. Every young person in Scotland should have the opportunity, security and support that they need to learn, earn, participate and fulfil their potential. That is what the Government will continue working to deliver.

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