



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Meeting of the Parliament

Wednesday 14 May 2025

Session 6



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 14 May 2025

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

Portfolio Question Time

Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, and Parliamentary Business

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon. The first item of business is portfolio questions, and the first portfolio is constitution, external affairs and culture, and parliamentary business.

I advise members that there is a lot of interest in asking supplementary questions. There is next to no time available across the afternoon, so supplementary questions will need to be brief, as will the answers.

Live Music Industry

1. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of Scotland participating in a United Kingdom-wide fan-led review of the live music industry, in light of the recent UK-wide survey of the industry. (S6O-04640)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): Live music is a subject that many of us in the chamber and across the country feel very passionate about. It adds value to our economy and to Scotland's global cultural reputation. The Scottish Government will listen carefully to the findings of any fan-led review, as those would provide valuable insights to inform our continuing work with partners to help the sector to flourish.

Although some review issues such as dynamic ticket pricing and VAT rates are reserved, our latest budget already addresses some of the financial challenges that the sector faces. In 2025-26, 40 per cent relief is being offered to hospitality premises, including grass-roots music venues with a capacity of up to 1,500 people and a rateable value of up to and including £51,000. That relief is capped at £110,000 per business.

Pauline McNeill: The fan-led survey announced that fans want action on venue closures, ticketing and audience safety, and that they want further support for grass-roots music venues. Not surprisingly, 93 per cent of fans agreed that there should be a £1 ticket levy on arena and stadium live-music events to fund grass-roots venues. Further, 85 per cent of fans believe that there

should be a restriction on new residents filing noise complaints near existing venues. That is an old issue, and it is one that impacts my Glasgow region in relation to Barrowlands and King Tut's.

Will the cabinet secretary set out which issues raised in the survey, including the ticket levy, the Government can support? I agree that Scottish people love their live music, and it would be good for the Government to be seen to be active in delivering such support.

Angus Robertson: I assure Pauline McNeill that issues that have been part of public discourse for a while, such as the ticket levy, have been the subject of direct conversations that I have had with the Music Venue Trust and the wider sector.

We keep the matter under review. As I have said to the Scottish Green Party's Patrick Harvie and Mark Ruskell—who regularly raises the issue—and to others, it is under active consideration. I am happy to look more closely at the other areas that the survey highlights, and to reply to Pauline McNeill. We have a shared interest in making sure that live music thrives. If there is anything that the Government can do more of, less of or differently to support the sector, I am keen that we do that.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Music venues, particularly larger ones, are under unprecedented financial pressure at present. I know that the Music Venue Trust is writing to the cabinet secretary on the rates issue, although he might not have received that letter yet. If the Scottish Government is not prepared to reconsider its stance on business rates, what additional support can it give to the sector, which is being squeezed in a difficult way?

Angus Robertson: I will look closely at the letter that is being sent on the subject, which is one that I take seriously. Murdo Fraser knows that, as long as I have been in office, I have been committed to changing the foundations of the way in which the culture sector is supported financially in Scotland. This year, we have been able to make a massive step change with the introduction of multi-annual funding, which directly and indirectly impacts on a lot of venues.

I have no doubt that there are other issues that should be considered and I am content to consider them. Murdo Fraser has made a number of suggestions that would entail more Government spending. I note, without wanting to be too prickly on the subject, that he voted against the record rise in spending for culture in Scotland. Nevertheless, I will give him another chance. If he has suggestions about financial interventions and where the money can be found, I would be happy to look at those.

Live Borders

2. Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the recent report by Scottish Borders Council on the future of Live Borders, regarding any impact on cultural services, community engagement and libraries across the Borders. (S6O-04641)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): We value culture in all its forms, which is why we increased the culture budget by a record £34 million in 2025-26. Creative Scotland is engaged with Scottish Borders Council through the Scottish Borders place partnership on developing a Scottish Borders culture strategy.

Creative Scotland supports Alchemy Film & Arts, which will receive a total of £881,250 in multiyear funding between 2025 and 2028. In 2024-25, Scottish Borders schools received £221,861 via the youth music initiative.

Of course, decisions on local culture policy lie with local authorities, and I urge Scottish Borders Council to continue working with local communities to ensure that they receive the services that they deserve.

Rachael Hamilton: The report recommends the closure of key local facilities, including Coldstream museum, Eyemouth community centre, Jedburgh swimming pool, Abbey Row community centre in Kelso, Selkirk leisure centre and other important facilities. Service usage patterns have changed and running costs are high, but the Scottish National Party has reduced funding to local authorities, and Labour's national insurance rise has put a strain on SBC resources. I urge the Scottish Government to consider a longer-term strategy that will ensure equity in rural areas for the people who rely on those vital services.

Angus Robertson: To correct the record, spending for local authorities is going up under the SNP's budget, which Rachael Hamilton voted against.

Specifically on facilities, I draw Rachael Hamilton's attention to libraries, although I am happy to talk about other issues in correspondence. We believe that everybody should have access to library services. That is why we have asked the Scottish Library and Information Council to put together a short-life advisory group to explore what good-quality public library services look like and make recommendations on the mechanisms for ensuring that a standard level of service is delivered across Scotland, with an approach that strives for excellence and creates a benchmark for quality. The group is expected to commence work soon. I urge her to feed into that process.

Up-and-coming Artists (Concerts)

3. Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how it is working with the music sector to enable up-and-coming artists to hold concerts in Scotland. (S6O-04642)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The Scottish Government and our partners continue to work with the music sector, recognising that music is an integral part of what makes Scotland the perfect stage. Music is often offered as one strand of events and festivals, which provide a platform both for up-and-coming bands to perform and for the hospitality sector. VisitScotland continues to grow the market and increase demand for all genres by regularly promoting through its channels events and festivals across the country as part of the rich year-round programme that Scotland offers. Events and festivals that host music can apply for grants through EventScotland's national and international grant programmes, and there are opportunities for learning and development through its events industry development programme of activities.

Jeremy Balfour: A young DJ recently told BBC Scotland that he is concerned that the rising cost of going to gigs will stop people being energised by music and that priority is being given to artists from more affluent backgrounds. Will the cabinet secretary outline what action the Scottish Government is taking to enable artists from all backgrounds to thrive at this time in particular, as we approach the important festival season?

Angus Robertson: One initiative in this year's budget is to look at the establishment of a Scottish exports office for culture. I am sure that Jeremy Balfour will agree that one of the great opportunities for young up-and-coming artists across genres is that they have not only the ability to perform here but the ability to travel and perform internationally. I am very keen to support that specific area.

I draw Jeremy Balfour's attention to other initiatives that are promoted and funded through Creative Scotland and which help to showcase young and up-and-coming talent. I am happy to forward some information to him on that. If he believes that anything should be done in addition to what is already taking place, I will be very interested to hear his suggestions. I agree with him that we want the young up-and-coming generations of talent in this country to thrive and succeed.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): Support for emerging Scottish talent is key to a thriving music industry. Can the cabinet secretary say more about how the Scottish

Government is supporting grass-roots music venues to ensure that up-and-coming artists have a platform to perform on? I fondly remember, way back in the 1990s, watching Biffy Clyro play in the teeny, tiny, tottie-wee Kay Park tavern in Kilmarnock. Such platforms are essential to a thriving sector.

Angus Robertson: The Scottish Government understands the pressures that many businesses continue to experience. Although substantial financial pressures persist, the budget this year means that more than 90 per cent of hospitality premises are liable for the basic property rate. Offering 40 per cent relief to mainland hospitality premises that are liable for the basic property rate ensures that the vast majority of hospitality premises on the mainland will be able to benefit and will continue to offer a platform for gigs.

Historic Environment Scotland

4. Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will undertake a review of Historic Environment Scotland before the end of the current parliamentary session. (S6O-04643)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): There are currently no plans for the Scottish Government to undertake a review of Historic Environment Scotland.

I draw the member's attention to Historic Environment Scotland's recently published corporate plan for 2025 to 2028. It is a public access document that highlights that, by 2028, HES will have increased direct expenditure on its assets by 15 per cent; increased its contribution to Scotland's gross domestic product by 10 per cent—from £1 billion to £1.1 billion—and invested at least £40 million in local communities across Scotland through its grants schemes. We can all agree that those are ambitious outcomes and programmes of work, and I am very supportive of the excellent work that the organisation is undertaking.

Tess White: Just a few weeks ago, it emerged that Historic Environment Scotland was propagating that trans women are women. It had no policy regarding the provision of single-sex spaces and suggested that excluding people from bathrooms and changing rooms is transphobia.

When my colleague Rachael Hamilton demanded that the cabinet secretary intervene, the cabinet secretary said that it was

“an operational matter for Historic Environment Scotland.”—[*Official Report*, 19 March 2025; c 2-3.]

Following the Supreme Court's judgment and the Parliament's swift action to comply with the

ruling, will the cabinet secretary stop washing his hands of the situation and ensure that the organisations that fall under his remit immediately comply with their legal obligations to women?

Angus Robertson: I hope that Tess White understands that Historic Environment Scotland, Creative Scotland and other such organisations are arm's-length organisations. I agree with her that we want to ensure that all organisations comply fully with the law and the regulations that apply to them. I am happy to write to her about that.

Every time there are portfolio questions on culture, the cultural organisations watch the exchanges that take place. I am sure that Historic Environment Scotland will be seized of the matter that Tess White has raised. We can continue our dialogue on the subject during future question sessions.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): My question relates to the first question and not the anti-trans supplementary. Can the cabinet secretary say any more about how revising the framework document to permit more financial freedom will benefit Historic Environment Scotland?

Angus Robertson: Those greater freedoms mean that, for the first time, Historic Environment Scotland will be able to invest every penny from commercial income to protect our historic environment for future generations, mitigate the impacts of climate change, improve visitor experiences and deliver for Scotland. I hope that we will all welcome that.

Brexit (Impact on International Relationships)

5. Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the impact of Brexit on Scotland's international relationships. (S6O-04644)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The European Union's founding values of human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law and respect for human rights are the values of Scotland. Despite voting to remain in the European Union, Scotland was taken out by a hard Brexit that has limited economic growth, restricted trade, increased food costs and diminished opportunities for young people. It has also damaged long-standing ties with European neighbours at a time when global insecurity makes international co-operation more important than ever.

Let us be clear that the best future for Scotland must be in rejoining the European Union as an independent country.

Bill Kidd: As has been mentioned, in the face of global conflicts and turbulent economic times, it is more vital than ever for our prosperity and security that we have a strong relationship with our neighbours in Europe. On the basis of what he said, I think that the cabinet secretary agrees that, when we are confronted with global challenges such as trade tariffs and energy security, the harms of Brexit will only grow. Therefore, it is more important than ever that we return to the European Union.

Angus Robertson: I agree with Bill Kidd. We face unprecedented times and events that bring into question the very survival of the values that have underpinned the international order throughout our lifetimes and provided us with the stability and peace that we have been able to enjoy.

As the spectre of war has returned to this continent, it has become more important than ever that we consolidate our long-standing relations with our neighbours in the rest of Europe. Like the majority of members of the Parliament, I believe that the best way for Scotland to take its place in the international community is as an independent member state of the European Union.

US Tariffs (Impact on Film and Television Industry)

6. Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what it anticipates the impact will be on the Scottish film and TV industry of the US President's intention to impose tariffs. (S6O-04645)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The Scottish Government is committed to building on the exceptional growth of Scotland's screen sector in recent years, so the prospect of any tariffs is greatly concerning. However, the scope of potential tariffs or non-tariff measures on foreign movies has not been confirmed by the United States Administration.

An outline US-United Kingdom trade deal has now been reached, and I look forward to exploring the details of the final agreement once it has been shared by the UK Government, to fully understand the potential impact on the Scottish film and television industry.

Patrick Harvie: The cabinet secretary is right that that has not been confirmed, but that is why we should seek to influence the UK Government in its negotiating position right now. Has the cabinet secretary spoken to, or does he intend to speak to, his UK Government counterparts to make sure that they prioritise the film and television industry, which has been a success story in Scotland, and make it clear that, in a country that already imports

a great deal of cultural content from an increasingly toxic US culture, tariffs, as threatened unilaterally by the US President, will be entirely unacceptable?

Angus Robertson: The Scottish Government's concerns in relation to trade discussions have been communicated directly to the UK Government.

On what the Scottish Government is doing to support the film and TV sector, our budget for 2025-26 includes a £2 million increase for Screen Scotland to support work to attract international investment in large-scale productions in Scotland. Recently, we were able to confirm the excellent news that the Los Angeles-based animation and visualisation company Halon Entertainment is to invest £28 million in a new Glasgow studio, creating up to 250 jobs over the next three years.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): Although the new US Administration appears to have rolled back slightly on its threat of film industry tariffs, the situation shows the importance of supporting a home-grown film and television sector and young creative talent. The cabinet secretary will be aware that, last week, the Scottish Institute of Theatre, Dance, Film and TV collapsed into administration. In the light of that situation and the impact of any US tariffs, will the cabinet secretary set out how the Scottish Government can help to ensure that young Scots have opportunities and a pathway into working in the arts, whether that is in Scotland, the US or other global markets?

Angus Robertson: Neil Bibby is absolutely right—the role of skills and training is vital as we see the screen sector approach the £1 billion mark in terms of gross value added to our economy, which we hope it will pass by 2030. The Scottish Government is directly responsible for a number of initiatives in the area. At present, we are trying to introduce screen studies into Scottish primary and secondary schools. That will be a tremendous achievement, as other countries do not do that.

Neil Bibby raises a very specific and concerning case involving a private training centre. I am aware of the case that he raises, and I know that ministers are seized of the matter. Our priority must be to support the students who studied there and who wish to conclude their studies. I undertake that I will get my colleague Jenny Gilruth to write to Neil Bibby, letting him know what the Scottish Government is doing in that case. However, in the generality, training and skills are absolutely key to the growth of the screen sector in Scotland, and we fully support that.

Constitutional Strategy (Fiscal Autonomy)

7. Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what recent

discussions the constitution secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding its constitutional strategy, including in relation to its reported call for full fiscal autonomy. (S6O-04646)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): I regularly hold discussions with ministerial colleagues about matters concerning my portfolio. Independence would give control over all public spending decisions while providing the range of fiscal powers that are necessary to unlock Scotland's full economic potential. Until the people of Scotland can choose a different constitutional arrangement, moving to full fiscal autonomy would create a fairer system, protecting public services and allowing investment in our economy. The Scottish Government stands ready to engage at any point with the United Kingdom Government on substantial new fiscal powers for Scotland, following which we will model the impact of potential policy choices.

Michael Marra: I thank the cabinet secretary for his answer, but on 16 January the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government, Shona Robison, informed the Scottish Affairs Committee that the Scottish Government's preferred policy was indeed full fiscal autonomy. In very similar words to the constitution secretary, she said that

"moving to full fiscal autonomy for the Scottish Government would create a fairer system that would protect public services and allow investment in our economy."

However, the Scottish National Party Government's statistics show that full fiscal autonomy would immediately wipe out £12.8 billion of Scotland's public finances, so will the cabinet secretary explain how a cut of £12.8 billion would protect public services?

Angus Robertson: First, I point out to Mr Marra—I think that he should know this, because he is usually well informed on these matters—that Scotland having fiscal control over its own policies is not a new priority of the Scottish Government; it has been a priority for a long time. Of course, we would like to be able to operate as an independent member state, like all our neighbours, all of which are more economically successful than the United Kingdom.

I do not recognise the statistic that Mr Marra has presented to us—if he would like to write to me on the subject, he should feel free to do so. There is a big difference between our parties. On the SNP benches, we believe that decisions about Scotland are best made in this place, by parliamentarians in the Scottish Parliament, rather than subcontracting them to Mr Marra's colleagues in London, who seem to be making one bad mistake after another.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will take two supplementaries, but they need to be brief, as do the responses.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): As it stands, the Labour Government has chosen to save British Steel, but not Grangemouth; fund carbon capture in England, but not in Aberdeen; support artificial intelligence in Cambridge, but not in Edinburgh; and impose austerity measures across the UK, which the Scottish National Party Government has spent £1.2 billion on mitigating so that Scotland is the only place in the UK where child poverty levels are going down, not up.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that fiscal autonomy will allow the Scottish Government to fundamentally rebalance the economy—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary.

Jackie Dunbar: —to deliver for the people of Scotland?

Angus Robertson: To answer briefly, it is clear that Scotland's interests are not best served as part of the United Kingdom. Our best hope for the future lies in becoming an independent country in a partnership of equals with our friends across the United Kingdom. That will allow us to make a real difference for our people and our future prosperity.

Until such time as the people of Scotland can choose a different constitutional arrangement, moving to full fiscal autonomy would create a fairer system that would protect public services and allow investment in our economy.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I am not sure why the SNP continues to return to the scene of the crime to check that the body is really dead. David Phillips, from the Institute for Fiscal Studies, warns that full fiscal autonomy would result in "difficult fiscal trade-offs", so why would SNP ministers even contemplate that, when they are already complaining that they do not have enough money?

Angus Robertson: It is not a very difficult concept to grasp, although I know that, over the years, Willie Rennie has had great difficulty in accepting, or understanding, it. We on the SNP benches believe that decisions about Scotland's economic and social progress are best made here. Willie Rennie does not—he thinks that the major decisions should be made by people in the UK Parliament whom we have not elected.

I will keep on trying to persuade Mr Rennie of the advantages of being a normal country. It is for him to spell out how federalism would work in a multinational context, in which 85 per cent of the population live in one part of it. There is not a single example of that working anywhere in the

world. I would be happy to hear Mr Rennie explain how his plans would work.

Museums Capacity and Support Programme

8. Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide further details on how its planned museums capacity and support programme will support local and regional museums and galleries. (S6O-04647)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The £4 million Scottish Government investment in a new museums capacity and support programme will help to embed the collaboration, innovation and organisational sustainability that is needed to enable positive, strategic change across the sector so that those vital organisations can continue to enrich our local communities now and for generations to come. Plans are currently being worked up with partners and further details will be shared in due course.

Evelyn Tweed: The Stirling Smith Art Gallery and Museum recently opened its exhibition of the Mary, Queen of Scots casket and has ambitious plans for future exhibits. Will the cabinet secretary join me in congratulating the team at the Smith on securing the loan of the casket, and can he outline how the Scottish Government is supporting small museums to realise their innovative plans?

Angus Robertson: I briefly take the opportunity to congratulate everybody involved in the exhibition at the museum in Stirling. It is exactly the type of initiative that the Scottish Government's investment in a new museums capacity and support programme would help. In relation to the collaboration between local and national museums and the organisation that will be required for such exhibitions in the future, it is a really good test case. I commend everybody who is involved in it, and Evelyn Tweed, who has been a doughty supporter of it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have a very brief supplementary from Alexander Stewart.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Increasing visitor numbers at local galleries and museums depends on having innovative collections and material for people to view. Can the cabinet secretary outline what action the Scottish Government is taking to ensure that collections that are held in Edinburgh and Glasgow are shared with local galleries and museums in order to increase footfall?

Angus Robertson: The member raises an interesting point. There are significant figures in the artistic community—one of them is Dr Bendor Grosvenor—who have been outspoken in support of wider lending from collections both in Scotland's national museums and in museums and galleries

in London. I am very keen to support the maximum amount of lending that can be supported by local galleries and museums. I would be happy to discuss that with the member, because there is definitely room to grow. I know that people in the arts sector are also of that view.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): On a point of order, Deputy Presiding Officer. I seek your advice. Emma Harper stated that my colleague Tess White's question for the Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture was anti-trans. That was not the case. In her question to the cabinet secretary, she asked legitimately about the obligations that fall under his remit for organisations such as Historic Environment Scotland to be compliant with workplace regulations, the law and the public sector equality duty. We must all strive to be respectful in the Parliament. Can the Deputy Presiding Officer share with members in the chamber whether there is a mechanism for Emma Harper to apologise and correct the record?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I suggest to Rachael Hamilton that that is not a point of order. I was in the chair and heard the remarks that were made, and I did not deem that any intervention was required. However, I stress that courtesy and respect are required from all members in the chamber.

That concludes portfolio questions on constitution, external affairs and culture, and parliamentary business. There will be a brief pause before we move to the next portfolio, to allow members on the front benches to change over.

Justice and Home Affairs

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next portfolio questions are on justice and home affairs. I remind colleagues that there is next to no additional time across the afternoon. There is a lot of demand for supplementary questions, so I will require brevity in questions and responses.

Financial and Economic Abuse (Support for Women)

1. Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how the justice system aims to support women who experience financial and economic abuse from a partner. (S6O-04648)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): The Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018 created the offence of domestic abuse that incorporates coercive and controlling behaviour, including financial abuse.

Anyone who is experiencing domestic abuse is encouraged to seek help. Equally safe, which is Scotland's strategy to prevent and eradicate violence against women and girls, explicitly recognises economic abuse. Our £26.1 million a year delivering equally safe fund supports survivors, including through the greater Easterhouse money advice project, which delivers specialist financial advice and support for survivors in Glasgow. The victim centred approach fund will provide more than £32 million to 23 organisations between 2025 and 2027, including £12 million for advocacy support for survivors of gender-based violence.

Bob Doris: The Social Justice and Social Security Committee has heard about issues for women who face financial abuse in accessing legal aid. The Scottish Legal Aid Board has admitted that flexibility could exist, but that women rarely apply for funding. We also heard that provisions on domestic abuse protection orders and notices of the Domestic Abuse (Protection) (Scotland) Act 2021, which would remove costs for women and make them safer, are still to be implemented. How is the Scottish Government seeking to resolve those matters?

Siobhian Brown: I assure the member that we are determined to support women to get the right access that they need. We have provided a pilot project in Edinburgh that provides an early intervention service offering legal advice to women and children who are impacted specifically by domestic abuse. In addition to the current judicare system, we have provided annual grant funding of £230,000 for the past eight years to the Scottish Women's Rights Centre.

I am aware that the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs has previously outlined some of the challenges with the implementation of part 1 of the Domestic Abuse (Protection) (Scotland) Act 2021. The challenges are fully understood by our justice partners and external stakeholders. We will look to outline the next steps in the coming months.

Shoplifting

2. Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports that shoplifting crimes have increased by 89 per cent since 2020. (S6O-04649)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): I am very concerned by the rise in shoplifting crimes and recognise the significant harm to retail businesses from theft, as well as threatening and antisocial behaviour, which is totally unacceptable. The Scottish Government is committed to supporting Police Scotland's robust approach to addressing the issue, which is why we have made £3 million

available this year to support Police Scotland's work, alongside retailers, to tackle retail crime. That forms part of a record investment of £1.6 billion for policing this year, which is an increase of £90 million from last year's budget.

Sue Webber: Earlier this week, I met representatives of the Scottish Retail Consortium, who warned that retail crime is spiralling out of control, costing retailers more than £2.2 billion a year in stolen goods, with many incidents going unreported due to a lack of faith that shoplifters will face any punishment or consequences. They told me—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Through the chair, please.

Sue Webber: The Scottish Retail Consortium told me that, last year, retailers across the United Kingdom spent £1.8 billion on crime prevention measures in stores, with the Scottish equivalent being around £145 million.

The minister mentioned an investment of £3 million. With shoplifting up 89 per cent since 2020 and up 18 per cent in the past year, does the minister really believe that the Government is doing enough to stop retail crime?

Siobhian Brown: The Scottish Government recognises the distress that is caused to victims of crime and fully supports the activity to reduce that harm. Police Scotland has published an action plan that aims to provide a visible and measurable impact on retail crime. That includes stopping people from becoming perpetrators of acquisitive crime, bringing perpetrators to justice, with a focus on repeat offenders and organised criminals, and strengthening collective protection against retail crime.

Non-crime Hate Incidents (Recording)

3. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what recent discussions it has had with Police Scotland in relation to its policy on the recording of non-crime hate incidents. (S6O-04650)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): The handling and recording of non-crime hate incidents is an operational matter for Police Scotland, and revised guidance on the handling of non-crime hate incidents was published by Police Scotland in August last year.

We have regular discussions at official and ministerial level with Police Scotland on tackling hatred and prejudice, in line with our engagement with Police Scotland across the Government on a range of issues.

Murdo Fraser: Should Police Scotland be operating an unlawful policy? That is surely a

matter that should be of concern to the Scottish Government.

For more than a year, I have been in correspondence with Police Scotland on non-crime hate incidents. After my initial complaints were rejected, the Police Investigations and Review Commissioner ruled that the police had responded inadequately to my three grounds of complaint, and Police Scotland has been given until next Tuesday to give me a satisfactory response. If it continues to be unable to defend the lawfulness of its policy, at what point will the Scottish Government intervene?

Siobhian Brown: I am confident that Police Scotland takes recommendations from the PIRC seriously. As Mr Fraser knows, ministers have no role in the investigation of complaint handling reviews against Police Scotland.

It is not appropriate for me to comment on cases that are subject to an independent process. We also do not comment on operational matters relating to Police Scotland, in order to ensure that Scotland's criminal justice system remains free from political interference.

I understand that the PIRC has made recommendations about Mr Fraser's case, and I am sure that Police Scotland is currently considering the issue and will respond in due course.

Supreme Court Cases (Costs of Defending)

4. Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the justice secretary has had with the Lord Advocate regarding the costs of defending unsuccessful legal cases in the Supreme Court. (S6O-04651)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): I meet the Lord Advocate regularly on a range of issues, including cases that are being considered by the United Kingdom Supreme Court. The focus of my discussions with the Lord Advocate is not on the costs involved.

Craig Hoy: The justice secretary cannot or will not put a final number on how much taxpayers' money has been wasted on the Scottish Government's Supreme Court defeats, but I will give her some numbers: three nil against this Government and its law officers in the highest court of the land.

Why the Scottish National Party Government decided to waste taxpayers' money on cases that common sense dictated would fail, as the Scottish public knew that they would, is beyond comprehension. However, will the cabinet secretary now urgently commit to coming clean about how much that hat trick of humiliation has

cost Scottish taxpayers, and will she explain to the Parliament who is going to carry the can for those decisions?

Angela Constance: Like all Governments, the Scottish Government is necessarily involved in litigation, given the range and importance of its responsibilities. Sometimes we are defenders and sometimes we are pursuers of cases. The outlays that are incurred in litigation are, like any other cost of Government, subject to rules about public finance, decision making and accountability. Legal work is, of course, an integral part of the commitment to maintaining the rule of law at the heart of Government.

Abuse of Women and Girls

5. Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what further action it can take in the current parliamentary session to tackle abuse against women and girls. (S6O-04652)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): Tackling violence against women and girls remains a key priority for the Government. Our programme for government maintains progress on the equally safe delivery plan.

We are developing an approach to honour-based and extended family abuse. We are supporting schools to equip young people with the skills to counter the impacts of online hate, including misogyny, and we are piloting specialist independent legal advice for complainers in rape and attempted rape cases.

Subject to parliamentary approval, we are introducing domestic homicide and suicide reviews, abolishing the not proven verdict, and establishing a sexual offences court and a victims and witnesses commissioner.

Elena Whitham: The First Minister has advised that, with his regret, the legislation to protect women and girls from misogynistic abuse will not be taken forward in this session. The cabinet secretary will know that that advice has been devastating to me as a former women's aid worker for women's organisations across Scotland and to my constituents in Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley.

Does the cabinet secretary appreciate the depth of disappointment in that regard, and what reassurances can be provided to women and girls at this time, given that we are seeing an exponential rise in misogynistic harms?

Angela Constance: I appreciate the depth of feeling. Many members will recognise that misogyny is a complex area of policy and law. Our

criminal law needs to be clear and unambiguous, and the remaining time in this parliamentary session is short. We will, of course, consider how we take forward further work, recognising the gendered nature of misogynistic harm, over and above our commitments in the programme for government.

As I have already committed to, I will take further action. Women and girls need protection, which is why, in September, I will introduce new legal protections for women and girls by adding the protected characteristic of sex to the Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Act 2021, so that women and girls have the same protections as other groups that are protected under the act. I hope that that will be welcome.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have a number of supplementaries, and I will try to get them all in. Ideally, they will be brief.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): Every 10 minutes, an incident of domestic abuse is reported to Police Scotland. That is just the tip of the iceberg, with many cases going unreported. My Prevention of Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill was published last week, and it includes several measures to reduce the number of instances of domestic abuse.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that, if passed, the bill will significantly turn the tide, given that domestic abuse has ruined lives, destroyed families and wrecked communities?

Angela Constance: I have always been clear that we are willing to explore any options to reduce crime, reoffending and, in particular, domestic violence. I am happy to discuss Pam Gosal's proposed legislation with her. I am keen to see how it is envisaged that it will interact with existing measures, such as the disclosure scheme for domestic abuse Scotland, which gives people the right to ask about the background of their partner. It also gives Police Scotland the power to tell people that they might be at risk, even where that information has not been sought.

I am always happy to engage with members.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Deepfake abuse has been described as a "new frontier" of violence against women, and the United Kingdom Government plans to make creating sexually explicit deepfake images a criminal offence. The cabinet secretary will be aware that it is the creation of the images that is the issue.

In January, the First Minister said to me that the Government was considering whether there was a gap in the law, and that it would discuss whether it could make a joint effort on the issue with the UK Government. Will the cabinet secretary update me on whether there has been any further thinking

about making the creation of such images a criminal offence?

Angela Constance: Ms McNeill raises a pertinent point. The updated equally safe strategy certainly recognises that, just as violence against women and girls takes place in all communities and places, the same also applies to online places.

There has been much engagement with the UK Government, in particular around the Crime and Policing Bill. I will engage further with my officials and provide Ms McNeill with a more detailed update.

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): If we are serious about tackling the root cause of male violence against women, we must challenge the demand that fuels it. Does the Government agree that support in this Parliament for my unbuyable bill, which seeks to criminalise the purchase of sex and provide support for those who are exploited in prostitution, is a vital first step in changing societal attitudes by sending the clear message that women and girls are not commodities? Will the Government back that approach?

Angela Constance: I am aware that Ms Brown has been engaging very closely with Ms Regan on the matter. I know that Ms Regan will be aware of the work that the Government is currently undertaking to reduce the demand for criminal sexual exploitation. I am clear that criminal sexual exploitation is a form of violence against women and girls that should not be tolerated. The Government, like Parliament, will continue to scrutinise the detail of Ms Regan's bill.

Drug Driving (Highlands and Islands)

6. Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to recent reported figures indicating higher than average drug driving offences in the Highlands and Islands. (S6O-04653)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Before I call the cabinet secretary, I note that we need Ms Roddick's camera to be switched on.

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): I recognise that there has been a rise in the number of people who have been prosecuted and convicted for drug driving offences in recent years, both in the Highlands and Islands and at a national level. The increase follows the introduction of a new drug driving law in 2019 and a focused enforcement approach by Police Scotland in tackling the scourge of drug driving.

Emma Roddick: There are active efforts to go above and beyond the current guidance to spot

drug driving and there are on-going pilots of road testing. Does the cabinet secretary think that the higher statistics on drug driving are a result of such efforts and that they should therefore be replicated in other areas? What more can be done to raise awareness of the harm of drug driving and the ways in which the police and the justice system as a whole can deter it?

Angela Constance: The short answer is that the reason for the increase is very effective enforcement by Police Scotland and the successful campaigns that it has run, particularly around the festive period. Police Scotland has spoken to around 25,000 drivers to further promote the aims of, for example, the festive campaign and it has informed people about how they can easily identify drink and drug drivers. This is a good example of appropriate legislation being in place, followed up by enforcement action as well as awareness raising.

Legal Aid (Rural Areas)

7. Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to address the reported lack of access to legal aid in rural regions. (S6O-04654)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): Legal aid funding allows solicitors to deliver their services to people across Scotland, and those services can be delivered remotely as well as in person. Every year, legal aid helps many people with civil problems. Legal aid expenditure is on track to be more than £170 million this year, which is the highest ever level.

However, I recognise that improvement is needed and that there are challenges in certain areas with certain types of legal aid work. Our programme for government commits us to taking forward the reforms that are set out in the recently published legal aid reform discussion paper, which will simplify the system for solicitors and those who need legal assistance, along with longer-term proposals for funding and improving the delivery of services. That includes a review of legal aid fees that will help develop regular assessments to ensure that systems remain fair and sustainable and deliver for the public purse.

Martin Whitfield: In response to Craig Hoy's question, the cabinet secretary noted how important legal advice is to the Scottish Government. However, the Law Society of Scotland has warned that the legal aid system is functionally collapsing in rural Scotland. Entire communities, particularly in the south of Scotland, face systematic exclusion from access to legal aid. Indeed, in the Borders, only three firms remain able to offer legal aid, and they are at or beyond capacity.

Article 6(3)(c) of the European convention on human rights enshrines the right to legal assistance where the interests of justice require it. When did the Scottish Government last consider that it could be subject to a human rights claim due to the lack of access to legal aid, which is a result of the collapsing system of legal aid? What level of risk was that assessed as?

Siobhian Brown: I regularly engage with the legal profession, and that issue has not been specifically raised with me in my meetings. I know that the Scottish Legal Aid Board can and often does provide funding for solicitors to allow services to be delivered to people all around the country. I also know that there are some gaps in our rural communities at the moment, and SLAB is looking at the geographical issues. That is one of the issues that we consider in the discussion paper on how we can improve things.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): The minister cannot say that she was not warned. In a one-on-one meeting last year, the Law Society of Scotland warned her about the developing crisis in legal aid. I remind members that I am a member of the society. Last month, the Law Society of Scotland warned that the Government plans that we have just heard about fail to recognise the urgency of the situation and do not deliver on either the scale or the timeline that is needed. Given that, what are the minister's projected outcomes from her plans, and when will they be actioned?

Siobhian Brown: As I have said previously, we are unable to do legal aid reform in the current parliamentary session, but I am committed to making improvements that we can make in this session.

The discussion paper sets out three key strands of work that we will undertake to improve and reform legal aid. In the immediate short term, we will simplify the judicare model by bringing regulations to Parliament this year. It is our intention to make changes to criminal, civil and children's legal aid. We will make summary legal aid available for guilty pleas and cases continued without pleas in summary prosecution cases. A lot of work is set out in the discussion paper, but that is what we will be aiming to do in this parliamentary session.

Police Scotland (Information Sharing)

8. Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on how Police Scotland shares information with other statutory bodies about vulnerable individuals. (S6O-04655)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): It is my

understanding that Police Scotland shares information with other statutory bodies in a manner that is lawful, necessary and proportionate and is fully in line with data protection legislation, human rights obligations and safeguarding duties. That can include circumstances in which there is a clear risk to life, safety or wellbeing.

Protecting vulnerable individuals is a core priority for Police Scotland. Its three-year plan makes it clear that ensuring that people in crisis or distress receive the right support at the right time from the right service is central to how it operates. This Government fully supports that ambition.

Edward Mountain: I thank the cabinet secretary and the Deputy First Minister for meeting me and the families of the individuals who were killed or injured in Inverness in 2020. Subsequent to that meeting, I have identified that the police had no forms of concern relating to the accused, who had been previously arrested. The families and I have looked at the mental health and policing framework for collaboration and seen little that would compel the police to liaise more closely with partners such as national health service boards and councils.

What guarantee can the cabinet secretary give to assure the families that Police Scotland will learn from that incident and ensure that there is more joined-up action in future?

Angela Constance: I am very grateful to Mr Mountain for facilitating a very humbling but also very informative meeting with him and his constituents who are the family members of victims of a very serious crime. We have engaged substantially with Mr Mountain and his constituents on the framework for collaboration.

I would be happy to receive more detail on the specific information that he received on Police Scotland having no forms. I am cognisant that Police Scotland, like all partners, is often reliant on other partners sharing information, and that is why the framework for collaboration is so important in relation to people in the same multi-agency space sharing information.

I am more than happy to engage further with Mr Mountain.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): The safety of vulnerable individuals must be at the forefront of all actions in our justice system. Can the cabinet secretary provide further detail on how Police Scotland ensures that personal information remains secure when it is shared with third parties?

Angela Constance: That is an operational matter, but I am aware that, when a decision is taken to share a vulnerable person concern report with an external partner, which is an established

procedure for Police Scotland, it uses a secure email encryption system to transmit the information in a password-protected format. That approach ensures that, as members would expect, sensitive data is transferred securely.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, cabinet secretary. I am pleased that we got through that without your voice giving out completely.

That concludes portfolio questions. There will be a brief pause before we move to next item of business to allow members on the front benches to change positions.

Care Sector (Impact of United Kingdom Government Decisions)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a statement by Maree Todd on the impact of UK Government decisions on Scotland's social care sector. The minister will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:51

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): First, I thank the dedicated and hard-working staff who work in social care. I am incredibly grateful for the work that they do.

My statement will focus on the far-reaching impacts of recent decisions by the UK Labour Government. However, before that, I would like to take a moment to reflect on how far we have come. Under this Scottish National Party Government, we have introduced free personal nursing care for every person over the age of 65; we are making strides towards effective sectoral bargaining with our trade union partners; and, rather than kicking the can down the road on social care reform, as we have seen from successive UK Governments, we are implementing changes through our Care Reform (Scotland) Bill, which will improve the life of every person who is in receipt of care. We have also continued to invest in social care, having increased spending on adult social care by 69 per cent between 2011 and 2024.

However, that progress is under threat from the decisions of a UK Government that is intent on delivering blow after blow to social care. The latest of those falls from the devastating and needless proposal to end new visas for those working in social care. For workers, for the many vital social care services and for the people in receipt of care, there is no other way to describe that than as catastrophic.

Scottish Care has said that the policy

"would not only be irresponsible, but it would also be reckless. It would put lives, services, and whole communities at risk."

Providers in the independent and third sectors, who are grappling with the last round of visa changes, have now had the rug pulled from under them. A number of providers are reliant on international workers to fill critical vacancies. Already, Home Office statistics show that, since March 2024, when the callous and cruel ban on visas for dependants of care workers was brought in, there have been 81 per cent fewer applicants

for health and care visas. Now, shockingly, Labour wants to reduce the number even further.

We are clear that migration is vital for supporting sustainable communities, our economy and public services in Scotland. Scotland needs talented and committed people from across the world to work here without excessive barriers.

I echo the views of the Coalition of Care and Support Providers in Scotland and reject the notion that social care staff are "lower skilled workers". They are staff who provide critical and complex care to the most vulnerable people in our country, and for them to be labelled "lower skilled" is demeaning and disrespectful.

The immigration white paper represented a clear opportunity to redress the imbalances in the current system, and, through meaningful engagement, create a system that is flexible, forward thinking and well placed to promote economic growth across the UK.

We have consistently made the case for tailored migration routes within a single UK immigration system, and in March, we provided a set of policy proposals to the Home Office to feed into the white paper's development. Shamefully, to date there has been no substantive engagement from the Home Office on any of the policy proposals that we contributed. The UK Government's complete failure to engage with the Scottish Government underlines, once again, that Scotland is barely an afterthought for Labour. Now, more than ever, it is clear that Scotland needs full powers over immigration in order to properly support our public services.

However, we know that this is not the only challenge facing the sector. Over recent years, the social care sector has been hit by a whole host of issues: Brexit, Covid, increasing demand, the cost of living crisis and workforce challenges. Those have increased the risk to the continuity and quality of care and support for people across all communities in Scotland.

Despite that, in its autumn statement, the UK Labour Government took the decision to increase employer national insurance contributions and lower the threshold at which employers start to pay them. That reckless decision has placed a heavy and entirely avoidable financial pressure on our social care sector. My officials have estimated that Labour's decision will cost adult social care alone more than £84 million. When you factor in the costs for directly employed, contracted and commissioned services across health and social care, the figure increases to over £300 million.

At every opportunity, the Scottish Government has vehemently opposed that disastrous decision. We have made our view very clear to the UK Government and called for additional support to

fund those costs. That, sadly, has fallen on deaf ears.

In an extremely difficult financial environment, the Scottish Government has responded as best it can by increasing investment into both health and social care. This year's budget sees a record £21.7 billion going into health and social care, which exceeds front-line Barnett consequentials. The investment will deliver reform and improvement across our services, driving efficiency and delivering the quality and access to services that people have a right to expect.

We have provided almost £2.2 billion for social care and integration, which is almost £350 million more than was set out in our previous commitment to increase social care funding by 25 per cent over the parliamentary session. We are uplifting pay to a minimum of £12.60 per hour for adult social care workers, reflecting the real living wage. We are providing an additional £125 million in order to make that happen, and we have invested an extra £5.9 million in the Care Inspectorate and an extra £13.4 million in our independent living fund. I am also pleased that the partners that are involved in the national care home contract were able to reach an agreement that delivers an additional 5.8 per cent for nursing care and 6.8 per cent for residential care, incorporating some of the increase in employer national insurance contributions, pay rises and inflation.

However, despite substantial funding increases, we know that the national insurance increase remains a significant concern for the sector. While we will continue to demand that the UK Government changes course on national insurance, it is becoming more and more apparent that Labour is perfectly content to balance the books on the backs of the most vulnerable. That is why we have wasted no time in working with local government and the sector to understand the impact of these changes, and explore what might be possible to help address the pressures.

We have provided targeted support through our collaborative response and assurance group, and the cabinet secretary has hosted monthly round-table sessions with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, provider representatives and local leaders. We have established a joint financial viability response group with COSLA to engage with key partners. The group has been meeting weekly since February and working at pace to identify the proactive steps that can be taken to mitigate the impact of increasing financial pressures, to protect services and to support people who are in receipt of care. That work is ongoing, but we remain committed to exploring options and solutions in a collaborative way.

The new national care service advisory board will also work openly and collaboratively with

integration joint boards, local authorities, health boards and organisations across community health, social work and social care in Scotland. It will have a vital role in strengthening transparency around spend and considering how effective spending on integrated health and social care has been.

Once again, I urge the UK Government to rethink, to fully fund the cost of the national insurance changes to social care and to work with us to deliver an immigration system that works for Scotland. To quote Scottish Care again:

"It's like the UK government decided to make social care provision as hard as possible. National insurance is a nightmare, immigration changes are awful, disability changes will increase demand."

These decisions cannot wait. In just the past month, we have been notified of five adult social care services that are closing, where the increases in national insurance were a major contributing factor. Those closures alone will result in the loss of more than 80 care home beds. Quite simply, we cannot stand by and allow the social care sector to be sacrificed. We will always work collaboratively, constructively and proactively to support the social care sector in the face of substantial risk. There is only so much that we can do. Without swift action from the UK Government, I fully anticipate that more care services will close and that there will be areas of Scotland that do not have access to social care. That might mean that some have difficulty in securing a care home placement or individuals being cared for many miles from their friends, family and community. That is not a future that I want to see, and that is why I find it heartbreaking that the UK Labour Government is prepared to accept that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you. I remind members that we are tight for time across the afternoon. It is unfortunate that the statement has slightly overrun. I still intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions, after which we will need to move to the next item of business. I invite members who have not pressed their request-to-speak buttons but who want to ask a question to do so now.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I declare an interest as a practising national health service general practitioner.

This is yet another SNP statement that passes the buck, never accepting any responsibility. Labour's national insurance hike has financially devastated charities such as Scottish Action for Mental Health and Scottish Huntington's Association, which support the care sector, and has directly plunged GPs, pharmacies and care homes into chaos. However, the SNP has failed the care sector for almost two decades, with a lack of workforce planning, a lack of proper investment

and a failure to end delayed discharge. In fact, compared with a decade ago, we have fewer adult care homes, as 250 have closed under this SNP Government. It has also wasted £30 million—equivalent to the salaries of 1,200 care workers—on its failed national care service, and it has the brass neck to exalt its cobbled-together Care Reform (Scotland) Bill.

Social care staff are caring and compassionate; Scots are caring and compassionate. Why can the SNP not use some of the 125,000 unemployed Scots who are desperate for jobs to plug the gap, instead of relying on immigration?

Maree Todd: I will respond to Dr Gulhane's last point. Our social care staff are highly skilled, are regulated and have qualifications. It is somewhat insulting to suggest that people can come off unemployment benefit and straight into a social care job—

Sandesh Gulhane: Train them, then.

Maree Todd: That underestimates our social care workers, and the member's suggestion does him, as a doctor in our NHS, a disservice—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, could you please resume your seat for a second? We will get through the questions only if the questioners ask the question and allow the minister to respond.

Maree Todd: Yes, we are offering training for our social care service. To be fair, the member's comment revealed a somewhat central belt focus. Some parts of our country—I represent one of them—absolutely do not have enough people. Immigration is relied on for more than 80 per cent of the workforce. To suggest that there are in the villages and communities that I represent young people who are fit, healthy and able to train in the skilled jobs that social care requires is a very challenging point to make.

On our support for social care, the member will be well aware that, in Scotland, our offer to individuals who seek social care is more generous than that in the rest of the UK. We provide more financial support through personal and nursing care payments, and we also pay our social care staff more. In fact, in Scotland, social care is a regulated profession, unlike in England. We have been investing in social care for a great deal of time.

I am saying to the Parliament today that there has been a sequence of appalling blows. I said to the Parliament very clearly at the tail end of last year that the ENICs proposal was likely an existential challenge for the social care sector; we now face the blow on immigration.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): What the minister will not tell the Parliament is that Audit Scotland said that there is a £560 million black hole in the finances for social care this year, which is down to the SNP; nor will she tell the chamber about the £30 million that was wasted on a national care service bill that had to be renamed because it did not deliver a single hour of extra care, which is down to the SNP.

The minister will choose to ignore the fact that Scottish Labour has for four years demanded an increase in wages to £15 an hour to stop care workers leaving the profession to work in Aldi and Lidl, which pay more. That is down to the SNP. She will not talk about training some of the 119,000 unemployed Scots to fill the estimated 9,000 vacancies across all social care settings. That is down to the SNP.

Instead of addressing any of those issues and improving the terms and conditions of social care staff, the SNP simply blames someone else for its failures. After 20 years, Scotland needs a change.

Maree Todd: The fact that Nigel Farage is praising Keir Starmer for copying his policies should shame the Labour Party, which is an increasingly unrecognisable party of austerity cuts, Brexit and hostile migration policies. The Labour Party's damaging migration plans will leave communities across Scotland worse off by making it more difficult to recruit vital care workers, by squeezing economic growth and by harming Scotland's valued international workforce.

Would one of the few Labour Party members who are in the chamber today like to tell me whether the £300 million that will be going directly from health and social care in Scotland this year and every year from now on will support social care in our communities or worsen the £500 million gap? *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I encourage members to ask questions and listen to the responses, rather than provide a running commentary.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): In 2023, more than 58,000 overseas care workers came to the UK on skilled worker visas, representing nearly half of all new entrants to the social care workforce. Following the UK Government's announcement of its proposed immigration reforms, Unison's general secretary said:

"The NHS and the care sector would have collapsed long ago without the thousands of workers who've come to the UK from overseas."

Does the minister share my concern that the UK Government's decision to restrict recruitment from abroad will leave many providers with staff shortages?

Maree Todd: I absolutely share that concern. It is not a question of whether those changes will leave providers with staff shortages; that is inevitable. In recent days, Scottish Care, CCPS, Care England, Renaissance Care, Unison and the Home Care Association have all been on record telling the UK Government that. Providers have been clear that international recruitment is critical and that the impacts of not having it will be felt by the most vulnerable.

It is simply outrageous that the UK Labour Government does not recognise the immense contribution that care professionals from all over the world have played in caring for our communities over many years. Those vital workers have cared for the most vulnerable in society and, with the Covid pandemic, in the hardest of times. Rather than thanking them, Labour has chosen to devalue and disrespect them.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): We spoke to a group of chief executive officers of organisations that provide social care. They told us that they need to reduce their staff numbers just to keep their heads above water, yet the minister comes into the chamber and complains that recruitment is the biggest challenge that the sector faces, while it is having to shed jobs to stay afloat. Will she explain how she proposes to support care providers to retain existing staff in the face of the SNP's cuts and Labour's NI increase?

Maree Todd: Let me be clear that the Scottish Government is increasing the funding to social care. We have provided record funding to the NHS and local authorities. That is how social care is funded in Scotland.

I beg to differ on whether the greatest challenge in our social care sector is finance or people; the answer varies in different parts of the country. I refer members to the SAMH briefing that was provided to us for a grasp of the scale of the challenge that the social care sector faces. The ENICs increase this year will cost SAMH £500,000, which it has to find from a relatively fixed budget. It cannot increase its charges to the public in the way that all other employers can. I have been saying for months that the ENICs challenge—the tax on jobs—will lead to redundancies.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will need responses to be briefer.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): The Coalition of Care and Support Providers in Scotland has warned that the UK Government's national insurance hike is "a massive threat" and has said:

"We have absolutely no idea how we're going to cover that bill."

Will the minister update us on the Scottish Government's latest engagement with social care providers about the impact that the hike will have on services?

Maree Todd: As I set out in my statement, the ENICs increase is disastrous for social care, with care providers warning that significant numbers of providers could close their doors as a result of the changes from Labour. The situation has been described as an "existential threat" for the sector.

We have regular engagement on the issue with social care providers and stakeholders, such as CCPS and Scottish Care, through our financial viability response group. The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care has hosted monthly round-table meetings with that group and with COSLA. The group is continuing to work at pace, and its next meeting is scheduled for tomorrow.

The message that we hear loudly and consistently from providers and stakeholders is that the UK Labour Government must reconsider this harmful decision and fully fund the cost to social care of the national insurance changes. I echo that call today.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): It is ironic to hear the Government praise its work on the botched National Care Service (Scotland) Bill, which is now unrecognisable from what was first envisioned, with £30 million wasted in the process. Despite the Scottish Government's warm words today, in reality, the social care sector has been ignored, underfunded and let down for 18 years by this SNP Government.

The UK Government provided funding to the Scottish Government to assist with national insurance contributions. However, we believe that local government has not received all its funding to date. Will the minister tell the Parliament whether all the moneys that were provided by the UK Government have actually been allocated?

Maree Todd: As I understand it, that is absolutely the case. I can confirm that in writing if that would be of comfort to Carol Mochan.

On the £30 million—[*Interruption.*] I ask Jackie Baillie to allow me to make my point. I think that members in the chamber are just not understanding the scale of the threat that faces our social care sector. Carol Mochan raised the issue of the £30 million—£10 million per year over three years—that was spent on understanding and making improvements to the social care sector. Let us look at the scale of the national insurance bill for the health and social care sector in Scotland. This year and every year as we go forward, the bill is £300 million. That £300 million is going not directly to our health and social care sector but to HM Treasury.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Sadly, it seems that, once again, Scotland is an afterthought to the UK Government. Can the minister provide an update on any engagement that took place between the UK Government and the Scottish Government ahead of the announcement of the migration proposals?

Maree Todd: I question whether we were thought of at all. Renaissance Care has said that the UK Government

“are shooting themselves in both feet”

with its policy. More care homes will close, delays and waiting lists will increase and it will directly harm the lives of vulnerable adults across the UK. However, for the already fragile systems in areas such as the Highlands and Islands, including the area that I represent, the policy is nothing short of calamitous.

The UK Government cannot say that it was unaware of impacts. We issued a comprehensive, evidence-based proposal document outlining Scotland's needs to the Home Office during its development of the immigration white paper. There was no substantive engagement on any of the policy proposals that we submitted. Very clearly, the needs of Scotland's communities have been ignored. The brutal truth is that the UK Government knows the damage that that policy will do, and it is doing it anyway.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have six minutes and five colleagues who want to ask questions. We will need to get through the responses a little more quickly.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): As well as preventing more migrant workers from coming here, the announcement this week will undoubtedly make those who are already here worry about the anti-migrant rhetoric that is rising across the UK. What work is the Government undertaking to prevent those staff from moving away from Scotland and to support them at a time when the toxic narrative around migration appears to be growing?

Maree Todd: Gillian Mackay is absolutely correct to highlight the impact of the toxic narrative around migration on people who are already here—in fact, on people who have been here for generations. It is being felt very painfully. This morning, I had a meeting with NHS chairs, each of whom talked about the impact on the workforce. I worked in the NHS for 20 years, and I have to say that I welcomed the support, skill and talent of the many people with whom I worked who came from other parts of the world.

We talked about anti-racism work at this morning's meeting. NHS Grampian has a great piece of anti-racism work, and I would be more

than happy to meet Gillian Mackay to talk more about what our health and social care system is doing to make sure that those staff know that they are welcome here and that we value them.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): On a note of consensus, I absolutely agree that some of the best care in our country is provided by care workers who have chosen to settle here from overseas. I also agree with the Government that not excluding social care providers from the national insurance contribution increase is a hammer blow. However, does the minister recognise that the actions that have been taken by her own Government, especially in relation to the failure to supply affordable housing to care workers and the massive gap in funding for social care, fall squarely at her feet and are causing the closure of homes, particularly in the Highlands, in communities such as those that she represents?

Maree Todd: I absolutely recognise that the latest threats are not the only challenges that the sector faces. I acknowledge that. Alex Cole-Hamilton is absolutely correct to point to the sustainability of housing in rural areas as also being an issue. Again, we are working in a collaborative way to ensure that our health and social care sector is working closely with our local authorities in order to rise to the challenge, where it occurs locally.

On the gap in funding, I am proud to be part of a Government that has increased the amount of funding to social care. We have also increased funding to our national health service. We have given record amounts of funding to our NHS and to local authorities, which also means record funding to social care.

In Scotland, we pay our staff more. We value our social care staff. Of course I would like to go further, but the real living wage—to which the Government has been committed since 2016—is a substantial improvement on what is paid in England.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): The minister and many colleagues have mentioned the UK Government's employer national insurance contribution hike. That hike could cost the social care sector in Scotland £84 million a year. I think that the minister mentioned that the cost could even be £300 million. That is a huge cost for the sector, including in Dumfries and Galloway.

Can the minister reiterate how the Scottish Government is engaging with the UK Government on the issue and provide reassurance that the Scottish Government will continue to press it on the costs?

Maree Todd: It is important that people grasp the scale of the issue. We estimate a cost of £300

million across health and social care, including GP contractors. The direct cost to adult social care is £84 million—it could be up to £100 million—and we estimate a cost of £30 million for the not-for-profit sector in Scotland. It is unbelievable. Those costs are for each and every year, and they need to be met only to stand still. There are 100 better ways in which I could spend that money.

At every opportunity, my ministerial colleagues and I have stridently opposed the issue. We have tried to engage with the UK Government. Our budget and funding will be spent on mitigating UK policies.

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): Almost 6,500 people across Scotland are waiting for a social care assessment—a number that represents real lives and real families. The Scottish Government says that it is investing money in care services, but what does that mean for people who are waiting for those assessments? When will people receive the care that they desperately need?

Maree Todd: As I understand it, the number of people waiting for a care assessment has gone down year on year. I am more than happy to provide information on that. The situation is different, of course, if we pick certain months—particularly if we pick months in which we have faced a challenge. However, when we look at statistics because we want to learn about what is happening, we tend to look at the same point in each year and compare. Doing that shows us that, year on year, the number of people waiting for assessments is going down. However, I know that that is of no comfort to the people who are waiting for assessments, and I am determined to improve that performance.

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): The Labour Government's plan to limit the number of international social care workers is only the latest measure from successive UK Governments that have damaged recruitment in the sector. Can the minister set out what assessment the Scottish Government has made of the impact of Brexit on Scotland's social care workforce?

Maree Todd: As members know, Brexit had a devastating impact on the Highlands and on Scotland as a whole. Scottish employers were more reliant on European Union workers than employers in many other parts of the UK, so the ending of free movement as a result of Brexit, which Scotland did not vote for, had a hugely negative impact on our public services and the Scottish economy. That is one of the fundamental reasons why there are so many labour shortages across every sector at the moment.

Brexit left the social care sector with less flexibility to respond to on-going labour supply challenges. Research by the Nuffield Trust

highlights the broader negative impact on the UK health and social care sectors.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the statement on the impact of UK Government decisions on the care sector. There will be a brief pause before we move to the next item of business to allow members on the front benches to change over.

Additional Support for Learning

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-17524, in the name of Miles Briggs, on a review of additional support for learning and the implementation of mainstreaming.

15:24

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I am pleased to open this important debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives. The report on additional support for learning that Audit Scotland published earlier this year was damning, and it highlighted the Scottish National Party Government's failure to plan and resource accordingly to tackle the issue. Teachers and school staff face unprecedented pressures, and our most vulnerable pupils are being let down.

More than 40 per cent of Scottish pupils receive additional support for learning. In Edinburgh, in my region, the number of pupils with additional support needs has grown by more than 165 per cent over the past 10 years. ASN pupils now represent 39 per cent and 52 per cent of Edinburgh's primary and secondary school population, respectively.

The Audit Scotland report rightly calls on the Scottish Government and councils to

"fundamentally rethink how they plan, fund and staff additional support for learning as part of core school education in Scotland."

Stephen Boyle, the Auditor General for Scotland, said:

"The Scottish Government has failed to plan effectively for its inclusive approach to additional support for learning. Current gaps in data mean it is unclear whether all children's right to have an education that fully develops their personality, talents and abilities is being met.

The Scottish Government and councils urgently need better quality data to understand pupils' additional support needs and the resources required to provide support to enable all pupils to reach their full potential."

Ruth MacLeod, a member of the Accounts Commission, said:

"Councils and the Scottish Government must fundamentally rethink how additional support for learning is planned and provided".

I agree, and that is why we have brought this debate to Parliament.

Fundamentally, we need to urgently understand the levels of additional support for learning in our schools and realistically look at what the Scottish Government and our councils can do to meet that demand and prioritise resources. Teachers tell us again and again that we need leadership to understand how we are going to provide that

additional support and what that will look like on the ground. I am deeply concerned that the message from teachers and parents is that they cannot cope unless urgent and significant investment is made to enable schools to effectively deliver the support that we need. It is also important that we understand how the implementation of mainstreaming has impacted on teachers and the wider school community, and the additional pressures that that has brought.

In recent weeks, I have raised two issues at First Minister's question time. I raised the issue of children and young people who are seeking attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism diagnosis pathways being removed from child and adolescent mental health services waiting lists without suitable alternatives being made available and without their being told about or signposted to third sector support.

The Scottish Government's press release celebrated its meeting the target for referral to CAMHS, which it set almost a decade ago, for the first time. However, I know from speaking to parents whom I represent here in Lothian that that was a slap in the face for parents who have been waiting and waiting, many of whom have now decided that they will seek private diagnosis, with no clear pathway for the delivery of shared care with GP surgeries for their children.

The truth is that the only reason why ministers have been able to say that the target was met is that children and young people who are seeking an ADHD or autism diagnosis have been removed from those figures. One parent said to me that it feels like those waiting times have been gerrymandered, and I agree. That is why we are calling for a review, and I hope that Parliament will back that.

I am also deeply concerned that, in recent months, three of our major health boards—my board in Lothian, the minister's board in Highland and the board in Tayside—have been escalated to level 3 of the Government's support and intervention framework as a result of their mental health performance, specifically on CAMHS. Given that the figures will have changed, how will they be judged on improvement now that many children are being taken off that waiting list?

It is not only me who is asking that question. The Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland has said that the number of children who are on separate waiting lists to be assessed for neurodevelopmental conditions is now not routinely being published by the Scottish Government. It says that the Scottish Government needs to be more transparent, and I agree with that call.

Dr Laura Sutherland, who is the vice-chair of the Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland's child and adolescent faculty, said that children who are at the most risk are prioritised, which can result in people with a neurodevelopmental condition waiting even longer. She said:

"Often there is not an immediate risk which is why some of these young people can wait for longer but I think overall the impact is longer term ... It means young people can't get into education or be supported adequately and ultimately some of these young people will go on to develop mental health conditions on the back of neurodiverse conditions."

Those two issues are critical—we need action, and ministers need to take that forward.

I turn to the amendments. I have no problem with the Government amendment, but that is because it simply states that Parliament

"agrees that all children and young people should receive the help that they need to thrive".

The Scottish Conservatives agree, but we need to ask why, after 18 years, the Scottish Government is not delivering that.

I welcome what is contained in the Labour amendment. I very much agree that, 10 years on from the Morgan review, we have not seen the progress that we should have seen.

The Green Party amendment was not selected for debate, but it points out—importantly—a

"concern that only 1,215 children in Scotland have a coordinated support plan ... which represents just 0.4% of all children with a recognised additional support need".

At that rate, ministers will continue to fail. We need a rethink, which is why the Scottish Conservatives are calling for action.

I believe that there are solutions out there to support what we want to see. Last week, I visited the Yard, which is a wonderful charity that is based in Edinburgh. I apologise to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, as I may have inadvertently signed her up for a visit to see its facility and the fantastic resources that it has developed to provide models of support to teachers and the school community more widely. We need those models to be embraced and rolled out nationally.

I hope that today's debate will act as a wake-up call for ministers, the Scottish Government and councils to recognise that they are not delivering the support that our children and young people need. I hope that, if Parliament supports my motion at decision time, we will get clear timelines from the Scottish Government on when the key reviews will take place. We urgently need that action.

Teachers and parents are growing more and more concerned at the failure to provide and

resource the planning of additional support for learning in our schools across Scotland. That must change, and that is why the Scottish Conservatives continue to stand up for pupils, parents and teachers and demand that SNP ministers deliver the support that our children and young people need to thrive.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the Audit Scotland report calling for a fundamental review of planning and resourcing of additional support for learning in Scotland; recognises concerns over declining numbers of additional support workers and classroom assistants; highlights the need to understand the rise in pupils with additional support needs to better target resources and training; calls on the Scottish Government and local authorities to deliver a new model of support alongside the NHS Education for Scotland trauma-informed practice training on neurodivergence and autism; expresses concern over changes to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism diagnosis pathways removing children from child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) support without suitable alternatives, and calls on the Scottish Ministers to undertake a national review into the implementation of mainstreaming policy and the availability of specialist additional school places across local authorities.

15:32

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): I thank Mr Briggs for lodging his motion, which calls for a review of additional support for learning and the implementation of mainstreaming. I confirm that we will vote for the motion and the amendments as we are keen to seek a collaborative effort from members across the chamber to try to solve some of these challenging problems.

I have visited the Yard and I assure members that it is well worth a visit.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Does Maree Todd agree with the call from Miles Briggs that today's debate must be a "wake-up call" for a fundamental change in how we move forward in this area?

Maree Todd: As members will hear as I go through my speech—if I have an opportunity to get into it—and as the cabinet secretary will confirm, the Government is already taking forward a whole suite of work in this area. We are very keen to hear what more we can do and what would add value to the work that is already happening.

I begin by highlighting that the approach that is set out in the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 is highly inclusive. There continues to be consensus around the principles of inclusion on which our system is based, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the Morgan report and, more recently, the Education, Children and Young People Committee of this Parliament have

unanimously supported the inclusive approach that the 2004 act sets out.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills told the Scottish Secondary Teachers Association that she thought that the law that the minister has just described was “a bit old”. What exactly did she mean?

Maree Todd: I am sure that the cabinet secretary will explain all that later. The Government is always looking to improve—there is no question about that.

The motion refers to a decline in the number of pupil support assistants. Although I understand the concern around that, I point out that the number of pupil support assistants has increased by 1,800 since 2020 and is currently at the second-highest level on record. We continue to invest £15 million a year to help them to respond to children’s needs.

The cabinet secretary will say a great deal more in her closing remarks in this important debate about how we are tackling the increased demand for support for learning, but the motion gives me the opportunity to address recent coverage that has risked causing parents unnecessary worry and anxiety. That relates to neurodevelopmental services for children with conditions such as autism and ADHD. In recent weeks, some members have described children who are seeking a neurodevelopmental diagnosis as having been removed from CAMHS waiting lists, and Mr Briggs has repeated that rhetoric. The implication, whether intentional or otherwise, is that children and families have been left without alternative support. I want to reassure parents and be very clear with the Parliament that that is not the case.

It is mental health awareness week and it seems timely to urge all members to take care with the language that they use, given that it can be unintentionally stigmatising and could result in people not coming forward to seek support. That is incumbent on us all.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I agree with the minister’s point about language, particularly as it is mental health awareness week, but the reality is that, in Glasgow, for example, 9,000 young people have been moved from CAMHS waiting lists and put on to alternative pathways, which eventually lead nowhere.

Maree Todd: CAMHS is simply not the correct service for children who are seeking a diagnosis for neurodevelopmental conditions, unless they are seeking support for a co-existing mental health condition.

Miles Briggs: Will the minister take an intervention?

Maree Todd: I will take one more intervention on that point.

Miles Briggs: I have been listening to what the minister has to say. The biggest problem—and parents will say this to all of us—is that young people have to wait for years on each of those pathways. I have spoken to parents who have had to sell things so that they could get a private diagnosis for their child. Once they have a diagnosis, it will unlock support. However, if a diagnosis is not recognised, a GP surgery will not provide care. Parents are being forced to go private, which is a real concern. I do not think that the Scottish Government really understands what that means in the real world.

Maree Todd: Our overriding focus is on ensuring that people get the right help and support and that that help and support is available for our young people, particularly in the education system. For many, that is best provided through a neurodevelopmental pathway and not CAMHS. I make no apology for seeking to ensure that our young people are directed to the most appropriate service for their individual needs. That approach is right for everyone—it is right for the people who need specialist neurodevelopmental support and it is right for CAMHS, as it can focus on providing the right help for young people who need the specialist mental health support that the service offers.

As part of our continued commitment to ensuring that the right support is available to our young people, the Scottish Government, in partnership with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, has undertaken a review of the implementation of the national neurodevelopmental specification, which sets the expectations for services across Scotland. That review provides an opportunity to reflect on learning and progress and it will inform improvements to support health boards and local authorities to deliver the specification.

There has been a significant rise in the demand for neurodevelopmental diagnosis in recent years. That has been experienced across the whole of the United Kingdom and by all services. Figures on the number of children who are seeking a diagnosis are not currently reported nationally or published. I acknowledge that work is needed to improve the quality of the data that we have on neurodevelopmental support and services and gain a better understanding of the levels of need and the support that children and young people currently receive. We are working to improve that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I appreciate that the minister was very generous in accepting interventions, but she will need to conclude as there is no time in hand.

Maree Todd: I fully recognise the important role that a diagnosis can play, but we have to recognise that diagnosis alone does not define or determine a child's support needs. That is why our national neurodevelopmental specification—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, you need to conclude, as you are well over your time. You will also need to move your amendment. Please do so now.

Maree Todd: We have clear recommendations that support—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, I ask you to move your amendment and to please resume your seat.

Maree Todd: I will conclude.

I move amendment S6M-17524.3, to insert at end:

“agrees that all children and young people should receive the help that they need to thrive, and thanks Scotland's hard-working teachers, support staff and the wider education workforce for all that they do every day to support pupils.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have almost no time in hand. I can deal only with the time allocation that I have been given and I cannot magic time out of thin air.

15:39

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): All young people, including those with additional support needs, deserve the opportunity to learn and thrive, and our teachers, support staff, parents and pupils must be thanked immensely for all that they do every day, despite the system working against them, to make that so. Therefore, we welcome today's debate and will support the motion in Miles Briggs's name.

We will also support the Government's amendment, although I have to say that its focus on warm words and its brevity rather indicate that the Government had little to add by way of action in a space that is so desperate for that. For Scotland's teachers, support staff, parents and pupils, that will be disappointing. That is why our amendment adds crucial actions that we believe are necessary to support young people to thrive, and to do that alongside their peers, to be included in their schools and to get the support that they need.

The current system is not delivering that. As the committee said, the situation is intolerable. The reality is that, on this Government's watch, the experience of children and young people with additional support needs, their families and the staff who support them is one of exhaustion, exclusion and crisis.

The motion calls for a review of the implementation of mainstreaming and a new model of support, because action is needed. I also want to be clear that the failure is not around the presumption of mainstreaming, which allows children to learn together with their peers; the failure is on the part of this Government for not building an education system that empowers that.

The ability of a child to learn together with their peers matters, and I know that because I lived it. I went to a mainstream school and I did well, but that was not by accident. It took strong staff and strong teachers who had the time and capacity to support me to get the education that I did. That is what every family in Scotland deserves; they should not have to fight for their child's education to get it. However, right now, that is what they must do.

Parents feel abandoned by statutory services such as CAMHS when they are told that there is a new diagnostic pathway but are left waiting while nothing appears. I heard what the minister said about CAMHS, and I know that that service is not what all young people need, but if not CAMHS, what? Without a destination, we do not have a pathway but a crisis that leaves parents in distress and children without the support that they need.

Maree Todd: I acknowledge that many children and young people require more targeted support from specialist services, but many other children and young people will have their needs met through universal supports at home and in school. The additional support for learning legislation is really clear that a diagnosis is not needed to get support. Further, there are also community-based supports, such as a service in North Lanarkshire that I will visit tomorrow, given that it is mental health awareness week—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I think that Ms Duncan-Glancy has got the gist, minister.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I am afraid to say that the 9,000 people on waiting lists for support in Glasgow will be pretty vocal in explaining that the universal provision is not meeting their needs and that the services that the minister thinks are there to support young people are just not there and are not statutory—that is the issue.

Most worryingly, this is a crisis that is not counted or monitored; those young people are now invisible to the Government, because they have been moved from a system that was counted—albeit there were concerns about the way in which it was counted—into a system that is not. Those people have become invisible, and that is having a huge impact on our schools, including on our teachers. There are more than 292,000 children with additional support needs in Scotland—I think that that figure might be from

2002, so it is probably slightly higher now—but there are only around 1,400 ASN teachers, which is one ASN teacher for every 200 children, against the backdrop of a system that is not providing the support that they need outwith school. That is not inclusion; it is a damning indictment of a Government that has walked away from education for all.

What my colleagues on our benches and, I hope, across the chamber believe is that what we need now is action. That starts with a proper workforce plan. We need a detailed strategy that recruits and retains teachers and ASN specialists and pastoral care staff alongside urgent reform of support services, including triage and referral, so that nobody is turned away from CAMHS or speech therapy without a plan in place.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You will need to bring your remarks to a close.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: As Angela Morgan said, what we are talking about is no longer “additional”; it is the classroom now, and the Government needs to wake up and address the real problems that young people are facing.

I move amendment S6M-17524.1, to insert at end:

“; notes that the Scottish Parliament’s Education, Children and Young People Committee found that the ‘overwhelming view’ of evidence was that ‘the principle of the presumption of mainstreaming is laudable and should be supported’ but that the gap between the policy intention and its implementation is ‘intolerable’ and must be addressed; believes that parents and carers of young people with additional support needs (ASN) should not have to fight for everything that their child needs; regrets that, years on from the Morgan Review, there has not been enough progress; believes that teacher workload and the lack of availability of other support services and staff that young people with ASN need have contributed to a system that is overstretched, and calls on the Scottish Ministers to urgently bring forward a comprehensive strategy to increase the ASN and pastoral care workforce, restore access to vital support services, and create a specific ASN parents forum to feed directly into policy.”

15:44

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I thank Miles Briggs for giving us the opportunity to debate this issue today. I should start by making absolutely clear the Scottish Green Party’s support for the principle of mainstreaming and that we reject any attempt to undo that. However, mainstreaming without adequate resourcing just sets up failure.

It sets up something worse than failure, actually. We have children in our schools who are being traumatised by being mainstreamed without adequate resources and support to meet their needs. One of the comments that we hear most often from parents and carers, teachers and

support staff is that there needs to be a catastrophic failure for a child before the right support is put in place. Children need to be traumatised before the local authority allocates adequate resources to them.

I have sympathy for local authorities and I understand the resource pressures that they are under, but it cannot be right that the system relies on failure before action is taken to support a child whose needs are known and understood in advance.

I am glad that the motion calls for a review, but such a review cannot just repeat what we already know; it needs to build on the Morgan review, the co-ordinated support plan review, the Audit Scotland paper that Miles Briggs mentioned and multiple committee inquiries. It must focus on the actions and solutions that are required to address the implementation gap in the presumption of mainstreaming. There is no need for it to repeat the issues that we are already aware of.

I accept that there are financial and resource challenges, which are the greatest barrier to success in supporting children with additional needs. However, that is not an insurmountable barrier. I gently encourage colleagues to speak to their party colleagues on the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, which is about to consider my amendments to address some of the issues around local government financing that are relevant to the Housing (Scotland) Bill.

Alongside resourcing, we need to look at policy and legislative solutions. That is why the Green amendment, which was not selected today, pointed to the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004. That is a clear example of an area in which legislation needs to change. The world has moved on since 2004, as has our understanding of additional support needs.

As it stands, co-ordinated support plans are the only statutory plan available for a child with additional needs, whereby if there is a failure to support the child, they and the adults in their life have the opportunity of going to a tribunal to seek redress. However, to receive a co-ordinated support plan, a child must receive support from at least two different sources. The Parliament has already taken evidence on the challenges with that. One area in which we have made progress recently is to get educational psychologists and counsellors back into our schools. However, because they are now based in the school, that no longer counts as a separate stream of support for the child. Children who would previously have qualified for a co-ordinated support plan no longer do so, because of an improvement that we made in another area of support. That cannot be right.

I do not think that the solution is to update the primary legislation; the solution is to take the criteria for co-ordinated support plans out of primary legislation and put them into regulations, which the Government and Parliament would be able to update with far greater ease than has been possible for the relevant legislation over the past two decades.

I say to the Government, which I am sure will mention in closing the “Additional Support for Learning: Action Plan”, that it should ask itself whether, if every action in that plan is implemented and implemented well, it will shift the dial. None of us believes that it will. Every action in that plan is laudable and would be useful, but none of it will transform what is a catastrophic situation for many of the most vulnerable children in our schools—children whose needs are not being met—and for the wider school community, especially their parents and carers.

The debate is an opportunity for us to talk again about the required solutions to this problem. We have spent at least the past decade going over the same ground about what the problems are. I would really like to hear from the Government in particular this afternoon about the new actions that it will take to tackle the crisis in our schools.

15:48

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I start with a letter from a primary school teacher to the First Minister:

“When I started teaching, inclusion was becoming more and more the norm within schools. Now that there are very few specialist schools, teachers are feeling the effects of inclusion on a daily basis. This policy, whilst admirable in its intention, does not work as it is drastically underfunded. In my school, it is fairly common for teachers to be physically assaulted by children whose needs cannot be met due to the inadequate level of funding. It’s even more common for our teachers to be verbally abused.”

That letter is from 2018, and it was anonymous at the time, because the teacher felt that if she raised the issues, she would be criticised for being anti-mainstream and anti-inclusion. I think that we have moved on.

It is a good step that the Government is accepting the review of mainstreaming, but we should have recognised the issue years ago, as it was raised on a regular basis by teachers, who were feeling it even back then. That was before the pandemic—we cannot blame it on the pandemic. This issue has been brewing for a long time, and I am afraid that we have ignored teachers.

It was a taboo, but now it is open, and I think that we are willing to explore it. When the cabinet secretary concludes, I would like to hear from her when the review will start, when it will conclude,

and whether it will contain what Ross Greer highlighted—namely, practical actions for delivery. We have had review after review after review, but we need to have actions that make a difference.

I will talk about one other issue before I move on to practical solutions. All of this—absence, ASN, behaviour and violence—is interconnected. It is no surprise that pupils will want to stay away from school if they are not getting the appropriate support, or if they are getting violently abused, or if there is bad behaviour against them, or if they are not able to get taught properly. It is no surprise, and all those things are feeding into one another.

We need a solution that works. Part of that is about resource in the classroom. A teacher of 30 pupils will, on average, have 12 pupils who have an identified special need. Sometimes the number is much higher than that, and there is not one single need, but a variety of needs, so teachers need to be skilled in a whole range of different areas. That is almost impossible for them to manage.

So, what steps do we need to take? The mainstreaming review needs to look at the fact that the presumption of mainstreaming is almost turning into a compulsion of mainstreaming. Some parents do not want that for their child and do not think that being in the class is suitable for their child.

Karen Adam: Will the member take an intervention?

Willie Rennie: I have only four minutes.

They would prefer for them to get a specialist level of support, but it is felt that the cost that would be involved in that is prohibitive. Local authorities are therefore pushing the child into the mainstream, which does not suit them, and does not suit the rest of the class either.

The behavioural action plan needs to start working. We are way behind in terms of even the guidance that is to be implemented before we deliver the actual change. We need to take much swifter steps on behaviour.

The final bit is resources, which we know is tough. We have supported the budget this year in order to try and get more support into the classroom. However, when decisions are made about budgets, we need to consider things in the round to ensure that we are providing the appropriate level of support to make a difference.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate, with back-bench speeches of up to four minutes.

15:52

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

This is a very important debate that has been brought forward by Miles Briggs and the Scottish Conservatives. I am struck by the Scottish Government amendment, which I think that the minister said was worded to simply add to the Conservative motion, because the Government wants consensus and to move forward.

Maybe it is the cynic in me, and maybe I can be proven wrong by the cabinet secretary and the minister, but will they confirm that it is a fact that they agree with every word in the motion and that, as soon as it dropped into their mailboxes, they said, "Yes, we will support that"? Or did they make discreet attempts to find a body of votes with the other parties that would strike out a lot of the critical text in the motion and replace it with something bland and vague, as the SNP always does? I do not know whether any minister wants to deny that or say that it is the truth. No—they do not.

Maybe the Government has accepted, having lost its majority when the Greens left office, that it is more difficult to stitch up deals to remove the critical elements of motions. That is healthy, as it is forcing the Government to do things that, clearly, it would not normally want to do.

There is no doubt that this is a major issue. Stephen Boyle's Audit Scotland report on additional support for learning was deeply damning, but it was also, sadly, predictable. I will speak about a couple of recent cases that I have had in Moray. Miles Briggs also gave examples, as did Pam Duncan-Glancy in the context of Glasgow, and other speakers. It cannot be only Opposition MSPs who have people coming to their surgeries, reaching out to them and copying them into letters to the First Minister, as Willie Rennie cited. SNP ministers and back benchers must be getting the exact same thing.

When I had a surgery in Lossiemouth just a few weeks ago, a parent came to me to say that she was at the end of her tether, because she has seen very clearly that the support for her son in primary school has dwindled in recent years. He is not getting the same level of support and assistance as he did just a few years ago, and she is facing the consequences of that at home and when he is out of school.

Just a couple of weeks ago, I held a surgery in Knockando, where there was quite a harrowing case from a mum who came to me about her son. For four years, the family had tried to get an ADHD diagnosis for him through the national health service but, for four years, they had come up against brick walls and been unable to get the diagnosis that they needed. They spent personal

money that had been gifted to them from the boy's grandmother to go private in Stirling, because she could see how urgent things were. They quickly got a diagnosis and, indeed, medication, which is making a big difference to this young boy's life. However, because the boy's diagnosis was made by a private operator, the NHS board will not pay for the medication that he needs.

I wrote to the health board and the Scottish Government about that. My office chased up a response in advance of today's debate, as I had not had one. While Willie Rennie was on his feet—less than four minutes ago—the NHS board came back to me to say that it will meet the family to discuss the issue. It should not have taken MSPs threatening to raise the issue in Parliament, raising it with ministers and writing to the health board to get the response that this family and this young boy need and to ensure that he gets the support that is so clearly needed.

What I want to see from today's debate is consensus across the parties that we all accept that there is a problem; the SNP can show that by accepting the motion and the criticism within it. However, as others have said, we also need action. We cannot come back here in a few months or a few years' time and say the same things and not deliver. It is over to the Government now to take the feeling in the chamber today and from across the political parties and finally get something done to deliver for young people and families across Scotland.

15:56

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I welcome this debate on a very important issue for my constituents and for people across the country. There is no doubt that the number of ASN cases is rising, and that is very much reflected in my own case load. People are coming to my surgeries regularly now to seek advice and assistance, particularly when placing requests for specialist provision are being denied.

There has been a rapid increase in the number of such cases that my office and I have been dealing with this year, which far exceeds that of the years before the pandemic. Parents and children are being left frustrated and worried, and many are turning to the First-tier Tribunal once all avenues with the council have been explored.

I visit schools in my constituency every Monday, and I can testify to the fantastic work that our dedicated teaching staff and talented pupils are involved in. However, in almost all schools, I hear that the number of young people who need additional support is rising, and that is putting extra pressure on the schools.

There is no doubt that local authorities—it is North Lanarkshire Council in this instance—are under pressure in that regard. Of course, it does not help that they have often taken decisions to cut key resources, such as classroom assistants, as has been done in my local authority area.

However, I know that the council is also trying to find other solutions. For example, on Monday, I visited Shawhead primary school in Coatbridge, where I was informed that, from next term, the school would be used as a new enhanced mainstream provision with capacity for 10 children who have been denied ASN placements. That will involve additional staff and resources at the school. I very much welcome that step, and I am keen to find out how that exciting policy develops.

There is no doubt that the Scottish Government has supported local authorities to deliver in this area, with more than £1 billion spent on additional support for learning in 2023-24. However, we need to think more radically. We have a solution right in front of us that can help to tackle the rising incidence of additional needs, as well as behavioural difficulties, and to close the attainment gap. The cabinet secretary will know what I am going to say—it will be of no surprise to her. I believe that the introduction of a play-based kindergarten stage could be that very solution.

For several years, I have advocated the introduction of a kindergarten stage for Scotland. Almost a year ago, I brought a members' business debate to the chamber on fostering a discussion on a kindergarten stage. The debate was engaging, with positive feedback on the idea from members across the parties. As I said in that debate, the UK is a complete outlier when we look at when our children start school, with our primary pupils starting between two and three years earlier than many of their European counterparts.

Kindergarten would give us the opportunity to allow children to flourish physically, mentally and socially. I understand that the introduction of a kindergarten stage will not necessarily solve all the factors behind pupils' requirements for additional support needs. However, I firmly believe that taking that step will benefit pupils immensely and might address some developmental issues that can occur with our children. We currently have a system whereby children are expected to make a jarring transition from a nursery environment to a school environment while they are still between critical developmental milestones.

I could say so much more on the issue and talk about how the evidence points to a kindergarten stage reducing the attainment gap and behavioural difficulties. However, time is very tight in this debate, so I will end by urging the cabinet secretary to please explore the issue further, especially ahead of developing manifestos for

2026. A kindergarten phase will not solve all the issues in our education system overnight, and work must be done to help children who are struggling right now. However, the introduction of a well-designed kindergarten phase to at least the age of six, and possibly to the age of seven, will reap huge benefits in five to 10 years' time. It could be truly game changing.

It is time for the Government and the Parliament to be bold and to come together and deliver the system that lets children be children, continues to support parents and carers and finally puts an end to the current Victorian-based model of children starting formal school at the age of four or five. If we are committed to such a positive change, in only five to 10 years' time, debates such as this could be a thing of the past.

16:00

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): When I entered the Parliament in 2007, the Scottish Government introduced the policy of getting it right for every child—GIRFEC. It was seen as yet another acronym in the great usual clutter of educational jargon, but that policy actually mattered because it was—or it should have mattered, because it should have been—the scaffold of support for every single child across Scotland.

I contend that any decent teacher or education professional should have GIRFEC in their DNA. It should not take a Government to tell us why it matters. However, as time has progressed, many teachers and parents have told us that the implementation of GIRFEC is being undermined by several key aspects of education, most especially in relation to ASN.

As others have said, the recent evidence about the extent of the increase in the number of ASN pupils is clear and so too is the evidence about the accompanying concerns among teachers and parents and among pupils. We should not forget that part of the reason for the increase is better diagnosis—that is a good thing—but we should be clear about the increasing complexities that schools face as they seek to provide the best education for every child, no matter who he or she may be.

Part of the issue is about the interpretation of the principles of equity and mainstreaming, which are all well and good in theory but which are much more difficult in practice. I will be clear about the difference between equality in education and equity—equality is about offering exactly the same education to all pupils, but equity is different. Equity is about fairness and justice, but it also involves recognising that we do not all start from the same place. The principle of equity is so

important when it comes to education, and it articulates perfectly the principle of GIRFEC.

GIRFEC is about ensuring that all pupils have the opportunity to fulfil their full potential. It should underpin all debates about ASN provision. It is also the principle that underpins my member's bill on residential outdoor education.

From the principle of equity, we can examine the principle of mainstreaming. We can all agree that, in theory, mainstreaming is in line with several of the great traditions of Scottish education. However, in practice, especially now, it is much harder to justify saying that it is in line with GIRFEC. We know only too well that there is an increasing number of pupils for whom being in a mainstream classroom is not in their best educational interests. Parents, teachers and union representatives tell us that. I worry greatly that some children end up being placed in mainstream classes by local authorities for financial, rather than educational, reasons.

There is an important debate to be had about what we can and cannot achieve through mainstreaming. Added to that is the question whether specialist care can always be provided in every local authority—or without the help of the independent sector, where many schools have a long tradition of providing additional support for learning. I say gently to the Labour Party that another reason why the assault of VAT on the independent sector is so misguided is that some families with important additional support needs have been forced to leave that sector.

Many teachers, parents and, indeed, pupils rightly raise that the overstretch in mainstreaming often means that pupils with additional support needs get labelled as badly behaved. As Willie Rennie said, that is sometimes true, but it is more often not true—they are not the same thing, which we should note when considering the best interests of every child.

Last week, I was grateful that the Education, Children and Young People Committee supported one of my amendments to the Education (Scotland) Bill, which was designed to further broaden the inspection process in all our schools. Such an approach has to happen for additional support for learning, too. It is time that we properly did something about GIRFEC and supporting every child in the context of additional support for learning.

16:05

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab):

Let me say at the very start that an evaluation of inclusion—of mainstreaming—two decades after the enactment of the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 is one

thing, but going back to the old systems of segregation, removal and exclusion is something we should not support.

The presumption of mainstreaming is, in my view, correct. Equality, diversity and the comprehensive principle are correct—but, of course, there are some big questions. Over the past two decades, there has been an eightfold increase in the number of children and young people who need additional support for learning—some of it long term, some of it short term—and the need is not evenly spread. Children in our most-deprived areas are twice as likely to need additional support for learning as children who live in the least-deprived areas, but as the Auditor General warned the Parliament when he gave evidence in March,

“that is not reflected in how councils are funded for their education service”.

Neither is it reflected in education planning, teacher training or class sizes.

We learned, as well, that good-quality data does not exist. There are gaps and inconsistencies—in fact, to such an extent that Audit Scotland and the Accounts Commission could not undertake a full performance audit of additional support for learning in Scotland, as they originally intended, because the data was non-existent, inconsistent or unreliable. Yoshiko Gibo, a senior auditor, also told us:

“The data that is currently available was designed as a way of monitoring whether the ASL legislation had been put in place as intended, not as a way of understanding children's support needs.”—[*Official Report, Public Audit Committee*, 19 March 2025; c 8.]

So, when the Scottish Government's director general for education and justice gave evidence to the Public Audit Committee just seven days ago, he told us about the international experience. He told us that Scotland spends more per pupil than any other part of the UK and has lower pupil teacher ratios, but those are inputs, not outcomes. We were even told that there is not a perfect correlation between deprivation and additional support needs, because

“Orkney has high levels of ASN and low deprivation”,—[*Official Report, Public Audit Committee*, 7 May 2024; c 20.]

which is to misrepresent, to distort, the overwhelming evidence that a link between poverty, inequality and learning is irrefutable and it is causal, and it is to negate everything that the Scottish Government has told the people and the Parliament for years about closing the educational attainment gap.

We have legal obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, but we have enduring moral obligations, too. We need to get this right, because children are only five

once, only eight once, only 11 once and only 15 once. It is no good saying, "We'll carry out reviews and sort this out over the next five years." We need a greater sense of urgency and an end to Scottish Government complacency. Otherwise, for these children and young people, it may be too late. We need to get it right for every child, but we also need to get it right for every child at the first time of asking.

16:09

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I really welcome this debate, and I thank colleagues across the chamber for bringing attention to such an important issue. Additional support for learning and the implementation of mainstreaming are a vital issue that we should keep front and centre. I have had conversations with the Government, the cabinet secretary and the minister, and I believe that it is a conversation that they do not shy away from.

I will speak specifically about neurodivergence. In my time as a councillor and, now, as an MSP, it has been the number 1 issue that constituents have raised with me. Week in, week out, families have contacted me, exhausted and frustrated and often feeling powerless. That is not just because of the day-to-day challenges of parenting neurodivergent children, but because they are constantly having to fight to be understood. It is that understanding that I really want to focus on.

Families need to be listened to and they need to be able to access support systems, which are there but are often gatekept by people who do not understand. I have been open about my lived experience. I could stand here and say that I have a child who waited about eight years for an ADHD diagnosis, but that time was not spent on a waiting list, and that is what we need to be specific about. It was eight years of me asking teachers to see what I saw in my child, but they did not, so that diagnostic pathway was blocked and gatekept several times. When they finally—after I begged them—got him on the diagnostic pathway, it took a matter of months and he was helped and supported. I was told that his was probably one of the strongest-presenting ADHD cases they had seen, so what was the issue? The issue was not that the waiting list was eight years long; the issue was that the people on the ground who could give my child access to that pathway did not understand how neurodivergence could present.

I understand that it is not financially viable to offer one-to-one support to every single neurodivergent child, and I agree that trauma-informed practice is really important, but understanding is needed. Neurodivergent children have a strong sense of justice and fairness, and people can often add negative connotations to that

and say that they come across as obstinate, which can be time consuming in some busy classrooms. However, that is where understanding matters, and those qualities can actually be nurtured and become great transferable skills in the real world—she says, standing here with a strong sense of social justice.

I warmly welcome the Scottish Government's significant investment in ASL provision. I know that it has been listening and that it is working hard to find solutions, but money and policy alone are not enough. Those who are delivering the services on the ground must have an understanding of how neurodivergence presents and what these children need. I have had a child placed on a reduced timetable—I get it. I have been there when the anxiety kicks in when the phone rings, and I have been unable to work in traditional ways for many years because I have had to go to the school to ask my child to climb down from the shed after he has emptied all the gym equipment out. I get it.

However, too often, the relationship between parents and schools can become adversarial. We need to replace that tension with trust and with honest and open communication. We must stop the blame game for everyone and come up with constructive solutions to move forward and see what is best for everyone inside and outside the classroom.

I will have to skip quite a bit of my speech, but I want to give a shout-out to Banff academy, which has an excellent example of a really small action making a big impact. I went to the school and wondered why it was so calm and peaceful—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Adam, you are over your time.

Karen Adam: My apologies, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please bring your remarks to a close.

Karen Adam: The academy does not have a school bell, which has made a massive impact. There is no jarring noise and no sudden movement, and it helps people to take responsibility—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Adam—

Karen Adam: —for their timekeeping—she said, ironically.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Adam, your time is over.

We move to closing speeches. I call Ross Greer to close on behalf of the Scottish Greens. You have up to four minutes.

16:14

Ross Greer: In opening, the minister mentioned staffing and, specifically, issues around the number of support staff in schools. That is worth exploring further, because it also connects to Richard Leonard's point about the difficulties that Audit Scotland faced when it tried to accurately ascertain the state of play with ASN support in our schools.

One of the issues in relation to support staff is that, starting in around 2019, Government statisticians could no longer distinguish between ASN support staff and classroom or general pupil support assistants. From that point onwards, they began to group those two categories together in the school staff census. When the Parliament's Education and Skills Committee brought the statisticians in to explain that decision, they simply said that, at a local level, the lines had been blurred so much that there was no meaningful distinction. However, that decision masked the almost complete disappearance of dedicated ASN support staff from our schools.

That is why, when my party was in Government, we worked together with the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills to develop policy proposals for a system of accreditation and registration for ASN support staff—I pushed for that.

By no means do I mean this as a sign of disrespect, but it is often the least qualified and least well-paid members of school staff who are expected to provide the most complex and, often, the most intimate personal support to pupils. That is wrong for both the pupil and the member of staff who is expected to do that for far too little pay and without adequate training and support.

It is not only support staff. We have seen a significant reduction in ASN teacher numbers relative to the number of pupils—in fact, there has been no increase in the number of ASN teachers in our schools, even in absolute terms. The Government made an effort a few years ago to promote ASN teaching through the lead teacher model, but I think that we are at the point at which we can all acknowledge that that did not work—indeed, there was no clear incentive for a teacher to take that course.

We must give teachers the opportunity to move into ASN specialist teaching as a point of career progression, and the only way that we can encourage more teachers into ASN teaching is by making it a promoted post. We constantly hear from teachers that they still want to work with children and young people and that they want the opportunity of career progression without moving into a management position. Making ASN teaching a promoted post would be an obvious way to support that. Although it would require additional

resources because promoted posts have higher salaries attached to them, we must recognise the need to have specialist staff in our schools among both teaching and support staff.

One of the first constituents to whom I spoke after I was first elected in 2016 was a deaf 15-year-old young woman, who was in high school. She told me that, on her first day of high school, she had been assigned a member of staff for one-on-one support. She thought that that was fantastic—her anxiety went down at the thought that that dedicated support would be there—until that member of staff said to her that they had only ever worked with children who had autism but that they were sure that, between the two of them, they would be able to work out how to provide the right support for her. That was a failure not only for the young woman but for the member of staff, who had not been adequately supported to do their job—the job that they had been assigned to. Constituents have brought plenty of other examples to me since.

I want to address definition issues. Richard Leonard made an important point. Quite rightly, we have a very broad definition of additional support needs, and there is a whole range of advantages to that. However, when it is at the point where 40 per cent of all children have ASN, and everything from being gifted to being a permanent wheelchair user is an ASN, the grouping of a wide range of issues under one category masks those issues and makes it hard to identify the right kind of support. Although I think that we should keep that definition, we need better disaggregation of the data.

Although there are serious resource implications for getting this right, we could make policy and legislative changes right now with no cost, which would at least make some initial progress while we resolve the more difficult issues of resources. Our children deserve that. It is a crisis in our schools, and those changes need to be delivered now. I hope that the cabinet secretary can commit this afternoon to taking at least some actions.

16:18

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): I think that the tension around time for some speeches in the debate shows the importance of the matter and what other areas we should, as a Parliament, have the opportunity to explore.

I would like to start at the end, with Ross Greer's comments about the lead teacher programme—previously, we had the chartered teacher programme. We seem unable to celebrate experienced, qualified and wise teachers staying in the classroom—we want to yank them out and place them in management roles with human

resource, finance and other obligations, none of which are suited to their training. Doing that steals from our young people some of the best opportunities with which they could be gifted: time with a teacher—a pedagogue—who can be with them and meet them where they are. That very much speaks to the ASN situation in which we find ourselves.

To pick up on Karen Adam's slightly curtailed speech and the shout-out that I think that she was about to make, I note that these young people bring special gifts. They have enormous strengths that other children do not have. They have an ability to coalesce as a group and be empathetic to one another's needs and celebrate one another's strengths. Every person—not just children—should have the opportunity to do that. However, in our education system—to make a defence of mainstreaming—that opportunity can exist only if we can facilitate mainstreaming for as many of our children as that will work for. As we have heard, that requires resources.

I go back to Maree Todd's opening speech. I am grateful for the number of interventions that she took. It is interesting that the Government acknowledged that support staff numbers are currently at the second highest level on record, which relates to Ross Greer's comment about how that is measured. Even at the second highest level, the number of staff is still insufficient for the very significant number of ASN-identified children that there are.

A challenge on diagnosis has been raised in a number of debates, particularly with regard to autistic children and alternative pathways, which are constantly raised. I thank the National Autistic Society Scotland for its briefing on the debate. We often conflate the need for a diagnosis from a medical point of view with the requirement that children display elements that require additional support—but not for there to be a diagnosis—to trigger the support that occurs in our education system. We drift between those ideas in the Parliament. I do not think that we do that deliberately, but the failure to differentiate between the two ideas leads to the problems that we have noted with regard to co-ordinated care plans, for which there are requirements for external inputs.

We fail to understand the importance to parents of a diagnosis, and the importance that a diagnosis has for children in enabling them to understand their identity and strengths and the challenges that they might face. There has been a call to be careful with the language that we use. We must do that, because that challenge does not exist only in the chamber; it rolls outwards. There are parents who feel that their young person has been removed from a list that would have resulted

in a diagnosis and they do not know how to address that.

One of the requests of the National Autistic Society is that the Scottish Government clarifies whether it will implement a nationwide system for accessing autism and ADHD diagnoses and, if so, how. Will the cabinet secretary address that when summing up? What will that system look like? I echo the point that there are gatekeepers to some of the existing pathways and people may not know how to access them.

I recognise that time is short. This has been a fascinating debate and it is one that we should return to in Government debating time so that we can discuss solutions that we have been shown today.

16:23

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): I have been really impressed by the thoughtful and powerful contributions that we have heard from across the chamber. I thank Miles Briggs for raising the topic, which, as he will know, is constantly raised in my mailbox and during my visits to schools. I was in a school this morning, meeting with staff and speaking to young people about their experiences in school. I put on record my thanks to Molly, who I played shops with, and to Ellis, who asked me for more playtime. There was also an ask from some of the primary school kids for more sharing.

It was a heartening visit and it was all about the pupil equity fund and the difference that it has made in our schools. That funding is providing extra money to Scotland's headteachers to help them pay for investments in extra staff, as we have heard from members across the chamber today. We know that it is funding the employment of around 3,000 extra staff in our schools.

I was struck that the motion calls for another review. I see one of Mr Briggs's colleagues nodding. I am sure that, in previous debates brought to the Parliament by the Conservatives, I was instructed by her that the time for reviews is now over. However, I accept the gravity of the challenge. It is important that, as a Parliament, we come together to recognise what more needs to be done on behalf of Scotland's children and young people.

To respond to the points than Willie Rennie made, it is important that there is a collective understanding of what the scope of such a review should be. There have been different ideas about that, such as on the role of local government, which I note is not expressly mentioned in the motion, although Mr Briggs mentioned it. I would want COSLA to be at the table for any

engagement on the points that Ms Duncan-Glancy raised on workforce planning, for example.

I also heard the points that Karen Adam made about Banff academy; I have experienced the no-bell school that she mentioned, and if I had stayed in the north-east, I would have gone to Banff academy. Banff academy's approach to not having a school bell has had a transformative impact on the young people—particularly those with an identified additional support need—and the staff in that school.

I want to mention comments from colleagues, but I am conscious that time is tight. Liz Smith made a helpful contribution. She talked about the importance of GIRFEC and its interaction with our approach to ASN in our schools. As Stephen Kerr, I think, pointed out in relation to my commentary on Friday at the SSTA congress, when the 2004 act came into force, far fewer children had an identified additional support need. Today, in most schools, the number is at about 40 per cent. In some schools that I visit, it is more than 50 per cent. The landscape has fundamentally changed since that legislation was introduced and in relation to how it is now being enacted. That plays to the points in the Labour Party amendment about the 2004 act's interaction with delivery at the local level, on which I do not think that we heard disagreement.

More broadly, there was commentary on data. I am sure that colleagues will have seen the programme for government commitment to a data summit. On the consistency of data, we have highlighted that we have a broad approach to gathering data on additional support needs, which includes, for example, the needs of children who have suffered childhood bereavement and those of high-achieving children. A lot of different additional support needs are covered.

Miles Briggs: Does the data record how many parents have received a private diagnosis for their child? I have received an email from a GP practice saying that, unfortunately, shared care prescribing agreements have been established only between NHS primary care and NHS secondary care. On the back of the debate, will the Government look at how such agreements can be established for people who have had a private diagnosis for their child and want that shared care?

Jenny Gilruth: I am happy to commit to looking at that. Private diagnosis might be an issue that local authorities gather data on; we in the Scottish Government would not do so, given that the statutory responsibility falls on local government. I am more than happy to engage with Miles Briggs on that.

Miles Briggs made substantial points about teachers facing challenging pressures. Although

Willie Rennie was right to say that the pandemic is not the causal factor, I think that it has compounded some of the challenges in our schools. In education debates, we speak regularly about the wider challenges—in attendance, behaviour and attainment—and Mr Rennie was right not to divorce them from issues that relate to additional support needs. I wonder whether the Opposition might reflect on the scope of the review in totality, so that we do not narrow our focus too much on additional support needs and are mindful of those wider challenges across our school estate, post-pandemic.

Presiding Officer, I am very mindful of the time, and I will move on shortly.

In closing, I want to make a number of points about the progress that there has been in recent years for our children who have identified support needs. The attainment gap is closing, which is certainly welcome news. We also see that success is measured in different ways for children who have an identified support need.

The point was powerfully conveyed by Richard Leonard that there is strong support for the position on mainstreaming from all our trade unions, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and, more recently, the national discussion on education, which reported in 2023 that mainstreaming is a strength of Scotland's education system. However, I accept the challenges that we have heard from Opposition members today. To that end, I propose that, at the earliest possible opportunity, we engage in a round table, along with local government and COSLA, to talk about what more might be done to support additional support needs in our schools.

I mentioned some of the investment that we have made through the pupil equity fund—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary, you will need to conclude.

Jenny Gilruth: It is also worthwhile putting on record the funding that we have provided—more than £1 billion in the past financial year alone—for additional support needs.

The debate has been helpful, and I am more than happy to engage with Opposition members on the next steps in supporting our holistic approach to Scottish education.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Roz McCall to wind up the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives. Ms McCall, you have up to six minutes.

16:29

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am delighted to close this Scottish Conservative business debate, especially as the issue is so important.

On the cabinet secretary's final point, which was about another review, our options to get action, as an Opposition party, are slightly limited, so a review it happens to be. However, I welcome her offer of a round table and action on the issue. We will look forward to that.

We are debating education during Conservative party business time again, which proves that our priorities are the same as those of any parent, grandparent or carer who wants a system that works for their child, not against them; who wants a constructive education model that will empower their child to achieve, not doom them to fail; and who wants a support process that understands the needs of their particular child, not a tick-box exercise that works for a limited few.

The statistics highlight the scale of the issue of additional support for learning in our schools. As of 2024, the figures show that 284,448 pupils had an additional support need, which, as has been said, is 40.5 per cent of all pupils. The number has increased markedly since 2010, and there continue to be year-on-year increases. Yes, we can applaud the continued improvements in recording and identifying ASN and the introduction of additional need types, but if we do not put the correct processes in place all of that recording and identifying is for naught.

Ninety-three per cent of the almost 285,000 pupils spent all their time in mainstream classes. If we are going to have a presumption of mainstreaming in Scotland, it is incumbent on the Scottish Government to ensure adequate staffing levels, processes, funding and support for pupils and teachers alike. Unfortunately, that is not happening.

I will take a moment to draw attention to some of the contributions to the debate. In response to Richard Leonard and Ross Greer, I note that a review of support for the presumption of mainstreaming does not suggest a return to the old ways. We need to have a system that is working, and a review is certainly a way to achieve that.

Pam Duncan-Glancy highlighted that the system can work—she is testament to that herself—and that that comes from having strong staff and strong teachers, which is so important.

Willie Rennie highlighted the shift from having a presumption of mainstreaming to more of a “compulsion of mainstreaming”. That is a very interesting phrase, and it is a model that does not

work for every child. That was also highlighted by my colleague Liz Smith, who said that although the policy was based on getting it right for every child, we are not doing that.

Karen Adam made an exceptionally strong contribution to the debate. However, I come back to the point that resources and training in our education processes are very important in ensuring that we get the pathways right.

In the motion, Miles Briggs highlighted the importance of having our local authorities and COSLA included in the discussion. We need a call to action, and we need clear timescales.

Fulton MacGregor highlighted kindergarten, and he will not get an argument from me on that. That our children are ready to learn is vital, and that focus in early years education is fundamental.

It is more important than ever that we review ASN in our schools. Children present as having a need for additional support if they have learning difficulties such as dyslexia, dyscalculia or dyspraxia. Additional support is also required if a young person has a mental health issue such as anxiety or depression. Children might need learning support because they are autistic or because they have motor or sensory impairments. As Ross Greer mentioned, that is a massive range, and the range of support needed in our mainstream classrooms is vast.

The Audit Scotland report states:

“the Scottish Government has not planned effectively for the potential impact of this inclusive approach to ASL. It is not specifically reflected in funding formulas for education and education planning, such as training for teachers and support staff, class sizes and the design of school buildings.”

It goes on to state:

“From existing data, it is not possible to conclude whether levels of funding, staffing levels and mix are appropriate to meet current needs. Resourcing decisions to deliver agreed outcomes need to be based on a clearer understanding of pupils' additional support needs.”

Surely, if the range of needs is broad and diverse, the training, funding and understanding must be, too.

I support the request for the current system of ASN provision to be reviewed to ensure that we are providing adequate support for our young people and halting the inequality that is failing too many Scots.

Oil and Gas Industry

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-17525, in the name of Douglas Lumsden, on protecting Scotland's oil and gas industry. I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now or as soon as possible.

16:35

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): In June last year, we had a debate in the chamber on oil and gas. Almost a year later, the sector is in a worse state, thanks to the policies of this devolved Scottish National Party Government and an inept Labour Government in Westminster. Both have abandoned the north-east, both have betrayed the oil and gas sector and both are accountable for the loss of jobs, livelihoods and industry in our once-thriving north-east.

It is a disgrace to see how the sector has been sold out, and the Scottish Conservatives remain the only party that is standing up for the industry and those who work in it. The oil and gas sector currently supports more than 83,000 jobs in Scotland, and supports the Scottish economy to the tune of £14 billion—we should be doing everything that we can to protect it. In 2022, 78 per cent of Scotland's energy needs were met from oil and gas. We need a balanced energy provision. We cannot rely only on oil and gas, renewables or nuclear—we need a proper energy mix.

The Scottish Conservatives want to protect the oil and gas sector, and the vast majority of Scots agree with us. In a recent poll, 84 per cent of people supported the continuation of oil and gas exploration and drilling. The public understand that in order to continue to provide the energy that we need while increasing our renewables sector, there is a process that we have to go through in a reasonable, timely and well-thought-out way. We need to work with the industry and not against it, ensuring that the oil and gas sector is at the centre of our discussions on how we meet our energy needs, move to net zero and ensure that jobs are retained in the north-east.

Last week, we heard the devastating news that Harbour Energy is shedding another 250 jobs. Two and a half thousand jobs have now been lost—2,500 livelihoods lost—in the North Sea in the past year, and the SNP Government's reaction has been pitiful. When it looked like 200 jobs would go at Ferguson Marine, it nationalised the yard. When Grangemouth refinery announced closure, it set up project willow to look at how jobs could be saved, but in Aberdeen, it did nothing.

We need action to save North Sea jobs as a matter of urgency, so I call on the Scottish Government to grab the bull by the horns and convene an emergency summit with United Kingdom and Scottish Governments, local MPs and MSPs, local authorities, trade organisations, trade unions, third sector organisations, chambers of commerce, development boards and even Great British Energy. This is an emergency for the north-east. There can be no further dither and delay—something needs to be done.

Confidence among people who work in the sector is being lost, and businesses are failing as a result. The situation is not getting better. Even the Acting Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy said this week that more businesses might follow. I agree with her, unless the policies of the Labour and SNP Governments change and they both end their thoughtless, baseless and evidence-lacking approach to energy production in Scotland, now and in future.

The SNP has a presumption against new oil and gas. It is against the UK Government issuing new licences. It is against Rosebank and Cambo, and it has refused to consider nuclear energy. That is left-wing nonsense. Where are all the jobs that have been promised? Where are all the renewables and green-energy jobs? Perhaps the cabinet secretary would like to tell us now how many new jobs have been brought to the north-east in the past year, because we know how many have been lost.

We still have no energy strategy, and we have no direction from this Government—it is net zero on ideas. Will the energy strategy be published in this parliamentary session?

I ask the cabinet secretary: where is the plan? Has it been kicked into the long grass, delayed until after next year's election? Why does the Government not start being straight with the people of the north-east and tell them when it will be delivered?

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): Has the member taken some time to read the recent Scottish Renewables "Scotland's renewable energy industry—supply chain impact statement", which sets out some of the excellent inward investment, job opportunities and value to the Scottish economy that we have seen over the past year?

Douglas Lumsden: I am all for the jobs of tomorrow, but we need to protect the jobs of today. We have seen 2,500 jobs being lost in the past year—that is down to policies from both the Scottish and UK Governments. Labour's windfall tax will cost the north-east 10,000 jobs, as the front page of *The Press and Journal* last week made clear.

That is an emergency for the north-east. I ask members to imagine, for a minute, a Grangemouth closing every week from now until 2030. Can anyone in the chamber truly appreciate what impact that will have? That is not happening just in one town in Aberdeenshire, like Grangemouth—it will be happening to every town and village in Aberdeenshire. Entire livelihoods will be destroyed by the eco-zealotry of Gillian Martin, John Swinney and Keir Starmer.

They are taking oil and gas workers for fools. What a disgusting organisation the SNP is.

Humza Yousaf (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP): Wait a minute—come on.

Douglas Lumsden: To say to my constituents—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Lumsden—

Douglas Lumsden: —and even more disgustingly, in the case of the cabinet secretary—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Lumsden. Can I remind you that the Presiding Officer—*[Interruption.]*

Douglas Lumsden: Last week, the Presiding Officer did nothing about it—*[Interruption.]*

On a point of order, Deputy Presiding Officer. On 8 May 2025, the First Minister used the words

“It is a disgusting organisation”—*[Official Report, 8 May 2025; c 20.]*

in reference to ourselves. I seek your guidance. Nothing was raised by the chair then, so have the rules changed since that day, or has a different standard been applied?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Lumsden, this is going to be a debate in which we are going to see emotions rise. I am asking, at the outset, if we can set a tone in which courtesy and respect is applied.

Mr Lumsden, continue.

Douglas Lumsden: Okay. Right.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): But that is not right.

The Acting Minister for Climate Action (Alasdair Allan): Are you challenging the chair?

Members: Oh!

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, that is unhelpful by way of a contribution.

Mr Lumsden, continue.

Douglas Lumsden: I will move on, Deputy Presiding Officer.

What is the Government doing for oil and gas workers in the north-east? The answer is nothing. What a tragic stage this tired Government is in. It claims to want to protect jobs in the north-east, but it opposes Rosebank and Cambo. Do its hypocrisy and hubris know no bounds?

Enough is enough. Only the Scottish Conservatives are standing up for our oil and gas sector and our residents in the north-east: the jobs that the sector maintains, the families whom they support and the communities in which they live. Only the Scottish Conservatives are offering commonsense proposals for an affordable transition with oil and gas playing a pivotal role in it.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the importance of reducing emissions in a way that is credible, costed and publicly supported; regrets the absence of a clear, deliverable plan for achieving net zero, particularly in relation to the future of Scotland's energy sector and industrial base; condemns the Scottish and UK governments' ideological opposition to oil and gas, nuclear power and a balanced energy policy; calls on the UK Government to end its policy of issuing no new oil and gas licences; notes with deep concern the economic and employment impacts of the closure of the Grangemouth refinery and recent job losses at Harbour Energy in Aberdeen; further notes that the increase and extension of the UK Government's Energy Profits Levy has had a damaging effect on investment in the North Sea; argues that current Scottish Government policy on nuclear, oil and gas is having a detrimental effect on energy prices and energy security; points out that Great British Energy is a gimmick that will do nothing to bring down bills, and condemns the explosion of electricity infrastructure across the Scottish countryside, and calls on the Scottish Government to adopt a pragmatic, pro-growth energy strategy that supports the workforce, secures investment, delivers affordability and ensures energy reliability and national competitiveness for the future.

16:43

The Acting Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy (Gillian Martin): The energy transition is at the heart of Scotland's economic growth potential as well as our response to global climate change, and it is vital to our energy security. Our oil and gas workforce really does give us an advantage over other countries in that energy transition. Even if it were not an existential imperative for us to decrease our reliance on the burning of fossil fuels in our daily lives, the maturity of the North Sea basin is a fact that must propel our sector to pivot to secure future energy opportunities in Scotland for decades and into future generations.

It is not a case of having oil or gas over here and renewables over there—it is a whole energy sector, with oil and gas companies also holding licence options in Scotland, as members will know.

Harbour Energy has said that its decision to cut jobs is largely down to the UK Government's energy profits levy. The Deputy First Minister met with the company last week, and the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government met industry stakeholders today, to discuss the impacts of the EPL.

The EPL was introduced as a supposed temporary measure by the former Conservative UK Government.

Douglas Lumsden: Will the member take an intervention?

Gillian Martin: I would like to make some progress, Deputy Presiding Officer—*[Interruption.]* It would be good to do so without being heckled.

The EPL was introduced as a supposed temporary measure by the former Conservative UK Government, and was further extended by that Government and now by the Labour Government.

Given the adverse effects of EPL on jobs and investment, the UK Government should be considering the earliest possible end date to avoid more decisions such as that taken by Harbour Energy. Similarly, the First Minister has called consistently on the UK Government to work with us to extend the life of the Grangemouth refinery until the opportunities presented by project willow are live. That would have been a tangible demonstration of support for the workforce and the community. I have been working well with the UK Government on progressing project willow. Our joint working has been fruitful, and 60 companies have come forward to express an interest in the site. My UK partners also know of my disappointment and dismay, after many months of cautiously accepting that the UK Government would not step in to save the Grangemouth refinery, that it intervened very swiftly to save Scunthorpe. Do not get me wrong: it was right for the UK Government to do so for Scunthorpe and that community, but why is there a different approach for Scotland's only refinery?

Then came the news that carbon capture projects in the north of England would get £21.7 billion-worth of funding, which is good news for the sector. We need all the carbon capture, utilisation and storage capacity that we can get. But what about the Acorn project and the Scottish cluster? It was abandoned by the Tories when they were in power and now, it is in danger—

Stephen Kerr: Abandoned!

Gillian Martin: Is the Acorn project up and running because of the Conservative Government? The answer is no. It was abandoned by the Tories when they were in power—

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Will the minister take an intervention on project Acorn?

Gillian Martin: I will.

Liam Kerr: The previous Conservative Government put just over £40 million towards project Acorn. How much has the Scottish Government put towards it?

Gillian Martin: The Scottish Government has pledged upwards of £80 million—*[Interruption.]* The recommendation from those in the Acorn project and the Scottish cluster is that they will need that money when they get track status. The money will be available to them at that point. However, where is the track status? That is what I mean by abandonment. It is nowhere. The project has been completely abandoned for the pork barrel politics of the newly elected MPs in the red wall.

The move to renewable energy is existential for Scotland's economy and energy sector. Offshore wind is a significant opportunity to create high-quality, sustainable jobs and grow employment. Estimates suggest that the sector could support up to and even more than 54,000 jobs, depending which report you read.

Communities across Scotland must share in the benefits of the renewables transition, and we are taking action to ensure that that happens. In a short debate such as this one, I do not have time to run through all the ways that we are doing that, but I will mention the £30 million-worth of benefits that have already been offered to Scottish communities, supported by our good practice principles. Today, the Deputy First Minister announced an £8 million fund to catalyse community energy in Scotland, which will empower communities to deliver their own renewable energy projects. However, there is a limit to what we can do within our current powers. I continue to call on the UK Government to mandate benefits from onshore developments, which the Conservative Party would not do.

I turn to the Conservative motion in my final seconds. It is quixotic. On the one hand, it accuses us of not doing enough to accelerate renewables growth, which is an accusation that I completely refute. At the same time, the motion rails against essential upgrades to transmission infrastructure that will take clean energy to homes and businesses. Yet again, the Tories have abdicated responsibility for their part in a transmission strategy that consecutive UK Governments developed. It has abdicated responsibility and deliberately misled constituents about the fact that, when the Tories were in power, they did nothing to improve the regulations on community engagement and benefits, and they did nothing to make energy more affordable for households.

The debate is short, but I very much look forward to hearing members' contributions.

I move amendment S6M-1725.3, to leave out from "regrets" to end and insert:

"notes with deep concern the economic and employment impacts of the closure of the Grangemouth refinery and recent job losses at Harbour Energy in Aberdeen; further notes that the increase and extension of the UK Government's Energy Profits Levy, by the previous and current UK administrations, has had a damaging effect on North Sea investment, including on the transition; believes that a just transition must support workers and that the transition to net zero must deliver tangible benefits for consumers, communities and the wider economy; argues that the voice of communities must be heard in this process; condemns the anti-climate rhetoric of the Conservative Party, which ignores the reality of the impacts of climate change, and calls on the UK Government to fully fund and support the Acom/Scottish Cluster carbon capture project and demonstrate that, unlike the previous UK administration, it supports this vital scheme for jobs in Grangemouth and the north east of Scotland."

16:48

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):

Although I do not agree with some of the rhetoric of Douglas Lumsden's characteristic contribution, I am grateful for the opportunity to debate the future of the oil and gas industry in Scotland.

In the few short minutes that I have, I will start by stressing the importance of the industry. The energy transition is Scotland's defining economic and industrial policy challenge of our time. Since my election four years ago, it is the issue that has prevailed in discussions both economic and industrial. It is the animating purpose of so many businesses across Scotland and of employers, workers and trade unions across the north-east and beyond.

The energy sector is vital to the lives and livelihoods of tens of thousands of constituents—not just oil and gas workers, but those in the surrounding economy and all who depend on it. In truth, the issue has to be the animating question the length and breadth of this country. It is not just the economies of Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire that hinge on our energy sector; the fiscal framework that was agreed by the Scottish Government means that the fate of Scotland's energy sector, which underpins the median wage in Scotland, is an integral part of the calculations around the budget that we receive from the UK. The money that comes through that fiscal framework means that we are able to pay for nurses in Coatbridge, teachers in Orkney, refuse workers in Glasgow, police officers in Arbroath and social workers in Ayrshire, and those wages matter to the whole country. The energy sector is a pivotal part of our economy and our fiscal infrastructure.

For those reasons, we cannot afford Governments that are found wanting and politicians who abdicate responsibility and then, when the electorate gets rid of them, as it did the Tories last year, resort to howling at the moon and pretending that the complex challenges of the transition are somehow avoidable if only we shout loudly enough. Despite the rhetoric that we have heard—mostly from Mr Lumsden so far today, and I am sure there will be more to come from those benches, but partly from the SNP—the truth is that the SNP Government and the previous UK Conservative Government, in particular, have failed to seize the moment and have failed workers.

There is plenty of rhetoric, but the Government's record tells a different story. We all know the rhetoric about Scotland becoming the Saudi Arabia of renewables and that only a fraction of the jobs that were promised were delivered before Scotland's sea bed was sold off on the cheap, with that money being used to plug the holes due to the Scottish Government's woeful financial management rather than to invest in the supply chain or the required skills. I see that the minister disagrees, but I say to her that that was part of the three emergency budgets that we have had in the past three years.

The Tories in Opposition are vehemently against the grid infrastructure upgrade that, just 12 months ago, was the UK Government's policy, brought forward by the Conservatives, who are now howling at the moon.

The SNP and Tory Governments knew for years that the future of Grangemouth oil refinery was at severe risk, but neither party in government did anything about it at all. We have put £200 million in place.

Gillian Martin: Will the member take an intervention?

Michael Marra: No—my time is far too brief.

As Douglas Lumsden rightly pointed out, the SNP has dragged its feet on publishing an energy strategy. The draft strategy was published on 10 January 2023, more than two years ago—that is, three cabinet secretaries and three First Ministers ago. Industry, trade unions and workers desperately need clarity from the SNP Government about what it is trying to achieve.

I agree whole-heartedly with Douglas Lumsden that last week's news from Harbour Energy is hugely concerning. I spoke to the management this morning about its workforce plans and the support that it can put in place. We also discussed the fast-moving global context surrounding the industry, with oil now trading at \$62 a barrel and, according to some analysts' projections, heading as low as \$50 a barrel.

Stephen Kerr: Will the member take an intervention?

Michael Marra: I am afraid that I do not have time.

We must ensure that the fiscal regime for the UK continental shelf sustains continued employment, profits and tax revenue. I will discuss those issues with UK Government colleagues over the coming days. Treasury minister James Murray chairs the North Sea fiscal forum, which was established by Labour in Opposition and was continued when we came into Government. He knows the challenges and tensions that exist, but he also knows the base imperatives about which the Scottish Labour MPs have left him in absolutely no doubt. We have to make sure that we have a fiscal regime that works.

I move amendment S6M-17525.1, to leave out from first “condemns” to end and insert:

“recognises the UK Government’s commitment to a sustainable long-term energy mix, including increased renewable sources, new modern nuclear generation as well as continued oil and gas production for decades to come; notes the loss of jobs at Grangemouth and recently announced job losses at Harbour Energy, which re-emphasise the need for a just transition plan including the immediate publication of the long-delayed Scottish energy strategy; commends the creation of Great British Energy as a publicly owned energy generation company, headquartered in Aberdeen, which will help to deliver energy security, build supply chains, create thousands of jobs across the country and reduce energy bills over the long term; welcomes the £200 million of funding committed to the Grangemouth transition as part of a clean energy future to power Scotland’s economy and communities, and calls on the Scottish National Party administration to drop its ideological opposition to nuclear power.”

16:53

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): When this Parliament passed its first piece of climate legislation, the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009, I warned that we had consensus on the destination but not on the actions that were necessary, and I have continued to say that. However, in recent months, it has become increasingly clear that the Conservative Party has detached itself even from that consensus on the destination.

The 2045 target was set a little more than five years ago, and the final Tory speaker in the debate in which Parliament agreed that target said:

“The Committee on Climate Change outlined how Scotland can go faster and further in achieving net zero emissions. I support the principle that we need to go further and faster, for the good of both the economy and the global environment”.

Further, he closed that debate with these words:

“we are confident that it lays the foundations for a climate change plan that will support innovation, create jobs and use technology, as well as addressing the undeniable climate change emergency that we face.”—[*Official Report*, 25 September 2019; c 103-4.]

It is inconceivable that a member of the Conservative Party would make such a speech now, railing as they do against renewable infrastructure, whether that is transmission infrastructure, storage infrastructure or anything else. Further, it now looks as though the future direction of travel is even worse, with Andrew Bowie, the acting shadow Secretary of State for Scotland, openly describing the IPCC as biased.

Today, the Conservatives say that they want an evidence-based debate. Mr Bowie had no evidence for what he said. In fact, when he said,

“There’s quite a few scientists that say we don’t need to get to net zero by 2050”,

he was, of course, unable to name any. He also said:

“There’s no scientific rationale for choosing 2050 as the point to which we should reach net zero.”

That is utterly at odds with the evidence that the scientific community has provided from around the world.

What do we need in order to reach net zero through a just transition? First, we need political leadership. That means not just backing targets but not blocking the actions that are necessary. Far too many politicians have voted for targets and then blocked the actions that are necessary, whether on transport, heat, land use or something else.

We need urgency from the Scottish Government. The energy strategy and just transition plan has been delayed for far too long, and it must include a strong presumption against new fossil fuel extraction. There must be urgency when it comes to the new climate plan, too.

For far too long, the 2030 target was slipping out of reach as a result of inaction over the first 15 years of this journey. If the track record of the past 15 years is repeated in the final 20 years of the transition, we will fail; however, we need not fail if we apply the urgency that is needed now.

Finally, and most crucially, we need accountability of the fossil fuel industry, which has made vast profits, including from the North Sea, over many years. It spent decades covering up what it knew about the climate change that it was causing. It then spent decades more funding and seeding climate denial conspiracies around the world. More recently, it has moved to a position of climate delay and is abandoning its workforce. If it had invested a fraction of those vast profits in the transition and in the workforce to which it owes a

moral responsibility, the situation would be very different.

The industry has made negligible—

Douglas Lumsden: Will the member take an intervention?

Patrick Harvie: I do not have time.

It has made negligible investment in renewables. The International Energy Agency has stated:

“For the moment the oil and gas industry as a whole is a marginal force in the world’s transition to a clean energy system.”

That was before the industry started to further slash investment in renewables and to double down on fossil fuels.

We must raise the funds necessary, including from the industry, to invest in the just transition that neither Government is yet providing.

16:57

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I knew that the debate was going to be an emotional one, but I never thought that Alexander Burnett would start smashing glasses on the floor in response to Patrick Harvie’s commentary. This is darker than I ever thought possible.

We have multiple objectives here, but sometimes we look at the issues in isolation. Today, we are concerned about the jobs in the North Sea; on other occasions, we look at energy bills or at energy security; and, on other occasions, we look at climate change. Rarely do we have a proper comprehensive discussion about all of those issues at once. I accept that some do that, but we, in the Parliament, are buffeted. Investors, campaigners and people who are responsible for trying to turn back the tide on climate change get inconsistent messages from this place.

I remember that, during the 2021 elections, we were debating energy. At the time, all parties agreed that it was about cutting demand rather than about dealing with the supply—apart from Patrick Harvie, I have to say, who was in favour of dealing with the supply as well. It was about trying to deal with domestic energy use, and there was also a real focus on transportation. It then flipped and we dealt with energy bills. Ukraine came along and we had another set of priorities. We must be a bit more consistent in the Parliament and ensure that the outside world understands our direction of travel. Too often, I am afraid, we are buffeted, and that needs to change.

Douglas Lumsden: Do you think that the energy strategy would help to clarify where we are going as a country?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Through the chair.

Willie Rennie: It would, as would a bit of consistency from the Conservative Party. I sometimes get the impression that the debate is more about trying to save the future of the Conservative Party than it is about the North Sea. I am afraid that that happens too often.

We need to understand that we are trying to get a comprehensive strategy that works. I would like, for instance, Home Energy Scotland to improve its act and get the grants out the door much more quickly for those installers who are desperate to put heat pumps in place.

I would love to have had a future of agricultural support mechanism in place to help farmers to reduce their climate change emissions on farms, but it took years to get that into place. I am afraid that it was one of the rare occasions when Mike Rumbles was right—we should have had that in place a long time ago.

We need to get more people on to public transport, but it takes years to get any strategy that is consistent and that works over time.

On renewables, we need to make the consenting process much more swift and ensure that we have the infrastructure, including housing, in place to house the workers. We also need to improve the supply chain.

Gillian Martin: Will the member take an intervention?

Willie Rennie: I have only four minutes.

We need to make sure that the supply chain is there in Scotland. Some of it is working, but, in places such as BiFab, we have failed miserably.

We implemented an offshore wind skills programme through the budget process, but why has that skills programme not been in place for years? We have known that this was coming for a long time, so why is everything so reactive and so delayed? We need to focus on delivery rather than all the rhetoric about the North Sea.

I do not know how many times we have had this debate, in which we say the same things over and over again. We need consistency of message as well as consistency of, and early action on, delivery. We also need to stick with the plan, ensuring that it is done and that it has the funding to make it happen. Otherwise, people out there will be utterly confused about what this Parliament is saying.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate.

17:01

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): We need to cut through the misdirection and misinformation that lies at the heart of the Government amendment and the minister's remarks today. The minister, rightly, lambasted the Labour Government for its short-sighted and ignorant hiking of the windfall tax. In yesterday's *P&J*, she called for it to be scrapped, not least, she said, because it is "shaking business confidence". However, no one in the north-east will forget that the most enthusiastic supporters of the windfall tax were the SNP.

Gillian Martin: Will the member take an intervention?

Liam Kerr: I will come back to the minister.

Nicola Sturgeon said in September 2022 that the UK Government should introduce an enhanced windfall profits tax and remove the investment allowance. Humza Yousaf, as First Minister, listened as Harbour Energy's bosses pleaded with him to help ease the windfall tax before it did catastrophic damage, and were told no.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Liam Kerr: No. I will come back to the member after I have made my proposition.

In fact, in a speech a few weeks later, Humza Yousaf said:

"We support a windfall tax".

By extraordinary coincidence, he was introduced and welcomed to the stage that day by Stephen Flynn MP—he who led a Commons debate in March 2022 demanding extra taxes on companies such as the oil industry, and who recently described the windfall tax as

"the right thing to do".

The minister does the usual diversion of saying that this situation is about the UK's licensing regime, but she admitted that people want to know the Scottish Government's view on the reserved issue of licensing.

Alasdair Allan: Will the member take an intervention?

Liam Kerr: I will make my proposition and come back.

Of course they do, because the continuing uncertainty caused by the SNP's draft energy strategy, which was published more than two years ago, still includes a presumption against oil and gas licences. There is little that does more to stifle investment, innovation and entrepreneurship—and, indeed, shake business

confidence—than years of uncertainty over Government policy.

However, this Government has no idea what impact the uncertainty that it has created is having. When I asked in January what assessment the Government has made of the impact on investment and activity levels in the North Sea as a result of the presumption against new exploration for oil and gas, the answer was so devoid of detail—other than that it was clear that nothing was happening on that—that I felt the need to formally complain to the Minister for Parliamentary Business.

Finally, before I take an intervention, the minister talked of Acorn and aimed both barrels at the UK Government, but failed to mention that, in 2022, the then energy minister promised £80 million to Acorn, with no conditions, no caveats and no contingencies. However, in a response to Douglas Lumsden in March, the cabinet secretary said:

"The £80 million is for when the Acorn project gets track status, in order to make the early developments to get it off the ground."—[*Official Report*, 11 March 2025; c 5.]

I have some wonderful news today: Acorn has been granted track 2 status. However, that was in July 2023. There can be no more blame shifting and no more excuses, minister. It is time to pony up.

I will take the intervention.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please make it very brief, minister.

Alasdair Allan: I am seeking a little clarification from the member, because it is difficult to recognise his characterisation of the Scottish Government's position on the EPL, given that we, as a Government, did not oppose the initial levy but opposed its extension. He has gone through quite a few somersaults to try to mischaracterise that position.

Liam Kerr: That is an extraordinary intervention, given that, when in their role as First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon and Humza Yousaf—who has run from the chamber because he does not want to be drawn on it—and the leader of the SNP in the House of Commons were delighting in the energy profits levy. It is an extraordinary intervention to make.

The UK Labour Government presents a clear and present danger to Scotland's oil and gas industry, but misdirection, revisionism and spin from the SNP are causing untold damage. The way to protect our oil and gas industry is by taking the steps that are set out in Douglas Lumsden's motion, and that is why I support it.

17:06

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): The urgent need to deal with the risks of climate change and the challenges of an uncertain geopolitical and energy security landscape underpin the direction of travel of our energy industry. For more than five decades, Scotland's oil and gas industry has supported thousands of well-paid and highly skilled jobs, underpinned a significant domestic supply chain and provided more than £400 billion of production taxes for the public purse. The North Sea is, as we know, a mature basin and the transition away from fossil fuels to a different, commercially viable energy mix, through the redeployment of the expertise and skills that are already in the energy sector, is of vital importance to Scotland's economy and that of the UK.

In my constituency of Aberdeen South and North Kincardine, I have already seen many brilliant examples of that transition, where oil and gas businesses are actively seeking and embarking on new opportunities in offshore wind, hydrogen transportation and accelerator programmes that will support start-ups and scale-ups. However, as we know, sentiment in the sector has been taking a knock. The increase in and extension of the UK Government's energy profits levy by the previous Tory and now Labour UK Governments has damaged North Sea investment, with Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce highlighting that 10,000 North Sea jobs have been lost since the EPL was introduced in 2022. Last week, as we have heard, Harbour Energy, which is the UK's largest oil and gas producer, confirmed that it would cut 250 jobs in Aberdeen. Scott Barr, Harbour Energy's UK managing director, said:

"The review is unfortunately necessary to align staffing levels with lower levels of investment, due mainly to the Government's ongoing punitive fiscal position and a challenging regulatory environment."

Of course, the Acorn carbon capture and storage project has been the focus of continuous pleas from business leaders, parliamentarians and stakeholders urging the UK Government to provide investment certainty in the upcoming comprehensive spending review. As a recent letter to the UK Government from a host of parliamentarians set out, Acorn could be a major driver of economic activity and growth. It could unlock £7 billion in private investment, create 15,000 new jobs, protect 18,000 existing ones and generate £17.7 billion for the UK economy.

I do not think that we can have a debate about oil and gas without acknowledging the North Sea transition task force's report, "Securing the Future of the Energy Transition in the North Sea". Among the many points that it raises is the importance of

public bodies, businesses, industry and Governments collectively creating the right conditions to bring investment and entrepreneurship to the North Sea, with the UK Government leading the way—which, at the moment, it is not.

Without glossing over the challenges, there is a great deal to be optimistic about. Scotland is already punching above its weight to support the UK to become a clean energy superpower. Significant work is under way to attract investment, upgrade the grid and revitalise our ports infrastructure.

Despite net zero and the benefits of clean technologies coming under attack, particularly by the Tories, I commend the work by developers, supply chain, Government and communities who are making a strong case for renewables. In my conversations with stakeholders in the renewables space, it has been clear to me that a stable policy environment, unity across the Government and stakeholders, and leadership from the UK Government—rather than the damaging decisions that we are currently seeing—will ensure a viable energy sector for Scotland for the future.

17:10

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): I speak today on behalf of my constituents who rely on the energy sector for their livelihoods. The job losses at Harbour Energy are the tip of the iceberg. Why? Because the SNP and Labour are directly harming the industry with a presumption against new oil and gas exploration in the North Sea and a punitive fiscal environment. Hostile left-wing politicians are presiding over the industrial decline of Scotland's oil and gas sector.

Russell Borthwick of Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce is right: if the SNP Scottish Government and Labour UK Government do not change course, recent lay-offs will be

"just a tiny fraction of what's to come".

The so-called just transition risks becoming a jobless transition. It will not be fixed by gimmicks such as Great British Energy. Even its chairman, Juergen Maier, said that it would take 20 years to deliver the 1,000 jobs that have been promised. That is an utter sham.

SNP ministers tout a clean energy future, but they will not even define what "clean" means, scaring off the investment that we need for an affordable transition. The SNP Government ploughed ahead with a ScotWind gold rush, selling off vast swathes of the sea bed on the cheap with no real plan for grid infrastructure.

Meanwhile, Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks wants to puncture our prime agricultural

farmland and rural landscapes with monster pylons up to 230 feet tall, leaving residents feeling betrayed and disenfranchised. Their mental health is already suffering and they are fearing the health impacts, lost livelihoods and plummeting property values from the explosion of that new energy infrastructure. The bottom has dropped out of their world.

Farmers are ringing alarm bells over serious safety concerns about overhead lines and farming machinery.

Audrey Nicoll: Will the member give way?

Tess White: I am sorry, but I have only four minutes.

They are, rightly, worried about the loss of agricultural productivity and the impact on their businesses, the health and safety of their animals, the crop yield and overall food security. It is environmental vandalism, and this is just the start. It cannot be the vision of a so-called just transition. To rub salt into the wound, the SNP and Labour have been pushing to muzzle the voices of communities by removing the right to a public inquiry.

Countries such as the Netherlands and Germany are undergrounding cables to great effect and Denmark is developing energy islands to act as an offshore energy base. We undergrounded the pipes in the 1970s—why can we not do it again?

The Scottish Conservatives' commonsense plans balance the needs of today and those of tomorrow. We recognise that we will need to use our oil and gas for years to come. We know that Scotland's oil and gas workers and renewables ambitions can go hand in hand. That means scrapping the ban on new oil and gas production and embracing innovation in order to cut emissions while preserving jobs. It also means listening to communities and pursuing alternatives to monster pylons and huge substations.

I urge my SNP and Labour colleagues to see sense before it is too late.

17:14

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate. The main area that I wish to raise with colleagues across the Parliament is the future of the Wood Group, which is one of Scotland's largest and most iconic companies. I am surprised that it has not been the subject of more discussion and debate in the country to date.

Headquartered in Aberdeen, the Wood Group is one of Scotland's largest companies and the largest legacy of what we achieved as a nation

from the 1970s North Sea oil boom. It has now grown to become one of the most diversified global engineering contractors. It is based across 60 countries, employs 35,000 people and has a global headquarters in Aberdeen that employs 4,500 people.

In 2017, the Wood Group acquired Amec Foster Wheeler, which was an American rival, for £2.2 billion. Although the Wood Group had been very successful in recent years, Amec Foster Wheeler's heavy liabilities unfortunately left it with significant debts and liabilities. The acquisition was initially viewed as being good for the company due to Amec Foster Wheeler's experience in oil and gas and in environmental and infrastructure projects, but because it had many contracts at fixed prices, profit margins were wiped out as inflation rose.

As a result, the Wood Group has suffered significantly. The reduced revenue and the liabilities from those old contracts have led to significant weaknesses in the company, which has seen its market value plummet, and £1.4 billion of debt facilities will expire next year, meaning that the company's share price has crashed and it has fallen out of the FTSE 250. That has opened up an asset-stripping takeover opportunity for Sidara—a smaller engineering consultancy that is based in Dubai—which came in last year with a £1.5 billion offer for the company. It has now returned, marking the offer down by 85 per cent to just £242 million for the larger Wood Group.

That takeover would be strategically inept, and the Scottish and UK Governments should take action to support the Wood Group's board to resist it due to the company's strategic importance to Scotland and the UK. It is one of the UK's primary engineering resources for renewables, carbon capture knowledge and North Sea decommissioning. Sidara has a global headquarters in Dubai and a British head office in London. If its takeover happens, there is a very high chance that the Aberdeen headquarters will close down because a second UK base will not be required, and that would mean that shared global functions such as finance, human resources and information technology would be transferred to Dubai.

We have seen all too many examples of the so-called branch plant economy in Scotland. If the Scottish Government is serious about a just transition, it needs to look at options to step in and save the Wood Group. There is a practical way to do that. The Wood Group currently owes around \$1.1 billion to lenders and around £800 million in net cash and bank accounts. Its current crisis stems from the need to refinance that borrowing by quarter 4 of 2026. The Government stepping in and offering reassurance to the Wood Group's core lenders would relieve the pressure on the

company and allow it to be better placed to resist the takeover.

The Government would have plenty of options as a result, such as seeking an equity share in the company or even a non-executive director position, and it would allow the company to maintain its strategic headquarters and independence as a Scottish company. In time, the legacy contracts from the acquisition of Amec Foster Wheeler will expire, the company's share price will recover, it will return to the FTSE 250 and the Government will redeem a significant premium on its investment. It will preserve a strategically important Scottish business in Aberdeen, with a headquarters with around 5,000 people and a global network that will allow Scottish leadership to be sustained in the sector.

It is a no-brainer. I encourage ministers to seriously investigate options and engage with the Scotland Office and UK Government colleagues to pursue the opportunity before it is too late.

17:18

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): I am grateful to speak in this debate on this important issue. I appreciate that it is particularly significant to colleagues who represent the north-east of Scotland. However, as I have said in similar debates such as the one that took place last year, the North Sea oil and gas sector and the wider energy industry are important to all of Scotland, including my constituency, where the port of Leith services many different shipping vessels that work in the industry and are at the forefront of the just transition to renewables. In addition, many of those in our service industries, such as in legal, consulting and planning, are based in the central belt but work in the North Sea.

The sector is therefore important to all of us, as is the transition. That is symbolised by the All-Energy conference, which is taking place today and tomorrow. I remember going to the conference in Aberdeen when I worked in different roles in the private sector, and it was a great experience. It is a really important event that brings people from across Europe to our country to continue to develop our energy sector, including the oil and gas sector, and the just transition.

The fact that the conference has moved to Glasgow is symbolic of the fact that this is now a wider issue than just what happens in the north-east. However, I hope that those who are in Glasgow today are too busy to be watching this debate, because of the way that we have gone about discussing this very serious issue—which, according to the latest figures, involves about 12 per cent of our gross domestic product and £25 billion of our gross value added. We could do

more than have a party-political knockabout when it comes to this issue.

Douglas Lumsden: To take the politics out of it, does the member support my call for an emergency summit at which Governments and trade unions could get together to look at what is happening in the oil and gas industry and try to do something about it?

Ben Macpherson: The need to respond, particularly when there are job losses, and to see what can be done is absolutely something to consider. It would be appropriate for the Government to respond to that point.

Alasdair Allan: Will the member take an intervention?

Ben Macpherson: I ask the minister to use his own speaking time, as I have a few more things to say.

That was a very constructive intervention from the member. I wish that he had been as constructive in his opening remarks and in the way that he spoke yesterday.

I welcome the fact that the motion includes reserved issues and calls for a Scottish Government strategy. Those things go against points that have been made on the Conservatives' side of the chamber in previous debates, so I look forward to the party welcoming discussion on reserved issues in this Parliament where that is appropriate, and welcoming Scottish Government strategy documents when they are necessary and will make a difference.

Remarks were made that only one party is standing up for the Scottish oil and gas sector or the north-east of Scotland. That is simply not true, as has been evidenced by other contributions that were made today, and it does not help us. There has also been a sense from the Conservative party that it has not had any involvement in the issue. I know that it has not been in power in Scotland since 1955, but it was in power across the UK for many years until last year, so it should take responsibility for its role, too.

A lot more could be said about this important issue. The reality is that we face a declining basin in the North Sea. The challenge for us all is how to support those who are transitioning to new roles and to identify the areas of growth for their skills to be utilised to great effect—for example, in the port of Leith, where I held a round-table meeting on skills the other day. There are good opportunities, these are serious issues and this is a really important aspect of our economy and our country, so let us be constructive and solution focused in moving forward to support those people for the benefit of our country and us all.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches.

17:23

Patrick Harvie: I genuinely hope that those in the Conservative Party who want their party to continue to show leadership on climate action—they are out there somewhere—are able, at some point, to take back control of their party, if I can borrow that phrase. It is very clear that, under its current leadership in Scotland and the UK, the party is abandoning its commitment to net zero, whether that is by 2045 or 2050. The Scottish and UK party leaders have said so, and they have said nothing about what the alternative target date should be.

As for the rest of the political spectrum, I hope that, when we see the advice from the Climate Change Committee on the new carbon budgets—I think that the Government has already seen it, but in looking at the minister, I see that that is not the case, so I hope that when we all see the advice and the response to it, we will all reject the kind of anti-climate rhetoric that we are hearing far too much. Just as is the case with other parts of the far right's rhetoric, copying it and aping it will do nothing to defeat it, so we should not do what the Conservatives are doing by copying Reform on the issue.

In my opening speech, I used so much of my time pouring scorn on the Conservative position that I forgot to pour any on the two amendments. In the Government's amendment, the SNP is correct to call out the Tories' anti-climate rhetoric and to highlight the impact on employment, including in Grangemouth. However, it fails to acknowledge that the unjust transition that we are seeing is the result of choices that have been made by an industry and by private sector interests that have extracted vast profits over many years, are now abandoning that industry's workers and are not being held to account by the Scottish Government or the UK Government. The idea that the best response now is a massive tax cut for the fossil fuel profiteers that have caused that crisis simply beggars belief.

The Labour amendment comes from a political party that is still equivocating on the future of the unlawfully granted licences for Rosebank and Jackdaw—indeed, it has not told us whether it will finally kill off the projects that the previous Government unlawfully granted approval for. Moreover, Labour is continuing its obsession with nuclear. Even before considering the issues of nuclear safety or waste, nuclear is wildly expensive and slow to build—it cannot and will not help with the Labour Government's goal of

decarbonising electricity by 2030, as it is simply too slow to do that.

More to the point, Scotland does not need nuclear. More generating capacity is not our challenge. Our challenge is in grid infrastructure, storage, interconnection and, for consumers, in the artificially high price that people are forced to pay for renewable electricity, which is cheap to produce but expensive to consume, as well as in other barriers to the uptake of electricity to displace fossil fuels from heat and transport.

I draw members' attention to the paper that Oil Change International produced, which sets out clear measures about how the UK Government could

"raise over £6 billion a year"

to fund

"a just transition."

The measures include taking money from the fossil fuel profiteers, converting the temporary energy profits levy into a permanent, predictable and fair tax on the big oil industry—that would generate at least £2 billion annually—as well as closing tax loopholes that benefit those who do not need it and stopping funding fossil fuels. Advocates often claim that it is renewables that need subsidy, but the fossil fuel industry is getting producer subsidies on a vast scale of much more than £2 billion a year. That money should be redirected from the causing of the problem to the solution.

I implore the Scottish Government and the UK Government to work together on a package that will genuinely redirect the funds from those who profited from causing the crisis to funding the just transition.

17:27

Michael Marra: I associate myself with the remarks that called for some mark of realism, including Ben Macpherson's fine speech and Willie Rennie's contribution about the need for some kind of clarity, consistency and a real plan to govern in a challenging time. The volatile external international economic environment in which the oil price is fluctuating and dropping quite significantly is creating significant challenges for our most vital oil and gas industry in the north-east—and, as I set out in my opening speech, for the whole country. Issues of demand and supply, problems of tariffs and industrial policy globally are creating significant headwinds.

On that basis, I agree with colleagues' calls to ensure that we get the almost mythical energy strategy to come forward from the Scottish Government. We need to have a trend and an understandable direction of travel from the

Government, for people to know where they can invest and where they will have security in doing so. It would be welcome if, in his closing remarks, the minister gave us a date for that strategy.

Governing an energy transition is incredibly difficult, and we must all recognise that challenge. Not only is it challenging to govern a change on such a fundamental issue of policy, but it requires significant investment. I therefore do not think that it is reasonable for the Conservative Party to set out, publish and get right behind plans for infrastructure across the north-east only to then make a complete volte face and take an opposite approach, which is what came out in some of the speeches and what the previous UK Government did when it was in charge just over a year ago. I have sat in the living rooms of people across the north-east who are entirely worried about the situation and, although members are right to identify the matter, it is not well served by flip-flopping to take an opposing position.

Whether ministers accept it or not, some of the critique of the SNP's position on the energy profits levy is well founded—talk about flip-flopping. The SNP did not oppose it, then it actively supported it and now it does not support it and wants to get rid of it entirely. That is not a credible position.

Ben Macpherson: *[Made a request to intervene.]*

Gillian Martin: Will the member take an intervention?

Michael Marra: I will not take any interventions—I am afraid that I have a lot to get through. I am sorry.

We must also recognise that the EPL makes a significant contribution to the UK's coffers. That is part of the reason why we were able to give an extra £5.2 billion to the Scottish Government, which was the largest-ever uplift in the Scottish Government's budget, and it was delivered by the UK Labour Government. I will add the demand to scrap the EPL to the £70 billion of spending demands that the SNP made ahead of the UK budget and its opposition to £45 billion of revenue raisers, which would be a fiscal adjustment of £115 billion. Ministers should remember that Liz Truss crashed the economy on a fraction of that amount.

Returning to some kind of sanity, Paul Sweeney gave us a practical example of how a sound industrial policy could be pursued. It would be welcome if the minister either found time in his closing remarks to cover Paul Sweeney's eminently sensible proposal or wrote to him to cover the engagement that the Government has had with the John Wood Group about a concerning set of developments.

We need to have a balanced energy mix in this country, and oil and gas will be part of that for decades to come. That energy mix includes nuclear power, which is a long-term position that we must take, and I oppose Patrick Harvie's view on that. Renewables infrastructure is vital, too, but we have to look at what happened in Spain in recent days, when the volatility and frequency of the national grid led to blackouts.

Patrick Harvie: Will the member give way?

Michael Marra: No, thank you, sir—I am just concluding.

We must ensure that there is a solid and predictable base load that can be used in the energy infrastructure—the absence of that was the principal reason why Spain's grid fell over. We must also ensure that there is a sustainable energy mix that is not reliant on just one source and which includes oil and gas, renewables and nuclear.

17:31

The Acting Minister for Climate Action (Alasdair Allan): This has been a brief but spirited debate. I acknowledge the many considered speeches, but I must begin by addressing some of the claims that were made in the Conservative motion. There are basic facts that should frame any evidence-based debate on North Sea oil and gas—I believe that we are still living in days in which evidence-based debate is possible.

Before I move on to the wider issues that have been raised by the Conservative motion, I will pick up on an important point that Ben Macpherson made. He talked about the real economic and human impact of the Harbour Energy decision and, in particular, about whether the Scottish and UK Governments could do anything together. I am happy to confirm that the First Minister has responded in very positive terms to the suggestion from Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce that there should be a summit involving the Prime Minister and the First Minister. I hope that that can progress.

The North Sea basin is now geologically mature, and production is affected by that. As many members have said, the challenge and the opportunity are to ensure a just transition for the companies and individuals that are involved in the sector, particularly in the north-east, so that they will continue to play a role in our energy future, as well as helping individuals here and now.

Liam Kerr: I am listening carefully to the minister. If a transition is so important to the Government, why is the energy transition skills hub not receiving any Government funding to

support school leavers and the economically inactive to retrain in green jobs?

Alasdair Allan: There have been many interventions from the Scottish Government—indeed, sometimes with the UK Government—such as the skills passport and the on-going explanation to school leavers about the many opportunities that exist in the renewables sector. Many positive things are happening on all those fronts. The Scottish Government is committed to doing all that it can within its devolved powers to support the transition to which the member refers.

However, as members know, decisions on offshore oil and gas licensing, consenting and the associated fiscal regime are all currently reserved to the UK Government. Therefore, we continue to call on the UK Government to approach its decisions on North Sea oil and gas projects on an evidence-led, case-by-case basis, with climate compatibility and energy security as key considerations.

To return to the Conservative motion, there is an implication that we in Scotland—or, perhaps, globally—should not be aiming that hard for net zero. However, the clear scientific evidence is that we must do so. The alternatives are fairly unthinkable for the generation that comes after us.

I remind the Parliament of its long-standing consensus around the 2045 net zero target, which was confirmed as recently as the passing of the Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Act 2024.

Patrick Harvie: The minister is right that we must continue the commitment to transition. Surely, however, the evidence tells us not just that we must maintain that course but that we are years behind schedule on where we must be—which means that we have to accelerate action, not merely continue on course.

Alasdair Allan: There is plenty that we must do. I could talk today about the work that needs to be done. I know that a subject close to Patrick Harvie's heart is the decarbonisation of buildings, which is one of the many things that we are looking at. He is right that we have to make sure that we reach those targets. As I said, there is an implication in the Conservative motion that that is not too important.

I do not think that members across parties will agree on the points that Patrick Harvie made about energy, but I am as strongly of the view as he is that new nuclear power would be hugely expensive and would take years to become operational, without our even looking at the environmental issues that would be involved.

Between 1990 and 2022, Scotland's economy grew by two thirds while our carbon emissions

halved. We are changing how we produce electricity. We are involving communities in decisions and working in partnership with other nations on shared challenges such as climate change.

Willie Rennie made an interesting and important point about the importance of a holistic approach. We recognise the need to do much more—in particular, to ensure that communities feel the benefits of the transition of which we all speak. As the cabinet secretary said in opening, we have called on the UK Government to act on a much wider mandatory community benefit, for instance, and we have called for further action to address fuel poverty.

The Scottish Government remains absolutely committed to a just energy transition. I ask members to support that aim today by supporting the Government amendment.

17:37

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): It was welcome news indeed from Dr Alasdair Allan that there will be a summit. However, it seems like a very closed affair if it is to be between only the First Minister and the Prime Minister. I remind the minister that what has been called for by the Conservatives in the debate is a summit attended by not just Governments but local authorities, trade organisations, trade unions, third sector organisations, chambers of commerce, development boards and even GB Energy. Is that on offer as a result of our debate?

Alasdair Allan: I cannot say what is in the Prime Minister's mind on that. I have indicated that the First Minister is open to a summit and has said so to the Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce. I hope that the Prime Minister is similarly open to the idea. I have no idea of the guest list.

Stephen Kerr: The situation is very urgent. It would be good to have some information as soon as possible about when the summit will be held and who will be invited to attend it. Critically, we need to know a timetable. It is very urgent. That has been the tone of the Conservative speeches in the debate—that this is an urgent situation that is unravelling in front of us.

I have news for Patrick Harvie: net zero is still part of our aspiration, but it must be pursued with a credible plan, with public support and with our economy and energy security intact. What we currently hear in the chamber—most notably from the fringe Scottish Greens—is ideology consistently trumping common sense. I speak as a Central Scotland MSP. Often, we are witnessing a muddled dash towards arbitrary deadlines without any serious consideration of cost.

I was grateful for the passion with which my colleague Douglas Lumsden addressed the issue. He reflected the concerns and interests of his constituents in bringing the motion to the chamber on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives.

There was some discussion from Ben Macpherson about the nature of the debate. I agree with him—I often do. It is difficult to have a full debate on the subject in Opposition time. A challenge to the minister—with the support of Ben Macpherson, I hope—is to schedule a proper, full-scale debate on the issue during Government time instead of leaving it to the Scottish Conservatives to use our Opposition time for such debates, as we did for the previous debate.

Let us not forget that, for all the talk of net zero and all the theorising, this is a multi-trillion-pound national undertaking that was compressed into 90 minutes of parliamentary time in the House of Commons in 2019. That was the first time that the target was set. There was no vote, no economic impact assessment and no serious scrutiny, and there is still no plan. I was one of three members of Parliament that day who raised concerns about the implications of such an arbitrary deadline—and it is still arbitrary in my view. We are in the absurd position that the true cost of one of the headline parts of that law—retrofitting every home with a heat pump—is unknown and unknowable. The cost of making public buildings compliant with net zero is often higher than the value of the buildings themselves.

People know that the reductions that we achieve in Scotland—which have been referred to several times during the debate—are being swamped by the increasing level of emissions that are being pumped out by countries such as China and India. The working people of Scotland are left feeling that our politicians have lost all sense of perspective.

Let me refer specifically to some of the speeches that have been given today.

It was incredible to hear that, all these years later, the SNP minister could not give the chamber any indication of when an energy strategy will be published. The consultation closed two years ago this very month, I think. Will she intervene now and tell us when the Scottish Government's energy policy will be announced, or has she not got Stephen Flynn's permission to publish the energy strategy? I am happy to give way, but she has nothing to say, because—as usual—the SNP is incoherent on that subject.

Almost as incoherent as the SNP is Scottish Labour. How amazing was it that Michael Marra got through two speeches during the debate and did not mention EPL once? He certainly did not mention employer national insurance

contributions, Labour's tax on jobs that—from the mouth of industry itself—has led directly to the 250 job losses at Harbour Energy. The reality is that Labour is in a muddle as well, and it is no wonder with Ed Miliband, the ultimate zealot, in charge of the policy. He will achieve his objectives at all costs—he is on the record as having said pretty much that.

Our economy is becoming less competitive and our energy more expensive. We should be honest with each other and with the public: the truth of the matter is that our emissions are being offshored to countries with lower standards and higher pollution levels. Why are we importing fossil fuels from regimes with appalling environmental records when we have domestic resources in the North Sea that have been developed with world-leading environmental standards?

The reason why that is happening and why we are in this guddle is that the Labour Government is peddling fantasies, and one of the biggest fantasies that it is peddling is GB Energy. Even now, professionals in the energy sector have absolutely no idea what that is about. It is a slogan. It is not a plan but a glossy political gimmick.

I am being told to wind up by the Presiding Officer, much to the chagrin of my colleagues, I am sure, who are probably enjoying my speech.

The Presiding Officer: You must conclude, Mr Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: Net zero can be delivered only through a clear-eyed, costed and pro-growth approach. That is the change that Scotland needs, and it is what the Scottish Conservatives will keep fighting for.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on protecting Scotland's oil and gas industry.

Urgent Question

17:44

MV Glen Rosa (Delivery)

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government for what reason the MV Glen Rosa will now not be delivered until the second quarter of 2026, with costs estimated to increase by up to £35 million.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): Ferguson Marine has advised that the revised delivery date and the cost increase stem from historic failures in project planning, poor sequencing of work and a loss of focus during the delivery of the MV Glen Sannox. The situation is wholly unacceptable, and I have communicated that in the most direct and robust way that I can to the yard's leadership.

Sue Webber: Earlier this year, the former chief executive officer of Ferguson Marine, John Petticrew, told the Public Audit Committee that there was a risk of further delays to the Glen Rosa, but this is far worse than we could ever have imagined. It is delayed until June 2026, and both vessels are set to cost upwards of £460 million. CalMac Ferries routes have already been pushed to the limit thanks to an ageing fleet, and islanders were counting on the delivery of that lifeline vessel.

When was the Deputy First Minister informed that the Glen Rosa would be delayed further? Did ministerial pressure and perhaps the poor sequencing of work on, or cannibalisation of, the Glen Rosa to complete the Glen Sannox factor in the latest delay? Will the new chief executive officer of Ferguson Marine be yet another scapegoat for the Scottish National Party's failure to deliver this lifeline ferry on time and on budget?

Kate Forbes: Let me be very clear that this is not a question of scapegoats; this is about holding all parties to account for the delivery that is required. I have been clear that that delivery needs to happen with urgency, discipline and full accountability.

In the past few weeks, I have put in place rigorous oversight to hold people fully to account on those issues. We have established a small review team, with involvement from Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd, to ensure that we can scrutinise the delivery plan in detail. That is proceeding right now.

There is a weekly review group with CMAL and Scottish Government officials, and I have made clear my expectations of the new chief executive

and the board. I met the new chief executive to communicate that shortly before he started at the end of April.

Sue Webber: Bill Calderwood, from the Isle of Arran ferry committee, said:

"The community are at a loss at what more can be said about the continued examples of mismanagement on this project."

He also said:

"The programme has gone from delay to delay with little, or no, obvious consequences for the management of the company or others involved in these failures."

After years of repeated delays, enormous cost overruns and a revolving door of senior figures at Ferguson Marine and CalMac, not one SNP minister has been shown the door. That is an insult to islanders and taxpayers.

There cannot be any more delays— islanders are sick to the back teeth of this. What more will the Deputy First Minister do to further ensure that the ferry is delivered on or before April 2026, and will anyone ever be held accountable for this SNP-made crisis?

Kate Forbes: On the member's final point, I agree with her, having communicated to the yard's leadership that there can be no more delays.

This morning, I met the shop stewards, union members and workers themselves, and we agreed a number of additional actions that will amplify their voices in the process to ensure that the issues that they identify as impacting on the timescales are escalated immediately to ensure that there is maximum accountability and oversight, and that action is taken on any issues that emerge.

Sue Webber started her last question by talking about islanders. I am in no doubt that she will appreciate that I represent some of those islands, and I assure her that my inbox reflects the frustrations that she has just articulated on behalf of Bill Calderwood. Islanders need a resilient ferry network, and the Glen Rosa needs to be delivered as quickly as possible.

We have implemented the additional oversight steps and the review groups, and we have agreed additional actions with the shop stewards. I am very happy to work with any member in the chamber if there are specific actions that I should take to ensure that there is that maximum scrutiny. The board also reports to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, which is absolutely right and proper, so there is parliamentary oversight as well.

The bottom line, however, is that the final vessel needs to be delivered as quickly as possible.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There is a lot of interest, and concise questions and answers will enable more members to be involved.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North)

(SNP): The Glen Rosa is destined for the Brodick route, but until Ardrossan harbour is redeveloped, she and her sister ship, the Glen Sannox, will only make three return sailings each day from Troon, rather than five from Ardrossan.

Eighteen months ago, I advocated using the Islay-class vessels for the Brodick route in the short term, until redevelopment of Ardrossan harbour could begin. Although those vessels have only 53 per cent of the capacity of the Glen Sannox and the Glen Rosa, that would be offset by an increased number of sailings and better accessibility through Ardrossan.

Given the latest delay and added uncertainty about the Glen Rosa entering service, will the Deputy First Minister urge CalMac and CMAL to reconsider that option?

Kate Forbes: We absolutely understand the views of Kenny Gibson and the wider community in favour of retaining Ardrossan as the mainland port, and we remain committed to ensuring that the Arran ferry service is fit for the future.

I agree that all options should be considered, and that Transport Scotland should work with CalMac and CMAL to deliver best use of the available resources across the network and to consider all options to maintain services and reduce disruption.

Obviously there are limitations of physical and operational fit on routes, which need careful consideration, but, in spite of those caveats, I think that all options should be considered.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I feel that I have gone back in time to three years ago, when the cabinet secretary said the exact same thing about unacceptable delays. The whole ferries fiasco has been the result of a lack of leadership and inconsistent management from owners, agencies and Government ministers. Not one of those supposed leaders has taken responsibility; meanwhile, islanders and workers have been subjected to buck passing and a merry-go-round of ministers and turnaround directors.

What leadership is the Scottish Government finally going to show to get the ferries finished and secure a future for the yard? On that point, when will the investment to improve efficiencies at the yard that was promised by the Scottish Government be delivered?

Kate Forbes: On that final point, the member will know that that money has been allocated in the budget this year—it is to go towards the

improvements that the board has identified. We are committed to distributing that funding as soon as possible. That has to be done in collaboration with the board, which will determine the improvements that are required.

With regard to the other steps that we have taken, I outlined some of them to Sue Webber, but I will go through them again. We have taken immediate steps to establish a weekly review group with CMAL and Scottish Government officials to scrutinise the delivery plan. I have asked for additional steps, including for the new chief executive, who has only been in post since 1 May, to consider the plan.

A number of actions have been agreed this morning with shop stewards to amplify their voice, because they are often on the ground, identifying issues that might have a knock-on impact on build.

At the moment, there is union representation at the board meetings, where the representatives get an opportunity to pose questions. I want to see a feedback loop, as it were, of issues being escalated immediately so that they can then be resolved. As I said—

The Presiding Officer: Briefly, please, Deputy First Minister.

Kate Forbes: As I said to the Conservative MSP, if there are further steps that we, as the shareholder, can take to ensure that there is maximum scrutiny and review of the plan at board level, I am very happy to listen to members.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands)

(Con): For clarification, I say to the Deputy First Minister that the last time that Ferguson Marine (Port Glasgow) reported to the committee was in October 2024. The only reason that we have the dates that we have now is because Ferguson Marine was threatened with being asked to come before the committee if it would not reply to our successive letters.

Andrew Miller, chairman of Ferguson Marine, sacked his first CEO because of delays and increasing costs. The second one whom he appointed left after six months. The latest one took over and had to announce further delays. Does the Deputy First Minister have confidence in Andrew Miller? I do not think that many other people do.

Kate Forbes: I understand the frustration that has been expressed by the member, as the convener of the committee to which the board is accountable, and by the committee, about timely responses, and also about the latest delay.

There has been a need for consistent leadership of Ferguson Marine. I am pleased with the appointment of Graeme Thomson as the new chief executive. He brings decades of commercial

experience of building vessels and I hope that he will apply that to the completion of the Glen Rosa.

I expect the board of Ferguson Marine to demonstrate strong leadership, grip and full accountability for delivering the MV Glen Rosa without further delay or cost escalation. I have underlined that robustly to the leadership team.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I thank the Deputy First Minister for meeting the two shop stewards and me earlier today. The discussion covered many different areas and issues in the yard. I am very much assured by the actions that were agreed to between the Deputy First Minister and the shop stewards. Can she confirm to the chamber that she will continue to have regular dialogue with the shop stewards as we move forward and try to turn the yard around?

Kate Forbes: I thank the member for arranging this morning's meeting with the shop stewards. The content that was shared with me by the shop stewards was very powerful, and the emotion of a workforce that knows that their talent and skills are not the reason for the latest delay was evident. They want to ensure that there is a commercial future for Ferguson Marine. That relies on the timely delivery of the Glen Rosa, so the stakes are high. I agreed with the shop stewards that I would have regular dialogue with them, that I would put a number of items that they had raised with me directly to the board, and that I would look at what other steps on reassurance and scrutiny that we can incorporate, including looking at whether third parties can provide scrutiny for us.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I commend Graeme Thomson as an excellent appointment. I worked with him on the delivery of HMS Duncan in 2012, and he is a very competent programme director.

The issue is that, fundamentally, the yard is driven by milestone payments, and a big milestone payment was the delivery of the Glen Sannox. It was known as long ago as October that, in order to deliver the Glen Sannox, the yard had to cannibalise parts from the Glen Rosa and put man hours from the Glen Rosa into the Glen Sannox. Is it not the case that trade-offs have to be accepted, given the complex nature of the programme? That the Government, as the main shareholder, is not sighted on those issues is a problem. Perhaps there is an issue with the chairman continuing to sack directors and chief executive officers without proper management handovers or a proper understanding of the trade-offs and difficulties that the programme is enduring.

Kate Forbes: The member raises an interesting point. We will all know of the immense pressure on the Government and Ferguson Marine to deliver

the Glen Sannox—quite rightly, because it was overdue, it had been delayed and island communities were relying on it. I am pleased and relieved that the Glen Sannox is now serving our island routes, but Ferguson Marine's letter is quite clear that that meant that all focus was on the Glen Sannox, to the detriment of the Glen Rosa.

The member also asked about the actions of the chair of the board. I politely suggest that the board is ultimately accountable for ensuring that the leadership team delivers, not just according to key milestones, but to the timetables that are provided and to budget. It is right and proper that I communicate with the board directly and robustly, but the board is also accountable for who serves in primary leadership roles in order to deliver the results that we want to see, which is the Glen Rosa serving the island communities, as the Glen Sannox is currently doing.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I was pleased to hear the cabinet secretary say that it is not the fault of the workers. That leaves the leadership. Who appointed the leadership? Who brought in the new owner of the yard? Who bought the yard? It was the Scottish Government, yet the cabinet secretary acts as though it is nothing to do with her. The soaring costs mean that it is now £1 million per worker to build those two ferries.

With all the things that she said about the performance of the Government when she was on the back benches, is Kate Forbes surprised that not one minister has resigned as a result of the fiasco?

Kate Forbes: I understand the strength of Willie Rennie's question. I humbly suggest that the fact that I am answering questions here, and I have stated quite clearly the actions that I have taken, suggests that I am not in any way shirking the responsibility of the Government or myself, in my current brief, with regard to holding to account the board, which in turn holds the leadership to account.

I have been crystal clear with the board about what I expect, and I am extremely disappointed to be answering questions here today, not because I think that the questions are wrong but because of the additional delay that has prompted those questions.

Those island communities need, demand and require the Glen Rosa to be serving them. My priority is to ensure that all additional scrutiny and review steps that can be implemented are implemented, so that the timetable is delivered on, as the leadership have suggested that it will be, and so that we get the Glen Rosa out on the seas as quickly as possible.

As I have said to other parties, if members of Parliament require further information and

communication over and above the accountability that already exists between the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee and the board, I am willing to explore that.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): When he gave the green light for these contracts, John Swinney hailed the absence of any banana skins. After the latest cost increase and delay, how would Kate Forbes rate John Swinney's ability to spot banana skins?

Kate Forbes: I am going to be very open about the challenges that those contracts have faced. I have previously apologised to communities and I will apologise again, because the additional delays are completely unacceptable, as are the budget increases.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): Kate Forbes is having the mickey taken out of her. Can she tell us which budget she is going to raid to fund the latest increase?

Kate Forbes: Obviously, that additional increase will be met from the Government's budget. Earlier today, I had a conversation with the Finance and Public Administration Committee about how we will meet that increase. Clearly, the Government balances its budget every year, so we will meet those costs.

Business Motions

18:02

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-17531, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 20 May 2025

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Ministerial Statement: Climate Change Plan Monitoring Report 2025

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Regulation of Legal Services (Scotland) Bill

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

6.30 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 21 May 2025

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Deputy First Minister Responsibilities,
Economy and Gaelic;
Finance and Local Government

followed by Ministerial Statement: Proposed Grangemouth Flood Protection Scheme

followed by Scottish Government Debate:
Empowering Scotland's Island Communities

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 22 May 2025

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:
Net Zero and Energy, and Transport

followed by Standards, Procedures and Public

Appointments Committee Debate:
Committee Effectiveness Inquiry

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 27 May 2025

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 28 May 2025

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands:
Health and Social Care

followed by Scottish Liberal Democrats Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.10 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 29 May 2025

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:
Social Justice

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 19 May 2025, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

Motion agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motions S6M-17532 and S6M-17533, on stage 1 timetables for bills. I call Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move the motions.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Scottish Parliament (Recall and Removal of Members) Bill at stage 1 be completed by 7 November 2025.

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the UEFA European Championship (Scotland) Bill at stage 1 be completed by 14 November 2025.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

Motions agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

18:03

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of two Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motion S6M-17534, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, and motion S6M-17535, on designation of a lead committee.

That the Parliament agrees that the Land and Buildings Transaction Tax (Group Relief and Sub-sale Development Relief Modifications) (Scotland) Order 2025 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the supplementary legislative consent memorandum on the Employment Rights Bill.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

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

Decision Time

18:04

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are seven questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-17524.3, in the name of Maree Todd, which seeks to amend motion S6M-17524, in the name of Miles Briggs, on review of additional support for learning and implementation of mainstreaming, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-17524.1, in the name of Pam Duncan-Glancy, which seeks to amend motion S6M-17524, in the name of Miles Briggs, on review of additional support for learning and implementation of mainstreaming, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-17524, in the name of Miles Briggs, on review of additional support for learning and implementation of mainstreaming, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

That the Parliament notes the Audit Scotland report calling for a fundamental review of planning and resourcing of additional support for learning in Scotland; recognises concerns over declining numbers of additional support workers and classroom assistants; highlights the need to understand the rise in pupils with additional support needs to better target resources and training; calls on the Scottish Government and local authorities to deliver a new model of support alongside the NHS Education for Scotland trauma-informed practice training on neurodivergence and autism; expresses concern over changes to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism diagnosis pathways removing children from child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) support without suitable alternatives; calls on the Scottish Ministers to undertake a national review into the implementation of mainstreaming policy and the availability of specialist additional school places across local authorities; agrees that all children and young people should receive the help that they need to thrive; thanks Scotland's hard-working teachers, support staff and the wider education workforce for all that they do every day to support pupils; notes that the Scottish Parliament's Education, Children and Young People Committee found that the 'overwhelming view' of evidence was that 'the principle of the presumption of mainstreaming is laudable and should be supported' but that the gap between the policy intention and its implementation is 'intolerable' and must be addressed; believes that parents and carers of young people with additional support needs (ASN) should not have to fight for everything that their child needs; regrets that, years on from the Morgan Review, there has not been enough progress; believes that teacher workload and the lack of availability of other support services and staff that young people with ASN need have contributed to a system that is overstretched, and calls on

the Scottish Ministers to urgently bring forward a comprehensive strategy to increase the ASN and pastoral care workforce, restore access to vital support services, and create a specific ASN parents forum to feed directly into policy.

The Presiding Officer: I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Gillian Martin is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Michael Marra will fall.

The next question is, that amendment S6M-17525.3, in the name of Gillian Martin, which seeks to amend motion S6M-17525, in the name of Douglas Lumsden, on protecting Scotland's oil and gas, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

18:06

Meeting suspended.

18:08

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: I remind members that if the amendment in the name of Gillian Martin is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Michael Marra will fall.

We come to the vote on amendment S6M-17525.3, in the name of Gillian Martin, which seeks to amend motion S6M-17525, in the name of Douglas Lumsden. Members should cast their votes now.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)

Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Rona Mackay]
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowe, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)

Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-17525.3, in the name of Gillian Martin, is: For 61, Against 56, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-17525, in the name of Douglas Lumsden, on protecting Scotland's oil and gas industry, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)

Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
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 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
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 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)

Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 61, Against 55, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises the importance of reducing emissions in a way that is credible, costed and publicly supported; regrets the absence of a clear, deliverable plan for achieving net zero, particularly in relation to the future of Scotland's energy sector and industrial base; condemns the Scottish and UK governments' ideological opposition to oil and gas, nuclear power and a balanced energy policy; calls on the UK Government to end its policy of issuing no new oil and gas licences; notes with deep concern the economic and employment impacts of the closure of the Grangemouth refinery and recent job losses at Harbour Energy in Aberdeen; further notes that the increase and extension of the UK Government's Energy Profits Levy has had a damaging effect on investment in the North Sea; argues that current Scottish Government policy on nuclear, oil and gas is having a detrimental effect on energy prices and energy security; points out that Great British Energy is a gimmick that will do nothing to bring down bills, and condemns the explosion of electricity infrastructure across the Scottish countryside, and calls on the Scottish Government to adopt a pragmatic, pro-growth energy strategy that supports the workforce, secures investment, delivers affordability and ensures energy reliability and national competitiveness for the future.

The Presiding Officer: If no member objects, I will ask a single question on two Parliamentary Bureau motions.

The question is, that motion S6M-17534, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, and motion S6M-17535, on designation of a lead committee, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Land and Buildings Transaction Tax (Group Relief and Sub-sale Development Relief Modifications) (Scotland) Order 2025 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the supplementary legislative consent memorandum on the Employment Rights Bill.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Beaches

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-16920, in the name of Kenneth Gibson, on the Marine Conservation Society's "State of our beaches" 2024 report. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes the publication of the Marine Conservation Society 2024 report, State of our Beaches, which compiles data gathered through the organisation's year-round citizen science initiative, Beachwatch; acknowledges that Beachwatch was launched in 1994; believes that it provides one of the most detailed datasets on marine litter across the whole of the UK; applauds the 4,000 volunteers who attended beach cleans across Scotland in 2024, including in the Cunninghame North constituency, which represents a 25% increase in volunteers compared to 2023; notes that they removed over 10,000 kg of litter from Scotland's beaches in 2024, consisting of around 527,000 separate items; expresses concern that, on average, 204 items of litter were found for every 100 metres across Scotland's beaches, which represents a 7.2% increase on 2023 and is higher than the UK-wide average of 170 items per 100 metres; understands that 22,000 wet wipes were found on Scotland's beaches in 2024, and that drinks-related litter was recorded on 95% of surveyed beaches; acknowledges that marine litter not only harms what it sees as Scotland's beautiful coastline, but can also damage marine habitats; notes the view that reducing marine litter will require not only behavioural changes, but also a range of policy changes, including the introduction of circular economy measures and the phasing-out of single-use plastic items, and further notes calls for the Scottish Government to continue its work alongside key stakeholders to drive down marine litter across Scotland's beaches.

18:14

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I am grateful to those members who signed my motion allowing the debate to take place. I am also grateful to Daniel Hale of the Marine Conservation Society for his very helpful briefings.

Scotland boasts one of Europe's most expansive and ecologically rich marine environments, fringed by more than 18,000km of coastline. These waters support a wealth of biodiversity, from seals and whales to seabirds, and they sustain critical sectors such as fisheries, aquaculture and offshore renewable energy. The Marine Conservation Society's "State of our beaches" 2024 report offers a detailed and sobering assessment of Scotland's coastal and marine environments. Compiled from the society's beachwatch programme, which is a year-round citizen science initiative that was launched in 1994, the report draws on one of the United

Kingdom's most comprehensive marine litter data sets. More than a third of this year's 1,262 surveys took place in Scotland: 467 surveys, representing a 28 per cent increase on the previous year.

The significance of this evening's members' business debate is underscored by two timely events: the 99th birthday of Sir David Attenborough last week and the release of his latest documentary, "Ocean", which is a powerful tribute to the beauty and fragility of our seas. As always, Attenborough's voice brings moral authority and urgency, calling on us to reconsider our relationship with the natural world, particularly its most expansive and endangered domain.

The report paints a picture of paradoxes. Although the Scottish Government is making progress, persistent challenges, particularly plastic pollution, continue to erode the resilience of marine ecosystems. Encouragingly, public engagement is gaining momentum. In 2024, more than 4,100 volunteers took part in formal beach clean-ups across Scotland, removing a total of 527,460 individual pieces of litter. There were also many more informal clean-ups, including those that I organised myself, and yet the scale of the issue remains sobering. An average of 204 littered items were recorded per 100m of coastline, which is significantly higher than the UK national average.

Litter linked to public behaviour was the most common type found on Scottish mainland beaches, accounting for 40 per cent of all recorded waste. Certain regions saw especially sharp increases in litter density. Fife recorded an increase of 124.9 per cent, while Dumfries and Galloway experienced a shocking 287 per cent rise, which I am sure that Mr Carson will want to comment on in his speech.

Sewage pollution presents another urgent threat. In some areas, the situation is particularly severe. The national average for sewage-related debris is 1.5 items per 100m, Falkirk and Inverclyde reported figures of 212 and 237 items respectively. Wet wipes have emerged as a particularly troubling pollutant: more than 22,000 were collected from fewer than half of the beaches that were surveyed in Scotland. Often made from synthetic fibres, wet wipes degrade very slowly, posing serious risks to marine ecosystems. They can clog waterways, contribute to microplastic pollution and threaten marine life.

Scottish Water has expanded monitoring of combined sewer overflows from just 7 per cent in 2020 to 32 per cent last year, which is a welcome step forward. However, the majority of discharges still go unmonitored. To address those environmental pressures, the Scottish Parliament passed the Circular Economy (Scotland) Act 2024, a critical move away from single-use culture. The

act empowers ministers to impose charges on select disposable items, including wet wipes and takeaway cups. That legislative progress builds on the success of Scotland's carrier bag charge, which was introduced a decade ago. Within its first year, that modest charge led to an 87 per cent reduction in plastic bags found on beaches.

Further measures are on the horizon. Scotland's deposit return scheme, which is scheduled to launch in October 2027 as part of a UK-wide initiative, will add a 20p deposit to most single-use plastic bottles and cans. Consumers can reclaim the deposit by returning empty containers to participating retailers. Meanwhile, the Scottish Government has implemented wide-reaching protections for marine environments, with more than 37 per cent of Scotland's territorial waters now designated as marine protected areas. These include the sea of the Hebrides—the world's first protected zone for basking sharks and minke whales—as well as the South Arran MPA and numerous protected sea lochs. More than 2,000 square kilometres of inshore waters are now permanently safeguarded from destructive practices such as bottom trawling and mechanical dredging, in line with the Marine (Scotland) Act 2010.

In my constituency of Cunninghame North, the UK's first no-take zone was established in Lamlash bay in 2008. It has been a resounding success that should be repeated elsewhere in Scotland. Spearheaded by the Community of Arran Seabed Trust—COAST—the area has seen remarkable biodiversity recovery, including notable rebounds in scallop and lobster populations. In 2021, the initiative was recognised by the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity as one of the world's top-20 outstanding practices.

Building on that success, COAST partnered with the Arran outdoor education centre in 2023 to launch a free marine science education programme. Delivered to more than 375 students from across North Ayrshire, the programme integrates sea bed cameras, remotely operated vehicles and plankton sampling with classroom learning, enhancing environmental literacy and supporting student wellbeing. Elsewhere, targeted conservation efforts have spurred the recovery of the critically endangered flapper skate in the legally designated MPA that spans Loch Sunart and the Sound of Jura. That success is bolstered by the use of artificial intelligence-powered monitoring, which has helped to identify nearly 2,500 individual fish, illustrating the powerful synergy between legal protection and technological innovation.

Overall, since 2022, the Scottish marine environmental enhancement fund has invested more than £3.8 million in 54 projects, restoring

seagrass meadows, salt marshes and native oyster populations. Those projects not only improve biodiversity and coastal resilience, but contribute to blue carbon sequestration, which is a vital climate mitigation tool.

As we reflect on the findings of the "State of our beaches" 2024 report, it is clear that Scotland stands at a critical juncture. Our nation's marine environment is one of the richest and most diverse in Europe, and it remains both an extraordinary asset and a fragile inheritance. While the report paints a sobering picture, marked by rising plastic pollution, sewage-related debris and the enduring impacts of public littering, it also speaks to the power of progress.

We are seeing tangible steps forward, with record volunteer engagement; new legislation, such as the aforementioned Circular Economy (Scotland) Act 2024; expanded marine protections; and the steady integration of cutting-edge technology in conservation efforts, yet we cannot be complacent. If we are to preserve the integrity of our marine ecosystems for future generations, our actions now must match the scale of the threat. That means continuing to strengthen legislation, accelerating the roll-out of initiatives such as the deposit return scheme and supporting a ban on single-use plastic wet wipes by next year.

The challenges before us are significant, but they are not insurmountable. Although the journey is far from over, with further preservation and sustained effort, the environmental tide may finally turn.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate.

18:21

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): First, I congratulate my friend, Kenneth Gibson, on securing this important debate. It is refreshing to hear Mr Gibson talk fish, when normally he talks about the economy.

It is often said that life's a beach, and I am sure many of us have fond memories of digging our toes into the sand, building sandcastles that are destined to be washed away by the tide or braving the icy waters, to emerge with blue lips and goose bumps.

Those simple, joyful moments are possible only because Scotland is blessed with some of the finest beaches in the world. Many of them are in Scotland's most beautiful constituency: my constituency of Galloway and West Dumfries, which is home to some of the most beautiful beaches imaginable. From the sand dunes of Sandyhills, the rugged sheltered bays of Carrick,

the soft white sands of Mosseyard, the dramatic cliffs of Drummorie and the pebble coastline of Portpatrick, we have it all. Other beaches may be available, but if Marks and Spencer or Carlsberg did beaches, they would be the beaches of Galloway.

As we heard from Kenneth Gibson, our ability to enjoy those natural treasures is thanks in no small part to the dedication of more than 4,000 volunteers who took part in beach cleans across Scotland in 2024—a 25 per cent increase on the previous year. In my constituency, groups such as ONUS—oceans need us—South West Scotland, are making a real difference. Just recently, a dozen volunteers tackled marine litter at Port Logan and along the coastline near Stranraer. Their efforts are nothing short of inspirational.

Another stand-out initiative is the Solway Coast and Marine Project, which aims to restore vital coastal and shallow sea habitats all along all the 210km of the Dumfries and Galloway coastline, from Gretna to the Rhins of Galloway. That project, which is led by the Dumfries and Galloway Council environment team and the Solway Firth Partnership, is supported by NatureScot, the Scottish Government and the National Lottery Heritage Fund. Its mission is to restore salt marshes, seagrass beds, coastal woodlands and—last but no means least—native oyster beds, for which I am the Parliament's nature champion. I must be one of the few nature champions who can actually eat the species that they are assigned to protect, and I wish the Solway Coast and Marine Project all the success in the future.

I am also delighted that local authority councillors will consider resuming mechanical beach cleans in Wigtownshire. However, despite those efforts, the issue of marine litter remains one of the most pressing—and, to be frank, most disheartening—environmental challenges of our time. Each year, millions of tonnes of plastic and other waste material enter our seas, harming marine ecosystems, endangering wildlife and even threatening human health.

The Marine Conservation Society's "State of our beaches" 2024 report paints a stark picture: more than 10,000kg of litter, comprising more than 527,000 individual items, were removed from Scotland's beaches last year. That is a 7.2 per cent increase on 2023, and it is well above the United Kingdom average.

For some additional context, I can share the following data points that are specific to Dumfries and Galloway. The region saw a 287 per cent year-on-year increase in the number of litter items per 100m of beach. It recorded 41 items of sewage-related debris per 100m, which is one of the highest rates of any local authority in Scotland, and it had 45 items of drink-related litter per 100m,

the third highest in Scotland, highlighting the urgent need for effective deposit return schemes and package reform. However, I know that much of that litter comes straight from the A75, which winds its way along the Solway coast for much of its length.

It is not a problem that we can clear our way out of. Although volunteer effort is vital, we must also adopt bold policy measures, such as embracing a circular economy and phasing out single-use plastic items such as wet wipes, cotton buds, cutlery and straws. Behavioural change is essential, but it must be supported by strong legislation and co-ordinated action. The Marine Conservation Society has rightly called on all UK Governments, including the Scottish Government, to work closely with stakeholders to tackle the crisis head on.

This is not an insurmountable challenge, but it will require a serious shift in public attitudes, robust policy intervention and continued support for the volunteers and organisations who work tirelessly to protect our coastlines.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Carson. As a fellow species champion, I am pretty sure that the idea is not to encourage people to eat the species, but I might have got that wrong.

I now call Rhoda Grant to be followed by Ben Macpherson in around four minutes.

18:26

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I congratulate Kenneth Gibson on securing the debate. I also pay tribute to the work of the Marine Conservation Society to highlight the impact of litter on our seas and beaches. I thank it for organising the beach cleans throughout the UK that have enabled more than 15,000 volunteers to take part this year.

The beach cleans are not simply a tidy-up exercise, although they are part of that. The feedback that the MCS gets and the information it gathers in its surveys—it did 1,200 surveys last year—tell us what is littering our beaches and what it is finding there. That information is useful. It gives us an insight into the main cause of pollution, but it also gives us an insight into the most likely culprits, which is valuable information for tackling the issue at source.

That knowledge also shows trends of pollution and the impact of Government policy. What I found particularly striking was the number of carrier bags that were collected, which increased over the decades and then fell dramatically when a charge was placed on them. We know that it was not the cost of the carrier bag that led to the change of behaviour, rather it was the constant

reminder that we were not doing the right thing if we took a carrier bag. Before the charge was implemented, we all set off shopping with great intentions about taking reusable bags, but we often forgot. That led to huge numbers of plastic bags blowing away and being discarded deliberately. The charge changed behaviour and that change was almost immediate—in a very short space of time, there was an 80 per cent decrease in the number of discarded carrier bags that were found in beach cleans. That shows how many had been littering our seas and other public places until that point.

Sadly, that bucks the trend, because plastic litter continues to increase. Because of public awareness and the beach cleans that add to that awareness, the pressure to ban plastic and wet wipes continues to grow as we see an increase in the number of those wipes littering beaches. Their disposal in our sewage system adds to the pressure on the ancient infrastructure, causing further pollution.

We have heard that Scotland's beaches regularly top the list of the best beaches in the world. I was going to start listing some of the beautiful beaches in the Highlands and Islands to give Finlay Carson a run for his money, but I just did not think that that would be fair, because there are many, many more in the Highlands and Islands. However, it is desperately sad that they can be spoiled by litter, which impacts habitats but also our enjoyment of the seaside.

The information that was gathered from the Marine Conservation Society surveys must be used to initiate policies that cut litter and change behaviour, because it has to be down to each and every one of us, individually, to make that change and to make it socially unacceptable for people to litter. We see it all too often—not just on our beaches but on our roadsides.

We must also clean up our waters and ensure that we properly monitor sewage discharge, with a view to ensuring that there are no discharges of untreated sewage into our environment, including our seas. That will be good for the environment and for nature, and it will make our seas much safer for us, too. It benefits us all to make a difference, and I urge the Government to act on those suggestions.

18:31

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): I pay tribute to my colleague for bringing this important issue to the chamber and to the work of the Marine Conservation Society, which I have had the pleasure of engaging with on beach clean-ups in Wardie Bay in my constituency, for example. I know that other

members support their local beach clean-ups. Volunteers, along with the Marine Conservation Society and others, have really helped to bring attention to these issues in the political context and in the media, which builds our collective awareness of the issue of marine pollution in the places that we call home.

I represent the constituents of Edinburgh Northern and Leith, which includes Granton harbour, Newhaven harbour, port of Leith and the beach of Wardie Bay, as I mentioned. The whole of the east coast of Scotland and our capital city have contended with these issues for some time. We are seeing change and improvement; for example, there are now oysters in the Firth of Forth, which is excellent in terms of the increase of biodiversity and nature restoration. However, we still face big challenges together, as the volunteers who clean these beaches discover every time they go down to the beaches and do the good work that they do, picking up bagfuls of litter. I will say more on that in a moment.

The issue of sewage has been touched on. As the chair of the Seafield waste water treatment works stakeholder group for the past nine years, I am very aware of the challenge of the pressure of a growing population, the effect of climate change and the difficulties that those issues can present. The wet wipes issue is the biggest one, and Scottish Water has done a good job of raising awareness of the fact that people should not flush wet wipes down the toilet or put them down the drain in any way. That is about a culture change, because, in the past, people perhaps did not realise that they were doing something wrong by doing that. We have moved positively, but there is more to do.

Issues with sewage water overflows need to be discussed carefully. For example, my constituents have expressed concern when there have been genuine issues with sewage water overflows that have required the attention of the authorities. However, some politicians have also created undue and inaccurate alarm, chasing headlines about sewage, which is not good for anyone. That is just a word of caution.

With regard to litter, when young people come into the Parliament or when I visit schools—I do not know whether other colleagues have experienced the same—one of the questions that I am nearly always asked is, "What are you going to do about litter?" Young people say, "We really do not like litter. We are really appalled by litter," and yet something changes in our culture later in life and some people think that it is okay to throw litter, whether that is on the street or into a river or the sea. Although I support measures such as the plastic bag charge and bans on some products, which I will talk about in a minute, how we change

the culture around the acceptability of dropping litter is still the perennial challenge in this regard. It must become totally unacceptable, socially, if we are going to make the progress that we need to make.

The Circular Economy (Scotland) Bill, which came through the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee last year, creates some important opportunities. However, we need to be careful about seeing the application of charges on single-use products as a meaningful solution. The plastic bag charge is not the same as the potential plastic cup charge. We should not give all products the same consideration, because they are different and people might use reusables in different circumstances. Bans on certain products have been really meaningful, whether it is cotton buds, plastic straws or nurdles—which are an issue that we face in the Firth of Forth.

I would like the Government to consider that not only are single-use sponges a single-use plastic but, through the process of cleaning, they create microplastics that then go into the water system, especially if their scourer parts are plastic ones. There is comment internationally about that issue, and I have wondered for some time whether we need more action. We would need an affordable alternative that is not a microplastic and is a sustainable product. People use those sponges every day, and I am concerned about the amount of microplastics that goes into the water system. Although they are not big bits of litter, the issue does matter.

This has been a great debate. Thank you for the time, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Macpherson. We come to Mark Ruskell, who is the final speaker in the open debate.

18:36

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I thank Kenny Gibson for bringing the debate to the chamber. We have this debate pretty much every year, and it is really good to be able to reflect on the progress that has been made and to celebrate MCS's on-going, excellent work.

As we have heard in contributions from all members, Scotland undoubtedly has some of the most beautiful beaches in Europe. It would be remiss of me not to mention West Sands in St Andrews and Silver Sands in Aberdour, in my region. We have thousands of miles of beaches and coasts, which not only are home to nature but keep us active and healthy, and bring pleasure to millions of people. They also tell us the story of our communities and are wonderful places for learning and discovery for people of all ages.

Although our beaches and coasts are also on the front line of climate change, with threats from storms and sea level rises, our shores hold part of the solution as to how we can adapt to climate change, too. I was really delighted to visit Restoration Forth's seagrass project recently. I see that Ben Macpherson is nodding, as he will recognise that project from this side of the Forth—in particular, the excellent work on oyster bed recovery.

I was particularly struck by that work on seagrass, which is—or was—found in many sheltered areas and coasts. Not only is seagrass a wonderful nursery for marine life, but it captures 35 times more carbon than the rainforests do. It feels to me that restoring seagrass and working with communities is a great way to address some of the impacts of climate change and to empower people. We need to find those wins for nature and climate that create that sweet spot for community action. Seagrass is a really good example.

Many more coastal projects have been funded through the nature restoration fund, which is creating a real focal point for community empowerment. It would be great to hear the minister reflect on the success of that fund and where it will go in the future. However, what we have learned through the surveys, particularly in the past couple of years, is that our beaches are sadly becoming dirtier, with a rising tide of marine litter. To return to seagrass, 92 per cent of our seagrass across the UK has been destroyed, in part because of litter. This year's "State of our beaches" report shows an increase in the proportion of litter that is found on our beaches for the second year in a row. We cannot ignore the fact that drinks bottles and cans remain a major part of the beach litter problem.

Changing behaviour and attitudes is one part of the solution. A number of members have mentioned the success of the carrier bag charge, which came in more than a decade ago. As a result, there has been an 80 per cent reduction in bags turning up as marine litter. Clearly, incentives for citizens and consumers work, but it is also important that we do not forget that the polluter should pay and that producers of waste should ultimately take responsibility for it.

In the previous session, the Parliament agreed to the deposit return scheme for drinks containers, putting the responsibility back on to producers to run their own take-back scheme that would work for the public. I remember that, when the DRS was being considered by the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee, the many years of MCS beach cleans were a central part of the evidence in favour of the DRS scheme, which was originally introduced by Roseanna Cunningham.

It is disappointing that, in this session of Parliament, ostensible lobbying from the glass industry undermined the scheme that had been developed in Scotland. Ultimately, it was blocked by the UK Government. As we move past that period and look to a new UK-wide DRS, although it will arguably be weaker, it is important to acknowledge that, in many ways, the worsening condition of our beaches is happening because vested interests have had some considerable success in slowing environmental regulation.

Members talk about nurdles and microplastics, so there is a role for regulation here. There is a role for making the polluter pay and for driving industry towards innovation to find solutions. Voluntary action can take us only so far. For decades, raising the floor of regulation across Europe was how we delivered environmental progress. That is why maintaining alignment with European Union laws will be important for the health of our coasts, nature and bathing waters. It is also why Environmental Standards Scotland has such an important role in holding Governments and regulators to account post Brexit, so that we can continue that progress.

I am a little disappointed that we will not see the promised water and sewage bill from the Scottish Government in this session. Maybe the minister will have more to say on that. That could have kept up the pressure for improvement.

I believe that communities, from wild swimmers to dog walkers, have a role to play in monitoring the state of our beaches and making a small but important contribution to cleaning up. I join other members in thanking volunteers and celebrating that work. I am already looking forward to joining my next beach clean in Fife.

18:42

The Acting Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy (Gillian Martin): I have really enjoyed listening to the debate. If I am not in my favourite place, on the front benches in the chamber, I like to be in my second favourite place—the beach. I come from a coastal constituency, and the beach is my happy place. I know that I speak for many people in that regard. I am very pleased to be responding on behalf of the Scottish Government to the debate.

I thank Kenny Gibson for lodging the motion. I recognise that, in his constituency, we have some of the most spectacular coastal areas in the whole of Scotland, and we are doing great conservation work. In particular, I point to Lamlash Bay and the no-take zone. I believe that David Attenborough mentioned it in his new film. I am yet to see it, but I have it on my list for the weekend.

I join members in thanking the Marine Conservation Society and its volunteers, and I congratulate them on their commendable efforts over many years, not only to remove litter from Scotland's beaches but, as Rhoda Grant pointed out, to give us vital intelligence on what is washing up on our beaches. That has informed policy. If we know what the problem is and its scale, we can look at how to address it. That data really helps. Our marine litter strategy and our "National Litter and Flytipping Strategy" drive forward that work to reduce litter.

Many members have mentioned human behaviour. In particular, I was struck by what Ben Macpherson and Finlay Carson said about littering from cars. As Ben Macpherson said, we must make littering socially unacceptable, in the same way that other things are socially unacceptable. If somebody is dropping litter, I would like the people who are with them to say, "Hey, don't drop that here. Pick it up and put it in a bin". The same should apply if someone in a car opens the window and throws out a drinks container, or—as I see in my constituency, and I will not be alone in this—throws out wholesale a burger carrier bag with all their empty food cartons in it. In my constituency, on the Aberdeen western peripheral route, there are signs about how many bags of litter have been collected each month. It is absolutely appalling.

Human behaviour is important. What we do here in making regulations is only part of the solution and it is better if we do not have to be punitive or to put those measures in place. It is better to reduce the amount of litter by making it socially unacceptable for people to drop it or to throw it out of their cars.

Many people have mentioned the regulations regarding single-use plastics, including those on plastic-stemmed cotton buds and the introduction of the carrier bag charge. Rhoda Grant mentioned the 90 per cent reduction in bag use, and I look forward to seeing that happen with plastic bottles and cans on our beaches. As Mark Ruskell said, change was supposed to happen in March last year. I should be standing here saying that we have seen a marked difference since the implementation of the DRS, but we have lost a year or more. I am pleased to be able to say that there is, in general, a four-nations approach to that and I hope that we will remove many hundreds of thousands of plastic bottles and cans from our roads and beaches when that goes ahead.

I will say a little about wet wipes in particular.

Finlay Carson: I wonder what your view is. We are very lucky in Dumfries and Galloway, because our towns and villages are well looked after by the people who live there. However, as I said in my contribution, litter on the A75 is a big part of what

ends up in our seas. What is your view on the removal of roadside bins? There are two ideas about that: one is to let people leave their litter in bins and make it someone else's responsibility; the other is not to have bins but to encourage people to take their litter home. What is your view on litter bins being available at roadsides?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I may have a view on that, but I am not going to share it and will ask the cabinet secretary to answer.

Gillian Martin: I would, of course, be very interested in your view on that, Deputy Presiding Officer.

There are pros and cons to that and I cannot give a fully rounded opinion in the time that I have. There can be an issue with the seagull population when there are open bins, but I am also acutely aware that people are inconvenienced if there is no bin nearby. Most of the litter we are talking about is caused by people not even stopping to look for a bin. The cause is human behaviour and people thinking that it is acceptable to roll down their car window and chuck a bag out. The point is well made.

I will talk briefly about wet wipes and take the opportunity to put on record that the issue comes not only from the plastic wet wipes that we will be banning, but from all wet wipes. Even the ones that do not contain plastic take a long time to degrade, and that is not acceptable. That fits in with Ben Macpherson saying that people do not know they are doing something wrong: all wet wipes, even the non-plastic ones, cause major problems for the sewage system because they take so long to break down and can create blockages. People should particularly think about what they put down the loo, rather than assuming that it is acceptable to flush a wet wipe that contains no plastic.

Sewage-related debris continues to be a challenge. The point about having a sensible conversation about sewage overflows was well made. The grey water that might have to go out through a sewage overflow actually protects homes and prevents any backup going into them and is only a small fraction of what is in the water system. I am pleased with the work that Scottish Water is doing, which is testament to the fact that we have a publicly owned water company and that all its profits go back into programmes such as the rolling out of dynamic overflow detection systems throughout the country.

A lot depends on human behaviour, so I will end by talking about volunteers, who have been mentioned throughout the debate. The people who organise or go on litter picks are worth their weight in gold, but no one has to wait for an organised litter pick to be able to play their part. I have taught

my kids to take a plastic bag with them when they take the dog down to the beach and to do their bit incrementally by picking up the bits of litter that they find. If we all do that, it will become socially unacceptable for people to litter. Not only will people be going to beaches and playing their part incrementally, but they will be showing that they care about the environment. The more that people do that, the more that other people will see it and I am confident that that will be part of a change in behaviour.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate.

Meeting closed at 18:50.

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Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

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