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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 22 May 2025

[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 11:40]

General Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good morning. The first item of business is general question time.

EHRC Interim Update (Supreme Court Ruling on Equality Act 2010)

1. **Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government when it plans to implement any necessary measures as a consequence of the interim update from the Equality and Human Rights Commission, following the Supreme Court's ruling on the legal definition of "woman". (S6O-04688)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The Equality and Human Rights Commission has launched its consultation on updating its code of practice, which will run to 30 June 2025. We encourage organisations to engage with the consultation.

The Scottish Government is reviewing its policies, its guidance and the legislation impacted by the judgment through the cross-Government short-life working group to ensure that we are ready and prepared ahead of the updated code of practice being published. On 15 May, I met the United Kingdom Government to discuss the Supreme Court judgment and our work to prepare for the updated EHRC code of practice. The UK Government confirmed that it, too, is waiting for the EHRC's updated code of practice before it issues any further guidance, to ensure consistency in this complex area of law. The EHRC has not objected to that approach from the Scottish Government.

Pam Gosal: As expected, the cabinet secretary has not provided a clear answer. It has been more than one month since the UK Supreme Court's monumental judgment on the definition of the word "woman", and almost a month since the EHRC published its interim update. Two weeks ago, the Scottish Parliament announced that it will be implementing what is in the update.

However, bodies that are still waiting for clarity from the Scottish Government include the Scottish Secondary Teachers Association and the national health service nursing unions. Sandie Peggie is calling for the Royal College of Nursing to take a

stand, and prisons need clarity on how to handle transgender prisoners.

The cabinet secretary and the Scottish Government are dragging their heels, so I ask again: when will the Scottish Government implement the EHRC interim update? It is a simple question—what is the date?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I have already said—but I will try once again—the Scottish Government has already begun its work to review the policies, guidance and legislation that are impacted by the decision through the cross-Government short-life working group. Decisions on the parliamentary estate are for the Scottish Parliament to take. I assure members that we have begun to undertake our work.

I am disappointed that the EHRC cancelled its meeting with Scottish ministers, when we could have gone through this in detail. As I said in my recent correspondence with the EHRC, my diary remains open for further discussions on the matter. I hope that the EHRC will take up the opportunity to speak to Scottish Government ministers soon, because I am determined to ensure that the Scottish Government does the work that people expect us to do.

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): Last week, I urged the Cabinet Secretary for Justice to revoke the unlawful gender self-identification policy that has put male offenders, including murderers and sexual torturers, in women's prisons for more than a decade. Teachers are also crying out for lawful guidance to repair a decade of lobby-led ideology. Councils across the country are losing court cases. Female prisoners who are denied justice and their human rights may yet sue. An NHS Fife policy, which has now been exposed at an employment tribunal, is clearly unlawful. How much legal, financial and reputational damage will Scotland stomach before the Government stops dragging its feet?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The Scottish Government has begun its work following the Supreme Court judgment, as I have said in my answers. We have detailed, in writing to the EHRC, the decisions that we have taken on how we will move forward with implementation. As I said, the EHRC chose to cancel the meeting with Scottish Government ministers when we could have discussed that.

If the EHRC has any issues with or concerns about how we are implementing the judgment, I expect it to write back. My diary remains open for direct minister-to-EHRC discussions on the issue. We have raised the issue with it and it knows our intent. I have shared that intent and discussed it with UK Government ministers, who are doing likewise.

In the meantime, we are determined to move forward with implementation. While we await the conclusion of the code of practice consultation, we will continue the work in the Government.

FBU Survey (Maternity Leave)

2. Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the justice secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding the reported findings from a survey by the Fire Brigades Union that there is support and a need for 52 weeks of full pay for firefighters on maternity leave. (S6O-04689)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): The pay and conditions of firefighters are negotiated on a United Kingdom-wide basis through established collective bargaining procedures. The Scottish Government is not part of those negotiations, which are rightly a matter for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service as the employer. I know that the Minister for Victims and Community Safety discussed maternity leave when she met Scottish Fire Brigades Union officials on 15 May.

Maggie Chapman: The FBU's "Fight for 52" maternity survey report makes for stark reading. Firefighters are not able to decontaminate properly before going home to breastfeed or must stop breastfeeding early or not breastfeed at all, because there are no safe ways to continue doing so after returning to work. Women firefighters in Scotland also get paid more than £16,000 less in maternity pay than those in many services south of the border. Will the cabinet secretary commit to putting in place 52 weeks of full pay for firefighters on maternity leave as part of the SFRS's strategic service review programme?

Angela Constance: Maternity pay, like firefighter pay and terms and conditions, is negotiated on a UK-wide basis under well-established procedures for collective bargaining, which I know that the FBU and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service remain committed to.

The member has raised an important matter. The health and wellbeing of staff, along with their terms and conditions, are crucial matters for the employer. I am very much aware of the calls that the FBU made on 7 May. For information, the SFRS's maternity leave is currently 26 weeks on full pay and 13 weeks on statutory maternity pay, and there are some other flexibilities. I should say that the SFRS went beyond the collective agreement by extending it to support staff.

The issue is obviously very live for the FBU. It is important to say that there are particular operational procedures for pregnant and breastfeeding firefighters, particularly as they

cannot participate in operational duties because of risks of contamination.

Health and Social Care Workers

3. Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government to what extent it considers workers in the health and social care sector to be skilled. (S6O-04690)

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): The Scottish Government greatly values all in our health and social care sector and recognises that they all have the skills that are required to undertake their individual roles in the workforce. Their knowledge, compassion and dedication are essential to delivering safe and effective care, and their contribution is vital to our public services.

I agree with the Coalition of Care and Support Providers in Scotland and I reject the notion that our social care staff in particular are low-skilled workers. That term is demeaning and disrespectful, given that they provide critical and complex care to some of the most vulnerable people in Scotland.

Michelle Thomson: I absolutely echo the sentiment that the minister has expressed regarding the quite demeaning and utterly disrespectful characterisation by the Prime Minister of social care work as being low skilled. Nigel Farage's Labour Party policy of ending skilled visa routes for social care workers is short-sighted and irresponsible and will have a disproportionate impact on Scotland, where social care vacancies are rising and we face distinct demographic challenges. To that end, what further representation will the Scottish Government make to the United Kingdom Government regarding the development of a separate pathway for overseas workers to move to Scotland and contribute to our society?

Maree Todd: A key strand of the Scottish Government's migration strategy is to engage with the UK Government and to highlight the urgent need for an immigration system that meets Scotland's demographic and economic needs. The Scottish Government issued comprehensive, evidence-based proposals to the Home Office during the development of its immigration white paper, including proposals for tailored migration routes to Scotland, such as a rural visa pilot and a Scottish graduate visa. None of those proposals was included in the white paper. We continue to engage with stakeholders and will ensure that their requirements are reflected in on-going engagement with the UK Government.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I declare my interest as a practising general practitioner in the national health service. During last week's

ministerial statement on the care sector, I made the point that we should be training more people here to work in our care sector rather than relying on immigration. The minister, Maree Todd, responded:

“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.”—[*Official Report*, 14 May 2025; c 27.]

I found that response to show a shocking attitude from the minister and to be a disservice to young people, who, I believe, are capable and smart enough to be trained, despite what the minister thinks. I ask again why the Government is not willing to look at training some of our 125,000 unemployed Scots, who are desperate for jobs in our care sector.

Maree Todd: I make the point again that Sandesh Gulhane has just illustrated—that he has absolutely no understanding of the rural communities that I represent nor of the challenges that we face with respect to our demography. All over Scotland, the population is growing only because of immigration but, if we look closely at the rural areas in the Highlands, the challenge is immense. I am surrounded by schools that are closing. The ageing demographic is hitting us hard and it is hitting us first.

It is simply outrageous for Dr Gulhane to suggest that there are lots and lots of young people in the communities that I represent who are hanging around unemployed and doing nothing. It is also outrageous for him to suggest that anyone—just anyone—can be trained to work in social care. That is completely untrue. If he were to engage with the social care sector, he would understand that better.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama

4. **Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government, regarding its work to support faith and belief communities, what plans it has to join the Buddhist community in Scotland in celebrating the 90th birthday of His Holiness the Dalai Lama on 6 July. (S6O-04691)

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): The Scottish Government greatly values the rich contributions of all faith and belief communities in Scotland, including the Buddhist community. On the significant occasion of the Dalai Lama’s 90th birthday, and on behalf of the Scottish Government, I offer my warmest greetings and best wishes to the Dalai Lama and the Buddhist community in Scotland. I acknowledge their role in promoting peace, compassion and cultural diversity throughout the country.

Ross Greer: I am very grateful to the minister for her remarks on behalf of the Government, and I know that the Buddhist community will be as well.

The most important issue for Buddhists across Scotland and the world who are celebrating the Dalai Lama’s 90th birthday is the matter of his reincarnation. When the Panchen Lama died, 30 years ago this month, the Chinese Government immediately kidnapped the six-year-old boy who had been chosen as his successor and the boy’s family. It then installed its own false Panchen Lama in his place. Buddhists fear that the Chinese Government will attempt the same with the next Dalai Lama. The Scottish Government enjoys positive relations with the leaders of many faith groups, and His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama has made a number of visits to Scotland. Does the minister agree that it is for Tibetan Buddhists to choose the 15th Dalai Lama, in line with their traditions and teachings, and that the Scottish Government would recognise only a Dalai Lama who was appointed on those terms?

Kaukab Stewart: I thank Ross Greer for bringing those issues to the chamber. I am aware that he travelled to India in April and met the Dalai Lama. The Scottish Government supports the principles of religious freedom and human rights. It believes that the Tibetan Buddhist community should have the right to choose the next Dalai Lama without external interference.

Malnutrition and Dehydration

5. **Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what recent action it has taken to improve the prevention and monitoring of malnutrition and dehydration. (S6O-04692)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): The Scottish Government is committed to preventing malnutrition and dehydration, and we have established a working group to develop recommendations for prevention, early detection and early intervention. We will shortly publish a 10-year population health framework, which, alongside recommendations from the malnutrition working group, will inform a new diet and healthy weight implementation plan. The Scottish Government is also supporting Health Improvement Scotland to review the 2014 food, fluid and nutritional care standards, which aim to ensure that everyone receiving care gets safe, effective and person-centred nutritional care.

Carol Mochan: Malnutrition is believed to be on the increase across Scotland, particularly in our vulnerable communities. As well as that being totally unacceptable, it places significant pressures and costs on our healthcare system. Many families, including in my South Scotland region, face high costs, poor food availability and

significant inequalities, all of which limit their access to nutritious foods.

The cabinet secretary referred to the malnutrition short-life working group. It was commissioned to recommend a framework for the prevention of malnutrition and dehydration more than two years ago, but we have had no detail to date. When will the framework be published?

Neil Gray: As I said in response to Carol Mochan's first question, we will be developing a diet and healthy weight implementation plan, which will be informed by the working group and by the population health framework, which is coming imminently.

There is a significant amount of work going on to support people in communities to prevent the issues that Carol Mochan has rightly raised as being of concern at the moment. That includes work on our five family payments: the Scottish child payment, best start foods and the three best start grants, which, together, could be worth more than £10,000 by the time an eligible child turns six. We also have healthy start vitamins, which contain vitamin D and are provided free to all pregnant women throughout their pregnancies.

We are taking a number of steps to address the poverty-related drivers of poor nutrition and malnutrition that Carol Mochan speaks of, as well as responding with the framework, which will come imminently.

Immigration (Care Sector)

6. Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide further details of its initial assessment of the potential impact of the United Kingdom Government's immigration plans on Scotland's care sector. (S6O-04693)

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): Our initial assessment is damning. Plans to end the international recruitment of care workers are short-sighted and will be devastating for the care sector in Scotland, which relies on international talent, particularly in rural and island communities. The number of health and care worker visa applications has already fallen since the 2023 restrictions on bringing dependants, and Labour now wants to reduce that number further.

Workers from overseas have filled and will continue to fill vital roles in the sector. The UK Government's immigration white paper completely fails to account for Scotland's distinct demographic needs, demonstrating why Scotland needs a tailored approach to migration.

Marie McNair: The chief executive of Scottish Care, Donald Macaskill, has described the move as

"deeply concerning and disturbing for the Scottish care sector."

He is right. The UK Government's efforts to go to the right of Farage on immigration policy will be extremely damaging to the care sector. Does the minister agree that this is further evidence that Scotland needs the full powers of independence, to maximise the capacity and skills of our social care workforce?

Maree Todd: I agree whole-heartedly. Scottish Care estimates that there are 15,000 to 20,000 international care workers in Scotland. The UK Government's plans to end the recruitment of care workers are short-sighted and will be devastating for the care sector in Scotland, which relies on international talent—in particular, as I have emphasised, in rural and island communities. Migrants make a huge contribution to Scotland. We need a migration system that meets Scotland's distinct needs, yet the white paper completely fails to account for them.

Dental Practices (Support)

7. Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to support dental practices. (S6O-04694)

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): Our significant investment in national health service dental payment reform in November 2023 provided the sector with a stable platform from which to move forward. Official statistics show that NHS dental practices and dental services are performing well under the new system, with more than 4.1 million courses of treatment delivered to patients in 2024.

We have been clear that payment reform must be only the first step in ensuring the sustainability of our dental services, which is why our programme for government sets out a number of actions to improve the NHS dental workforce now and in the future.

Sharon Dowey: The Scottish National Party promised to abolish NHS dental charges. However, patients in Ayrshire cannot register with NHS practices and are being forced to go private. I contacted 24 dental practices in the area, and not a single one is currently accepting new NHS patients.

What is the point of having free dental care if people cannot access it? What is the minister doing to fix that? Has the Government increased the number of funded university places for dentistry? What concrete steps is the Government

taking to ensure that patients can access the free, high-quality NHS dentistry that they were promised?

Maree Todd: The programme for government sets out key actions to improve the NHS dental workforce, backed by £3 million of funding in 2025-26. We will expand domestic dental student numbers by 7 per cent from September 2025, supporting our annual dental workforce pipeline. We also plan to launch an innovative new training package that will support international dentists to join the NHS Scotland workforce, and we will work with NHS boards to refine the financial incentives to support dentists to move to work in more rural areas—those “golden hellos” that we have mentioned several times in the chamber.

First Minister’s Question Time

12:01

Knife Crime (Young People)

1. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): Last Saturday, 16-year-old Kayden Moy was stabbed to death on Irvine beach. Less than 24 hours earlier, on Portobello beach, a 17-year-old was, allegedly, stabbed. Police Scotland says that the number of serious assaults committed by teenagers has risen by 600 per cent in the past five years. Two teenagers died and 11 were injured during a spate of knife incidents involving youths in the past two months.

Young people do not feel safe. The system does not protect them. What does John Swinney have to say to parents who tell me that they are terrified every time their son or daughter leaves the house? (S6F-04090)

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Before I call the First Minister, I remind members that, in relation to this question and to question 6, there are a number of active cases in Scotland relating to knife crime and those are sub judice. For that reason, and because of the age of many of those involved, I would be grateful if members would not refer to details of any criminal proceedings in relation to those incidents.

The First Minister (John Swinney): First, I express my sympathy to the family of Kayden Moy. It is a tragedy that they are having to come to terms with, and one incident is one incident too many. The disorder and the violence at Irvine beach and in Portobello were totally unacceptable. As you have indicated, Presiding Officer, Police Scotland is pursuing the relevant incidents.

There are three approaches that the Government is taking in relation to knife crime. First, we have education programmes on the danger and the unacceptability of carrying a knife and taking part in violence. Secondly, there is effective punishment when offences are committed. Thirdly, there is sustained school and community engagement with young people to make sure that we create responsible citizens in Scotland. Most of Scotland’s young people are responsible citizens.

We have seen a sustained fall in the levels of knife crime in the past 15 years, but I repeat that one incident is one incident too many, and we will act to eradicate such incidents.

Russell Findlay: Young people do not feel safe because of the sickening rise in youth violence, but it is not happening in a vacuum. It can be linked directly to the policies and actions of the

Government. The Scottish National Party has systematically weakened the justice system, especially in youth justice. It seeks to make excuses for those who commit harm, and those who commit crimes are told that there are no consequences for their actions, which means that there is no longer any meaningful deterrent. That inevitably fuels youth violence.

That misguided thinking is at the heart of SNP policy making. Surely John Swinney can see that it is not working and it is time to take a tougher approach.

The First Minister: As I indicated in my earlier answer, there are three elements to the approach that the Government is taking. Great importance is attached to education programmes on the danger and the unacceptability of carrying a knife and being involved in violence.

The mentors in violence prevention programme, which is directed through Education Scotland, is delivered in all 32 local authority areas, and young people are involved in that work. We support the work of the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit in proactively engaging with young people to avoid incidents of violence. That is in addition to the work that we do to support Medics Against Violence to engage young people in the work that YouthLink Scotland does to deliver the no knives, better lives training to hundreds of practitioners and young people around the country.

Proactive work is being done to ensure that the issues that Russell Findlay has raised are addressed, but there is also firmness in the justice system when incidents take place. It remains open to prosecutors to prosecute a young person if they have committed a serious offence. Our sustained focus on prevention and early intervention is a core part of our strategy, but steps can also be taken in the criminal justice system to bring people to justice. I expect the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service and the judicial system to consider all those issues in addressing any cases that emerge.

Russell Findlay: It seems that John Swinney will not accept that his Government bears any responsibility for rising youth violence, but let us look at the SNP's policies. It will not exclude disruptive and dangerous pupils from schools. Official guidelines prevent teachers from being able to instil basic classroom discipline.

John Swinney talks of firmness in the justice system, but the SNP passed a law banning under-18s from being sent to prison, even if they commit murder, and it decided that more young criminals should not be prosecuted in court. Instead, they are sent to children's panels, where their interests are the priority and victims are ignored. There are also the perverse under-25 sentencing guideline,

which prevents criminals—adults, by any definition—from being jailed.

That approach is weak, it is reckless and it is costing lives. Is it not time for John Swinney to rethink those harmful policies?

The First Minister: I must correct Mr Findlay on what he has said to the Parliament today. The sentencing guideline for young people, which has been developed by the Scottish Sentencing Council, makes it clear that all sentencing options, including imprisonment, remain open to the court. It is absolutely vital that that is understood by the public.

Our approach must be about education, early intervention and prevention. That is why we invest so much in measures such as the work of the Violence Reduction Unit and the mentors in violence prevention programme. We undertake that work, and, over a 15-year period, we have seen a sustained fall in knife crime in our society.

However, I come back to what I said in my first answer. One incident—one tragedy—is one too many, but it is vital that it is understood, particularly by those who might perpetrate such offences, that it remains a possibility that imprisonment can be imposed. Parliament should properly understand the requirements of the law.

Russell Findlay: If John Swinney will not listen to me, perhaps he will listen to the parents of victims. A mum whose teenage daughter was subjected to a horrific assault, which was filmed, said:

"My girl cannot return to school or leave home. She lives in fear while her attacker faces no punishment. The system is broken."

The mum of a teenage boy who was subjected to a homophobic attack, which was filmed—his attackers faced no consequences—said:

"We cannot come to terms with what is happening in Scotland. Serious crime is being downgraded. The clear message to us and our son is that people can do what they want to him because he just doesn't matter enough."

A mum who was too fearful to include details of her child's ordeal said:

"Many of the bad kids are in gangs and know that there are zero consequences for their actions. Good kids are paying a heavy price. Who is going to stand up and do something that will actually make an impact?"

Parents want a return to discipline in schools and deterrence in the justice system, so why will John Swinney not listen to them?

The First Minister: I fear that Russell Findlay has not been listening to my answers, in which I have set out that a combination of proactive and preventative work is undertaken by a number of very successful organisations, which, since 2008-09, has resulted in a 69 per cent decrease in

emergency hospital admissions because of assault with a sharp object.

That is the result of us tackling knife crime in our society. That prevention work is having an effect. Scotland is a safer country today than it has been in the past, but I return to my point that one incident is one incident too many.

The work on prevention is absolutely vital, but the public cannot look at this exchange and believe that there are no consequences for carrying a knife or for carrying out an incident. I repeat: the Scottish Sentencing Council guideline for young people indicates that all sentencing options, including imprisonment, remain open to the court. That is what the law says and that is what the guideline says. People need to understand the consequences of carrying a knife and committing an offence. There is a risk of imprisonment. I encourage people to follow the advice issued on Wednesday by Police Scotland, which was that under no circumstances should young people carry knives in our society. It is dangerous, it is damaging and young people should not do it.

Knife Crime (Young People)

2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): Like millions across Scotland, I was devastated to hear of the fatal stabbing of 16-year-old Kayden Moy over the weekend. Kayden was a beloved son from East Kilbride whose young life, which was full of promise, was stolen in an instant. Tragically, his is not the first such death, and many parents fear that, due to a culture of violence that is going unchallenged, it will not be the last. Just one day before Kayden's death, another young man was stabbed, this time at Portobello.

The statistics are damning. The number of young people being caught with knives is rising, with a 15 per cent increase among 11 to 15-year-olds in only five years. Many parents are rightly worried. They fear that their children are not safe and are asking how this Government has allowed the situation to get so out of control.

The First Minister (John Swinney): As I indicated in my answers to Mr Findlay, the Government takes a combination of measures in relation to these issues.

First, we are proactively taking forward education programmes on the danger and unacceptability of carrying a knife or taking part in violence. That advice was reinforced by Assistant Chief Constable Tim Mairs in his public statement on Wednesday. Secondly, effective punishment is in place when offences are committed. Thirdly, there is sustained school and community engagement with young people to ensure that we create responsible citizens in our society.

As I indicated, I share the devastation about the loss of young lives as a consequence of any violence in our society. Mr Sarwar and I share that devastation. I assure him that the Government will take forward a combination of early intervention and education measures, but we will also resort to punishment, if required, when offences have been committed. That is the approach that the Government will take and which it will work with Police Scotland to deliver in our communities.

Anas Sarwar: John Swinney ignores the wider systemic challenges. The crisis did not emerge overnight; it has been years in the making. Since the Scottish National Party created Police Scotland, we have lost 800 officers. Since 2017, the SNP has cut 730 officers from local divisions and shut countless local police stations.

We are now hearing horrifying reports of children—primary school children—being caught carrying knives. That is not a coincidence. The SNP has cut the number of police officers and shut police stations. It has decimated youth work services and has so badly mismanaged our justice system that 500 police officers are stuck in courtrooms every day, with 90 per cent of them not even giving evidence. The SNP has broken our national health service to the point where police officers are stuck in accident and emergency departments escorting patients when they should be on the streets, fighting crime. Is what we are seeing now not a direct consequence of SNP decisions and failures?

The First Minister: In what I say to Mr Sarwar I will, inevitably, rely on material that I have already used in my answers to Russell Findlay. Since 2008-09—which precedes the creation of Police Scotland—there has been a 69 per cent decrease in emergency hospital admissions due to assault with a sharp object. Over a long period—during which we undertook the reform of the police service and the creation of Police Scotland—Scottish society has become safer.

We have recorded crime data that shows that there has been a 55 per cent fall in attempted murder and serious assault, with homicides remaining at a near-record low in our society today. In addition to that recorded crime data, we also have the latest Scottish crime and justice survey, which captures incidents that are not reported to the police as well as those that are. That reveals that crime has fallen by 53 per cent since 2008-09.

I totally understand the points that Mr Sarwar puts to me. However—and I go back to my point that even one incident is absolutely unacceptable and devastating, so I do not diminish that at all—the evidence indicates that, overall, Scottish society is safer today than it was before we created Police Scotland. That is the outcome that

has been achieved as a consequence of the reform that the Government put in place to create a single police service that serves every community in our country.

Anas Sarwar: I think that John Swinney should get out and speak to some of the parents directly and hear what they feel about SNP justice.

There are no more powerful words on this serious issue than those of mum Vicky Donald, and I think that it is important that we end on her words. Her daughter was just 13 when she was viciously assaulted on the way to school. Today, in the *Daily Record*, Vicky has written an open letter to John Swinney, saying:

“this is not just a tragedy. It is a failure. A failure of the systems, structures and leadership meant to protect our children ... This isn't about reputation or reports. It's about reality. It's about life and death.”

She asks:

“When will the Scottish Government stand up and say enough is enough?”

She asks:

“When will you stop hiding behind procedures and start putting real consequences in place for violent behaviour among youth?”

She asks:

“When will early intervention become the priority, and not just a buzzword?”

She demands:

“Stop waiting for more funerals. Do something now.”

The First Minister: Mr Sarwar invites me to speak to the parents. That is, of course, what I have done, because in January I convened a gathering, at the instigation of Vicky Donald, who came to it, with leaders of all political parties. Pauline McNeill attended on behalf of the Scottish Labour Party. Colleagues from all parties were there, and I welcome that engagement around the table. I have sat with parents and listened very directly to their feedback.

I have seen the letter from Vicky Donald and I have replied to her this morning. One of the points that I made in the letter is that, although this is of no comfort to victims of violence and their families, knife crime has fallen and the number of homicide victims aged 13 to 19 years has decreased by 79 per cent. That is some of the progress that I think has come about because of the prevention work that the Government has been taking forward.

When it comes to that prevention work, we have a number of different elements. Education Scotland delivers the mentors in violence prevention programme, which is delivered in all local authority areas in the country. I welcome the engagement of schools and local authorities. I have seen that programme in action in my

constituency, and it is powerful and emphatic. The young people themselves become the advocates for violence prevention.

We also have the work of Medics Against Violence, which engages with young people in youth clubs on the consequences of violence, and YouthLink Scotland takes the no knives, better lives training to hundreds of practitioners.

We are also supporting the outstanding work, which is internationally renowned, of the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit to expand its reach across Scotland, from Glasgow, Dundee and Edinburgh to now Ayrshire.

I say that in the hope of reassuring Mr Sarwar, members of the public and Vicky Donald that the Government is very focused on the issue.

I reiterate the point that I made to Mr Findlay a moment ago. There are punishments available that the courts can decide to apply, and they can involve imprisonment, so nobody should be under any illusion that there are no consequences to being involved in the unacceptable actions of knife crime or violence.

That will be the sustained approach that the Government takes forward, and I will be very happy to engage, as I engaged with all political parties in January, on what we can collectively consider to address the issue. There will be a follow-up discussion on these questions in June, which the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs will convene. In the light of these issues, I will attend that discussion as well, and I invite other colleagues and members of the youth work sector to be involved in that, too, to make sure that we leave no stone unturned in addressing the issues, because one case is one case too many.

Scotland's Carbon Emissions (Climate Change Committee Report)

3. Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): The Climate Change Committee report that was published this week shows that Scotland's carbon emissions are on a disastrous trajectory. The report tells us that

“immediate action at pace and scale”

is needed to cut emissions so that Scotland can meet its new carbon budgets and build a path to net zero that creates good jobs and saves people money. That means that we need a proper plan for warmer homes that are cheaper to heat, and real investment to make public transport available and affordable to get people out of their cars. The First Minister often tells us how proud he is of balancing Scotland's financial budget every year, but what immediate actions will he take to balance Scotland's first carbon budget?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I welcome the advice that we have received from the Climate

Change Committee, which the Government will carefully consider before setting out our proposed carbon budgets in secondary legislation, in due course.

I assure Lorna Slater that the Government is absolutely committed to meeting its target of net zero emissions by 2045. We recently put a number of vital climate measures in the budget, which I was pleased that the Green Party was able to support. We have added to that another measure to make public transport more affordable, which is the abolishment of peak rail fares from 1 September. I hope that that is taken as an example of good faith regarding what the Government is trying to do to prioritise action on climate.

Lorna Slater: The First Minister's Government has spent the past year ripping up policies that are designed to tackle the climate emergency. The First Minister knows that delaying action on climate actually costs more in the long run. Analysis from Global Witness shows that climate damage is already costing Scottish households £3,000 every year on average, while multinational fossil fuel giants are still raking in billions of pounds of profit. Unless polluters pay, communities will be worse off and the super-rich will keep getting richer. So that we can invest now—not only to save money later but to create green jobs and opportunities that will benefit Scotland—will the First Minister support policies to tax polluters?

The First Minister: As I said in my earlier answer, the Government will announce its plans to respond to the Climate Change Committee in due course. I very much welcome its contribution.

We are implementing a range of measures. For example, we made a commitment to create 6,000 public charge points for electric vehicles, which helps with the shift to electric vehicles, and we exceeded that target two years early.

Yesterday, along with the Secretary of State for Scotland, I had the pleasure to be at the announcement of a regional selective assistance grant—which goes alongside investment from the Scottish National Investment Bank and the National Wealth Fund of the United Kingdom Government—for the green aircraft engine developer ZeroAvia, at the Advanced Manufacturing Innovation District in Renfrewshire. That is a splendid example of investment in new technology that reduces emissions, and it can help to create 350 jobs in Renfrewshire, which is a step in the right direction.

Average Earnings (Future Economy Scotland)

4. Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what

assessment the Scottish Government has made, regarding any implications for its work to grow Scotland's economy, of analysis from Future Economy Scotland indicating that average earnings in Scotland are £15,000 less per year than they would have been if wages had not flatlined since the financial crisis. (S6F-04115)

The First Minister (John Swinney): Scotland's economy has been robust despite significant economic challenges. Since 2007, Scotland's gross domestic product per person has, overall, increased by more than the United Kingdom's has. Our labour market remains resilient. Our programme for government includes measures to support economic security and growth, but it is right to recognise the effect on Scottish living standards of UK Government austerity and damaging decisions on issues such as migration and Brexit, which have created the circumstances that are accounted for by the Future Economy Scotland report.

Willie Coffey: Future Economy Scotland's report lays bare the sheer cost of the union and Westminster economic mismanagement. That is a vast sum for Scots, who could have put that money towards saving for their first homes, keeping those homes warm, feeding their families or saving for retirement. Does the First Minister agree that that is a clear indication that the union, and Westminster austerity, which is now embraced by Labour, are not working for Scotland? Will he outline what his Government is doing to combat that?

The First Minister: It is beyond question that austerity and Brexit have reduced the living standards of people in Scotland. That is an inescapable reality. Of course, all of that was presided over, ushered in, nurtured and coaxed into reality by the Conservative Government. Colossal damage has been done to individuals and their livelihoods.

The Scottish Government is taking forward a number of measures to tackle the cost of living challenges that people face in Scotland. Council tax is about 30 per cent lower on average than it is in England, and water bills are 20 per cent lower. We have free prescriptions in Scotland. Families who send their children to Scottish universities do not pay tuition fees, and we have just added to that the abolition of peak rail fares for good.

The Scottish Government is acting within our powers and responsibilities to tackle the very issues that Mr Coffey puts to me, but I am absolutely certain that Scotland's position would be enhanced if we had the full powers of independence, which would enable us to deliver a better economic future, just as many of our neighbours are able to do.

“Lessons from Singapore for Scotland’s Economy”

5. Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government’s response is to the Hunter Foundation report, “Lessons from Singapore for Scotland’s Economy”. (S6F-04113)

The First Minister (John Swinney): I welcome the report from the Hunter Foundation and share the aim to boost economic growth and secure a prosperous future for the next generation of Scots. I particularly agree with Sir Tom Hunter’s comments that we in Scotland need a separate immigration policy that suits our circumstances and can help to boost our workforce. I hope that the United Kingdom Government will take those calls into consideration.

Graham Simpson: The First Minister will no doubt have been delighted that Sir Tom Hunter has hinted that he, the First Minister, is paid too little, but Sir Tom cannot get everything right. He wants radical action to reverse what he calls Scotland’s “managed decline”. He references falling standards in education for the past two decades, some of the worst health outcomes in Europe and a demographic ticking time bomb.

The report also highlights how Scotland continues to punish the entrepreneurial community with high tax rates. We have a top tax rate of 48 per cent, compared with just 24 per cent in booming Singapore. Does the First Minister not recognise that lower, simpler taxes can boost Government revenues, inspire innovation and lead to extra investment?

The First Minister: An area of policy that I have been closely associated with throughout my parliamentary career is that of entrepreneurial activity. By anyone’s estimation, Scotland now has a supportive innovation and entrepreneurship system. The Techscaler programme that the Deputy First Minister leads is generating significant economic benefits and wealth in Scotland.

The key challenge is how we generate sufficient economic activity to support our investment in people and public services. Part of the correct approach in Scotland is to ensure that we raise the revenue to invest in our public services. The position that Mr Simpson’s party’s front-bench members advocate is to reduce public expenditure by £1 billion. The Conservatives often shout at me about it, but what they do not shout at me is how they will reduce public expenditure without harming the people of Scotland. They do not tell us the hard realities. If the Conservative Party is prepared to share that detail with the public, I will be very pleased to listen to it. However, what is clear to me is that the Scottish Government is

taking the right steps to raise revenue, invest in our public services and improve outcomes for the people of Scotland.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): The majority of people already pay less tax in Scotland than they would elsewhere in the UK. By asking those with the broadest shoulders to contribute a bit more, we can fund vital services that benefit us all. Can the First Minister say more on how our progressive taxation system helps to provide Scots with the most comprehensive social contract anywhere in the UK?

The First Minister: It is a matter of fact that more than half of Scottish taxpayers continue to pay less income tax in this financial year—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: —than they would if they lived elsewhere in the United Kingdom. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: First Minister, please sit down. I ask members who are shouting from their seats to desist.

First Minister, please continue.

The First Minister: In order that members can hear properly what I say, I repeat that it is a fact that more than half of Scottish taxpayers continue to pay less income tax in 2025-26 than they would if they lived elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

According to the Scottish Fiscal Commission, the policy choices that we have made will raise up to an additional £1.7 billion in this financial year. That will help to pay for the best cost of living package of support in the United Kingdom, which includes free prescriptions, an expansive early learning and childcare offer, free eye care tests, free bus travel for 2.3 million people and, of course, free higher education.

If the Conservatives want to get rid of the overwhelming majority of what I have just set out, that is up to them, but I am not going to follow their advice.

Knife Crime

6. Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the First Minister, in light of recent reported incidents, how the Scottish Government is working to prevent knife crime. (S6F-04110)

The First Minister (John Swinney): As I indicated in my earlier answers, my heartfelt sympathies go out to all those affected by the appalling knife crime incidents in Irvine and Portobello over the past weekend. Since 2023, we

have invested more than £6 million in our violence prevention framework, which supports a range of targeted prevention and early intervention activity in schools and hospitals, and across communities, as well as work with partners to tackle violence and its harms.

Foyso Choudhury: Following the tragic death of a 16-year-old boy from East Kilbride last week, three young people have now been killed in stabbing incidents in the past year. Since March, there have been 11 stabbings involving young people, including multiple instances in Portobello. Such incidents are destroying lives and traumatising communities, and the problem seems to be getting worse. Last year, the police seized 248 weapons in schools. Will the First Minister intervene? Will he request that the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit incentivise its efforts? Will he say that enough is enough? Will his Government deliver youth work and policing that reach out to young people to help to prevent further incidents?

The First Minister: Those are the actions that we are taking. As I indicated in my earlier answer to Mr Sarwar, the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit is internationally acknowledged to have deployed very significant and effective interventions aimed at reducing the level of knife crime in our society. I would not for a moment want members to consider that I do not accept, in any way, the seriousness and significance of these issues. One incident is one incident too many. We have tried and tested methods of addressing the issue of knife crime, and we must make sure that those methods remain effective in all that we do, to ensure that young people and communities are protected.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): As the First Minister is aware, Kayden Moy from East Kilbride tragically lost his life at the weekend, and the community there is reeling. Investigations are on-going, and the police must be given the space to carry out their work. I ask people who have information that might be relevant to the investigation, including anyone who was at Irvine beach on Saturday, to contact the police.

Will the First Minister confirm how the programme for government will focus resources on the justice system and on diverting young people from antisocial behaviour and offending, so that we can prevent future tragedies? Does he agree that the work of the no knives, better lives programme and the Medics Against Violence organisation is crucial in preventing violence in the first place?

The First Minister: I agree with Collette Stevenson about the methods that are being used to address the issue. We need to make sure that they remain effective. We must be open to challenging the content of those programmes, to

ensure that they are effective. As I have referred to, very clear words were issued by Assistant Chief Constable Tim Mairs on 20 May, when he said:

“The key message to children and young people is they shouldn’t be carrying knives—it is absolutely the wrong thing to do.”

He also said:

“the tragic consequences at the weekend demonstrate how horrific, in a second, the fact that you’re carrying a knife with you can be, and how it can end lives immediately. The clear message is do not carry weapons—do not carry knives.”

That is at the heart of the work of the violence prevention framework for Scotland, the cashback for communities programme and the other measures that emphasise that no one should carry a knife.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I have listened to what the First Minister has said in a number of his answers today, but he needs to acknowledge the real and concerning trend that we are seeing in Scotland. The number of violent crimes among young people in Edinburgh has doubled in one year alone. Last year, 529 alleged offences were reported to the Scottish Children’s Reporter Administration, with children as young as eight having been reported for alleged violent incidents here, in the capital. According to Police Scotland, a disturbing trend of gang culture is also developing. What impact does the First Minister believe significant cuts to youth services and centres have on the issue, and why is that trend not being acknowledged today?

The First Minister: As I have indicated in a number of my answers, the Government is investing in a sustained number of programmes through YouthLink Scotland, the violence reduction unit and the mentors in the violence reduction programme, to address those issues. They are serious and significant issues, but, in the longer term, there has been a significant fall in knife crime. We have to ensure that the programmes that we have in place remain effective and impactful in addressing the circumstances that Mr Briggs puts to me.

The Presiding Officer: We move to general and constituency supplementary questions.

European Union-United Kingdom Deal (Fisheries)

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Once again, Scotland’s fishers have been utterly betrayed by a Westminster Government in London—this time by Labour and its EU-UK deal. How will the Scottish Government continue to support fishers, particularly in my constituency of Banffshire and Buchan Coast, and will the First

Minister give an assurance that his Government will always put Scotland's fisheries first?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Not for the first time, the fishing communities of Scotland have been judged to be expendable—this time by a Labour Government and the previous time by a Conservative Government. The people of Scotland know that, whether it is a Labour Government or a Tory Government, the UK Government will sell out the Scottish fishing industry. My Government will support the industry, and we will do what we can to assist the communities to overcome the obstacles that are put in their way by the deals made by Labour and Conservative Governments. Of course, the only way in which the fishing industry in Scotland will be properly protected is with the powers of independence.

North East Scotland College Funding

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): North East Scotland College calculates that it has been underfunded by around £30 million over the past decade. That has resulted in fewer places for domestic students and threatens the north-east's economic future. The college says that the funding system is

“significantly disadvantaging the people and employers of the north-east”.

The Scottish Funding Council's recent funding allocation includes a substantial rural premium for nine colleges but not for NESCol. Will the First Minister urgently contact the SFC about restoring the rurality premium before it is too late?

The First Minister (John Swinney): As Mr Kerr will know, the Scottish Funding Council operates at arm's length from Government. That is what the law requires. The Government makes an allocation to the funding council, which has seen a 2 per cent uplift in the resource allocation for colleges in this year's budget. It is then for the funding council to take such decisions independently of Government, which is what the law requires.

Here we are again, with a Conservative member coming to the chamber and pressing me about the public finances. Graham Simpson, Liam Kerr's colleague, who is sitting two seats along from him, just asked me to cut taxes by £1 billion, and now Liam Kerr wants me to increase public expenditure. That demonstrates the incoherence of the Conservative Party—the incoherence between two members sitting just two seats along from each other on the Conservative benches. They are utterly and completely incoherent.

Stagecoach Drivers (Pay)

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): Is the First Minister aware that Stagecoach west

Scotland's drivers are the lowest paid of any Stagecoach bus drivers across the United Kingdom? The drivers have simply tried to stand up for themselves, but the company has tried to reduce their leave and cancelled all existing leave over a planned strike period, which has caused much distress to everyone. That is just one of the many tactics that Stagecoach is using to prevent ordinary workers from having any say in their conditions. Does the First Minister agree that those drivers deserve a fair pay deal?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The services that the bus drivers provide are critical for the mobility of the constituents that Carol Mochan represents. I want to avoid any possible disruption to the delivery of transport services, including bus services, in the area. I encourage all parties to work together to find an agreement that will avoid the inconvenience for members of the public that Carol Mochan has raised and enable services to operate as planned.

Immigration (Scottish Care Report)

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): A new report from Scottish Care shows the immense contribution of immigration to Scotland's care sector. Will the First Minister respond to concerns raised in the report that Westminster's approach to migration could end up collapsing the care sector in Scotland? Will he commit his Government to rejecting the disgraceful anti-immigration rhetoric of Nigel Farage and those who seem determined to imitate him?

The First Minister (John Swinney): On Tuesday, I convened a discussion involving representatives of a broad range of sectors in Scotland across social care, the national health service, food and drink, engineering and construction and education to discuss the United Kingdom Government's white paper on immigration. It was absolutely chilling to hear the anxiety that was expressed by those in different sectors in Scotland about the issues arising from the fact that we have a shrinking working-age population, which we need migration to boost.

Scottish Care gave me a briefing paper and it cites a survey of its members indicating that 26 per cent, or 11,294, of the total social care workforce are international workers. How the United Kingdom Government believes that we will be able to operate social care services with the type of hostile approach that is contained in its white paper is beyond me.

There needs to be serious engagement about the implications of the white paper, because it will be devastating for countless sectors of the Scottish economy. The Scottish Government will not, in any way, shape or form, engage in the type of rhetoric that the Prime Minister engaged in a

week past Monday. His rhetoric was absolutely appalling, and it represented the wrong policy position. We need migration in order to boost our working-age population. That will be the sustained position of the Scottish Government.

Cancer Diagnosis (Young People)

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I want to raise the tragic case of Isla Sneddon, who died at the age of 17 after a six-month battle with cancer. She first went to her general practitioner in 2022 with lumps in her breast. In June 2024, the GP made an urgent referral to the breast clinic for a biopsy, but it was downgraded to routine status. By the time that she was diagnosed, she had a sarcoma in the lining of her heart and the cancer had spread from her breast to her lungs and lymph nodes. If she had been an adult, the biopsy would have been urgent, but it was downgraded because she was under 18. Will the First Minister ensure that there is explicit guidance that suspicion of cancer in children and young people must be treated with the same urgency as cases in adults?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am very sorry to hear the details that Jackie Baillie has shared with me about Isla Sneddon, and I express my sympathies to her family. Jackie Baillie makes a compelling case. I will take the issue away and raise it with the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care. We will pursue the issue of clinical guidance, because I understand the significance of the point that Jackie Baillie has raised.

Football Disturbances

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): Does the First Minister agree that, over the weekend, we saw deplorable scenes to do with football, not least in the Glasgow Cross area, which Kaukab Stewart and I share? Does he have any suggestions about how we can prevent that in the future, for example by ensuring that the clubs take more responsibility?

The First Minister (John Swinney): There were unacceptable incidents at the weekend. I completely understand the desire of football fans to celebrate the achievements and the performance of their teams. However, incidents such as the one that took place at Tannadice, where a chair was thrown at an Aberdeen Football Club player—it seems that that emerged from the Aberdeen supporters' stands—or the disorder that took place at Glasgow Cross, on the boundary of Mr Mason's constituency, are totally unacceptable.

Celebrations are fine, but they should not inconvenience other people, and they should not harm other people in any way, shape or form. We will work closely with Police Scotland and the football authorities, and the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs will shortly hold a

discussion with key partners to discuss those issues and ensure that we challenge everybody, including the clubs, to do everything possible to ensure that football is safe for supporters, and that we minimise disruption for local communities.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time. There will be a short suspension to allow those leaving the chamber and the gallery to do so.

12:46

Meeting suspended.

12:48

On resuming—

Tall Ships Races 2025 (Aberdeen)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-17330, in the name of Kevin Stewart, on Aberdeen welcoming the tall ships races. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

I call Jackie Dunbar to open the debate on behalf of Kevin Stewart.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes the return of the Tall Ships Races to Aberdeen from 19 to 22 July 2025; recognises that the event, which will see over 50 tall ships and over 1,500 international crew arriving in the harbour in the Aberdeen Central constituency, sees the ships coming back to the Granite City for the first time in 28 years, and will be the largest fleet of the 2025 races; understands that there will be a plethora of entertainment for visitors and residents alike to partake in while the ships are berthed in Aberdeen, including public access to the ships themselves, parades, cultural events, open-air concerts, headlined by Deacon Blue, Kaiser Chiefs, Ministry of Sound Classical, Tide Lines and Callum Bowie, and much more; believes that this has the potential to be the biggest event in Aberdeen in a generation, with the opportunity to create a lasting legacy in the city, and hopes that it is a tremendous success that brings a lot of joy and excitement to all those who join in with the festivities.

12:48

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): As you can see, Presiding Officer, I am not Kevin Stewart. He has asked me to lead his debate and to pass on his apologies for not being here today, due to his illness. I am sure that the chamber will join me in wishing him a speedy recovery.

The following are his words, and I am happy to use them, although I think that some of them will be a bit of a tongue twister.

It is with immense pride that I welcome the tall ships race to Aberdeen. For Aberdeen, the arrival of the tall ships is more than just a visit; it is a homecoming. The homecoming of the tall ships coincides with the 200th anniversary of the Aberdeen Line, which was founded by George Thompson in 1825. Aberdeen's shipyards were the home of the Aberdeen clippers, the fastest sailing ships ever built.

The first Aberdeen clipper, and the first ship to sport the famous "Aberdeen bow", was the Scottish Maid, which was designed and built in 1839. Her revolutionary bow was so extraordinary that the ship was built back to front, with the Aberdeen bow hidden under a fake normal bow until the day that she was launched. The new bow

proved its worth, and the iconic design of the Aberdeen tea clipper was born.

Over the next 30 years, Aberdeen tea clippers reigned supreme as the fastest ships to sail the seas. Speed records fell with every new ship that was launched until the greatest of all the Aberdeen tea clippers, the Thermopylae, was launched in 1868 from Aberdeen's Walter Hood & Co shipyard. Her reign as the fastest ship on the seas would not go unchallenged, however, and just a year later her great rival, the north-east-designed Cutty Sark, was launched.

That set the stage for the greatest tall ship race in history—the great tea clipper race of 1872. It was a race between Inverbervie design and Aberdonian workmanship. The two ships set off together from Shanghai on 18 June, and the Cutty Sark steadily built up a lead of 400 miles. However, like her namesake nightdress, the Cutty Sark cut a little too close to the wind, and she broke her rudder in a storm while passing between Java and Sumatra. Determined not to be defeated, the crew of the Cutty Sark cobbled together a new rudder from scrap iron and set off in pursuit of the Thermopylae. However, despite the efforts of the Cutty Sark's crew, they could not pass the Thermopylae, which arrived back in London first and retained her crown as the fastest ship in the world.

The great battle of the Aberdeen tea clippers rightly stands as the greatest tall ship race in history, and it was in the spirit of that race that today's tall ships races event began. Although today's event is not a commercial venture for tea, it carries forward the same spirit of competition, adventure and the pursuit of excellence.

To those who are unfamiliar with it, I can say that the tall ships races is not just a spectacle but an international event, organised by Sail Training International, that is designed to promote youth development and international friendship through sail training. It brings together magnificent vessels from across the globe, crewed by young folk, many of whom are experiencing life at sea for the first time. That includes young folk from Aberdeen who serve as crew aboard the racing ships and learn seamanship, teamwork and resilience, while forging bonds that transcend borders and cultures. This year, one such young person is Kevin Stewart's constituent Noah Tait, who will be competing aboard the Dutch schooner, the Gulden Leeuw, in the race across the North Sea from Aberdeen and to Kristiansand.

Several of the larger sailing ships also serve as naval training vessels, with cadets on board from as far afield as Peru and Oman taking part. Sadly, the perils of the sea remain today, and my thoughts are with the families of the two young navy cadets of the Mexican naval training ship the

Cuauhtémoc who died when their ship hit the Brooklyn Bridge as she set sail across the Atlantic to join the tall ships races.

This year's races will begin at Le Havre and have four stages, beginning at Dunkirk, Aberdeen, Kristiansand and Esbjerg. The tall ships are due to arrive in Aberdeen on 19 July. They will spend four days there, where there will be a packed schedule of events during the long weekend to celebrate the tall ships and Aberdeen's own maritime heritage.

The Aberdeen sea cadets will be on hand to showcase the heritage of the Aberdeen clippers, but a wide array of other events is also planned. They include TechFest, which will focus on Aberdeen's engineering heritage with hands-on science, technology, engineering and mathematics activities. North East Scotland College and the Scottish maritime academy will be in attendance to promote maritime careers as well as their popular trainee deckhand course and officer of the watch cadetship programme. There will also be daily quayside music concerts, with Scottish musical talent from Deacon Blue and Tide Lines. With those events and the tall ships themselves, the race will prove to be a true spectacle.

Beyond the spectacle, the tall ships races embody timeless values: the importance of teamwork, the discipline of seamanship and the thrill of adventure. The ships are living museums that preserve the skills and artistry of a bygone era, while simultaneously inspiring the next generation of seafarers and global citizens. They remind us, even in our digital age, of the enduring magic in the power of wind and sail, and the irreplaceable value of hands-on experience and shared endeavour.

As the tall ships prepare to grace our waters, I urge everyone to embrace this incredible opportunity and come down to Aberdeen harbour to witness those magnificent vessels up close, feel the spray of the sea and let the spirit of the Cutty Sark, the Thermopylae and the great tea clipper race transport them to a time of grand adventure.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Dunbar. We move to the open debate. I call Liam Kerr to be followed by Audrey Nicoll.

12:55

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I was delighted that Kevin Stewart lodged a motion on welcoming the tall ships to Aberdeen. I thank Jackie Dunbar for stepping in. It was no surprise to me that Kevin did so, as, although he and I differ on some—perhaps many—political issues, what he and I share, along with the other north-east cross-party representatives who attended a briefing at the Aberdeen maritime museum in April and other north-east members who are here

today, is a deep desire to do what is best for Aberdeen and the north-east.

The return to Aberdeen of the tall ships races between 19 and 22 July—only eight weeks from now—for the first time in 28 years is definitely a great thing for us in the north-east. As Jackie Dunbar said, what an opportunity we have here. Much credit needs to be given to the host partners—Aberdeen City Council, Aberdeen Inspired and Port of Aberdeen. We also need to acknowledge the support of VisitScotland and the funding of the United Kingdom Government, because we know that Aberdeen is a great place to live, work and visit.

So many attractions already exist there, such as the maritime museum, which I mentioned earlier, and the art gallery, where visitors can see the “Monsters of the Deep: Science Fact or Fiction?” exhibition, which opened last weekend—note that it has extended hours during the tall ships races. There are the shows at the music hall in His Majesty's Theatre. On that note, let people not forget that we had our own independent Belmont Cinema, which will rise again if viewers support it at www.belmontcinema.co.uk. The campaign to save the Aberdeen Arts Centre has also just launched, and viewers can help to support it in its time of need and save it by visiting www.aberdeenartscentre.com.

It is fair to say that people do not realise quite how good Aberdeen is and how much there is there. The 2025 tall ships races in Aberdeen from 19 July will be an amazing event in and of itself, but it will also act to showcase the best of Aberdeen and the north-east.

As we heard from Jackie Dunbar, almost 50 tall ships are coming. We are getting the Red Arrows, quayside concerts and a march. There will be 60 business and charity stalls in place at the north harbour and the north end of Union street, and there will be hundreds of opportunities for young people aged 15 to 25 to get on board through the Sail Training International sail trainee programme.

The projected 400,000 visitors will not only provide a welcome boost to our local economy; they will also showcase that Aberdeen is not merely a great energy city but a tourism hub for itself and the wider shire, with the attractions in the city. What a legacy that event could leave, which would be a fitting tribute to the 300 volunteers who have been recruited to support the event, 60 per cent of whom live in the city, around 60 per cent of whom are female and a quarter of whom are under 40.

The fact is that there is too much to tell about the tall ships races returning to Aberdeen from 19 to 22 July, but I say to people who are watching that they can find out all about being a sail trainee,

volunteering, the concerts, the stalls, the ships themselves, the event programme and how they can get involved, simply by visiting www.tallshipsaberdeen.com. I cannot wait to be one of the 400,000 visitors.

12:59

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I am very pleased that my colleague Kevin Stewart secured a debate that celebrates and highlights the return of the tall ships races to Aberdeen. As we have heard, the tall ships races are a wonderful opportunity for the city, the wider north-east and Scotland, and I believe that parliamentary recognition of them is fitting. I extend my thanks to Kevin Stewart for the debate—I wish him well—and I thank Jackie Dunbar for stepping in today.

As we have heard, in 57 days, the tall ships races will visit Aberdeen's shores for the third time between 19 and 22 July. During that time, the Port of Aberdeen and a whole host of other businesses and organisations will welcome at least 50 tall ships that will be visiting from all over the world.

Like my colleague Jackie Dunbar, I extend my sympathies to the families of the two cadets who lost their lives earlier this week in the tragic incident involving a Mexican tall ship that was due to participate in the event.

As part of the tall ships races, 240 young people living in Aberdeen or Aberdeenshire will be offered the life-changing experience of joining the crew of a tall ship that will sail from Dunkirk to Aberdeen or from Aberdeen to Kristiansand. I am sure that the rest of the chamber will join me in wishing good luck to the young cadets who will be embarking on their first voyage.

As we have heard, the tall ships races will bring a significant economic opportunity. Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce anticipates that it will inject tens of millions of pounds into the city and region's economy. To capitalise on that opportunity, local business and charities will participate in activities such as Charlie House's "Curated on the Quayside" initiative, which will allow the north-east to further showcase local culture and produce in a wonderful open-air market event that will be held across the city, including in the area of the harbour.

In addition to the economic benefits, the tall ships races provide a platform to showcase Scottish and Doric culture. Local musicians, artwork, and vibrant street performances will be displayed throughout the city. Aberdeen's history and maritime contributions will also be highlighted in free informative events. As we have heard, Aberdeen art gallery has a stunning range of tall ship-themed souvenirs that have been created by

local creators and makers that reflects the maritime history and sheer spectacle of the tall ships. We have also heard that there will be a programme of open-air gigs, which will see our very own Deacon Blue, Kaiser Chiefs and Tide Lines entertain visitors.

It certainly goes without saying that this year's tall ships races will greatly benefit Aberdeen city and the surrounding region. With that in mind, I reflect on the impact of the previous tall ships races in Aberdeen. As we have heard, the tall ships races first visited Aberdeen in 1991. Crowds of more than 300,000 flocked to the granite city to witness the great sailing ships and to enjoy a variety of performances. Aberdeen welcomed the tall ships races for a second time in 1997, coinciding with the bicentenary of the renowned Aberdeen Line, a shipping company known for its excellence and efficiency. That event proved to be even more popular, with more than 500,000 people attending. The races are a cherished memory for all those who attended, as well as for the city itself. As a result, they have left a truly lasting legacy.

In closing, I congratulate everyone involved in the organisation and running of the 2025 tall ships races in Aberdeen, including all the volunteers who will support the event. With their hard work, the tall ships races will remain a cherished part of Aberdeen's legacy. I again thank Kevin Stewart for securing the debate and I invite anyone and everyone to visit the tall ships races in July.

13:03

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I thank Kevin Stewart for lodging the debate and Jackie Dunbar for standing in and transporting us to a time of grand adventure. I am not sure that my nerves would have coped with the story of the tea clipper race had it been related in Kevin Stewart's theatrical élan, so perhaps we have all been saved by Jackie Dunbar's intervention.

For nearly 50 years, the tall ships races have traversed ports across these islands and all over Europe. The races even involved a transatlantic voyage in 1984, reaching as far as Quebec. This is the third year—and the first time this century—that Aberdeen has been involved. With around 50 tall ships and 1,500 crew members arriving in Aberdeen for four days in July, the event will bring a carnival atmosphere to the city, with concerts, parades and even a display from the Red Arrows. I am sure that it is set to be a fantastic time in the granite city. There is an opportunity to board the great ships and learn more about their long history—some of the ships are as old as 125 years.

It will be a huge boost for businesses in the city, with tens of thousands of spectators expected to attend. That will be welcome for many hospitality and retail businesses, in particular, given the challenges that those sectors have faced in recent years following the pandemic and the Scottish National Party Government's failure to pass on rates relief from the UK Labour Government.

Events such as this, the Commonwealth games and the Tour de France grand départ, which I know the minister has been involved with, are all good for Scotland and the people of Scotland. They have the potential to showcase our country at its best and to give a much-needed boost to our economy. Liam Kerr laid out well some of the many attractions in Aberdeen of which visitors are likely to be able to afford themselves. There is an opportunity for great cultural exchange and dialogue around such events and to see some of the world's great sportsmen and women at the top of their game.

It is vitally important that, when such events are organised, logistics are in place to minimise negative disruption for local residents and to maximise enjoyment for all visitors. The use of park and ride facilities for the event has been welcomed by my constituents. Those will be at four locations across the city to help to reduce congestion in the city centre, which will be welcome.

The ships are to be berthed at the port of Aberdeen, which is so central to the economy of the city and the North East Scotland region, which I have the pleasure of representing. Aberdeen accounts for around 43 per cent of vessel traffic in Scotland; it is Scotland's busiest port. Since being elected in 2021, I have worked closely with colleagues at the Port of Aberdeen port authority and its chief executive, Bob Sanguinetti. As a trust port, it is run by a board for the benefit of stakeholders. With all the profits being reinvested to safeguard and improve the port, it is a civic benefit to the city and the wider community.

The port has a significant role in the offshore energy industry—although a significant proportion of the port's revenue comes from oil and gas, which will be the case for decades to come—and it is working towards its goal of becoming the UK's first net zero port by 2040. It is one of the fundamental components of the north-east, providing thousands of jobs and essential logistics to keep our region's industries going. The recent £420 million expansion to the south harbour will be transformative for the port's future, with the potential to increase its gross value added contribution by 60 per cent and the number of jobs that it supports by 45 per cent, which could take the number of jobs up to 17,500.

Although tall ships are not typical vessels for the port of Aberdeen, I know that it will welcome them and the further boost to Aberdeen's economy that the spectacle will bring.

13:07

The Minister for Business (Richard Lochhead): It is appropriate to start by joining colleagues in sending deepest condolences to the family and friends of, and others who knew, the two young crew members and cadets who lost their lives on the Mexican navy ship, the Cuauhtémoc, during the tragedy in New York this past Saturday. Although this debate is focused on the celebration to come in July in Aberdeen, we must acknowledge the loss for the tall ships and sailing community of two of their own. I noticed the statement last night from Sail Training International—the body that is behind tall ships races—which said that it wanted to acknowledge, with sadness, the fact that the Mexican navy will no longer be participating in the tall ships races.

I thank Kevin Stewart for lodging the motion and, in his absence through illness, I wish him the best for his recovery. I thank members who signed the motion and Jackie Dunbar for taking the helm and so eloquently laying out the importance of this event and talking about the heritage of Aberdeen.

As I have said many times before in the chamber, the Scottish Government places huge value on major events, which have a unique ability to bring communities together, offer lasting legacies for generations to come and provide considerable economic impact locally and nationally. We are committed to ensuring that the country capitalises on those benefits and that we continue to be the perfect stage for such events.

We have a really good reputation in the major events space, as Michael Marra just said, evidenced by our successful delivery of events such as the 2014 Ryder cup, the open golf championships and the 2023 Union Cycliste Internationale cycling world championships, and by our support for the upcoming 2026 Commonwealth games, the 2027 Tour de France and the 2028 UEFA European football championships. We should not forget the island games in Orkney, which I will be attending the week before the tall ships races in Aberdeen.

I am pleased to share how the 2025 tall ships race in Aberdeen will continue that pipeline of major events in Scotland and reinforce our nation's status as an outstanding major events destination. We are very proud to be working alongside our partners in Aberdeen City Council, the UK Government and the port authority, and other partners that have been mentioned.

We provided £158,000 through the EventScotland international events programme to support the event. The international events programme supports the delivery of Scotland's national events strategy, "Scotland: The Perfect Stage", by investing in major world-class events that raise Scotland's profile and showcase Scotland's key event and tourism assets. Those assets include our people, our cultural identity and heritage, our national environment and, of course, our built environment.

The tall ships races are a fitting example of an event that showcases all those things. It is an event that sits close to Scotland's heart. We have hosted the tall ships event four times before; however, as the motion states, it has been 28 years since the event's last return to the granite city—Aberdeen previously hosted it in 1991 and 1997. As part of Europe's largest free family festival, the 2025 event will see a fleet of 50 sailing vessels visit Aberdeen, a sight that, no doubt, will be something to behold. It will have been worth that 28-year wait, and it truly has the potential to be the biggest event that Aberdeen will have held for a generation.

Fittingly, 2025 also marks the 200th anniversary of the Aberdeen Line, which built more than a hundred ships from the Walter Hood shipyard—the very place that the tall ships will be berthed in July. That is a good reminder of the city's rich maritime heritage.

Beyond the tall ship races themselves, Aberdeen's festival of the sea, which will extend either side of that event, will provide further opportunities for visitors and communities to enjoy and participate in the proud celebration of the region's heritage and culture, as well as highlighting further points of interest across the whole city.

As others have said, the tall ships races will potentially play host to an incredible 400,000 people, and the event presents a significant tourism opportunity for Aberdeen and the wider region. Locals in the city and beyond will be excited about the races. There were many applications for the voluntary positions to help at the event: 300 people were selected from 1,400 who applied, and 60 per cent of them are from the city itself. We pay tribute to the many volunteers who help support such events in Aberdeen and throughout the country.

My final remarks revolve around what is happening in Aberdeen at the moment. It is an exciting event, as many people have said. People may know that I have strong personal connections to Aberdeen. I lived there for a while—when I was first elected to the Parliament, I moved to Aberdeen, and I have family connections to the city. I also support the local football team, which I

wish the best for the cup final this weekend. I hope that, whoever wins, it is a successful cup final and that both teams and their sets of fans have an enjoyable occasion.

A lot of positive things are happening just now in the city. I pay tribute to the creativity, ingenuity and hard work of so many bodies in the city that make those things happen.

Jackie Dunbar: Will the minister give way?

Richard Lochhead: I have time to do so—yes.

Jackie Dunbar: The minister was discussing what is happening this weekend, and it would be remiss of me if I did not mention that the Denis Law legacy trail will be opening this weekend. That is another great walkabout for when folk come to see our tall ships.

Richard Lochhead: Jackie Dunbar's point is well made. When I was in the city a couple of days ago, at the weekend, I noticed the murals of Denis Law—they are something to behold when you are driving on Great Northern Road.

The tall ships races are one of many positive developments for the city. I pay tribute to the organisations and partners that are involved in promoting economic development in the city. There are some amazing events that illustrate and exemplify the ambition of the city, the Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce, the council and the various other initiatives that are promoting the city. Aberdeen is an exciting place with a huge amount of potential, and I am paying close attention to the exciting developments in the city.

Scottish ministers will be represented at the tall ships races. I wish all the participants the best of luck, and the city the best of luck in hosting this fantastic event. I congratulate all the sponsors and other partners. Let us look forward, as a country, to one of Scotland's major events in the coming months.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate.

13:14

Meeting suspended.

14:00

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Net Zero, Energy and Transport

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good afternoon. The first item of business this afternoon is portfolio question time and the portfolio is net zero, energy and transport.

Clyde and Hebrides Ferry Services

1. **Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government for what reason it decided to make a direct award of the Clyde and Hebrides ferry services contract to CalMac. (S6O-04696)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): This is a unique opportunity to change the emphasis from having a commercially driven arrangement to having a public-focused service that is wholly directed at meeting the important and particular needs of island communities. A direct award will enable Scottish ministers to have greater influence on strategic objectives and on significant decisions relating to the provision of the Clyde and Hebrides ferry services. That will provide the necessary flexibility to drive improvements and adapt to the evolving needs of our island communities.

Sue Webber: CalMac services have been pushed to the limit and, as we head into the summer months, islanders are being left at the whim of an ageing fleet thanks to last week's announcement that the issue of the MV Glen Rosa will not be resolved until next year.

Now that a direct award has been made, what guarantees has the cabinet secretary received from CalMac, Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd and Ferguson Marine that the new contract will not result in the same poor level of service as the current one?

Fiona Hyslop: We have announced that it is our preferred intention that the contract will be awarded in October, and we are working to deliver that.

The most recent full-year statistics show that, out of 170,000 scheduled sailings between October 2023 and September 2024, only 3.4 per cent were cancelled due to technical and other reasons, such as weather-related issues.

I had a meeting this morning with CMAL regarding the delivery of the four new vessels that we expect in the next year. Important work is also being conducted on ports and harbours. That investment will be supplemented and supported by

key performance indicators in the contract. I also met this morning with the chair of the ferries community board, and the board is actively involved in ensuring that the service delivery improvements that I spoke about will be realised for the benefit of islanders.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): As the cabinet secretary knows, concerns have been raised by islanders and others who are frustrated that CalMac has not fulfilled all the terms of the current contract. I was pleased to hear that there will be more customer focus in the next contract, but what confidence does the cabinet secretary have and what steps are in place to ensure that CalMac will, indeed, be more customer focused in the forthcoming contract and in the months and years ahead?

Fiona Hyslop: The technical compliance that I spoke about when I made the initial announcement will enable strategic oversight.

Regarding delivery, instead of simply working to a contract that includes variations that can be used for flexibility in services, there will be a culture of continuous improvement in operations and of accountability to the KPIs that I referred to. Those are being developed, in conjunction with communities and trade unions, to drive forward the improvement culture that everyone expects.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I welcome the direct award to CalMac, which was the right thing to do. Yesterday, we debated how we can empower our island communities, and part of that is ensuring that they are better represented in the organisations that deliver the services that they rely on. Has the cabinet secretary given active consideration to having direct representation of islanders on the CalMac and CMAL boards?

Fiona Hyslop: Both boards already have islanders on them, and the next round of CalMac board appointments, which is about to commence, will specifically include islander representation.

The Presiding Officer: Question 2 was not lodged.

Electricity Act 1989 (Cumulative Impact Assessment)

3. **Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government to what extent current projects will be included when making a cumulative impact assessment for a section 36 application under the Electricity Act 1989. (S6O-04698)

The Acting Minister for Climate Action (Alasdair Allan): When new energy developments come forward, applications are subject to site-specific assessments by the

decision maker. The cumulative effects of developments are an important consideration in the decision-making process, alongside potential impacts on communities, nature and cultural heritage. When an application is ready to be determined, Scottish ministers consider all relevant material that is available to them before making any decision. The merits of each proposal are considered on a case-by-case basis, and a careful balance must be struck.

Alexander Burnett: Most people would assume that a reporter would consider all the available information. However, for the public inquiry into the proposed Hill of Fare wind farm, the cumulative impact assessment will consider only other projects that were consented or the subject of a full planning application at 10 August 2023. That is more than two years before the reporter will hold her inquiry. It will fail to take into account applications that are known about but are in the earlier stages of planning and consultation, as well as any other energy infrastructure projects.

We know that the planning system is outdated, but given that, this week, the minister welcomed the fact that councils are developing renewable energy mapping tools, is it not right that all available information be considered?

Alasdair Allan: The member will not be too surprised to hear me say that I cannot comment on the specific case that he mentions. However, it is the case that, in the process, the decision makers consider all the available evidence. I realise that the member's point is about forthcoming proposals. In reaching a decision, ministers will determine applications in accordance with legislative requirements and relevant policy, and any cumulative impact assessment that is made is limited to considering existing and already approved developments. However, as I have indicated, all representations that are made in any community about an application are considered when a decision is made.

Proof of Concept Fund (Just Transition in North East Scotland)

4. Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the net zero secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding how the recently announced proof of concept fund will encourage an innovative just transition in the North East Scotland region. (S6O-04699)

The Acting Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy (Gillian Martin): We will launch a pilot proof of concept fund this year to support university researchers, including those from the north-east, to develop their innovative ideas and technologies and to bridge the gap between

groundbreaking research and commercial applications. Through the fund, we hope to increase the pipeline of projects with commercial potential and support economic development. Meanwhile, we are also working in partnership with the United Kingdom Government and the North East of Scotland Regional Economic Partnership to deliver its investment zone, which will help to accelerate the realisation of its regional economic strategy.

Audrey Nicoll: It is vital that we work to support innovation at all levels, particularly when we are furthering our investment and ambitions to deliver our green energy transition. In that regard, my constituency of Aberdeen South and North Kincardine and the wider north-east host a wealth of innovators and inventors. Can the cabinet secretary say more about how the Scottish Government is supporting young tech innovators and entrepreneurs across Scotland?

Gillian Martin: Our national innovation strategy sets out actions to utilise innovation as a driver to grow the economy and create jobs. We are actively supporting entrepreneurs and young tech innovators through several initiatives including our Techscaler programme, which is designed to create, develop and scale tech start-ups. We are supporting the young EDGE—encouraging dynamic growth entrepreneurs—awards to recognise and reward exceptional young talent in the tech sector. We also work with universities and colleges to deliver the entrepreneurial campus blueprint, ensuring that more young people develop entrepreneurial skills, and we are providing support through the ecosystem fund, which enables young entrepreneurs to access vital resources, knowledge and connections.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): Today, the Just Transition Commission published its latest damning report, which highlights how this devolved Government is failing workers in the north-east. The report's message is clear: this Government is not delivering a just transition for Aberdeen and the north-east. The SNP simply does not care about the hard-working oil and gas workers in the north-east. My constituents do not need another report to tell them what they already know. They need action, and they need it now. Has the cabinet secretary read the report? What is her response, and what is she going to do about it?

The Presiding Officer: Please respond to the substantive question, cabinet secretary.

Gillian Martin: I have read the report and, indeed, I welcome all the interventions that the Just Transition Commission made. I work very closely with the Just Transition Commission.

I cannot really answer Douglas Lumsden's question based on the original question that was put to me by Audrey Nicoll, about the proof of concept fund, but I want to give clarity to the Parliament that I take everything that the Just Transition Commission says very seriously and I regularly work with it on how we can deliver a just transition in the north-east.

Social Tariff Working Group

5. James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding progress on the recommendations in the final report by the social tariff working group. (S6O-04700)

The Acting Minister for Climate Action (Alasdair Allan): The Scottish Government's working group, which included energy suppliers and consumer fuel poverty and disability groups, called for a social tariff to cut fuel bills for Scots in its final report.

In March, we wrote to the UK Government to share the final report and press for the urgent introduction of a targeted discount on bills to address unaffordable energy prices at source. We are in regular dialogue on energy affordability and have been fully involved in the UK Government's recently convened data working group, which is critical to delivering automatic and targeted energy bill support that is based on a sophisticated set of metrics. The powers to deliver the scheme are reserved, but we remain committed to working with the UK Government to make urgent progress on that critical policy.

James Dornan: Does the minister agree that the targeting of support is urgently needed to ensure that consumers are protected against high costs at source and can afford all their energy needs, and that, although the report recommends a robust scheme, the reality is that the UK Government is ultimately responsible in that policy area and must urgently deliver a unit rate discount with the level of discount proportionate to need?

Alasdair Allan: I whole-heartedly agree. We have worked hard and collaboratively to present a compelling way forward, and we have achieved a rare degree of consensus on a social tariff to bring down energy bills.

A key principle of our report is that support needs to be targeted, as the member indicated, and based on a meaningful set of metrics, including, for example, a combination of household income, medical need and rurality.

I have been clear with the UK Government that its current approach of relying on the warm home discount scheme provides too little help for those who are most in need and it does not provide it

when they need it. Again, therefore, I call on the UK Government to deliver a new and additional scheme that provides a unit rate discount with the level of discount that is proportionate to need.

Port of Leith (Contribution to Net Zero)

6. Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it is working with partners to support the port of Leith's contribution to Scotland's net zero ambitions. (S6O-04701)

The Acting Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy (Gillian Martin): As it is part of the Forth green freeport, the port of Leith will benefit from green port incentives, which include reliefs on non-domestic rates, increased capital allowances, reduced national insurance costs, land and buildings transaction tax reliefs and up to £25 million-worth of seed capital and long-term funding provided by the Scottish Government, which will allow local authorities to retain relevant non-domestic rates to reinvest in the programme.

We have also committed to invest up to £500 million over five years to leverage private investment in the infrastructure and manufacturing facilities that are critical to the growth of the offshore wind sector. We are taking a team Scotland approach when engaging with potential inward investors, including Vestas, to ensure that we maximise those opportunities.

Ben Macpherson: I thank the cabinet secretary for that detailed answer, and for of all the investment and effort that is going into realising the potential that she set out.

As has been mentioned, the developing green economic activity at the port of Leith will be significant, which is why, in recent weeks, I hosted a round-table event with employers, local educators and the Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans, to help to facilitate further collaboration to nurture the workforce that will be required. I will follow up my question with a letter to the Scottish Government. One of the suggestions that was made on the evening was to utilise some of ScotWind's revenues to help to fund skills development initiatives in the area. Will ministers consider that as part of the budget formation in the months ahead, to prepare the workforce that we will need in the coming years?

Gillian Martin: I am glad that Graeme Dey was able to meet Forth Ports and Mr Macpherson on 12 May. The 2025-26 budget utilised more than £300 million of ScotWind funding to be targeted at activities with long-lasting benefits for the people of Scotland. We will continue to invest ScotWind revenues in a range of projects.

As Mr Macpherson outlined, the Forth green freeport has a skills plan, which is funded by businesses that benefit from the tax incentives at the site that I mentioned. The Government provides non-domestic rates relief to green ports, which can also be invested in skills and workforce development.

Mr Macpherson will also know that we are providing targeted funding to colleges over the next year, as part of the budget that was approved by Parliament, to establish an offshore wind skills programme, which will help to create region-specific training hubs for offshore wind skills. That is on top of funding that has already been committed to a just transition for the energy sector.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I welcome the cabinet secretary's reference to the importance of renewables manufacturing at the port of Leith, and the need to have a joined-up approach to delivery and to invest in skills and training. However, will she acknowledge the need to tackle the significant problem of planning delays, which the renewables sector regularly raises with us? Projects can be in planning for more than two years. That affects not just low-carbon projects; it affects all the supply chains and jobs that come with them.

Gillian Martin: I point to the energy consents unit in the Scottish Government. We have been tasked by the industry to vastly reduce the amount of time that is associated with consents. We have invested in doubling the capacity of personnel in the unit, which has been met with a great deal of praise from the sector. We are committed to delivering on consents within 12 months.

Transport Infrastructure in Highlands and Islands (Ferries)

7. Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its plans to improve transport infrastructure in the Highlands and Islands, particularly in response to the reported request from Highland Council for additional support to run its six ferry services. (S6O-04702)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): The Scottish Government remains committed to continuing to improve the transport infrastructure in the Highlands and Islands, for which we have direct responsibility. We are introducing new vessels to our ferry networks and are delivering further upgrades to key trunk roads and public transport infrastructure. We have invested more than £2 billion in our ferry services since 2007, and we have outlined plans to invest around £700 million in a five-year plan to improve ferry infrastructure. That includes the delivery of more new major ferries and the small vessel replacement programme.

We are also supporting the four local authorities that operate their own ferry services—we have increased funding from £41.7 million in 2023-24 to around £70 million in 2025-26. That includes the full £1.521 million requested by Highland Council for this year.

Ariane Burgess: I welcome the funding for replacing the Corran ferry, which I had called for in the chamber. However, the rising costs of maintaining the ageing fleet, the Tory legacy of inflation and the Labour United Kingdom Government's decision to increase employer national insurance contributions have put considerable pressure on the sustainability of those services. Will the cabinet secretary commit to asking Transport Scotland to boost Highland Council's funding this year?

Fiona Hyslop: The funding for local authority ferries, which I outlined and which has increased from £41.7 million to £70 million this year, acknowledges some of the increasing pressures. Transport Scotland does not fund Highland Council directly. Local authority funding is determined at a local government level; the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government is actively involved in that. As I outlined in my initial answer, we have been very responsive to the request from Highland Council.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary outline what improvements to transport infrastructure and provision have been brought about since the Scottish National Party took office, what has been achieved as a result and what engagement the Government has had with Highland Council since the announcement that it was to receive £28 million for the Corran ferry?

Fiona Hyslop: Since the announcement of the arrangements and funding agreements for the new Corran ferry, Scottish Government and Transport Scotland officials have been engaging with Highland Council on a timeline for delivery of the new vessel and on potential procurement routes. It will be for Highland Council to consider and manage the appropriate route to overall delivery.

The member asked what the Scottish Government has achieved for the Highlands and Islands. I highlight that there have been 10 major trunk road upgrades. We have also opened new rail stations including one at Inverness airport. Our recent investment has enabled the lengthening of platforms at some Highland stations, which this year has allowed longer trains to be deployed on the Highland main line.

In addition, some 57,000 young people aged under 22 across the Highlands and Islands benefit from free bus travel. We have invested £2 billion in ferry services since 2007. The road equivalent

tariff saves passengers around £25 million a year. Northern isles residents receive a 30 per cent discount on ferry fares. We have also recently extended free ferry travel for under-22s in local authority-run Highland communities.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): An update on the dualling of the A9, which was meant to be completed this year, was noticeably absent from the cabinet secretary's answer.

I have repeatedly highlighted the growing crisis in our ferries fleet, including vessels that are operated by our councils. In Highland, Orkney and Shetland, there is an increasingly urgent need for a serious replacement plan, the cost of which could run into billions of pounds. Without passing the buck to local councils, which the cabinet secretary knows fine well are reliant on funding from the Scottish Government, what does she estimate to be the cost of any replacement scheme over the next 10 years? Is she comfortable with progress on delivering any replacement scheme, given that there is still no timetable, cost projection or funding commitment in place?

Fiona Hyslop: The member will be aware that there are separate ferry replacement task forces for Shetland and Orkney, both of which are chaired by the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government. I regularly meet members of the respective councils, in which I am supported by the Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity, Jim Fairlie.

The member will also be aware that, in the recent budget that he did not vote for, £10 million was provided for each of those councils to do exactly the work that he says needs to be done to identify the scale of the issue. It is not just about ferry replacements; it can include other types of connectivity. For example, a number of people in the island communities that I am personally supportive of consider tunnels to be a potential alternative for the longer term.

However, the member is right to highlight the need to identify the scale of what is required. That is why it was important for the Scottish Government to provide funding to help with the scoping work that he has asked for.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): As the cabinet secretary has alluded to, in the recent budget—and thanks to the Scottish Liberal Democrats—additional funding was put in place to support the pathway towards procurement of new ferries. However, in the isles that rely on those lifeline routes there is growing frustration at the lack of a timetable for the replacement process to get under way. Will the cabinet secretary advise when the task force is next due to meet? Will she

give an indication of the likely timeframe for that process?

Fiona Hyslop: As I outlined, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government chairs that task force, and I am not a member of it. However, I will ask for the information that Mr McArthur requires to be relayed to him in written form.

Parking and Road Safety (Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park)

8. **Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what engagement it has had with stakeholders regarding safe parking and road use in popular rural areas, including Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park. (S6O-04703)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): In Scotland, the majority of car parks and roads in rural areas, including Loch Lomond and the Trossachs, are managed locally by local authorities or private car park owners. It is a matter for each local authority to engage with stakeholders to promote the safe use of roads and car parks in its area and to adhere to any legislation that applies.

On the specific issues that are affecting the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park, the Scottish Government is a member of the national park safe recovery action group, which was formed in 2020 in response to increased visitor levels following the Covid pandemic. The group's primary objective is to collaboratively manage visitor-related pressures across the national park.

Evelyn Tweed: Temporary clearways on trunk roads in popular rural locations such as those near the A84 and A82 play an important role in keeping our roads safe. What consideration has the Scottish Government made of whether such clearways should be made permanent?

Fiona Hyslop: Several permanent clearway orders for popular tourist locations on the trunk road network are under consideration, including for the locations that the member has mentioned. Those orders will proceed through the relevant legislative processes. The areas under consideration include the A84 at Loch Lubnaig and the A82 at the Falls of Falloch. Clearways might have a role to play there, but those determinations must follow the relevant legislative processes.

Housing Emergency

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a statement by Shirley-Anne Somerville on response to the housing emergency. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:26

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Housing has an essential part to play in delivering the First Minister's four key priorities for Scotland, most notably those on eradicating child poverty and growing Scotland's economy. Housing is both a social and an economic good. It is critical to supporting health, wellbeing, life chances, job prospects and tackling child poverty. We know that more people must be able to access good, affordable homes, but the drivers of the housing emergency are long standing, complex and interconnected. A broad span of ownership and co-operation is therefore required to deliver comprehensive solutions, which is why, over the past year, we have built a strong collaboration with a range of key partners spanning the Scottish Government, local government, housing representative bodies, developers, investors, third sector organisations and tenant groups.

I will take a moment to summarise some of the key activities and outputs from this year's delivery. This year, the Scottish Government is investing £768 million to support the delivery of 8,000 homes for social and mid-market rent and low-cost home ownership. We have also announced £4 million of homelessness prevention funding and £2 million to increase the scale and pace of privately owned empty homes being returned to use. We remain committed to working closely with the private sector to support economic growth, including through regional economic partnerships.

Yesterday, the Minister for Housing attended an event in Annan in the south of Scotland organised by Prosper, exploring opportunities for housing and its role in supporting the economy across the region. I am pleased that, as part of our commitment, the housing investment task force, in addition to the work that it has done with Government over the past year, provided its report to ministers, which will be published in the next few weeks.

We are now focused on long-term plans for implementing those recommendations to unlock new investment opportunities across all tenures. Optimising the impact of investment is essential if we are to bring further private investment into the housing sector. One clear example of how we aim

to amplify increasing institutional investment is the £100 million funding that was committed last year, which is intended to grow to at least £500 million to fund construction of 2,800 mid-market rent homes. The procurement for market testing of that is now live.

We have also invested £46 million in charitable bonds, supporting the delivery of around 325 homes. That will generate £13.8 million in charitable donations to help to fund future affordable housing projects. To home in on the areas in most need, we have adopted a targeted approach. We introduced a new £80 million voids and acquisitions fund, with 80 per cent of that resource being directed towards the five local authorities that face the most sustained temporary accommodation pressures. We have already seen marked positive impacts, with the City of Edinburgh Council's management information showing us that void levels have been cut by more than 50 per cent since June 2023.

That approach has brought more than 1,000 properties into use as affordable homes, helping to reduce the number of homeless households spending long periods in temporary accommodation. A further reflection of our determination to focus our efforts on the people who are most in need is our work with local authorities to directly support increased family housing capacity.

Our investment of £3.7 million in the Scottish empty homes partnership and network of empty homes officers is also delivering real results, with more than 11,000 homes being returned to active use since 2010, including 1,875 in one year alone, as per the latest analysis.

Our work on planning is demonstrating the activist, supportive government approach that will take Scotland through and beyond the housing emergency. We have progressed the 23 actions that are set out in the Government's "Planning and the Housing Emergency—Delivery Plan" and we have worked at pace and in close collaboration with housing providers and local government on removing barriers to stalled housing sites. Through strategic actions and direct intervention, we are supporting the delivery of up to 20,000 new homes. The stalled sites work that has been undertaken since the autumn is another example of the required partnership working, where Government and business are working together to identify the problems and deliver solutions.

We have also progressed our programme for government commitment on strategic sites by confirming £15 million in funding to unlock the opportunities for more than 800 affordable net zero homes at the Granton strategic site, supporting our approach to place-based intervention. Alongside that, we have been

working intensively with local authority partners to better understand the local drivers of homelessness and temporary accommodation, which is helping partners to develop plans for impactful, purposeful spend, while sharing best practice and pursuing economies-of-scale opportunities.

I turn to our action on homelessness. Temporary accommodation is an important safety net for those who need it, but we want far fewer households, especially those with children, to be in temporary accommodation. Focused partnership action helped an estimated 2,669 households with children into affordable housing in the year ending December 2024. Our most recent statistics show that 20 councils have reduced the number of children who are in temporary accommodation. We take two lessons from that: we are encouraged that we can make a positive difference, and it also is confirmation that there is still more to do.

Our Housing (Scotland) Bill is currently undergoing stage 2 scrutiny. If passed by the Parliament, it will deliver new homelessness prevention duties and create new tenants' rights, including long-term rent controls for the private rented sector. Those provisions will ensure that people can stay in their homes and avoid becoming homeless. The new prevention duties are seen by many as a game changer. That is why we have included an additional £4 million in the ending homelessness together budget for 2025-26 in order to help local authorities, front-line services and relevant partners to prepare for the new prevention measures and to help them to respond to the housing emergency by preventing homelessness before it occurs. Where possible, we are taking a cross-party approach to ensure the legislation will effectively strengthen tenants' rights and protections so that people can have safe and warm homes.

We continue to support local authorities to transition to a rapid rehousing approach, with a commitment of £8 million this financial year to deliver initiatives that prevent homelessness where possible, and when homelessness does occur, to minimise the time that is spent in temporary accommodation. The activity that I have set out is enhanced by our partnership with private, public and third sector partners. The housing to 2040 board has been central to our collaborative approach, bringing together private developers, Shelter, Crisis, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and national Government to provide a forum to work collectively, share best practice and to stress test delivery plans. There have been welcome and valuable contributions from across the partnership. One example of many is the sustained

constructive input from Homes for Scotland colleagues.

In June last year, following the declaration of a housing emergency, some members of the board formed a coalition of partners to set out a range of actions in response. The coalition made 17 asks, and I am pleased to say that we assess that our action to date has resulted in almost 90 per cent of those asks being met, in part or in full. In addition to the asks that were set out by the coalition, last week, the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee published its housing inquiry report. It sets out a range of recommendations for the Scottish Government to consider as we continue our work to respond to the housing emergency. I thank the committee for its report, and we will give it close and serious attention before responding to the committee.

I have set out the work that the Scottish Government has undertaken in the past 12 months. We are making progress, but we know there is much more to do as we move into the next phase of our response.

That is why the latest programme for government reiterated our commitment to the delivery of the 110,000 affordable homes target by 2032. We will remove barriers to stalled sites, support people to access secure tenancies, double to £20 million our funding for housing adaptations for disabled tenants, and make available £97 million in discretionary housing payments, which mitigates the bedroom tax and the benefit cap. We have also extended the rural and island housing fund to March 2028 to deliver more affordable homes in rural and island communities.

The Scottish Government will continue to make progress, applying all available powers and resources to the challenge. We will, of course, continue to work at pace alongside local authority and housing coalition partners to support a co-ordinated response.

However, there remain a number of legacy issues, outstanding challenges and inhibitors that continue to present a challenge to delivery. The action that was taken in December 2022 by the UK Government to streamline the asylum decision-making process means that it will be challenging to reduce the numbers in temporary accommodation in the short to medium term, particularly in Glasgow and Edinburgh. I was deeply disappointed that UK ministers did not join a recent round-table discussion that was convened by the Scottish Refugee Council to discuss refugee homelessness in Glasgow, but participation by Scottish ministers in the work of Glasgow City Council shows that we are serious about working collaboratively on solutions.

Other factors driving the increase in homelessness lie beyond the Scottish Government's control. Crisis has previously stated that we cannot ignore the essential role that local housing allowance rates play in preventing and ending homelessness, which is why the LHA rate should cover the bottom 30 per cent of rents in a given area as an absolute minimum. That is an issue that I have repeatedly raised with the UK Government's child poverty task force, as such a policy would provide vital protection to those living in the private rented sector.

The Scottish Government's interventionist approach is making a positive difference. Although the situation remains difficult, we are determined to maintain our focus and work with our partners to continue to rise to the challenges. That is the formula for moving Scotland through and past the current emergency.

The Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business. Members who wish to put a question should press their request-to-speak buttons now.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement.

A year ago, the Scottish Government was forced to admit that Scotland has a housing emergency. Sir Tom Hunter has said that Scotland's housing shortage could be resolved "tomorrow" if the Government listened to the sector. He said that he knows of developers who are choosing to take build-to-rent projects to Birmingham and Manchester because of Scottish National Party rent controls. Yet, here we are, progressing a bill to bring in permanent rent controls that is bad for investment and will not result in one home being built. Sir Tom Hunter is right, is he not? We need to "build, baby, build".

Instead of continuing with plans to push damaging rent controls, will the Government focus on building more affordable housing? Is the cabinet secretary confident that the Government will reach its target of 110,000 affordable homes by 2032, considering that it is miles off its target and that today's statement did not mention the word "build" once? Finally, will the cabinet secretary confirm today that the Scottish Government will not cut the affordable housing supply budget next year, given that it has already been cut by £218 million in real terms since 2021?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I said in my statement, the Government is absolutely committed to the 110,000 target.

I am slightly confused about the outrage about rent controls that Ms Gallacher is portraying today, given that, at stage 2 of the Housing (Scotland) Bill, she joined Labour and the Greens to extend rent controls into other areas of the housing sector. Last week, I wrote to investors to reassure them that the Scottish Government will, if necessary, introduce amendments at stage 3 to ensure that rent controls are not extended. That addresses one of the main concerns that I have heard from investors recently.

Only last week, I also heard from investors that they need certainty. We have had differences of opinion in the Parliament about rent controls, but the Government is moving forward with them. We have made changes at stage 2 to provide certainty for investors in the build-to-rent and purpose-built student accommodation markets. The Government is determined to provide that certainty. I hope that Ms Gallacher will join me at stage 3 in voting for amendments that are needed to rectify any potential challenges that have been brought about by earlier voting at stage 2.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): What the Government has brought before us is not a plan for ending the housing emergency, but, as Shelter says, "a programme for homelessness". Freedom of information responses show that the Government runs the risk of missing every single housing target that it has set.

We have a housing budget that is lower in real terms than it was two years ago. Rates of affordable new homes are falling, which is somehow being packaged as a success. The promise of 8,000 homes in the statement is a lower number than we have had in previous years. All of that is happening in the face of 10,000 children living in temporary accommodation.

Can the cabinet secretary point to the part of her statement that will end the housing emergency, instead of allowing more children to wake up in awful hotels? Not a single individual or organisation outside the Government believes that it will end it.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I point to the Government's strong track record delivering on affordable homes. The Government has delivered 136,000 affordable homes, which is 47 per cent more per head of population than in England and 70 per cent more per head of population than in Wales. That is a strong record that I am proud of, but I know that we need to go further. That is exactly why, as I said in my statement, we have taken a range of actions, on voids, acquisitions, affordable homes and assisting private developers.

The work that we have undertaken has been shaped by the 17 asks of the coalition, which I

mentioned in my statement. Those organisations came forward with asks at the start of the housing emergency, and those asks have shaped our work on it. The coalition asked for a full reversal of the cut to the affordable housing supply budget, and that has been delivered. It asked for prioritisation of funding for larger homes and those in areas of specific pressure, and that has been delivered. It asked for specific work to be done with energy suppliers to assist with voids, and that work has been delivered, and indeed it is on-going.

We are absolutely determined to rise to the remaining challenges. I know that we have made progress, but I also know that there is more to do.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): It is vital that we continue to press forward with action to tackle homelessness and ensure that everyone has a safe and secure place to call home. Can the cabinet secretary provide an update on the steps that the Scottish Government is taking to support local authorities and front-line services to prevent homelessness, and what difference the upstream homelessness prevention fund is expected to make for people who are at risk?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The project that Emma Roddick mentioned, the upstream homelessness prevention fund, was an ask by the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations as a response from the housing sector on how to deal with the housing emergency. I am delighted that the Government is able to support that fund.

Homelessness prevention is vital as part of tackling the housing emergency, and it will continue to be vital once we have moved out of the housing emergency. That is why, as I mentioned in my statement, we have put an additional £4 million into the ending homelessness together budget to assist people to prepare for the new preventative powers that will come in through the housing budget. When that is put together with the more than £30 million for homelessness prevention activity that is given to local authorities and the money to mitigate the bedroom tax, which assists more than 94,000 households to safeguard their tenancies and prevent homelessness, it is clear that the prevention work that Emma Roddick rightly focuses on is integral to the work that the Government will be doing to tackle the housing emergency.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): The City of Edinburgh Council pays out millions of pounds of public funds to private businesses to provide unsuitable temporary accommodation in which people do not feel safe. Does the cabinet secretary agree with the recommendation of the 36 organisations that are represented by Everyone Home that that money would be better spent creating

“a Challenge Fund for councils, housing associations and/or the third sector to replace unsuitable temporary accommodation”?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Jeremy Balfour has raised an important point about the money in the system that is used for temporary accommodation or, indeed, unsuitable temporary accommodation. Part of the focused work that the Scottish Government has undertaken in our reaction to the housing emergency is to deliver learning to all local authorities about good practice elsewhere. For example, the local authorities that are using money that could be spent otherwise on temporary accommodation should turn that money into permanent homes. That type of practice is happening more in some areas of the country than in others.

Regardless of whether that is a local authority responsibility, there is an onus on the Government to use its facilitation and convening powers to share that best practice with Edinburgh and other councils to assist in the reduction of unsuitable temporary accommodation usage.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): As the Scottish Government has emphasised, the drivers of the housing emergency are long-standing, complex, interconnected and strongly related to inequality. Although build-to-rent accommodation has a role, it is not a panacea. There are many measures to take, and the cabinet secretary has mentioned some of the measures that the Scottish Government is taking in Edinburgh—where the emergency is most acute—such as the £80 million investment to realise voids and for acquisitions, and the investment in Granton as a strategic site.

How is the Scottish Government working with the City of Edinburgh Council to address the emergency and the severe situation with homelessness and temporary accommodation? Could it perhaps consider keeping the local connections regulations under review in places where there is real pressure, such as here? Can the cabinet secretary say more about the difference that changes to the local housing allowance would make?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I mentioned in my statement, if the UK Government moved on its position on the local housing allowance, it would make a tremendous difference in Edinburgh and elsewhere. At the ask of councils, an analysis has been done of the impact of the change in local connections, which shows that there is a flow of pressure from one council to another and not a particular pressure on one council. However, we will keep an eye on that particular matter. It is an important part of people’s rights that I have no intention of taking away, but we will always look at the impact that it is having.

I mentioned the targeted work that has been done with the five main local authorities with the most pressures on temporary accommodation. Ben Macpherson mentioned the £80 million for voids and acquisitions. Voids are usually part of the day-to-day management of a council but, given the interventionist approach that the Government is keen to take, we have provided funding, which the City of Edinburgh Council and others have taken up.

I welcome the fact that Ben Macpherson got to join the First Minister to mark phase 1 of Granton waterfront and the £16 million that went to it from the housing infrastructure fund. That is another way in which the Government can provide infrastructure funding to unlock sites such as Granton.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests. Will the cabinet secretary accept that the £4 million homelessness prevention fund that she announced will not even cover the work that is needed in Edinburgh, never mind across the country? The Everyone Home statement was clear:

"Not enough has been done. The measures taken have been insufficient, the ambition too modest and the urgency lacking."

In our capital city, people have to wait years to access affordable social housing. Does the cabinet secretary think that that is acceptable? We are talking about tackling homelessness and enabling people to access affordable social housing. Will the cabinet secretary acknowledge that the sector is massively underfunded?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am sure that Sarah Boyack would recognise that the £4 million is additional funding that has come in to ready local authorities and other partners in public services for the new responsibilities that will befall them if the housing bill goes through the Parliament. It is on top of the funding that is already provided to local authorities, registered social landlords and others to enable them to assist in preventing and tackling homelessness.

With Ben Macpherson and others, I have been through the work that we are undertaking to ensure that money is being spent, particularly in Glasgow, Edinburgh and other areas where there are extreme pressures on temporary accommodation. That targeted funding is now paying dividends. I accept that there is more to do, but improvements are being made that will make an immediate difference, for example, around the voids in the City of Edinburgh Council's own stock.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests and to my

membership of a local government pension scheme.

Given the scale of the housing emergency, it is clear that delivering the homes that Scotland needs will require innovative and collaborative approaches. Will the cabinet secretary share with us what engagement the Scottish Government has had with public and private sector pension funds to explore how their investment capacity could support new housing delivery, particularly for mid-market rent?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I thank Keith Brown for that question. It raises an important point: as well as looking at the funding that the Scottish Government can deliver, we should also look at innovative ways of bringing additional funding into the sector.

I have heard concerns from various stakeholders about some of the challenges around attracting private investment into the sector and having the right investment structures in place. Keith Brown mentions one of those challenges, which is around pension funds. That is why we are looking at innovative solutions and why the Minister for Housing established the housing investment task force, which will report in the next few weeks. It is also why we are moving on in our work on mid-market rent and institutional investment, which involves a combination of Scottish Government and private sector funding. That will pay dividends and will ensure that we are delivering much more than the public sector could deliver alone; that we are using public funds more effectively; and that we are working out the structures that we need, and can help to put in place, in order to attract higher levels of private investment.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Scottish Government data shows that there are more long-term empty homes than there were homelessness applications last year. I have lodged amendments to the Housing (Scotland) Bill that would see vacant or derelict properties being brought back into use for residential purposes through compulsory sale or lease orders. Those are just some of the measures that we need to implement to ensure that homes are for living in and to help us to prevent homelessness.

Does the cabinet secretary support those proposals to increase the number of existing homes that are actually lived in? Will she ensure a renewed focus, beyond the empty homes partnership, on bringing empty and derelict homes back into use?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I thank Maggie Chapman for the conversations that she and I have been having about the Housing (Scotland) Bill. We have perhaps agreed on some areas

more than others, but the conversations have certainly always been useful.

The challenge that Maggie Chapman, rightly, mentions about the use of empty homes is an important one. In my statement, I said that work is being undertaken by empty homes officers across Scotland with Scottish Government funding support. The work that the Scottish Government has undertaken to analyse what is happening in different local authorities in relation to use of the powers that they have at the moment demonstrates that some local authorities are using their current powers much more than others. That is one of the areas where we hope to demonstrate to local authorities that are perhaps not going as far as they could that they should do so.

I will give serious consideration to Maggie Chapman's amendments to the bill, but she will know that we will be undertaking a review of compulsory purchase orders, which involves a complex piece of legislation. Regardless of whether we want to go further on that, local authorities could be doing a lot more with the powers that they have at the moment.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Although not as much as I would like, the Government has moved away from some of the damaging policies and rhetoric of the past, which I believe contributed to the housing emergency that we have now, with high levels of temporary accommodation and low levels of new starts and completions. Will the cabinet secretary guarantee that there will be no return to policies that damage investment in housing?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I mentioned in a previous answer, it is exceptionally important that we not only maximise the public funding that goes into housing but encourage and maximise the private investment that goes into it. I recognise the challenge that Willie Rennie puts to me today, and has put to me in the past, on ensuring that the Government does all that it can to encourage private investment. That allows private development, and, with private development, there are more affordable homes.

I reassure Willie Rennie that the Government has no intention of extending rent controls, for example. We are also working with investors to tackle any challenges that they have. I can give the example of the work that the Minister for Housing is doing on stalled sites to see what more needs to be done; we are giving active consideration to whether there is infrastructure funding that could unlock a number of such sites. I give Willie Rennie those examples to demonstrate that I know that private housing investment is an exceptionally important part of the jigsaw of tackling the housing emergency.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Housing plays a key role in sustaining our rural communities. Will the cabinet secretary provide an update on the action that the Scottish Government is taking to tackle the housing emergency in rural and island communities?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We are determined to deliver on not only the 110,000 affordable homes target but the part of the target that states that at least 10 per cent will be in rural and island communities. That work is supported by the rural and islands housing action plan. I have already mentioned some of the funds that are available for that plan, such as the £30 million rural and islands housing fund, the extension of which to March 2028 we recently announced in the programme for government. There is also the rural affordable homes for key workers fund, which is demand led, so I am keen to encourage colleagues across the chamber and the public sector to ensure that applications come in for the fund. We must encourage the best use of the homes that we have at the moment, as well as developing new homes.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): The cabinet secretary's statement made no reference at all to home builders that are small and medium-sized enterprises, which I found rather odd. The number of active SMEs is down two-thirds since the global financial crash, and more than 500 in Scotland were dissolved in 2023, yet they are vital if we are to build more homes.

This week, the cross-party group on housing heard that up-front costs are too high and the planning system is too slow. One of the biggest barriers that builders face is the cost of electricity connections, with sites across the country stalled because they cannot get on to the grid. When the cabinet secretary looks at the issue of stalled sites, which she referenced in her statement, will she look at that issue? Will she agree to then report back and even to meet members of the cross-party group?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: SME developers are exceptionally important—when I mention private developers, they are an important part of that work. The work on stalled sites is also exceptionally important, whether the sites involve a small developer or one of our larger developers. In that work, Scottish Government officials, planning officials and others work with developers to go through specific stalled sites to see exactly why they are stalled and what can be done to unlock each site.

I will check in again on the issues around electricity connections, but I reassure Mr Simpson that the entire point of sitting down and looking at each site specifically is so that each issue that is stalling a site can be discussed. It might not be in the power of the Scottish Government to unlock

the site, but we can facilitate discussions with other parts of the public sector or with the private sector.

As I have said in previous statements, we are also looking to see what infrastructure funding can be put in to unlock a private development. In today's statement, I gave the example of the £16 million for Granton, but smaller sites are also considered as part of that process.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): Homelessness is a terrible symptom of the housing emergency, which is actually a people emergency. People who have grown up in poverty, who have already experienced severe disadvantage and discrimination, are the most impacted. I have heard directly from women who have experienced violence in hotel accommodation, including sexual assault. That is trauma upon trauma.

The lack of housing supply is directly causing people to be homeless. Given the seriousness of the situation, will the Scottish Government commit to doing everything that it can to foster innovation and to increase the resources available for both housing supply and support to sustain tenancies, while also supporting our third sector partners to play the huge role that they can play to deliver housing first?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Elena Whitham gives me the opportunity to put on record my thanks to all those in the third sector who provide that type of support. As we work through this housing emergency, it is important to work together—the third sector is an important part of that.

Elena Whitham also mentioned tackling the issue through housing supply and support. That talks to the work that we are doing around the prevention of homelessness, the provision of more homes and the better use of the homes that we have built. I give her the reassurance that I recognise the role of the third sector in providing those services and I thank the sector very much for the work that it does for some of the most vulnerable in our society, every day of the year.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the ministerial statement. I will allow a few moments for members on the front benches to get organised for the next item of business.

Committee Effectiveness Inquiry

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on behalf of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee on the committee effectiveness inquiry. I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons. I call Martin Whitfield to speak on behalf of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee.

15:02

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to open the debate and to see so many people eager to contribute to what is, in essence, an evidence-capturing session for what I, modestly, think is probably one of most important inquiries that any committee will undertake during this parliamentary session.

Let us turn the clock back to 1774 and listen to the words of Edmund Burke, who was trying to explain to his electorate some of the challenges that he faced and the relationship between elected representatives and their constituents. His reflection was that

“government and legislation are matters of reason and judgement, and not of inclination; and what sort of reason is that, in which the determination precedes the discussion”?

If I can be so bold, I will take those words and look at them in relation to the challenge of scrutiny. How should we, as modern-day parliamentarians, set aside our individual and party viewpoints to focus on delivering the best scrutiny that we can, in the interests of our constituents? How do we develop a culture, to quote a fellow MSP, of

“being prepared to be open and to accept that you might hear evidence over the course of the process that leads you to change your mind”?

As I open this debate on the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee's inquiry into committee effectiveness, I am keen to make it clear that today is about hearing the views, reflections and experiences of members in the chamber on that important matter. As a committee, we do not hold a monopoly on wisdom about committee effectiveness. I wish to ensure that, whether members' reflections are informed by their role as a committee member, convener or minister, those reflections have a chance to be aired, shared and discussed in a constructive and open debate.

There have been three strands to the committee's work: structure, elected conveners and evaluation. Today's debate is the final part of our evidence gathering. As well as five oral evidence sessions, in which we captured practice

and academic expertise on committee operation, we held a facilitated discussion with the Conveners Group and gathered written views from the public and from other legislatures, parties and committees, so we are primed to feed what we, as a committee, hear from members today into our work and, ultimately, our inquiry conclusions and recommendations to the Parliament. I thank everyone who has engaged with our work to date.

The evidence that we have received has highlighted areas in which committees are performing well: they carry out important, if sometimes unsung work; they have an impact; they hold the Scottish Government to account; they achieve good outcomes; and they provide an opportunity for us to hear directly from those who are impacted by the decisions that we take.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Looking around the chamber, I can see conveners who have established powerful committees on the basis that Martin Whitfield has described. How important is the role of the convener? Does he agree that the convener sets the culture and tone for a committee and allows it to do exactly what he has suggested should be the role of committees?

Martin Whitfield: Of course the convener holds a key piece of the jigsaw in ensuring that the committee works effectively. I will come to the evidence on that in a minute, if the member will kindly let me finish talking about the impact of our work.

To aid today's deliberations, I would like to set out in detail the strands that the committee looked at. In relation to structure, we sought to answer the question, "Are there structural and procedural changes that would improve committee scrutiny?" We heard various views on whether the size of a committee matters. Smaller committees seem to assist with the development of a sense of cohesion, but bigger committees offer the flexibility to deploy members as reporters, to form sub-committees and to manage high workloads.

Churn in the membership of committees has been a recurring theme. As well as considering ways to reduce that churn, we heard reflections on how its impact can be mitigated by committees having mission statements that set out long-term aims and purposes, so that new members can recognise and support those from the outset.

We gave consideration to committee remits and to whether they should continue to mirror the ministerial portfolios, or whether there needs to be more flexibility for ad hoc bill committees or more cross-committee working.

We heard reflections on what is seen by many to be the ideal of a committee member leaving their party hat at the committee door, whether that is always desirable or, indeed, realistic to achieve,

and how members can be empowered in their role through the provision of induction, training and support.

The committee also explored the use of parliamentary time and whether that should be utilised differently, for example by setting aside specific periods in which committee activity can be focused on or by giving committees more flexibility to meet in private session at the same time as the chamber.

The committee has agreed that, as a minimum, there should be no single-sex committees from the start of next session, and we have used the inquiry to explore the other quotas that are set out in the gender-sensitive audit regarding committee membership and convenership.

The second strand—this relates to Stephen Kerr's intervention—was that of elected conveners.

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): I noted the statement that there should be no single-sex committees in the Parliament. How would Martin Whitfield ensure that that would be delivered?

Martin Whitfield: That challenge will rest with members of the Scottish Parliament in the new session. We highlight the issue because of the overwhelming evidence that we have heard that having no single-sex committees is one step towards achieving a better gender balance. However, members in the next session will have to address the issue in the context of the make-up of the Parliament and the different characteristics of its members. In a sense, our recommendation that there should be no single-sex committees is a bellow from this side of a dark tunnel to those who emerge at the other side after the election, but there is genuine recognition that it will improve the process if it is adhered to.

To return to the issue of elected conveners, we reflected on experiences in Westminster and in the Senedd of moving to having elected committee chairs. There was a suggestion—and this speaks to Stephen Kerr's intervention—that being elected gives chairs more authority and a mandate to run the committee more independently from party groups. We also explored whether having elected conveners would deliver an alternative career path for members, outside of being part of Government.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I will go back to what you said about having gender-balanced committees. That is surely down to what the gender balance will be in the chamber. If that policy was put in place as things stand just now, you would actually be giving us women more work to do, because there are more men in the chamber than there are women.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Martin Whitfield: That intervention speaks to the very heart of the reality that the Parliament must find for itself in the next session. There has been a lot of discussion about where that responsibility rests, and much of it rests with political parties and their decisions about how to select candidates, which is, rightly, outside the scope and control of this chamber.

To go back to what I said in my response to the previous intervention, this is a cry from this side of a dark tunnel to say that the Parliament in the next session will have better committees if they are not single-sex. In a wonderful example of kicking things into the future, how that is achieved and implemented may rest with others.

I am conscious of time and will turn to evaluation, which was a key aspect throughout our inquiry. Do committees have time to look at how well they have worked? Do they have time, outside of their legislative programme, to explore what they want to explore? We also considered the merit of post-legislative scrutiny as well as the suggestion that added value should be given to pre-legislative scrutiny.

I hope that this short opening has been helpful to members. The inquiry has very much been a listening exercise by the committee. I look forward to hearing all the reflections from members across the chamber on what is—I reiterate this—an important inquiry for those who will come after us.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise members that we have a bit of time in hand and that they will be given the time back, should they take any interventions.

I call Kenneth Gibson to speak on behalf of the Finance and Public Administration Committee.

15:12

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in this debate on committee effectiveness, because it is crucial that Parliament practices are kept under review and that we continually improve in order to carry out the most effective possible scrutiny and to meet public expectations. I therefore welcome the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee's inquiry into committee effectiveness and the excellent work that it has undertaken to date.

The SPPA Committee asked me to discuss the approach and practices of the Finance and Public Administration Committee because it was mentioned as an example of good practice in the evidence gathered to date. Since the start of this session of Parliament, the FPA Committee has

worked in a consensual, constructive and collective way to hold Government to account and to do so robustly where needed.

Party politics are largely left at the door, ensuring that our work is more impactful. For example, we have published 40 reports so far this session, and every single recommendation that we have made has been agreed consensually, with not one involving a division. Our seven members represent four political parties, and we have one member who sits as an independent.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): Would Mr Gibson say, as I would, that it is an advantage for a committee to have only seven members? Will he also mention the fact that we have to read all our papers, because we are not given questions by the Scottish Parliament information centre?

Kenneth Gibson: You have jumped the gun, John, because I am going to touch on that as I progress through my speech.

To point to our successes, the FPA Committee has improved the transparency of the budgetary information published by the Scottish Government, created the conditions for an open debate about the need—or not, as the case may be—for commissioners, secured a full review of the national performance framework, sought to protect and enhance the time available for parliamentary scrutiny of the Scottish budget and achieved much-needed improvements to the consistency and presentation of financial memoranda.

I note that the SPPA Committee is looking into the Parliament's current committee structure, the optimum size of committee membership and the number of committees, and I believe that our committee is exactly the right size.

Our workload includes a mix of referred items, such as pre-budget and budget scrutiny, and consideration of bills and Scottish statutory instruments, and we undertake one or two self-initiated inquiries a year. It is crucial that all committees have balanced workloads, and, in carrying out our inquiries, we have chosen subjects on which we feel that we can make the most impact and effect real change.

Our remit in the current session broadened our scope to do just that. It is the first time that public administration has been specifically included in a Scottish Parliament committee's responsibilities. That has allowed us to shine a light on new issues such as the effectiveness of Scottish Government decision making and to embed public administration in all areas of our work, including budget scrutiny, the commissioner landscape, the cost-effectiveness of public inquiries and the Government's public service reform programme.

Stephen Kerr: The member is undoubtedly—I have said this to him privately and I am going to say it publicly—an excellent example of what a convener in this Parliament should be. He mentioned the size of the FPA Committee. However, given the size of the Parliament, is there not an issue with the size of the Government? There are nearly 30 ministers, which means that the committee workload of a back-bench member from the Government party will be that much greater. Should we not look to reduce the number of ministers in the Scottish Government?

Kenneth Gibson: First, you make me blush with that compliment. Secondly, I think that you have a point. I realise—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please speak through the chair, Mr Gibson.

Kenneth Gibson: I realise that the Scottish Government's remit has increased over the years. However, in 2007, there were six members of the Cabinet and 16 ministers, and we know for a fact that the numbers have increased considerably since then. That puts an increased workload on back-bench members—who, for example, have to cover two or more committees.

Our committee has sought to continuously identify where improvements can be made to parliamentary scrutiny, including through our current inquiry into the budget process and focused work that is aimed at strengthening the content of the Government's medium-term financial strategy.

It has helped to maintain our committee's collective approach that the churn of members has been low—five members have remained in place since the early days of the current parliamentary session. That makes a huge difference, as it enables members to build up expertise, pursue issues over a period of time and identify links between the range of topics across our remit. We also pursue lines of questioning until we get answers, even over months or longer.

As members know only too well, committees take different approaches to questioning witnesses. At the start of the session—this also happened when I chaired the 2011 to 2016 Finance Committee—the FPA Committee agreed that it did not want the Scottish Parliament information centre or our clerks to provide pre-scripted questions that would be divided among members. Instead, we have background briefings and summaries of evidence to prompt our own questioning. Those documents are always published, for openness and transparency. That sink-or-swim approach encourages members—

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Kenneth Gibson: If I will get the time back, I am more than happy to take another intervention.

Finlay Carson: There are sometimes calls for some of the less popular aspects of a bill or other scrutiny to be covered by prepared questions. Certainly, in the committee that I convene, there is a need for some questions to be asked that might not result in a clip or that do not concern aspects of the bill that members are interested in pursuing, but that does not mean that those areas do not need to be covered.

Kenneth Gibson: To digress slightly, I note that what usually happens in the FPA Committee is that I open and cover a number of topics, which is followed by members exploring them in greater depth. However, we do not discuss as a committee what we are going to explore; it is up to every individual member to decide that. I find that, 80 to 90 per cent of the time, everything is covered. If one or two items are left out, I tend to cover them at the end, and I always ask witnesses whether they have any further points that they wish to make.

I had started to say that that sink-or-swim approach encourages members to develop their own knowledge and pursue particular areas of interest, leading to effective and impactful scrutiny and to members feeling invested in the committee's work.

Finally, I want to emphasise the importance of the convener setting the tone for consensual and impactful scrutiny, which Stephen Kerr emphasised in his intervention on Martin Whitfield. Leadership is important. Being from the Government party, I work hard to gain the trust of and build solid relationships with committee members from across the political divide, and I am sure that they would agree that I have never shied away from asking difficult questions of Government and other witnesses. I allow members the space and time to pursue their own lines of questioning and create opportunities for us to work together on business planning days and fact-finding visits. I seek to consult members and represent the collective view prior to meeting ministers and stakeholders and when speaking to the media on the committee's behalf.

I understand that the SPPA Committee is considering whether elected conveners would strengthen the Parliament's committees and, if so, how. That is not an issue that the FPA Committee has considered, but it is clear to me that conveners of all parties can already play a key role in strengthening the effectiveness of their committees. However, they must be prepared to set the tone for all members to work in a constructive, non-partisan way and ensure that the necessary processes and practices are in place to support impactful scrutiny.

I look forward to hearing the other contributions to the debate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Richard Leonard to speak on behalf of the Public Audit Committee.

15:20

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer. I will speak predominantly on behalf of the Public Audit Committee.

The Public Audit Committee has submitted a formal response to the call for views in the SPPA Committee's inquiry, but I want to take a few minutes to speak about the experience that the Public Audit Committee brings, because it does have a particular remit, it does have a distinctive structure and it does have a different way of working compared to most other committees in this Parliament.

Let me begin by saying that our committee is smaller than most committees in the Parliament, with just five members, but we have found that not to be a weakness—it has proved to be a strength, because it gives every member the space to contribute properly every week. It creates the time for more in-depth questioning of witnesses, and it helps to build trust and collaboration across party lines—something that is especially important in scrutiny work. With fewer voices in the room, we are able more easily to follow the evidence, and it allows committee members not just to ask one question, but to ask a second, a third or even a fourth follow-up question of the same witness. So, it leads to more thorough scrutiny and a more constructive tone. That is why we have said in our written submission that smaller, more focused committees could improve scrutiny right across the Parliament.

John Mason: As Richard Leonard will gather, I, too, am a fan of smaller committees. How do we tie that in with party representation? The more popular committees—unlike his committee—such as the Education, Children and Young People Committee are the ones that everybody wants to be on.

Richard Leonard: I am simply observing. In the previous parliamentary session, Mr Mason and I were both on the Economy, Energy and Fair Work Committee—Ash Regan was on it, too. It was quite a large committee and I have to say that, in the end, on quite a lot of reports, it broke down into tribalism and members voted along party lines. My experience on other committees in that session and on the Public Audit Committee in this session is that there tends to be much better cross-party working. I think that that is, in part but

not exclusively, a function of the size of the committee.

Stephen Kerr: Does that not highlight that the role of a member of the Scottish Parliament should transcend the party labels with which we are elected? Should we often not just junk the d'Hondt system? Should the jobs not be done by the best possible people to do them on behalf of the people of Scotland? Should that not be the criterion for the work of committees and for everything that we do as a Parliament?

Richard Leonard: I will come on to discuss some of that at the end of my contribution, so I will hopefully answer Mr Kerr's question with my perspective on that.

Let me turn to something that has already come up and that I think is an issue. Low turnover in committee membership is, in my view, better for nurturing a collective and consistent approach. Gaining expertise and building relationships takes time, but the experience that we have had in the Public Audit Committee is that only two of us are original members who have been there from the start of the session. That is not a criticism; it is simply an observation—and, for the record, I say to Mr Mason that it is not because of the unpopularity of the Public Audit Committee. Also for the record, it is not because those who have left have done so to take up ministerial posts—that might be a criticism, actually. In my view, the Parliament might wish to consider the benefits of locking in stable committee membership as much as possible.

Our committee works differently from others in another significant way. Unlike most other committees, we do not routinely take evidence from ministers. Instead, we hear principally from senior civil servants—the so-called accountable officers—from the Scottish Government and from public bodies. They are defined, incidentally, in the Scottish public finance manual as “accountable officers” whose accountability is to us—the Parliament, on behalf of the people—and not to Government. These are the people with direct responsibility for how public money is spent and how public services are delivered. That allows us, in turn, to ask questions about performance, outcomes and value for money without party politics dominating the room.

It also helps us to focus on the evidence on whether service users—citizens—are getting what they have been promised. That approach has been central to some of our most high-profile work—this week, once again, on the delays and escalating costs of the Glen Sannox and Glen Rosa ferries programme and, just last week, the publication of our report on the misuse of public money by the Water Industry Commission for Scotland.

On the issue of elected conveners, our committee members held differing views, and we have submitted those individually, but on gender balance we were united. We support an end to single-sex committees. We would welcome positive action to ensure that a better gender balance exists across all the Parliament's committees, but we also believe that this is about more than gender. We believe that diversity of background, of experience and of perspective strengthens parliamentary scrutiny, because the people who hold those in power to account should better reflect the people we are elected to serve.

Here are some final thoughts from me, Deputy Presiding Officer. We have duties that we must discharge as representatives. I am elected on a party ticket—of course I am; I would not be a member of this Parliament had I not been a Labour candidate—but we were not elected to be robots, trembling before the party whips. Ultimately, we are responsible to ourselves, to our consciences, to our values, and that, in my view, should be better reflected in the way in which we conduct ourselves in committee and in this chamber. We are not managers or would-be managers. We are elected representatives. We should have conviction in our politics and the courage of our conviction. These are questions not just about the future of this Parliament. These are not just operational matters. They are about the state of our democracy itself.

History tells us that progress comes from below and that Parliaments have to catch up. I hope that this Parliament does catch up—with the people's hunger for more active, popular democracy not just in our Parliament, not just in our politics, but in our economy as well.

15:27

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate and, in my role as convener of the Criminal Justice Committee, to give some personal reflections on committee effectiveness. I pay tribute to the work of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee in securing the debate following its important and interesting inquiry.

I also thank all members of the Criminal Justice Committee and those who have been members during my time as convener. I believe that we have demonstrated what an effective committee looks like. Without being immodest, I think that the committee has worked hard to secure its reputation for robust scrutiny, whether in committee-led inquiries or when scrutinising legislation that comes under our remit. My goodness, there has been a lot of legislation.

On a point that some members have raised, in my view, certainly in the context of criminal justice, is that there is a need for some pre-prepared questions, which help to ensure that all aspects of a bill's provisions are the subject of evidence taking during committee scrutiny. However, it is important to extend some flexibility to members who are interested in following their own line of questioning.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I agree with the point that Audrey Nicoll has made. Nonetheless, does she accept that, if there are pre-prepared questions, there is a temptation for some members not to do the required homework or to think for themselves and seek out the most important points?

Audrey Nicoll: I agree. It is the responsibility of each member to consider their own lines of questioning. However, one of the advantages of having prepared questions is that it ensures that we take evidence across a broad spectrum of provisions, particularly when we scrutinise bills.

Even as a member of the Government party, I have always taken the view that our committee is a critical friend of that Government. By that I mean that we are not frightened to criticise when improvements are needed, but we do so constructively by working with ministers and others on as much of a shared agenda as we can, across the parties. Our committee's record demonstrates that.

In no small part, that is due to all committee members being prepared—most of the time—to set aside party politics and seek to attain real change. That is so whether it be through our scrutiny of the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill, which could make fundamental changes to our justice system, through seeking to improve the ways in which the mental wellbeing of our police officers is supported or through supporting calls to end Friday releases from prison. As its convener, I have been keen that our committee is one that, when possible, seeks consensus across political parties and that, regardless of its members' political affiliations, considers matters in a fair way, with a focus on improving Scotland's criminal justice system. I believe that we have done that.

I believe, too, that, in addition to working collaboratively, effective committees have excellent relationships and dialogue with the stakeholders and individuals who are relevant to their remit, and that they respond to them by tackling their concerns. By being fleet of foot and creative, our committee has always been willing to find a way to make progress on an issue by considering evidence and, when appropriate, encouraging ministers to take action.

I cannot talk about our committee's work programme without commending our clerking team, without whom I would certainly be lost. Nothing is too much trouble for them, and the huge workload that the team carries to make our committee work so well is not lost on any of our members. The support that we receive from our Scottish Parliament information centre, communications, and participation and communities team—PACT—colleagues is second to none, and we are indebted to them all. It is worth noting the sensitivity of some of our committee's work, which has involved our taking evidence from highly vulnerable witnesses. The complex and detailed support that the PACT team provides to make such evidence sessions happen ensures that we get the best evidence from all our witnesses.

In this parliamentary session, the Criminal Justice Committee has seen relatively few membership changes. Continuity with our members, clerks and researchers has meant that we have built up a good understanding of our remit and what needs to be done. Richard Leonard articulated that point well in his contribution.

We have also been innovative in working with two other committees to scrutinise the Scottish Government's response to tackling drug harm and reducing the number of drug deaths, and in supporting the work of its national mission on drugs. That cross-committee work supported a people's panel process that brought together members of the public to consider what Scotland should do differently to reduce the number of drug deaths.

I firmly believe that our committees are at their most effective when we work collectively, without fear or favour towards the Government, and when we are creative and persistent about achieving real change within our remits.

Convening a committee is an utter privilege. It is also not without its pressures and demands, but they are made so much easier by the support that is provided by all our members. For that support, I extend my grateful thanks.

15:34

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Jamie Hepburn): I, too, thank the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee for its work in this area. The Scottish Parliament recently celebrated its 25th anniversary. As Kenny Gibson set out earlier, it is right that how the Parliament operates is kept under constant review, to ensure that the best ways of working can be identified and implemented when there is consensus to do so.

I begin with an observation. A few weeks ago, we had a debate on the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee's inquiry into framework bills and Henry VIII powers, and that committee's convener cited the Donoughmore report of 1932. Today, the convener of the SPPA Committee has gone further back in the annals of history to 1774, to cite Edmund Burke. I note that Mr Carlaw's committee today published its blueprint for participation, which we will debate shortly. There is therefore a challenge to Mr Carlaw on how far back in history he can go in opening the debate on that report.

I speak in my ministerial capacity so, given the importance of protecting the principle of ministers being accountable to Parliament, I am sure that colleagues will understand my desire to avoid being seen to direct how Parliament discharges its responsibility. Instead, my principal interest is in considering how any changes might impact on the delivery of Government business.

At the outset, I acknowledge the careful way in which the SPPA Committee is going about its inquiry and its desire—as evidenced by today's debate, which is in a different format from those that we normally hold—to ensure that a wide range of perspectives are taken into account. I also recognise the difficult challenge that the committee has set for itself by tackling committee effectiveness. Whether something is effective might not be an easy thing to reach a view on, and I know from research that the committee has commissioned that many Parliaments have had difficulties in identifying outputs and measures on effectiveness.

It is, of course, not for me to say how effective parliamentary committees are at holding Government to account, but I will draw attention to how subjective and varied effectiveness can be. For example, how should we measure effectiveness in relation to bills? Is effectiveness best measured by how much impact a committee has on a bill by making amendments? The attraction of that metric is that it has the benefit of being tangible and measurable. Is the question more about how the committee has gone about the scrutiny of a bill, investigated whether it will deliver on its purpose and considered whether there were alternatives and what stakeholders thought?

My view is that the latter question is probably more important, but we have to recognise that it is much more difficult to measure. If the Government is doing its job properly—the view on that might be felt to be subjective—in bringing forward well-crafted legislation that has stakeholders' support, effective parliamentary scrutiny may not need to do much more than identify that such legislation is fit for its task. In other cases, particularly on issues

that are politically polarising, effective parliamentary scrutiny may look very different.

I will watch with interest to see what direction the committee wants to take on the measurement of effectiveness.

Finlay Carson: The minister will no doubt be aware of Professor Mary Brennan's letter with regard to the scrutiny of the secondary legislation on the good food nation. She finished her letter by saying:

"We strongly believe that it is incumbent on all those with responsibility to ensure the highest level of scrutiny and accountability are adhered to."

In bringing forward legislation, the Government surely needs to take cognisance of the Parliament's capacity to scrutinise it in that way.

Jamie Hepburn: Of course, and that is what we do. That has been the subject of some discussion in the context of the inquiry. I gave evidence to the SPPA Committee just last week, and I engage regularly with committee conveners. A sense is sometimes expressed that the Government is overburdening committees with workload. I put on the record last week at committee, and I am delighted that Mr Carson has given me the opportunity to place it on record now, that the average number of Government bills introduced per year has been broadly stable across all parliamentary sessions. In this session, we project introducing 12 bills per year; in session 5, we introduced 12 per year; in session 4, it was 13 per year; in session 3, it was 11 per year; in session 2, it was 13 per year; and in session 1, it was 13 per year.

The pattern is broadly similar for Scottish statutory instruments. The numbers of SSIs have been largely stable for the past few years, and this year there have been far fewer than in every other year since 2000-01.

I recognise the Government's responsibility to ensure that committees have a manageable workload, and in terms of our legislative programme, I think that we are doing that.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The minister makes an interesting point about numbers. Does he agree that some subject committees receive more legislation than others? Indeed, we discussed that this morning during the meeting that he had with me as convener of the Education, Children and Young People Committee. Between now and the end of the parliamentary session, the committee will have very little capacity to consider anything other than legislation, given the number of non-Government bills and Government bills that are coming forward. Although the numbers may be the same, certain committees receive more legislation than others.

Jamie Hepburn: I absolutely recognise that. The Government looks at the range of activity that committees are undertaking, as members can see clearly from the year 5 programme that we announced in our programme for government. We are cognisant of capacity issues and aware that some committees will have more capacity than others, and we try to balance that against the need to take forward the legislative programme that meets the Government's ambitions. Often, legislation falls under more than one committee's remit, and we try to balance activity with that in mind.

In giving evidence to the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee last week, I made the point frequently that it is not for the Government to dictate how a committee might scrutinise legislation or any particular issue. There may be a question of how a committee could scale its approach, depending on the significance of the issues. Committees could deal with minor technical issues quickly, which would allow them to spend more time on issues that are significant, of high public interest or of longer-term impact. Of course, committees have to make those judgments for themselves.

Over time, new processes and new information requirements have built up, which have increased committee workloads. At the Parliament's request, the volume of information that the Government must submit to the Parliament has increased and, in turn, the volume of information that the Parliament must consider has also increased. We seek to respond to such requirements accordingly. *[Interruption.]* Am I getting an indication from the Deputy Presiding Officer that I must conclude?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back for the interventions, with a bit of extra latitude.

Jamie Hepburn: Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer.

I will touch on whether there is scope for committees to do more pre-legislative scrutiny in order to improve their knowledge earlier in the process and to front load some of their consideration of certain issues. The Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee has looked at whether committees could front load some scrutiny while policy development is under way by engaging in consultations or discussing matters with lead ministers at an earlier stage and more regularly. That approach could ensure that less time was required to scrutinise the final product.

Of course, it is in the hands of committees to determine how much time should be allocated to scrutiny when they have been involved at an earlier stage of the process. I do not think that

there would be inconsistencies in a committee being able to inform the development of legislation that was subject to its scrutiny further down the line; committees should be perfectly capable of doing that.

Martin Whitfield: The minister opens an interesting question about the contribution that a committee can make to a bill's development, as opposed to its requirement to scrutinise a bill. Is he comfortable—I phrase that carefully—that a committee would be able to, in essence, contribute to what a bill should look like and subsequently scrutinise it successfully for parliamentary needs?

Jamie Hepburn: In short, yes—that would be perfectly possible. It would still be in the Government's hands to consider what the committee had said and draft its legislation accordingly. When it scrutinised a bill, the committee might feel that the points that it had raised had not been fully taken into account. I see no inconsistency in a committee being able to participate in both aspects of the scrutiny process.

I look forward to hearing what members across the chamber have to say. Again, I emphasise that it is not for the Government to dictate to Parliament on such matters but, of course, the Scottish Government is always ready, willing and happy to support such considerations in the appropriate way.

15:45

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): I realise that, as a child of the 1950s, I am the oldest MSP contributing to the debate this afternoon, but I assure the minister that I have no first-hand recollection of the events of 1774 or earlier, so I am not able to respond to his request in quite the way that he might have expected.

I realise that a special meeting of the Parliament is taking place this afternoon in Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse, but I am immediately impressed by the quality of the contributions that I have been able to witness so far in the debate. I do not know whether there is a collective noun for conveners, but I enjoyed hearing from Audrey Nicoll, Richard Leonard and, of course, Kenny Gibson. I join in Stephen Kerr's tribute to Kenny Gibson. It is my job—as it was once yours, Deputy Presiding Officer—to present, on behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Parliament's budget to the Finance and Public Administration Committee each year. I am always a model of circumspection and moderation in so doing, and I am always immensely impressed by the convener's robust handling of the issues that we discuss, especially when it comes to the issue of MSP remuneration.

Are there any changes to the Parliament's procedures and practices that would help the committees to work more effectively? The challenge that arises from this afternoon's discussion very much reminds me of the early days of the coalition UK Government, when it sought to embrace the challenge of House of Lords reform. One might have thought that, with a coalition rather than a majority Government, the land was best placed for some sort of collective agreement to emerge. However, in fact, each of the proposals, some of which were eminently sensible, found a different coalition of interests that was opposed to it, so nothing transpired. The challenge for the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee will be to take forward some of what I think will be a degree of agreed thinking in the chamber this afternoon and transform it into something that might lead to the Parliament being more effective.

When this Parliament was created, it joined the Parliaments of North Korea, Nicaragua, Mozambique, China and Cuba in being unicameral. The suggestion was that we did not need another chamber—of course, we do not, as we are one of the most over-governed countries in the world, and the last thing that we need is a second chamber. However, the promise was that our committee system would be the vanguard or bulwark of democratic accountability that would counteract inappropriate, badly drafted or simply wrong legislation. The question before us is, have we succeeded in doing that? The answer is that we have sometimes done so, but not always. That leads to the issues that are before us today.

I sympathise, for example, with the views that have been expressed about gender balance, and the fact that we should not have single-sex committees. I am the convener of such a committee myself now. It did not start that way, but we had a woman on the committee who was promoted to another committee, and there was not another woman available to put in her place. When another committee member left, we had two women from their party in rapid succession, after which that place was filled by a man. Then, another party changed its representative but declined to appoint a woman to the place. The way in which our committees are constructed makes it difficult to find a formula that will achieve mixed-sex committees without having a lot of red tape at the start of the session that requires parties not only to abide by d'Hondt but to nominate a member of a particular sex in order to achieve the continuity of gender balance.

I take the point that, if there is no gender balance in the Parliament, having a gender balance on committees would possibly lead to far more work falling on a handful of representatives—that would certainly have been

the case with the Conservative Party in this session.

Of course, continuity is a difficult thing to achieve, partly because people are promoted within their party to take on more senior roles, which changes the face of their representation. My committee has faced problems with continuity, too. The minister referred to our report containing our final recommendations on deliberative democracy, which the Parliament will debate early in June, but I note that there are only two members of the committee who have been through the whole of that committee inquiry and taken part in every stage of the development of the recommendations.

The Conservative Party is the only party in the chamber that has never had a taste of government in the devolved era, so we do not have the same vested interests as the other parties do in maintaining certain safeguards. Our view is that we should do away with d'Hondt in the construction of committees. If that were done, the smaller parties would have greater representation across the various committees, and it would achieve the ambition of the committees being more independent of Government and being able to scrutinise with more authority. Our view is that that would give additional emphasis to the notion that the committees are, in fact, an essential part of holding the Government to account and thus of ensuring democratic accountability.

We are not altogether sure about whether there should be elected conveners. I was part of the previous Presiding Officer's commission that first suggested electing and remunerating conveners. I am not sure about those suggestions, but I am sure that a number of conveners, particularly in the Conveners Group—which is a group that in some respects I think we could do without, because I am not quite sure what it achieves; I say that with the greatest respect to you, Deputy Presiding Officer, as the chair of it—are unsure about what their level of authority and responsibility is. Almost more important than conveners being elected or remunerated would be a clear understanding of what the authority of a committee convener is to act. I am aware that some feel able to act and others feel constrained by the committee as to what they can do. That probably interferes with the democratic accountability function.

We would also like to see the creation of a full-time post-legislative scrutiny committee. That is not an original idea, and we have gone round the houses on it. I hoped that deliberative democracy might offer an opportunity, but I do not think that the deliberative democracy model was particularly successful. We know that we are all supposed to do more post-legislative scrutiny, but we are

unable to do so within the construction and constraints that exist. That is our principal view.

In relation to committee size, the smaller the committee is, the better. Five to seven members has worked better but, in our model of doing away with d'Hondt, there would probably be more opportunity for authority and for representation from other parties.

I hope that there is a general interest in this issue in Parliament. Normally in the Conservative Party, when you get the whip's broadcast, if it says that you are speaking on Thursday afternoon and no division is expected, you rather feel that you have been consigned to the graveyard shift, because everybody else might have left. Notwithstanding the fact that we are here on a Thursday afternoon to discuss the issue, I hope that there is a genuine interest in it rather than a "you will be here to discuss it this afternoon" interest. I can see that everybody who has contributed to the debate so far wants to contribute and has genuine personal experience and ideas to contribute. I hope that we can translate those into something that committee conveners can take forward in a meaningful way so that we achieve the change that we would like to see.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Carlaw. As a small concession, I am sure that you will be delighted that the Conveners Group meeting is cancelled next month.

15:00

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I thank the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee for the debate and for carrying out an inquiry into committee effectiveness.

We must review and improve our procedures to ensure that the Parliament always operates to the highest standards. Our committees exist to hold Government to account and to test legislation. Members must leave their party allegiance at the door and hold Government to account. Some would argue that the role is different for members of the governing party when they are dealing with legislation, given that they stood on a manifesto that promoted that same legislation. I do not think that anyone would expect the committee—

Kenneth Gibson: Will the member take an intervention on that point?

Rhoda Grant: Yes.

Kenneth Gibson: That is a really important area. However, it is important for all of us that legislation is of quality, is robust and that it delivers for the people of Scotland. It serves no one's interest if members of the governing party go soft

on Government ministers when, in fact, they need to be more robust in specific instances.

Rhoda Grant: Indeed—I was about to make that very point. Legislation must be tested to ensure that it will do what it is meant to, that it will not have unintended consequences and that it will be really good legislation. That benefits the Government as well, because it means that its legislation is all the better because of it.

At the same time, I do not think that anyone expects committee members to leave their personal beliefs at the door when they go into committee. Sometimes, that directs the approach that they take. It is difficult to see how we can leave our party politics at the door in what sometimes can be a very partisan Parliament.

A proposal is that we elect committee conveners. We believe that that would help. It would obviously have to be under the d'Hondt system, so that candidates could be only from one party. That approach would give scope for a different career path for MSPs, who could look to become a committee convener rather than a Government minister or cabinet secretary. It would also provide opportunities for those who might not be in favour with their party and might never hope to aspire to committee convenership otherwise. Excluding cabinet secretaries and ministers from casting a vote in the ballot would ensure that the Government could not unduly influence those elections.

Jamie Hepburn: The member will surely recognise—I must be careful of what I say here—that not every minister might remain one for the entire duration of a session of Parliament. How would she deal with the notion that those members who have been disenfranchised might then find themselves on the back benches and on a committee?

Rhoda Grant: That would apply, too, to those who were promoted into ministerial and cabinet secretary positions—they would already have cast a vote and would then be subject to scrutiny by that same committee. However, we would simply have to live with that, because I do not think that any of us are so arrogant that we cast a vote expecting to be in an elevated position and none of us are probably looking at our demotion so clearly as when we are looking to cast a vote—although the minister might disagree.

We must also not shy away from setting up short-life committees. Sometimes the committee structure is so stuck that we cannot do things a bit more flexibly. We should look at setting up short-life committees and sub-committees—or joint sub-committees of two or more committees, if that would be useful. That would give us the flexibility to react to circumstances.

I absolutely agree that there should be no single-sex committees. Scottish Labour works hard to ensure that our group has gender balance, and we must never stop doing that.

Douglas Ross: I have been interested in the discussion about that issue. If I understand correctly, all the committee members on the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, which is considering the matter, are female, apart from the convener. Would the member be comfortable if a committee had all female members and a good, female committee member had to be taken off to be replaced by a male?

Rhoda Grant: I really look forward to the day when that must happen—[*Laughter.*] I cannot conceive of it, but I sincerely hope that it does. If that were the case, I would be willing to come off the committee.

Our Parliament should be representative of the communities that we represent. If we had gender balance in the Parliament, single-sex committees would not be an issue at all. However, signing up to the ideal of no single-sex committees without challenging parties to have better gender equality means exactly what Jackie Dunbar and Jackson Carlaw have talked about—that women would end up working harder than men. I am sure that every woman in the Parliament would argue that we already work harder than men as it is, and that we would not want to work any harder than that.

Not only would it be incredibly disappointing if we had single-sex parties; a single-sex party could not prevent a committee from being single sex if it were the last party to nominate. That would cause problems for other parties. Should they forego their committee membership? Should another woman step in? What should happen then? The simple way of avoiding that is to ensure that all parties pursue gender equality in their MSP group.

Having taken a number of interventions, I am now running out of time. It is essential that we review and refresh our procedures to keep our Parliament responsive to the needs of our communities. We need to review our committees. We also need to review legislation and build post-legislative scrutiny into our processes. There might be opportunities to do that at the start of a parliamentary session, when legislation has not yet been introduced. We need to consider using that time to train committee members, as well as let them review previous legislation. That would give them an insight into that committee's work.

16:00

Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): The Scottish Green group submitted a detailed paper on the inquiry, and I am grateful that this work is being

undertaken. We feel that significant improvement to how our parliamentary committees work is needed in order to improve scrutiny of the Scottish Government, particularly post-legislative scrutiny, and scrutiny of public bodies. The Scottish Government is prone to setting itself targets and setting out intentions without following up and taking the action needed to meet them. We have seen that happen disastrously with Scotland's high-level climate targets, but also with what we might call the supporting targets, such as those on recycling, the reduction of waste, the reduction of car kilometres and so on.

First, it should be the role of committees to circle back on and immediately and persistently demand implementation plans for legislation that has been passed and that sets out targets. Costs, effectiveness and progress must all be followed up diligently. Otherwise, we let the Scottish Government get away with saying "We have the most ambitious climate targets in the world" for years, which covers up the truth that they have not taken the actions needed to meet those targets to the point that they are now rushing around having to erase them.

Secondly, although committee inquiries are often of very high quality, they frequently lead to no action. There should be structured follow-up to ensure that recommendations are implemented. If follow-up is not feasible within the parliamentary session, legacy reports should explicitly recommend that successor committees prioritise it. Aligning committee work with Government priorities could help to ensure that feedback is received at a time when the Government is working on the subject. It would help ensure that work is taken into consideration at the right time.

Thirdly, the Scottish Greens feel that budget scrutiny is largely ineffective and requires a complete overhaul. Reforms were agreed between the Parliament and the Government around budget scrutiny in the previous parliamentary session, but we need to understand how those are being progressed. Within the budget scrutiny process, evaluating how budget decisions align with Government strategy and stated priorities is nearly impossible. Take, for example, the Government's stated intention to reach net zero by 2045. How can the Parliament understand whether the budget is taking us in that direction? Some budget lines, such as those for dualling roads, will clearly increase emissions, whereas others, such as the reform of agricultural subsidies, should reduce them—but by how much? What are the trade-offs that the Government is making? Without that information, we cannot scrutinise the budget effectively. The Scottish Government will now be moving to carbon budgeting. That is an opportunity to fix the process and to match financial budget lines with carbon

budget lines, so that the Parliament can clearly see how both budgets are being balanced.

Fourthly, committees should have a clearer role in monitoring progress against the national performance framework. How do we know that what the Government is doing is in line with its stated priorities?

Fifthly, the lack of post-legislative scrutiny is a significant issue. At present, the first half of parliamentary sessions can be taken up by members pursuing their personal interests, which has the result of reducing the time that is available within the term to pursue new legislation or to amend existing legislation. If the first half of each parliamentary session was dedicated to post-legislative scrutiny—ensuring that laws, especially framework legislation, are functioning as intended before committees move on to new inquiries—that would resolve the problem.

The final point that I will make in my opening speech—I will perhaps make some of the others in my closing speech—is that parliamentary committees are failing to provide adequate scrutiny of SPCB-supported bodies and public bodies beyond the Government. Important findings made by SPCB-supported bodies—and, indeed, other public bodies—are often ignored due to a lack of committee mandate to engage with their work. Parliamentary committees should have duties and mechanisms to effectively scrutinise other public bodies, such as Environmental Standards Scotland. A structured approach, similar to the Public Audit Committee's weekly sessions with the Auditor General, would improve oversight.

There is time, so I will carry on for a bit.

In our paper, the Scottish Greens describe how committee structures and practices could be improved. More business time in the chamber should be allocated to committee-led debates, which would require committees to have ideas on what they would like to debate. Committee debates tend to be more informed and constructive and less likely to cut along party lines.

The Scottish Greens feel that, at the moment, a large amount of chamber time is wasted on repetitive and unproductive debates, partly due to the Government's reluctance to risk losing votes, and partly because Opposition parties do not push for more substantive discussions.

Bad behaviour in committees such as badgering witnesses or talking over conveners should absolutely not be tolerated. Conveners should enforce decorum and protect witnesses from targeted attacks. Mechanisms should be in place to call out inappropriate behaviour without fear of retaliation.

Committee conveners should be elected, instead of appointed based on party agreements. The current system allows larger parties, especially the governing party, to use convenerships as a reward for back benchers, reducing the independence and effectiveness of committees. Electing conveners was a recommendation of the parliamentary commission that was established by the previous Presiding Officer, but it has not been enacted in this parliamentary session, which is disappointing.

Party and gender balance on committees should be prioritised to ensure diverse representation. Following earlier comments, I note that there is, of course, a difference between perfect gender balance and single-sex committees—wiggle room, as it were, when parties do not have good gender balance among their members in the Parliament.

The electing of conveners should be structured to avoid popularity contests and to ensure that those who are chosen are committed to rigorous scrutiny. Cross-committee collaboration should be standard practice to address issues that cut across departmental lines. That would help to overcome siloed working and ensure comprehensive scrutiny of multifaceted issues. Finally, committees should have greater powers, including the ability to compel witnesses to appear and to strengthen their oversight capabilities.

Stephen Kerr: I think that Lorna Slater will find that, under the Scotland Act 2016, the committees of this Parliament have the power to compel witnesses to appear before them. I think that we already enjoy that privilege in this Parliament—something, by the way, that the Westminster Parliament does not enjoy.

Lorna Slater: I am very grateful to Stephen Kerr for correcting me on that point, if, indeed, I have got that wrong. I note that at least one United Kingdom Government minister has refused to appear before the Scottish Parliament when requested to do so in writing. Therefore, that would be a good power to have.

16:07

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I want to get a couple of things out of the way before I start. First, I reassure Jackson Carlaw that nobody had to bully me to take part in the debate. You can check with my whips—I was well up for it.

Secondly, I know that many committees have done excellent work in the Parliament, and I hope that their members, their conveners and anybody who has given evidence will understand that any criticisms that I make of the structures are absolutely no criticism of the work that they have

done. Indeed, it makes any successes that much more impressive.

I have sat on four committees, acted as a substitute member on two and appeared before two others as a minister, so I know that they are busy and often overloaded. The inquiries that are carried out often give much-needed air to issues that really matter to constituents and are important and worthy of time, but that are perhaps not quite as flashy when it comes to discussing them in the chamber—perhaps much like this debate. Committees do not have enough power or, I am afraid, enough respect.

My experience has taught me that the convener and their approach make a huge difference to the effectiveness of a committee and the experience of members and witnesses. A convener who does not allow members to pursue non-SPICe lines of questioning, overloads witness panels or does not show an interest in detail or in approaching difficult subjects can create a dispiriting environment. A convener who creates a culture of interest, curiosity and participation—or who brings bacon rolls to meetings—can really make a difference.

Respect from the Government and media for committees and the issues that they raise is incredibly important. I wish that I could think of an effective way to prevent party whipping in committees.

One particular example of good work was undertaken by the Social Justice and Social Security Committee under the convenership of Elena Whitham. At the end of an inquiry, we published the report, “Robbing Peter to pay Paul: low income and the debt trap”. It was hailed by third sector campaigners, those whom we took evidence from and MSPs across parties. It felt as though we had achieved something, along with the support of clerks and SPICe, in pulling together everything that we had considered into recommendations. However, the response from the Government was a huge disappointment to me, as a fairly new MSP.

One witness to the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee inquiry pointed out that it is hard to measure effectiveness. There is no key performance indicator on committee impact factor—yet. Is effectiveness measured by how many amendments the committee makes to a bill or how many reports it publishes? What about recommendations that are initially ignored by the Government but which make it in to the next budget or manifesto that is drawn up—without any credit given to the committee, with its report already forgotten?

That is an interesting question, which can only really be answered if we do more post-legislative scrutiny and follow-up work. I know from my

experience that committees often do not feel that they have time to do those things, but, if we want to be more effective, they are critical.

The convener of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee mentioned the issue of the time that committees have. We need to ask ourselves some serious questions about whether the value that we place on committees is reflected in the parliamentary timetable. There are a lot of solutions out there, from giving over some afternoons of chamber business to having separate bill committees. However, the solutions always seem to lead to a very difficult question for MSPs, including for those like me who sit on three committees: even if we have smaller committees, are there enough of us to meaningfully improve scrutiny?

I have a lot of sympathy for the issues raised about remuneration, which I believe is critical to strengthening the whole system. I have worked under many excellent conveners and I have seen the work that they are expected to do. It is a whole other job on top of being a back bencher—it is much like being a deputy presiding officer or a junior minister. If we want MSPs, particularly those who are in one of the parties of Government, to take their convenerhip seriously in its own right and not just to see it as a stepping stone, it must be remunerated in a way that recognises and encourages the level of work that is needed.

Committees should, and can, be incredibly effective. Issues should be spotted and fixed in committees, not in the press or with another bill in the next session. Ministers should be terrified to appear in front of us. I hope that the inquiry results in some change in structure to facilitate that.

16:11

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I am pleased to contribute to this important debate on the effectiveness of our parliamentary committees. Although I am convener of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee, I speak in a personal capacity.

The inquiry comes at a critical time, when public trust, transparency and accountability are paramount. Committees are the cornerstone of scrutiny in our unicameral legislature. They are where legislation is tested, stakeholders are heard and detail is examined, yet the evidence presented to the inquiry shows that our current system is falling short.

I recognise the dedication of committee members across the chamber, many of whom invest significant time and effort. However, we must also be honest about the structural, procedural and cultural barriers that limit our effectiveness. From my experience convening the

Rural Affairs and Islands Committee—which covers agriculture, fisheries, animal welfare, rural development and island communities—I have seen how vital it is for committees to be informed and empowered, yet our ability to scrutinise is often constrained by the very structure of the committee.

Effective scrutiny requires an environment—both physical and cultural—in which decisions are well informed and solutions are robust. However, the dual role of committees as both legislative and scrutiny bodies restricts their capacity for inquiry and often turns them into mini chambers. We need structural reforms to make committees more open and less bound by party lines.

On the flawed set-up, for example, the Scottish Conservatives have been clear: the Government majorities on most committees have created a culture in which scrutiny is sidelined, legislation is nodded through and dissenting voices are drowned out—not by debate but by design.

The concern is shared across parties. The Scottish Greens noted that committee inquiries “frequently lead to no action.”

The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations expressed frustration at the lack of follow-through. Scottish Labour acknowledged that committees have not fulfilled their intended role.

So, what can we do? First, we must reform committee composition. The commission on parliamentary reform recommended smaller committees and elected conveners. However, smaller must not mean less representative. In a diverse Parliament, we must ensure that all voices—especially, from my perspective, those from rural and island communities—are heard.

Secondly, we must address continuity. The high rate of turnover that I have witnessed in my committee weakens institutional memory and disrupts inquiry flow. Continuity builds expertise and trust, which are essential for effective scrutiny.

Thirdly, there needs to be better follow-up and accountability. Too often, committee reports are published, debated briefly and then forgotten. We need to have structured processes so that we can track implementation and revisit inquiries.

Fourthly, committees must be properly resourced. Effective scrutiny requires time, expertise and support. That means investing in our fantastic clerks, our research staff and access to data. There also needs to be continuity in the clerking team.

Fifthly, although I welcome the committee’s commitment to achieving a gender balance and eliminating single-sex committees, we must go further—we must support participation by

underrepresented groups, including members of ethnic minorities, people with disabilities and representatives of rural and island communities.

We must also reflect on whether our institutional architecture supports thoughtful, evidence-based decision making.

Martin Whitfield: One thing that is buried away in standing orders is a member's expertise to be on a committee. That is a factor that should be taken into account by the Parliamentary Bureau when it considers membership of committees. Does Finlay Carson agree that, as part of that process, consideration should be given to the geography of the area that the member represents, the skill set that they have and the lived experience that they possess? Does he agree that we should be in a position to pay far more heed to that than we can do at the moment?

Finlay Carson: I absolutely agree. I appreciate that intervention. As Martin Whitfield will know, the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee meets on a Wednesday. I believe that that decision was taken to ensure that members who represent our more remote communities could always attend without it impinging too much on their family time and without their having trouble getting to Parliament after the weekend.

Although the architects of the Parliament created physical spaces such as the infamous members' thinking pods, our systems do not always allow time for reflection.

If consensus is our goal, why does it remain so elusive? We should explore options such as having more but smaller committees, which could meet fortnightly, or separating committees' inquiry and legislative functions. Perhaps we could have ad hoc bill committees, as the House of Commons does.

The two Scotland acts that we have had since 1999, along with our exit from the EU, have significantly increased our policy load, as has the increasingly popular adoption of framework bills. Framework bills result in significantly more work for committees, as secondary legislation is where all the heavy lifting is done.

Has the Parliament adapted? Are we equipped to address the scale of the climate change and nature crises, or does our structure hinder us in doing so? The question is whether tweaking the existing system is enough or whether more substantial reform is needed.

Effective scrutiny is not about opposition for its own sake. It is about ensuring that legislation is well crafted, that policies are evidence based and that citizens' voices—especially those of people who live in rural areas—are heard and respected. The Standards, Procedures and Public

Appointments Committee's inquiry is an opportunity to reset the balance by building a committee system that is independent, effective and truly fit for purpose. I urge all members to support meaningful reform that will not simply improve our processes but strengthen our democracy.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise members that the generous amount of additional time that we had in hand is close to being exhausted, so I encourage members to stick slightly more closely to their allocated speaking times.

I call Foyso Choudhury. You have around four minutes, Mr Choudhury.

16:18

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): I extend my thanks to the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee for its work on the inquiry so far.

With our Parliament having no upper house, the work of the committees is extremely important in the scrutiny of legislation, in holding ministers to account and in bringing forward issues that matter to the public. I believe that the work of our committees can show the very best of Parliament. They were envisioned as being the engine of Parliament, but any good engine needs to be serviced.

I am a member of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, which, in my biased view, is one of the best committees in Parliament. We can directly respond to and raise constituents' concerns across portfolios. We have a varied programme—last November, we published our inquiry into the dualling of the A9, while, this week, we considered the microchipping of cats.

However, one problem that the petitions committee faces is that its membership is currently all male. We frequently hear and respond to petitions that relate to issues of which we have no lived experience. Although members often join us to give evidence on issues where they have an interest, we should be looking to embed that in the structure of the committee by mandating that no committee can be single-sex.

The evidence given highlighted the value of collaboration when members can allow themselves to put party politics aside and work together towards a committee's common goal. The size of committees, some of which have up to 11 members, was mentioned as possibly hindering that collaboration. The petitions committee is small, with only five members, which I believe has allowed us to be agile in our work and to become less bogged down in small issues.

Electing conveners could also improve the efficiency of committees. It could give them a mandate to pursue their priorities and could motivate them to share their views about the committee's future work in order to persuade others to vote for them. Electing conveners could also increase the profile of committees, turning them into the independent engines of Parliament that they were intended to be.

In summary, although our committees do great work, we should be looking to improve them. That could most easily be done by ending single-sex committees, but there are opportunities in bringing in elected conveners and enhancing committee powers. I again thank the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee for its work on this matter and look forward to seeing its final report in the autumn.

16:21

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in this debate on an important subject that is not routinely debated in Parliament.

As a relatively new substitute member of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, I found its inquiry into committee effectiveness fascinating. Like Foysol Choudhury, I think that committees are the engine rooms of this wonderful Parliament, whether they are taking evidence on important legislation or initiating vitally important inquiries on subjects that affect the whole of Scotland's population.

The questions that were central to the inquiry were about what it means for Scottish Parliament committees to be effective, how we can do better and where and how that is being communicated to the public to create maximum engagement and effect.

We took evidence from a wide range of witnesses and gained useful insights into the operation of Parliaments in other jurisdictions. We heard from academics, civil servants past and present, and representatives of all six parties in the Scottish Parliament. All that evidence helped to build a picture of how our committees operate and how, after 26 years of this Parliament, they could be improved.

As our convener and many others have said, the issue of committee size was crucial to our deliberations, with many witnesses stating that small committees work best. That has been well articulated by members from across the chamber today. The downside of having smaller committees would be that not every party could be represented under the d'Hondt system, which we have also discussed today. That system attempts to reflect the party balance in Parliament across all

committees, and the Scottish Government is clear that it would be for Parliament to determine whether that system of representation should change.

The gender-sensitive audit marked the importance of having a Parliament that is representative of society. As a member of the audit panel, I fully support that, but gender balance is possible only when a Parliament has a good gender balance to start with, and that rests on the parties' ability to attract diversity and create a good gender balance during the selection process.

We also examined how the process to elect conveners works—such a process currently operates in Westminster. The Scottish Government does not have a position on that, but I personally am not convinced that that would be the best route to take in a Parliament of 129 members, or that it could easily be introduced. Much of the evidence that we received from Westminster witnesses, although interesting, was not really relevant to Holyrood due to the different numbers of elected members.

It was agreed that churn in committee membership is not ideal but is often not preventable. Jackson Carlaw articulated that perfectly. Changes in membership can hinder members from building the expertise that they need to scrutinise legislation effectively.

We discussed post-legislative scrutiny, or the lack of time to do it, and it was felt that the legislative workload of most committees and the length of time that is now being taken to complete bills do not allow adequate time to do that important task.

It was also agreed that collaborative working between members that leaves party politics aside makes for more effective committees. As a long-standing member of the Criminal Justice Committee, I can testify to that. As others have said, that comes down to the role of the convener. We have excellent conveners in Audrey Nicoll, Martin Whitfield and Kenny Gibson. They unify their committees in a fair and considered way, which makes for far better outcomes.

Time does not allow me to give a comprehensive account of our inquiry, but I believe that we can be very proud of our committee system, which is helped by skilled back-up from our clerks and research teams. However, the structure should always be a work in progress and there will always be room for improvement.

16:26

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I think that that observation is a good introduction to my

remarks, so I am grateful to the member for it. We should be committed to continual improvement. Everything can get better. For example, one thing that could get better—I hope that the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee will look at this at some point—is debate management. Here we are in an important debate, and those of us who are on the back benches, who have waited an hour and 10 minutes to speak, must stick to our four minutes, whereas previously everyone took as much time as they liked. I do not think that that is a very good way to manage the time for debate in the chamber and I have given suggestions in the past about how to improve it.

I am going to model the behaviour of independent thinking and opinion that we have been speaking of, because I do not agree with everything that my party submitted to the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee for consideration in its inquiry into the future of committees. I will spell out in exactly which areas that is the case—I am sure that everyone will be absolutely scintillated to hear that.

The reality is that we have a single legislative chamber and the committees are absolutely not intended to be a supporting act but are supposed to be the engine of scrutiny. The question is whether they are, and I think that the answer is obvious, frankly.

We may take a lot of pride in the set-up of our Parliament. Much was promised in that regard: it was going to be innovative, progressive and distinctly Scottish. However, we have to be careful that our pride in what lies in the past does not prevent us from realising where the system as it stands today, after 25 years, is falling short. After such a length of time, we really should be asking ourselves whether our committees are delivering on the promise that we thought they had when the Parliament was established, or whether they have fallen under party control and become overburdened, underresourced and, frankly, too often ignored.

As I have said, there are a number of conveners in the chamber for whom I have a lot of admiration because of their independence of mind in the way that their committees go about their work. However, that is not true of every convener or every committee of this Parliament.

Let me be blunt. I believe that the current committee system is failing to meet its original purpose. Unless we act decisively, this Parliament will continue to fall short of the democratic standards that the people of Scotland deserve. The problems are structural—they are not tied to individuals—but they are not incidental. The committees are too often dominated by party

tribalism and party discipline. The long reach of the whips is felt in the committees, but, as parliamentarians, we should not tolerate that. The committees should be completely independent of the control of the whips.

Kenneth Gibson: Does the member agree that the sterility of some committees for which SPICE and the clerks write the questions reduces their flexibility? It discourages independent thinking by members and it channels members in a certain way, rather than allowing them a much greater interpretation of what is happening before them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back for the intervention, Mr Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: That is a brilliant intervention. I could not agree more. The member is absolutely right. We need to encourage independent thinking, because that is the bedrock on which a Parliament exists. Unless we have that, we will fall short in our responsibilities in holding the great public office of being a member of the Scottish Parliament. I repeat: the parties need to butt out of the committees, and we all need to live up to the expectations that the people of Scotland have in us, as holders of the office of member of the Scottish Parliament.

I want to touch on a couple of other things, because my time is about to run out—actually, it has run out. I completely agree on the issue of committee changes, and I have mentioned making the committees free of the whips.

There is also a workload imbalance. There is too much regimentation in how we go about things in the Parliament. For example, there are only so many hours in which a committee can meet, apparently. We need to be more liberal in the way that we see the parliamentary week. Committees should meet as often and for as long as is necessary to do their work, but there are too many standing order restrictions around that.

Audrey Nicoll: Will the member give way?

Stephen Kerr: I will give way—or am I not allowed to give way, Deputy Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You should be winding up at this point, Mr Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: I will give way.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Briefly.

Audrey Nicoll: On the point that Stephen Kerr has just made—Jackson Carlaw made a similar point—does he agree that conveners sometimes find it quite difficult to achieve the balance between being too liberal and flexible during a meeting and ensuring that there is the expected formality?

Stephen Kerr: I agree with that. I also think that there should be proper support for conveners to allow them to grow into their role. That is very important, too. For a convener to be truly independent, they need to have the mandate of every member of the Parliament, so I am strongly in favour of elected conveners.

I am also in favour of remuneration for committee conveners. Frankly, I do not believe for one minute that the workload of a committee convener is any less than that of a Deputy Presiding Officer or a junior minister. In so many different ways, in respect of the power balance between Parliament and executive, it is even more important that we have independent, fully functional conveners.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude.

Stephen Kerr: I know that my time is up, but I make the point again that we need to do better at managing our debates.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, I did not want to interrupt your flow, but I point out that the time that we had in hand earlier was not to allow members to continue well beyond their time; it was to allow for interventions—a number of which you made yourself—and to allow members to have the time back, in the same way as you have had.

16:32

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): This is an important inquiry, and I have enjoyed listening to the contributions this afternoon. I thank the committee for inviting me to give evidence last week. As a very small party, it is good for us to be able to take part in such things. In fact, due to the system that we currently have, I am not even entitled to a committee place at the moment, as a member of a very small party.

During my time here—I think that it has been just over nine years now—I have been on eight committees. I have also been in government, so I have been on both sides of the table. I have been in and out of government, and I have been on the government benches and on the opposition benches. It is fair to say that, during the past few years, my views on committee effectiveness have very much developed. Let us leave it there.

Committees are meant to be at the heart of scrutiny in the Parliament, but I agree with some of the previous speakers. Too often, the structure that Stephen Kerr pointed out undermines the purpose that we are here to carry out. Members are often overstretched, some convenerships appear very partisan and often there is limited co-ordination between committees, which serves to

weaken the quality of our legislative oversight. Smaller parties and independent MSPs—of whom we may see more in the next session of Parliament—struggle to have meaningful input.

Before I go on to the substantive part of my speech, I want to say that there are many examples of excellent work by committees in the Parliament, both on inquiries and on scrutiny of legislation, and some excellent conveners are sitting in the chamber with us this afternoon. However, unfortunately that is not always the case, and I want to use my time to put on the record an example of what I see as a very significant failure by committees and Parliament in an area that I believe is very important.

Members will not be surprised to hear me say that it relates to the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill, which I believe showed how serious the structural flaws have become. From the outset, credible legal experts, women's groups and statutory bodies raised what they felt were very urgent concerns about the interaction between gender recognition certificates and the Equality Act 2010. Those were not abstract legal theories; they were serious warnings about human rights and the clarity of the law. However, instead of being interrogated with care, those concerns were repeatedly dismissed.

We need to be very candid, as a Parliament, and face the fact that the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee failed in its core duty of scrutiny. It did not fully investigate the most contentious issue in the bill and it did not challenge the Government's legal stance.

Rona Mackay: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Could I get your guidance, please? The member is straying far from the subject matter of the debate. This is not the place for personal recollections.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The conduct of committees is ordinarily a matter for the convener of the committee, but I am content for Ms Regan to continue.

Ash Regan: When, during the week of stage 3 of the bill, the Court of Session issued a ruling that contradicted the Scottish Government's position, even that was ignored. No emergency session was called and no formal briefing was given to MSPs on how the ruling might affect how they voted. Manuscript amendments that were submitted by the Conservatives seeking to address the ruling were blocked. In my opinion, that was not scrutiny but strategic avoidance of certain issues.

Worse still, the conduct of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee since has only deepened public unease. Some of the personnel on the committee have changed but,

last month, the deputy convener publicly described the Supreme Court's decision and, by implication, its senior judges, as being motivated by "bigotry, prejudice and hatred". That was not a critique of the legal arguments involved. It was, I believe, a smear on the judiciary. Such rhetoric from a senior figure, charged with upholding equality standards, has brought the Parliament into disrepute and exposed the lack of checks and accountability in our committee system. The problem is clear. When committees scrutinise legislation and then mark their own homework in post-legislative review, we get defensiveness and not learning.

I am running out of time, Presiding Officer. I had much more to say about legislative impact and post-legislative scrutiny, and on things such as elected convenerships, but I am afraid that I will have to leave it there.

16:37

Lorna Slater: I do not have much more to add to my opening remarks, which I really managed to crank through. What I have heard today is cross-party agreement that we would all welcome continuous improvement. We could all reflect on how to ensure that we and our fellow committee members understand topics better, for example by taking the time to read the papers properly or coming up with our own questions. Parties may need to think about that when they are nominating people to committees.

I am interested in the conversation around smaller committees and the d'Hondt system. Being part of a smaller party, I am torn on that matter. We would love to be represented on all committees, but every one of our members is currently on at least two committees, which is a heavy workload. It is something to think about.

We have heard repeatedly about uneven workloads, with some committees being heavily burdened and others underburdened. I am interested in the New Zealand Parliament, which, like the Scottish Parliament, is a unicameral legislature with an additional member system. It has only 120 members and yet it supports around 20 committees—a mix of subject and specialist committees. Perhaps we can learn from other countries—I do not know whether there is anything to learn there—about how to share the burden out and how to set up specialist committees so that we can be more effective with the resources that we have.

16:38

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I might go slightly further than that one minute and 41 seconds.

This has been a really important debate, because it has been quite a cross-party and cross-experienced debate. There have been jokes about how long people have been here. I have experienced the different dynamics of being a Cabinet member and a committee convener. We should be thinking about the role of committee conveners, because they are critical to the effectiveness of this Parliament.

People have talked about the nature of what our committees do, which is central to how this Parliament was designed. Given the number of bills that we consider, it is increasingly important that we engage with stakeholders, hold ministers to account and carry out post-legislative scrutiny.

In this parliamentary term alone, some pieces of legislation that are before us still need a huge amount of work. Some members' bills, such as my own, have not yet gone to committees. An awful lot of work will be needed on those. We need to reflect on our approach to post-legislative scrutiny, too.

Members have made really useful comments about the importance of committees carrying out inquiries. Again, that is a really important part of their work. It should be about not just shadowing what ministers do but deciding, over the next few years, which important issues need to be discussed and which recommendations need to be made.

On committees doing cross-cutting or parallel work, a good current example is the work on Grangemouth and project willow, on which both the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee and the Economy and Fair Work Committee are taking evidence. There are various topics that cross over committees' basic subject areas.

We could do more post-legislative scrutiny, and do it better. We could also do more joined-up, cross-government or cross-policy thinking. However, that is often difficult for committees, because they are so busy. There is a huge amount of work to do across the Parliament.

As a couple of members said, the nature of our job has changed, with regard to not only our digital capacity but that of our constituents. The ways in which we can communicate with people have greatly increased.

Overall, a huge amount has changed, and we need to reflect on how our committees could do better. Therefore, the timing of this piece of work by the SPPA Committee is really important. For me, many of the issues come down to capacity and leadership and how we can learn lessons on those aspects. Things have changed a lot over the past 25 years, so such lessons are there to be learned.

Other key aspects that members mentioned included committee structure, having elected conveners, committee size and committee responsibilities. We must ask whether we should have short-term committees or ones that are set up to deal with a particular piece of legislation. That could happen if, for example, a committee that should be dealing with a bill was simply too busy. We have lots of challenges ahead of us as we move into year 5 of this parliamentary session.

I turn to members' views on committee size. There were good comments in favour of there being a role for smaller committees. One point that occurred to me is that we need not have that as a requirement for all committees. We have a lot more Government ministers than we have ever had, but some members of the Parliament are not on committees at all and others are substitutes rather than full-time members. That raises questions about capacity, which we should consider.

I strongly support the points that have been made about ensuring that there is a good gender balance on committees. I say that as a former planner. We need to have women involved in every policy area of life. It is not only committee members who will deliver that; important work is done by groups such as the women's budget group. We need a balanced Parliament in terms of both representation of women and supporting other forms of diversity. Richard Leonard commented on diversity in committee membership, and others spoke about both urban and rural sectors being represented. Our approach should extend to having members from different professional backgrounds as well. We should draw on all members' experience.

A lot of good comments were made about the need for committee conveners to be elected. I think that the time has come for that.

I have been a member of committees that were critical of the Government; I have also been a Government minister who received massive criticism from a committee.

The Presiding Officer: You must conclude, Ms Boyack.

Sarah Boyack: I am therefore conscious of the importance of the status of committee convener.

Given that the last report on committee effectiveness was in 2017, now is the time for change. Let us learn the lessons and get on with the job. Let us strengthen our Parliament's accountability and make it work better and deliver for people. That is why it was set up in the first place.

16:43

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

In closing the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives, I want to pick up on a number of points that were made by earlier speakers. First, though, I note that the debate has brought self-reflection and navel gazing to a whole new level, as members have sat for a couple of hours speaking about how good or otherwise they are on committees. However, I add that I have enjoyed listening to the debate, which has been valuable.

As both Jackson Carlaw and Foyso Choudhury mentioned, we have a unicameral Parliament. We were promised a committee process that would address any deficiencies caused by having such a system, but I am not convinced that we have that yet.

Rona Mackay mentioned that committees should be the engine rooms of our Parliament, and Finlay Carson said that they were the cornerstone of our democracy. I absolutely agree with both of those comments, but, if committees are not performing at their optimum level, they will not meet the aspirations that we had when the Parliament was reconvened in 1999 and which we have carried since then.

Martin Whitfield started us off in the debate by speaking about this being a listening exercise. When I was told that I was speaking in the debate, I quickly went to find the committee's report and found that it had not been published yet, but this might be the way to do things: having a chamber debate to hear members' varied views before the committee comes to a conclusion.

Kenny Gibson spoke about his committee, the Finance and Public Administration Committee, which has rightly been lauded by members across the Parliament, not just for Kenny Gibson's convenership but for the work of every member on it. Two members of his committee—John Mason and Ross Greer—are on the education committee, which I convene. Those are substantial committees, but those members put a lot of work into the various committees that they sit on.

Richard Leonard, speaking for the Public Audit Committee, made the good point that it hears less from ministers and more from accountable officers. Although I like having ministers in front of my committee, we have had very successful evidence sessions with accountable officers in their own sphere. For example, we had the chief executive and the chair of the Scottish Qualifications Authority in front of us. When we recalled the chief executive, she resigned a few days before she was due to appear again—I am sure that the two things were not in any way linked, but it is useful to sometimes get people from outside bodies in front of us.

Audrey Nicoll made an excellent speech on behalf of the Criminal Justice Committee. She rightly spoke about the relationship that the committee is building and the dialogue that it is creating with stakeholders, who are so important to the legislation that we pass. She spoke for every convener and committee member when she praised the work of the clerks, SPICe, PACT and the media teams, which I certainly agree with.

Rhoda Grant gave an excellent response to my intervention on her, but, although I hear the calls against single-sex committees, there are dangers. I put my point again: the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee is convened by a Labour MSP, and, apart from the convener, all the members are female. If that measure were in place at the moment, the committee that is leading the debate would restrict the Scottish Labour Party to selecting a male convener, because the committee would be single-sex if the convener was female.

Rhoda Grant: There are many committees on which there is only one woman, and there are some on which there are no women. That is an issue right here, right now, and it is not good.

Douglas Ross: I agree, but I am trying to say that there will be challenges with what the committee and, perhaps, the Parliament will decide.

Lorna Slater spoke about post-legislative scrutiny. I think that we all agree that there has been a lack of that and that we need to get better in that regard.

Emma Roddick said that committee appearances should not be easy or enjoyable for ministers, and I agree with that. I am not sure whether she is speaking from her experience as a former minister, but it is important that ministers are held to account.

Stephen Kerr spoke about the workload balance, which is certainly an issue given that so much legislation is being considered in this part of the parliamentary session. Ash Regan made a point about the impact on smaller parties or independent members, and the Parliament might have to consider that in the next parliamentary session.

I am not speaking as the convener of the Education, Children and Young People Committee—I am sure that some of my colleagues will be delighted about that—but I want to speak about some of my experiences on that committee. I will not lie to the Parliament and say that I am a non-partisan convener—I accept that I am extremely partisan. At times, that is important. When we have ministers in front of us, we are clearly going to ask party-political questions, and I

do not think that we should try to deter members from doing that.

It is important for ministers to be held to account during committee evidence sessions. Sometimes in the chamber—I have perhaps shown this—I get unhappy about not getting a direct answer from a minister, but it is far harder for ministers to avoid questions or subjects when members can come back at them in committee.

I do not have much time, but I want to finish with this point. My Scottish Conservative colleagues outlined a number of submissions to the committee. One that has not been talked about in the debate but which I am particularly keen on is for committee witnesses to declare any relevant interests, and I made that point to the committee. Scotland is a small country, and many of the people who give evidence to committees are almost professional witnesses—they come into the Parliament time after time to give their views, which are important, but many of them are supported by the Scottish Government. When those committee witnesses give that evidence, they should—for balance, because MSPs have to declare any financial interests—declare where their funding comes from. That would help our scrutiny and our deliberations.

I look forward to continuing the debate with the committee.

16:49

Jamie Hepburn: I have enjoyed this debate as others have. Just like Emma Roddick, I did not need to be bullied to take part, although I think that I was required to do so.

I appreciate that Jackson Carlaw's memory does not go back to 1774, although I would suggest, rather uncharitably, that the memory of the person who cited it might go back to 1774. Mr Whiffield will not be able to duck my challenge and I look forward to another historical reference when we come to debate his committee's report in due course.

The debate has been a useful means for us to reflect on how committees have undertaken their business during the 26 years of the Parliament's existence. Drawing on my 18 years of experience as a parliamentarian, there is much that I could say, but I remind everyone that I speak in the debate on behalf of the Government.

To pick up on Douglas Ross's point, I observe that the very nature of the debate shows that we are well capable of being flexible and able to adapt the manner in which we work for a specific purpose. It is another example of how our processes do not need to be replicated in every single circumstance. There are circumstances,

such as the committee's inquiry, in which we can operate slightly differently.

I want to talk about the purpose of committees in the context of the Parliament's structure. As has been noted, we are a unicameral entity. I enjoyed Mr Carlaw's selective rundown of unicameral institutions in his contribution, although he neglected to mention that Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland and Iceland also have single-chamber legislatures. In such circumstances, I recognise that it is important that we have a strong committee system. I am here to be held to account by the Parliament, and it is enormously important that we have strong committees.

Mr Leonard made the point that people are not elected to be robots. I have never thought of him as someone who is robotic or an automaton.

I thought that Mr Mason was rather uncharitable in his assessment of the Public Audit Committee. As a former member of that committee, I can testify to the delight that I felt when I was tapped on the shoulder and asked to sit on it. Mr Gibson was rightly cited as being an effective convener of the Finance and Public Administration Committee and I can testify to that, having been a member of that committee under his convenership.

I might be slightly misquoting Emma Roddick, but she suggested that ministers should be terrified to appear before committees. I am not quite sure that terror is necessarily the most conducive to some form of exchange. However, I recognise that exchanges should be robust and that ministers should be held to account for the work that we undertake.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): A number of people have mentioned Government back benchers and the role of party discipline. There has been virtually no mention of the equally negative effect of Opposition members who do not look at the merits of legislation, but simply oppose it and try to tear it down. That can be equally destructive for proper legislation. Until we get a balance and recognise both sides, does the minister agree that it is unlikely that we will make much progress?

Jamie Hepburn: I do not often agree with Mr Ross as much as this in any debate, but we need to be realistic and reflect on the fact that we are elected to the Parliament on a party-political ticket and, with that, comes party politics. If we are going to reflect on the conduct of back-bench members who are in the party of the Government, it is reasonable that we should also reflect on the conduct of all members, irrespective of their party and the fashion in which they approach legislation.

Stephen Kerr: Will the member give way?

Jamie Hepburn: I have very little time to give way, and I have barely addressed any of the contributions.

The Presiding Officer: You have just over one minute.

Jamie Hepburn: I have just over one minute, otherwise I would have given way to Mr Kerr.

I agree that churn or turnover—call it what you will—should be minimised as much as possible, but we should recognise that various factors lead to that, including appointments to ministerial office, illness and bereavement.

I should say that there is some merit in members sitting on more than one committee during a session, and some members might want the depth of experience that that provides. However, I broadly agree with the principle.

The Government has no view on the size of committees, although it is instructive to hear from those who sit on smaller committees that that is something that could be useful.

Again, the Scottish Government has no view on elected conveners. All that I can say—I made this point to the committee and I will make it again—is that the fact that, if, for example, Mr Ross, whom I met earlier today, had been elected by the entire Parliament rather than just by the committee after his appointment as a member, as conveners are at the moment, that would not change the nature of my interaction with him. For that reason, as I said, the Government does not have a strong view.

I could say much more on the issues, but I do not have the time. In any case, I am sure that we will return to the subject matter in due course, and I look forward to doing so.

16:55

Martin Whitfield: This has been a fascinating debate. I thank everyone for their contributions, whether in the role of convener, convener and party representative or, more importantly, back bencher. I give a shout-out to my fellow committee members and thank them for their contributions. I will take away the reminder about bacon rolls.

My deputy convener, Ruth Maguire, has not been able to be with us for a while, but I want to put on the record my thanks for the enormous amount of work she has done in relation to our inquiry.

It is not until we sit on a committee that we realise how hard doing so can be. We have heard a lot of discussion this afternoon about members' workload, with many members sitting on not just one or two committees, but three. We have also heard about the counterbalance to that, with the

expectation of developing independence, knowledge and interest in the subject matters, which can be a difficult Realpolitik for some members.

The interesting discussion about whether to have the support of questions from SPICe has run the entire gamut of opinion. There is an important point to be borne in mind about the need for MSPs to recall that we are independent. Committees should be places in which questions that are pertinent to the inquiry and to the legislation in front of us can be asked and explored.

Given the number of issues, there is no single answer to the questions that we face. One answer is that, through the convener, the membership and the interactions around the committees, we can create a cultural environment in which we have committees that can properly hold Government to account. That may be through fear, as has been suggested, or it may be through interaction and consideration.

Stephen Kerr: I hope that the convener of the committee has not lost the point that Douglas Ross made about declarations of interest by groups that appear before committees. They should declare whether they are publicly funded and say what proportion of their total income is from public funds.

Martin Whitfield: Every intervention teaches those who take it whether it was the appropriate time to have taken it. I note that that intervention is now on the record.

We have had a discussion about churn, which is similarly important. We have noted from the evidence, and it has been reiterated today, that a period of time on a committee allows members to gather expertise.

I am conscious that time is short today, and I note that the issue of time has been raised by a number of speakers in terms of the amount of time that committees have in which to meet. How committees sit, when they sit and how they pursue inquiries are all issues that we are looking at, and they will form part of the report.

This has genuinely been a listening exercise by the committee to take on board evidence that we have not been able to capture, such as the points about the interesting interaction between contributions from the convener and contributions from individuals, as well as contributions from members who sit on more than one committee. There are a number of areas that we will take forward and on which we might seek to obtain further evidence.

The Parliament needs to be iterative. It did not look like it does now, other than physically, when it began in 1999, and it cannot look like this going

forward. We are the session that was born in Covid, and I deeply pray that the next session will not have the challenges that we had at the start. We need to create an institution that sees itself as one that looks forward rather than back. We need to grasp the good ideas, be they from New Zealand, other legislatures or within this Parliament.

The committee is moving to the point where we will consider the recommendations of our inquiry report, which we hope to publish before the October recess. I am sure that, at that point, we can return to consideration of how to improve our processes.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on behalf of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee on its committee effectiveness inquiry.

Parliamentary Bureau Motion

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S6M-17661, on committee meeting times.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that, under Rule 12.3.3B of Standing Orders, the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee can meet, if necessary, at the same time as a meeting of the Parliament on—

(a) Tuesday 27 May 2025 between approximately 2.20 pm and close of business, and

(b) Thursday 29 May 2025 between 1.00 pm and Decision Time, with the exception of during Portfolio Questions and the Ministerial Statement: Responding to RAAC in the Public Sector Across Scotland.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

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

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There is one question to be put as a result of today's business.

The question is, that motion S6M-17661, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on committee meeting times, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that, under Rule 12.3.3B of Standing Orders, the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee can meet, if necessary, at the same time as a meeting of the Parliament on—

(a) Tuesday 27 May 2025 between approximately 2.20 pm and close of business, and

(b) Thursday 29 May 2025 between 1.00 pm and Decision Time, with the exception of during Portfolio Questions and the Ministerial Statement: Responding to RAAC in the Public Sector Across Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Meeting closed at 17:00.

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