



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

DRAFT

Meeting of the Parliament

Thursday 4 September 2025

Session 6



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 4 September 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.

Older Patients (Care)

1. Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what alternatives are being piloted to enable older patients to be cared for outside of hospitals. (S6O-04882)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): Our approach to reform focuses on primary and community care, aiming to shift the balance of care where appropriate for people and their families. Our immediate focus is on enhancing capacity in the community, and work is under way to increase hospital at home provision to 2,000 beds by December 2026, meaning that people can receive hospital-level care in their own homes. To ensure that all of our population can access a hospital at home service that meets their needs, we have commissioned Healthcare Improvement Scotland to support integration authorities to adapt services to meet the needs of rural and island communities.

Liam Kerr: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer, but the hospital at home initiative, which he mentioned, is not currently available in Aberdeenshire. Following a pilot in Westhill, the health and social care partnership had to pull out due to a lack of support and resources from the Scottish Government. The service is available just a few miles away in the city, but the shire is left with stacked ambulances, two-tier healthcare, general practitioner practices shutting down and village hospitals shutting. Is there anywhere else in Scotland that will not be running hospital at home? Will the cabinet secretary now provide resources to the shire for it to proceed?

Neil Gray: I am grateful to Liam Kerr for his questions. As he will know, decisions on how to deliver services for local communities are ultimately for integration authorities to make. In this case, it is the Aberdeenshire integration joint board. However, following NHS Grampian's escalation, officials have been working with NHS Grampian to confirm the additional funding based on the development of its whole-system plan, taking into account the recommendations that were made in the KPMG report. Through the

assurance board process, extensive work is under way with NHS Grampian to develop robust whole-system work so that its share of the £85 million of unscheduled care funding can be allocated. I expect hospital at home to be part of that consideration.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I very much welcome the investment that the Scottish Government is making in the hospital at home initiative, which will make it the biggest hospital in Scotland, with 2,000 beds by the end of next year. Hospital at home is allowing elderly patients in my constituency to benefit from being around their home comforts with family and friends nearby, and I very much welcome that. Beyond that, can the cabinet secretary outline what more is being done to support elderly and vulnerable patients to be treated more effectively in hospitals? For example, how will the new frailty units work?

Neil Gray: David Torrance is absolutely right that hospital at home can be transformational in terms of the delivery of services. The fact that we are moving to 2,000 beds by the end of next year will make hospital at home the largest hospital in Scotland.

For people who are living with frailty, hospitals can increase the risk of harm if their needs are not identified quickly and if our systems and services are poorly co-ordinated. That is why we have committed to delivering direct access to specialist frailty teams across every emergency department in Scotland. That will mean that frail patients with complex needs will bypass our busy accident and emergency departments to receive the specialist care and support that they need, minimising the risk of prolonged hospital stays. By providing co-ordinated multi-agency care both at the front door of our EDs and in the community, we can provide the right care in the right place, helping people who are experiencing frailty to remain as independent as possible.

Fire Station Services

2. Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government for what reason it is reportedly downgrading fire station services across the country, including in Helensburgh. (S6O-04883)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): It is important to be clear that the Scottish Government is not downgrading fire station services across Scotland.

Decisions on the location of fire stations, along with vehicles, equipment and the people who are needed to deal with responding to emergencies, are a matter for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's chief officer. The emergencies that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service responds to

have changed significantly over the years. For example, dwelling fires have reduced by 20 per cent since 2013. At the same time, we have seen the risks of flooding and wildfires increasing. It is therefore sensible for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to carry out a service delivery review to ensure that its resources are in the right place at the right time. It is currently consulting on its review, with a closing date of 16 September. Until the results of the consultation have been properly analysed, no decisions have been taken.

Jackie Baillie: I thank the minister for her response, but it is the Scottish Government that has cut the fire service budget by millions of pounds, so, ultimately, it is her responsibility.

The proposal to downgrade Helensburgh fire station is quite simply reckless. The station already has a problem with recruiting sufficient numbers of retained firefighters to cover the existing appliances, never mind the additional overnight cover under those proposals. In the previous year, the availability of appliances was at only 50 per cent at night and a staggeringly low 20 per cent at the weekend. That lack of coverage makes the downgrading short-sighted. Will the minister agree with me and her Scottish National Party colleague Brendan O'Hara that the proposal is reckless and should be scrapped?

Siobhian Brown: First, I need to highlight that, since 2017-18, there have been substantial year-on-year increases of funding to support the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. The current annual budget is more than £97 million more than it was in 2017-18. This year alone, there is an additional £18.8 million in support for front-line services.

We understand that this is not a cost-cutting exercise. The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is undertaking a service delivery review, and there is a live, full public consultation. I encourage everybody to take part in that consultation.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I have been contacted by constituents who have expressed concerns about the change in working patterns at Helensburgh and Milngavie fire stations. Last month, I met Scottish Fire and Rescue Service representatives who cover the west of Scotland and I expressed the concerns of local residents. The representatives to whom I spoke admitted that response times could increase, as on-call firefighters would have to travel from their homes to the station and then to the destination. Does the minister agree that that model risks putting lives in danger?

Siobhian Brown: No, I do not agree with the member's assumption. As I said, this is an operational issue for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. No decisions have currently been made,

and I encourage the member and her constituents to take part in the consultation.

The Promise

3. Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how it will deliver on its commitments in the Promise, in light of the publication, "Education Outcomes for Looked After Children 2023/24", showing a decline in most key educational outcomes. (S6O-04884)

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes): I appreciate Mr Whitfield's concerns. However, it is important not to lose sight of the positive difference in educational outcomes over the long term. The gap in the proportion of children achieving one Scottish credit and qualifications framework level 5 qualification or better reduced by more than 20 percentage points between 2009-10 and 2023-24.

We have introduced a range of targeted support measures, such as the care-experienced students bursary, the Skills Development Scotland mentoring scheme and the provision of more than £70 million to local authorities through the Scottish attainment challenge fund to support the attainment and wellbeing of care-experienced children and young people.

However, I appreciate that the measurements in 2023-24, where progress was static or showing small declines, require increased focus. It is important for us to understand how our investment could be more impactful.

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful to the minister for that response. Schools in Scotland must be ambitious for care-experienced children and ensure that they have all that they need to thrive.

The independent care review resulted in the Promise, and yet the latest results show that the percentage of pupils leaving school early is rising and there is a 10-point gap in relation to positive destinations. Those statistics are a damning picture of the SNP Government's failure to keep the Promise. What is more concerning from the minister's answer is that the Government does not appear to understand why. Is that the case?

Natalie Don-Innes: I do not agree with all of that. The statistics show that we need to go further to continue the positive long-term trends that I referred to.

In the statistics, it is good to see an increase in the proportion of looked-after leavers going on to positive destinations nine months after leaving school. That means that we now have more children and young people from the most challenging circumstances getting the chance to succeed at school and in life.

We and key partner agencies, such as local authorities, need to accelerate our efforts to keep the Promise. Earlier this week, the First Minister and the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills met local authority directors of education to reflect on the progress of 10 years of the Scottish attainment challenge and to look ahead at what more we need to do to give more children a chance to get the skills and qualifications that they need to succeed in life.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The minister will know about reports of 15-minute timetables for care-experienced children. That means that they attend school for just 15 minutes in a day, without any other support when they leave the school grounds. In my view, that is exclusion by another name, and it should be stopped, as was stated in the Promise. What investigation has the minister done into the 15-minute timetables?

Natalie Don-Innes: Mr Rennie refers to exclusion. As I have spoken about previously in the chamber and at committee, our national policy on exclusion has a strong focus on approaches that can be used to prevent the need for exclusion. Exclusion should be the last resort and, when it is used, it should be a proportionate response where there is no appropriate alternative.

Mr Rennie also refers to 15-minute timetables. I will not go into specific cases, but there can be a number of reasons why the school setting might not be the appropriate place for a child at a certain point in their life. The Scottish Government is taking a number of measures, some of which I have already alluded to, and there is the virtual school network, which involves looking at a child's specific needs, how to build an education around them, and transitioning them back to a school setting.

The Scottish Government is taking a number of measures to tackle the issue and to ensure that care-experienced children and young people get the education that they need.

Damp and Mould in Homes

4. Davy Russell (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government, regarding its definition of what constitutes “substantial” damp and mould in a home, at what threshold such conditions are considered to require remedial action by social landlords. (S6O-04885)

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): All homes in Scotland are required by law to meet the minimum tolerable standard, which requires housing to be

“substantially free from rising or penetrating damp”.

The Scottish Government developed guidance for local authorities on the tolerable standard, which includes guidance on assessing damp. Every case is different, and assessors are expected to use that guidance, as well as their professional judgment, to assess on a case-by-case basis whether a house is substantially free from damp.

I take the issue of damp and mould extremely seriously, which is why I committed to bringing in Awaab's law across the social and private rented sectors from March 2026.

Davy Russell: The Scottish house condition survey, in its most recently published data, found that 10 per cent—that is, 250,000—of the homes in Scotland have damp and mould. For two decades, the issue has been actively monitored. As woeful as that situation is, it is not spread evenly across the population. Low-income families living in rented accommodation are often left to the whim of rogue landlords and big insurance companies, which all too often do not put the householder first. Their tactic is to ignore and delay and to put numerous hurdles in front of the householder so that, they hope, the householder either gives up or goes away.

The risk to human life that is associated with having damp and mouldy conditions present in a family home is far too great to leave the protection of families to woolly legislation. Does the cabinet secretary seriously believe that it goes far enough?

Màiri McAllan: To frame Davy Russell's question in another way, I note that the 2023 Scottish house condition survey showed that 90 per cent of homes in Scotland were free from damp, condensation and mould. Do I think that that goes far enough? No. That is why, this week, we have confirmed that we will implement Awaab's law, starting with damp and mould, across the private and social rented sectors from spring next year.

Food Sector (International Exports)

5. Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it supports the food sector to export to international markets. (S6O-04886)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): Food exports are vital to our national and rural economies. In 2024, food exports were worth £2.1 billion. We have announced an increase in the export support that we provide to Scottish companies through the six-point export plan, which builds on the significant support that we already provide to Scottish exporters, such as the £705,000 that we provided this financial year towards the Scotland food and drink export plan,

which helps to exploit the most significant opportunities for Scotland.

The United Kingdom Government must secure a European Union sanitary and phytosanitary agreement to remove the complex and costly barriers to trade with our largest single export market, as we have consistently called for.

Karen Adam: Scotland's mackerel industry is a global success story, and Scottish mackerel now accounts for a fifth of the Japanese market. However, processors tell me that they are worried about the possibility of a significant quota cut in 2026, which might put their growth at risk. How will the Scottish Government ensure that processors have access to product, so that Scotland can continue to build on its export success? Will the minister meet me and industry representatives to discuss that challenge?

Jim Fairlie: Karen Adam mentioned the success of the mackerel sector, and it is a global success. Scientific advice will be published at the end of this month. However, the bilateral arrangements that we have secured with Norway and the Faroe Islands increase the United Kingdom's quota in 2025 by more than 26,000 tonnes, the vast majority of which comes to Scotland. We estimate that, following the introduction of amended economic link licence conditions, an additional £52 million worth of mackerel was landed in Scotland in 2023-24.

We met the Scottish Pelagic Processors Association on 22 July in Peterhead. I am happy to consider another meeting to discuss the issue further.

Housing Emergency

6. Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with local authorities regarding solutions to the housing emergency. (S6O-04887)

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): Since declaring the housing emergency, we have taken an activist and interventionist approach and have worked extensively with local authorities, particularly those that are experiencing the most acute housing pressures. Over the summer, I met extensively with partners across the housing sector, including local authorities and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, in order to understand their challenges and hear their proposed solutions. Much of that fed into the housing emergency action plan, which I presented to the Parliament this week.

Stephen Kerr: Scotland's biggest city is enveloped in a homelessness crisis that is impacting all of Central Scotland. Some 44 per cent of people who present as homeless in

Glasgow come from asylum seeker households. Asylum seeker families also make up more than half of all temporary accommodation placements and account for more than 60 per cent of the children who are in such housing. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the Scottish National Party policy of open borders would only make the housing emergency worse?

Màiri McAllan: Stephen Kerr, not for the first time in this chamber, should be utterly ashamed of the contribution that he has made. Given his colleague Craig Hoy's contribution about a change of "character" in the south of Scotland, he, too, should be ashamed. Scotland is an open, welcoming and inclusive country. The homelessness prevention support that we provide is for everybody in this country.

Funding (Arts and Public Performance Venues)

7. Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind): I apologise for being slightly late to this question session.

To ask the Scottish Government, regarding the future award of any grants or loans to arts or public performance venues, whether it or any public authority, including Creative Scotland, will require applicants to observe and respect freedom of expression under the law in order to be eligible for financial support, and that failing to do so will require any funding provided to be repaid. (S6O-04888)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): Freedom of expression is vital to the culture sector, in which the exploration of new ideas and debate are key to innovation. It is for individual artists and cultural organisations to engage with others in debate and discussion as they see fit. Therefore, Creative Scotland does not include conditions relating to freedom of expression in its funding terms and conditions. Clearly, though, all organisations, whether they are publicly funded or not, must operate within the wider framework of the law.

Fergus Ewing: I commend the cabinet secretary for his masterful ambiguity. However, an arts venue in Edinburgh was awarded £608,000 of taxpayers' money and then went on to ban, censor and cancel our very own Deputy First Minister, asserting that she was somehow a threat to the safety and wellbeing of its staff.

Will the Scottish Government unequivocally condemn that ludicrous decision? Even more important, will it prevent such a thing from ever happening again by making it clear that any grant of taxpayers' cash will be clawed back from offenders? Otherwise, the Government is sending

out a message that Scotland is where censorship rules okay.

Angus Robertson: The record has been put very straight on the issue that Mr Ewing asked of me, but I am sure that he would acknowledge that there are long-standing examples of freedom of expression in our national and cultural life, as well as issues of controversy—this is not new. I am a strong supporter of freedom of expression but also of recognising the arm's-length relationship between Creative Scotland and ministers, which is for very good reasons.

Mr Ewing will be aware that a review of Creative Scotland is on-going. I will look closely at any recommendations that it makes in relation to Mr Ewing's question. Indeed, he will no doubt have made a submission to that review, and I will be happy if he wishes to forward it to me.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Independence (Speech)

1. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): More than four out of five businesses in Scotland fear that they might go bust within 12 months. Around one in six people in Scotland are trapped on national health service waiting lists, with tens of thousands forced to pay for private treatment. Drug death rates are still the worst in Europe, with 4,570 lives lost since the Scottish National Party declared a national mission. All those issues need the Government's urgent attention now, so why on earth did John Swinney give a speech today all about independence?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Let me reassure Russell Findlay that all those issues command my attention. They are the constant focus of the work of my ministers and my Cabinet and of my personal attention as First Minister, because, as I said this morning, I am absolutely determined to focus on the priorities of the people of Scotland. One of the things that the people of Scotland are concerned about is that their standard of living has been static for most of the past 10 years of austerity, bequeathed to us by the Conservative United Kingdom Government. What independence offers for Scotland is—

Members: Nothing.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Thank you, members.

The First Minister: What independence offers for Scotland is a fresh start, and that will be positively welcomed by the people of Scotland.

Russell Findlay: The title of John Swinney's speech today was "Respecting Scotland's Right to Decide". That is right. That from the party that has never, not for a single minute, respected the decision that Scotland made. He said today—let me quote him, because it is absolutely priceless:

"You can't just support democracy when it suits you."

First Minister, the fringe festival is over—enough with the terrible jokes. Scotland did decide. Two million people voted to reject division, and they are still demanding that the SNP Government gives it a rest and focuses on what matters. When will he ever learn to take no for an answer?

The First Minister: One of the points that I made this morning is that, since the 2014 referendum and by 2030, a million individuals in Scotland will not have had the opportunity to decide on our constitutional future. One in four of the population will not have had the opportunity to

decide how this country should be governed. I think that, when we have very substantial support in the opinion polls for Scottish independence and a clearly expressed desire of people to decide on their constitutional future, there should be no roadblocks in the way of the people of Scotland exercising their democratic right to decide on their future. That, after all, is democracy, and I am proud to champion it.

Russell Findlay: In John Swinney's grand declaration of Leith today, he referenced Scotland's claim of right. Film buffs will know that this nationalist battle cry comes exactly 30 years since the release of "Braveheart". He has done everything but paint his face blue, while Scots are blue in the face, saying to the SNP, "Enough is enough".

I really hate to break it to the First Minister, but John Swinney is not William Wallace—nor is he even Mel Gibson. We know his game. He knows exactly what he is up to. He is desperately trying to get the focus off the SNP's dismal record of failure on the economy, schools, ferries, drugs, crime, health and everything else. Therefore, this week, he cynically focuses on independence and international affairs. Is it not time that he got back to the day job?

The First Minister: Well, I was here on Tuesday, leading a debate on the Government's priorities for Scotland and, in that debate, I set out—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: In that debate, I set out the fact that Scotland is now seeing in-patient waiting lists falling, the number of general practitioners increasing, the number of drug deaths—which is still far too high—falling, and young people delivering the best examination results since 2019, before the pandemic.

I notice that there was no round of applause from the Conservatives for the young people of Scotland who delivered an outstanding examination performance, but I am proud of them and all that they have achieved.

What the Scottish Government is doing—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: What the Scottish Government is doing is delivering on the priorities of the people of Scotland. That is what my Government is focused on. I want to make sure that Scotland is not inhibited by the failures of Westminster, and that we have the ability to democratically choose the future of independence.

I am confident that the people of Scotland will make that choice.

Russell Findlay: Scotland is inhibited by the failures of this rotten Government. When John Swinney became First Minister, he quite understandably tried to present himself as a more decent front, distancing himself from the chaos of Humza Yousaf, but the mask has now well and truly slipped. Despite what he said today, he is not focused on the economy, education or anything else that truly matters to the people of Scotland, who pay our wages, and he is not doing anything to help to improve people's lives. The same old John Swinney is back: obsessed with independence and distracted from the day job. Does he not realise that the majority of Scots want to tell him, "Move on, John"?

The First Minister: Russell Findlay seemed to miss the fact that, on Monday, the Government set out—no, not set out but delivered—the abolition of peak rail fares in Scotland, which will help—[*Interruption.*]

While all the shouting is going on, I will set out to Parliament—

The Presiding Officer: Sorry, First Minister, but I say to members that many people wish to put questions today, so let us continue with our business and let us hear one another.

The First Minister: On Monday, when the Government delivered on its commitment to abolish peak rail fares, commuters travelling from Glasgow to Edinburgh daily saw their travel costs reduced by 48 per cent. That is an astonishing saving for households in the country and for people commuting, but even that cannot be welcomed by Russell Findlay today.

I do not really think that Russell Findlay is in the strongest position to lecture me—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, members.

The First Minister: He just needs to look at the words of his former colleague, Jeremy Balfour, to see how moderate Conservatives feel about the outrageous leadership that Russell Findlay is delivering. What we are seeing in Scotland is Russell Findlay—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Thank you.

The First Minister: —in a partnership with Nigel Farage, and Scotland is going to send both of them packing.

National Health Service

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** This summer, I travelled to every part of our country and, in every community, the people I met had one clear priority: fixing our national health service.

However, this morning, John Swinney showed that fixing the NHS will never be his priority. Instead, he is trying to use independence to hide from his failures and is desperately trying to cling on to power, but it is not going to work.

Over this summer, we have seen NHS waiting lists soar to include almost 900,000 Scots. More than 100,000 Scots have been waiting more than a year to be seen on the NHS, there are record levels of people paying for their own procedures due to this Government's failures, and Scotland still has the highest rate of drug deaths in Europe. Do Scots not deserve a First Minister whose number 1 priority will be fixing our NHS?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Well, they have that, and they do not need to change the First Minister as long as I am here.

Let me give Anas Sarwar some statistics on what is going on: 97 per cent of people leave Scottish hospitals without their discharge from hospital being delayed; the number of operations that were performed in July was the highest in five years—and an 8.9 per cent increase compared with the number for July last year; our rapid cancer diagnostic services have reduced patients' waiting time from referral to diagnosis to an average of 14 days; and the number of hip and knee operations reached an all-time high in 2024. That is because the health secretary and I are absolutely focused on improving the performance of the NHS, and that approach is delivering for the people of Scotland.

Anas Sarwar: It is okay, First Minister—I know that you are tired, but you have only about eight months left, so I would not worry about it.

The Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair, Mr Sarwar.

Anas Sarwar: John Swinney is not the only knackered Scottish National Party politician who has given up on fixing our NHS. Yesterday, health secretary Neil Gray abruptly abandoned the SNP's flagship promise to end waits of more than a year in our NHS. On the same day that the news broke that more than 1,000 Scots lost their lives to drugs in 2024, what did Neil Gray do? He took to social media to ask people whether they had seen the good news about Scotland's NHS. That was on the same day that more than 1,000 deaths to drugs were revealed.

There are record waiting lists, with no plan to fix them; a record number of Scots are being forced to pay for their healthcare; and we have the highest drug deaths rates in Europe. This Government is so out of touch. Is it any wonder that the Patient Safety Commissioner has said that we have a bed crisis and that waiting lists are imploding under the SNP?

The First Minister: In-patient waiting lists are falling. That is what is happening under the SNP. In-patient waiting lists are getting smaller as a consequence of the interventions that we made.

I put to the Parliament a range of measures that would expand the number of procedures and appointments that were envisaged in the national health service. We surpassed our original targets with that investment, and we put in place the largest-ever financial settlement to expand the service's capacity. What is that achieving for us? It is helping us to roll out national treatment centre activity around the country; to deliver an increased number of operations; and to make sure that we have the largest number of hip and knee operations, which are at an all-time high.

Those are all things that the budget deal put in place. The only problem with the budget deal is that Anas Sarwar refused to vote for it. How has he got any credibility on the health service when he cannot even put his finger on the button to support the Government's budget? It is laughable.

Anas Sarwar: The First Minister is saying that the Patient Safety Commissioner is wrong, and his response just proves that he is completely and utterly out of touch. It is clear that John Swinney and his knackered Government are totally out of touch with the reality that Scots are facing.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): You are just making a fool of yourself.

Anas Sarwar: I hate to say it to the finance secretary, but the only one making a fool of themselves here is the Scottish Government.

Peter Black, a grandfather from Lanarkshire with stage 4 cancer, was forced to wait 15 hours, through the night, to be seen at the accident and emergency department at Wishaw general hospital. Peter was only seen after a relative contacted the chief executive of the health board to complain. Why should it take that? Does every family have to complain to the chief executive? Peter's daughter, Nicola, told me:

"No family should have to experience what we have, but I know that that is the reality for thousands of people."

The system is broken, and it feels like the SNP has totally abandoned the NHS. Is it not the case that our NHS will not survive a third decade of this tired, knackered, out-of-touch and incompetent SNP Government?

The First Minister: In relation to that individual case, I apologise to people who have to wait too long for treatment. The length of wait in the case that Mr Sarwar puts to me is unacceptable. If he will send me the details, I will look at it very specifically and get an answer from the chief executive of NHS Lanarkshire.

In the wider context, the performance of Scotland's core A and E system has outperformed that of the systems in England and Wales for the past 10 years. I accept that that is no consolation to an individual who has to wait too long or to their family, but the general performance of A and E departments in Scotland's national health service is stronger than that in the rest of the United Kingdom. As I recounted to the Parliament on Tuesday, the numbers of waits for eight and 12 hours in our accident and emergency departments are falling.

I want to ensure that people get treatment as quickly as they need to. In Scotland, 1 million people go into and out of A and E departments within four hours every year. We have to ensure that that performance is strengthened. The Government is absolutely focused on doing exactly that.

Council Tax Debt

3. Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Scots are trapped in almost £2 billion of council tax debt. They are locked into poverty and are living in fear of bailiffs at their door. Some of the families that are trapped in that situation spoke to Aberlour. They said:

"I felt like I was stuck in a hole, and I was getting deeper into it, and I wasn't going to be able to get out of it."

They also said:

"You worry about being seen as a bad parent. Or you worry and are upset that your kids are missing out on things or treats and stuff like that."

Thousands of families across Scotland are trapped in that situation. The rules for council tax debt in Scotland are four times as harsh as they are in England, which is trapping families, in some cases, with unpayable debts for decades. The Scottish Greens have a plan to end that scandal and bring our debt collection rules into line with the rest of the United Kingdom by changing the Housing (Scotland) Bill. Will the First Minister support our plan to end that cruel regime and break the cycle of poverty that so many families are stuck in?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Before I answer Mr Greer's question, I express my congratulations to Ross Greer and Gillian Mackay on their election as co-leaders of the Scottish Green Party. I extend my admiration to Patrick Harvie and Lorna Slater for their service and I look forward, as I do with all party leaders, to co-operating on the issues that require our co-operation in a Parliament in which no one party has a majority at present.

On the substance of Mr Greer's point, I acknowledge that financial distress can be a significant source of difficulty for families and that

it can increase the challenges that they face. That is why the Government's agenda is absolutely focused on eradicating child poverty. That is my key priority and it is at the heart of the Government's agenda. The support that we put in place is designed to do that, with measures such as the Scottish child payment. That does not exist in England and Wales and it is a significant measure that supports families who are in difficulty. On other occasions, we have taken steps to remove council tax debt. Ms McAllan, the Cabinet Secretary for Housing, and I are very happy to engage in discussions with Mr Greer about the proposals that he wishes to bring forward for the Housing (Scotland) Bill, which is coming to the Parliament for consideration.

Ross Greer: I thank the First Minister for his kind words.

Energy bills are sky high, the weekly shop costs double what it used to, a meal deal can be a fiver now and a jar of coffee can cost £7.50. One in five households are living from payslip to payslip, and they are terrified of how they will pay their bills if something goes wrong.

Yet not everyone is having a hard time. The richest 2 per cent of people now have more wealth than half the population combined. Billionaires should never be getting tax breaks, but they are. Some of Scotland's richest people pay no business rates for their shooting estates. We are missing out on millions of pounds for our schools, libraries and health centres. It is indefensible that some of the richest people on the planet get a 100 per cent tax break from the Scottish Government. The Scottish Greens have a plan to end that injustice. Does the First Minister really think that billionaire-owned shooting estates need a tax break? Should aristocrats get blank cheques, while the poorest have bailiffs at their door?

The First Minister: The issues that Mr Greer raises relate to the budget process, which the Government needs to go through. We will happily engage with the member on those issues, as we will with all parties. On his point about family and household costs, I totally agree with him about the burden of energy costs. I do not think that the situation has been helped by the failure of the Labour Government at Westminster to deliver on the promises that were made to people. People were promised that there would be a reduction in their energy bills of £300, yet energy bills are higher now than when the Labour Government came to power. My simple response to Mr Greer, the Parliament and the people of Scotland is this: if you want to work out what a Labour Government would look like, look at the shambles that is at Westminster today.

Road Traffic Incidents (Trunk Road Network)

4. Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking to reduce the number of road traffic incidents on the trunk road network, in light of reports of a number of serious accidents over the summer. (S6F-04246)

The First Minister (John Swinney): I express my sympathies to anyone who is affected by the loss of a loved one or who has been injured on our roads. The Scottish Government is investing a record £48 million in road safety in this financial year, including just over £12 million on trunk road safety engineering. Transport Scotland regularly liaises with Police Scotland on road safety issues and undertakes an annual assessment of the safety performance of the trunk road network. Mitigation measures are then prioritised for delivery. That robust approach ensures that the funding targets specific locations with a direct focus to improve safety and to save lives.

Evelyn Tweed: Recently, there have been five serious road traffic accidents on the A84 at Blair Drummond, in my constituency. What action is being taken following the 2019 Transport Scotland review of the area? Will the Cabinet Secretary for Transport meet me and concerned community members to discuss it?

The First Minister: I understand the concerns that have been raised by Evelyn Tweed about that junction. I understand that there is an on-going police investigation into recent claims in the area; that will be subject to review by Transport Scotland.

I would be happy for ministers to meet Evelyn Tweed and her constituents to discuss the issue. It is important that we are responsive to the challenges that are faced on the road network. Transport Scotland and the Cabinet Secretary for Transport look carefully at all these incidents to identify where we can take action to improve road safety. I am happy for those arrangements to be put in place.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Too many people are dying in accidents on the A75. Will the First Minister therefore add his voice in support to the campaign launched by Finlay Carson and me to save lives by expediting the dualling of the A75?

The First Minister: The Government has taken a number of measures to improve road safety on the A75 and to improve the road. There are on-going discussions in relation to the upgrade of the road, and the Government will play its full part in all those discussions.

Supreme Court Judgment

5. Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister whether he will provide an update on the steps that the Scottish Government is taking as a result of the Supreme Court judgment in *For Women Scotland Ltd v the Scottish ministers*. (S6F-04252)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government has made clear since the Supreme Court ruling that we accept the judgment and that we are taking forward detailed work that is necessary as a consequence. A working group convened by the permanent secretary is actively considering the implications of the judgment across every key area of Government.

As a result of that work, action has already been taken, including updated guidance for the Gender Representation on Public Boards (Scotland) Act 2018 and amendments to the public appointments recruitment process for regulated public bodies, through which the act is applied. Through joint working with Police Scotland, we will publicly consult on the stop-and-search code of practice before the end of this year. Actions have been taken. We also continue to engage with the Equality and Human Rights Commission while we await its updated code of practice, which I understand is yet to be submitted to the United Kingdom Government.

Tess White: What the First Minister has said is a huge insult to women and to the women who are protesting outside today. First Minister, we are not buttoned up at the back. It has been months since the Supreme Court judgment and the Court of Session decision on single-sex toilets in schools. Children have gone back to school now and teachers, some of whom are in the gallery today, are still being told to follow the Scottish National Party Government's unlawful supporting transgender pupils in schools guidance. They are fearful for their jobs if they do not do so. The City of Edinburgh Council has acted now because delaying would be illegal. This SNP Government is showing wilful ignorance. Why is the First Minister deliberately ignoring the rule of law?

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer—

The Presiding Officer: I will address any points of order after we have finished First Minister's question time, Ms Grahame.

The First Minister: The Government is undertaking the work that I set out in my earlier answer to Tess White. On the issue of schools guidance, we are committed to ensuring that the supporting transgender young people in schools guidance is fit for purpose. As with any significant legal or policy developments, we are considering

what developments are required in the guidance to ensure that all aspects of that analysis are taken forward. There is complex work under way in that respect and the Government is doing that work.

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): The Supreme Court has been absolutely clear: sex, in law, means biological sex, and single-sex provisions must be respected.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission told the Government not to wait before acting, yet we still see confusion across all our public bodies, from schools to prisons to the national health service and local authorities. If Government lawyers are not there to advise ministers to follow the law, will the First Minister explain what, exactly, they are there for? Will he now commit to ensuring that all publicly funded bodies comply with the judgment in full and without delay?

The First Minister: As I have explained in my answers and as has been explained by other ministers, the Government is undertaking the careful, detailed legal work that is required to put in place the provisions that are required following the Supreme Court case. We have taken some of the actions that we have been able to take to date, and we will continue to pursue the other issues as we take forward that work.

Government lawyers support the Government in its work to ensure that, at all times, the Government is acting within the law.

Water Supply

6. Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the First Minister, in light of the Scottish Environment Protection Agency's warnings of water scarcity over the summer and the introduction of restrictions on water abstraction last week in some areas, including north Fife, what action the Scottish Government is taking to secure water supply in Scotland in the face of changing climate conditions. (S6F-04244)

The First Minister (John Swinney): It is clear that climate change is driving more extreme weather, and, this summer, very dry conditions have been seen across Scotland, particularly in the east. Today, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency has confirmed that the number of areas that have significant water scarcity has increased to 10.

With SEPA and Scottish Water, we are implementing Scotland's national water scarcity plan, to support those who are affected. I recognise the seriousness of the situation, particularly for producers. SEPA is working closely with affected water abstractors—principally, NFU Scotland and the Scotch Whisky Association, and others—to minimise the impact where possible.

Our investment in resilience measures over many years means that Scottish Water is able to maintain supplies to all parts of Scotland during prolonged dry periods. However, supplies are clearly not infinite, so I encourage everyone to use water responsibly.

Alex Rowley: In the past week, I and other MSPs who represent the east of Scotland, including the First Minister, had an online meeting with Scottish Water, at which we heard about the work that it is doing. That includes its efforts to get people to reduce water usage, which I support. I have also been in touch with SEPA over the past few months, and I thank the staff at Scottish Water and SEPA for the work that they have done to manage the situation.

However, looking forward to the medium and longer term, does the First Minister recognise that there is a need to review water infrastructure and water resilience? For farmers, this has been a difficult year, and it is predicted that food production will be well down as a result of the dry spells. NFU Scotland has said:

"Building resilience must be a shared priority between growers, regulators and policymakers."

Will the First Minister agree to look at what we need to do in the medium term to put in more water storage to support farmers and others who draw water, and at the issue of reservoirs and whether we need to increase capacity across Scotland in the medium and longer term?

The First Minister: Not for the first time, Mr Rowley has raised significant issues and provided an indication of where the solutions lie. I very much welcome the content of his question and express the willingness of ministers to engage with him on those points.

The situation has been acute. This year, I started to receive a weekly water scarcity warning from SEPA in April. Normally, I would probably begin to receive such warnings in August. That gives a practical indication of the effects of climate change.

Mr Rowley will be familiar with the Government's priority of tackling climate change, which is part of the solution. Another part of the solution is the constant improvements that are being made to water infrastructure around the country. A significant upgrade has just been completed in my constituency, in the city of Perth, to deal with the issues that Mr Rowley has raised. Such developments, which are going on around the country, often cause some disruption to members of the public, and we have to wrestle with that, too.

Mr Rowley's final point was about the importance of water resilience and what more

must be done to secure that. That obviously has an effect on capital priorities, but the Government will be happy to engage with Mr Rowley and other interested members on those questions, which are very much on the agenda of the Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Last week, 6,000 people in Berwickshire, including vulnerable people and farmers with livestock, were left without water. I welcome Scottish Water's commitment to a full investigation of that issue, but will the First Minister confirm whether Scottish Water will provide full compensation to all the affected customers and will he outline what action is being taken to ensure that Borders residents are not left without access to water again?

The First Minister: I understand the inconvenience for members of the public when there are occasional interruptions to water supply. That happens very infrequently, when issues affect individual water systems around the country. I know that Scottish Water worked quickly to restore supplies and provided water to the affected households to ensure that they received an adequate supply during that period. I understand the inconvenience, but I recognise that Scottish Water worked hard to ensure that it offered resilience where there was an interruption to supplies.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): Even in a country synonymous with rain, the effects of climate change will make it necessary to be prudent about how much water we use and when and why we use it. Therefore, what can the Scottish Government and its agencies do to publicise and promote everyday tips so that all of us can conserve water and ensure that we are using Scotland's water sensibly?

The First Minister: The work that Mr Kidd talks about is important and those steps are all part of the water is always worth saving campaign by Scottish Water and SEPA. Although we have a history of abundant water supply, this summer has demonstrated that that can be challenged by climate change.

I experienced one example of extremely good work in the village of Dunkeld and Birnam, in my constituency, where, in collaboration with Scottish Water, the village was able to reduce water use by 1 million litres in one year. By community engagement and awareness and by doing simple things around the use of water, that small village in Perthshire was able to reduce water consumption. That is part of the mix of interventions required to address the point that Mr Rowley put to me, which Mr Kidd has reinforced.

I encourage more awareness of such campaigns and I will reflect with ministers on what more needs to be done to increase that awareness.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I have spoken before about water in the River Eden catchment and about the dramatic impact of flooding on the people of Cupar. There is now an impact on farmers, with broccoli, potatoes and even cereal crops being dramatically affected. I have argued before for a river catchment plan for the Eden, because we must get everyone together to deal with the extremes of climate change. Will the First Minister agree to such a catchment plan?

The First Minister: That is required not only for the River Eden; the current environment tells us that we need such river management plans in place across the board, and Mr Rennie is absolutely right to say that that can happen only if everybody is round the table to make it happen. I have seen such developments being successful in my constituency, but it required every party to be round the table to make that possible.

Mr Rennie highlights, as did Mr Rowley, the significant impact on this year's agricultural harvest. Malting barley is not at the strength that we would want to see and some vegetable crops have not flourished to the extent that we would want them to, because of the absence of both rainfall and the ability to abstract water.

I will take away from today's First Minister's questions the importance of river management catchment areas and will ask ministers to engage with Mr Rennie and other interested members on how that can be taken forward at local level.

The Presiding Officer: We move to general and constituency supplementaries.

Methanol Poisoning (Awareness)

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): A constituent of mine sadly lost her niece to methanol poisoning a few years ago. Since then, the family has campaigned to get the dangers of methanol included as a mandatory part of personal, social, health and economic education in England. Will the First Minister join me in reiterating the dangers of methanol poisoning and confirm whether the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills will meet me to discuss what more can be done to raise awareness in Scottish schools?

The First Minister (John Swinney): First, I express my sympathy to Marie McNair's constituent's family. I am very concerned and sorry to hear of the example that has been set out about the impact of methanol poisoning. It is important that we have a comprehensive set of interventions to address all such issues of

potential harm. I am happy to agree that the education secretary will meet Marie McNair to discuss our approach to education in respect of alcohol, medicines, drugs, tobacco and solvents as part of the wider curricular approach that we take in Scottish schools.

Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (Aberdeen)

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Around 150 home owners in Aberdeen's Balnagask area could lose tens of thousands of pounds because of the presence of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete, plunging them into debt and mental health crises. I notified the Government that I had found £20 million to fix that last spring, but the Cabinet Secretary for Housing still has not decided whether to release the funds. Will the First Minister instruct his cabinet secretary to urgently repurpose the £20 million and, if she will not, to use a fraction of the billions that were promised for housing this week to give a fair settlement to the Torry home owners who are affected by RAAC?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I recognise the importance of the issue that Liam Kerr raises and the worry that it will be causing his constituents. The cabinet secretary is actively engaged in considering the proposals that have been put to her and will come to conclusions very shortly. Mr Kerr and his constituents will be advised when that conclusion has been reached.

Assisted Dying for Terminally Ill Adults (Scotland) Bill

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Legal advice published this week concluded that the Assisted Dying for Terminally Ill Adults (Scotland) Bill would not be compatible with the European convention on human rights because,

"without justification, it contains no adequate safeguard protecting the position of those with disabilities where suicidal ideation is more likely, and who are, because of that feature of their disability, more likely to express a wish to die."

In particular, the advice indicates that the bill would breach article 14 of the ECHR, which prohibits discrimination. Does the First Minister agree that that presents an insurmountable risk to disabled people's equality and human rights in Scotland, should the Assisted Dying for Terminally Ill Adults (Scotland) Bill be passed?

The First Minister (John Swinney): First of all, the Government takes a neutral stance on the bill, which is before Parliament just now. It is a member's bill, not a Government bill, and the Government takes a neutral stance on it, so I can express only a personal opinion to Pam Duncan-Glancy.

As Ms Duncan-Glancy will know, I do not support the bill, and I do not support it for many of the reasons that she has just put on the record. I have enormous personal sympathy with the point that she raises. Parliament will have to wrestle with those issues as it considers the legislation, but I can only express to her my agreement with the point that she has made.

United Kingdom Budget

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Will the First Minister set out the implications for the Scottish budget of the UK budget being delayed until 26 November?

The First Minister (John Swinney): This is a very unfortunate situation, to put it mildly. The lateness of the presentation of the UK budget will mean that the budget process of the Scottish Government will be under enormous pressure. Given that the Parliament will rise for the election around the middle of March, the window for scrutiny and delivery of the budget priorities, and particularly for the Government to fulfil its legal obligations in relation to the scrutiny by the Scottish Fiscal Commission, for example, will be very constrained.

We have to leave enough time for both parliamentary scrutiny of the budget and scrutiny of the Government's choices by the Scottish Fiscal Commission, but the lateness of the presentation of the UK budget means that a very short number of weeks will be available in which that can be done before the start of the financial year in April 2026. It is a completely undesirable situation.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government has, I think, written to the Finance and Public Administration Committee, and she will discuss the issues with the Scottish Fiscal Commission. The Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government have been left in an entirely undesirable situation as a consequence of the delay to the timetable for the United Kingdom budget.

Asylum

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): The Scottish National Party's open-door policy to asylum is a sham. Even Susan Aitken, the SNP leader of Glasgow City Council, says that the number of asylum seekers is "unsustainable." Peter Smith's ITV report highlighted the farce of illegal migrants being prioritised for housing over legal migrants and Scots. Is it time that the First Minister was honest with the people and admitted that illegal immigration is crippling services in Glasgow?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I have set out my concern about where the debate on

migration is going. I honestly do not think that Sandesh Gulhane's contribution helps us one bit in trying to ensure that our country remains cohesive and united, as it has always been on those questions.

The issues that the city of Glasgow faces are fundamentally because of the inadequacy of the approach of the United Kingdom Home Office—Councillor Aitken made that point clearly. That is where there needs to be a realisation of the implications of those issues, and I encourage the Home Office to engage with Glasgow City Council on those particular questions.

I make it absolutely clear to anyone who is listening that I think that Scotland is a welcoming country. Under my leadership, it will remain a welcoming country, and that is something that we as a country should be proud of.

Saltires (Maryhill)

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): Hundreds of Scottish saltires have been put up in my constituency—predominantly, but not exclusively, in the Maryhill area. The saltire is an inclusive and welcoming symbol, representing tolerance. However, serious concerns have been raised by many of my constituents that there might be an attempt by the far right to hijack our country's flag. Racist graffiti is starting to appear in my local areas, including the phrase "Sink the Boats." The other day, one of my constituents was told to "Get back on their boat."

Many people in Maryhill, from all backgrounds, have reached out to me with huge concern, and offering their love, support and solidarity for all of the people, including immigrants and asylum seekers, who have made their life in Maryhill. Will the First Minister show his solidarity with the people of Maryhill, the vast majority of whom are welcoming, tolerant and inclusive? What practical support can the Scottish Government offer our communities?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I could not have expressed that point better than Mr Doris has. I agree with him that the national flag of Scotland has always been represented as an inclusive flag that is there to draw all of us together in Scotland as an essential part of our national identity, and I want to ensure that is always the case.

I had the pleasure of being in Mr Doris's constituency last Thursday at the launch of a magnificent partnership between Home-Start, Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS Board and Glasgow City Council. The partnership supports many vulnerable families in the Maryhill area, and I was glad that Mr Doris made it possible for me to

be there at its launch. At the heart of that event was the spirit of inclusion; the welcome to people from other places who had made Glasgow and Maryhill their home and who were proud of that fact.

The Government will give leadership and practical support for community cohesion, because we believe—as Mr Doris does—that Scotland is best served by being an inclusive and welcoming country; it has been in the past and it must be in the future.

Homeless Project Scotland

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): The Homeless Project Scotland in Glasgow has done an incredible job of feeding people, giving them a bed for the night and saving their lives—in fact, 27,000 people have gone through its doors. However, the charity might be homeless if the planning committee at Glasgow City Council does not consent to allowing it to remain on Glassford Street. If it were to close, it would be devastating for many homeless people. Does the First Minister agree that Glasgow City Council must work with the Homeless Project to find an alternative home should planning consent not be granted? Would the First Minister consider—time permitting—visiting the project, which he has known about for some time? He would be very welcome if he did.

The First Minister (John Swinney): If Pauline McNeill will forgive me, I will not intrude on the planning application process—it is generally pretty tricky when ministers do that. However, I will say that the Homeless Project Scotland carries out an important role in supporting vulnerable individuals in our country. Therefore, regardless of the planning application, we must find ways of supporting such individuals. The Cabinet Secretary for Housing is planning to engage on the issue and perhaps visit the project. I will give consideration to that, because I want to ensure that we have in place practical support for people who are homeless.

I hope that the housing secretary's statement to Parliament on Tuesday indicated the priority that we attach to improving housing supply. A lot of improvements to housing supply have been achieved in the past 12 months, and I am determined to build on that in the period ahead.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's questions.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. The Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body issued guidance that those attending in the public gallery should desist from wearing visible slogans. Does that direction apply to MSPs in the chamber? No

matter what a slogan says, the issue is especially significant as we enter election periods.

The Presiding Officer: That matter is not covered in our standing orders and there is nothing in the guidance in the code. However, as ever, I ask all members, as they do, to present themselves in the chamber dressed in a respectful manner, as a consequence of the role that we hold.

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—

Rail Fares

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-18570, in the name of Bob Doris, on the abolition of peak rail fares. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes the Scottish Government's reported decision to abolish peak rail fares in Scotland; acknowledges what it sees as the ambition to make public transport more affordable and help people with the rising cost of living; considers that initiatives such as the abolition of peak rail fares can encourage more people to switch from cars and opt to use the train; believes that this can help tackle inequalities by making commuting, day trips and access to leisure activities more affordable, and notes the view that passengers in the Maryhill and Springburn constituency should be encouraged to use this opportunity, not only for the daily commute but to see all that Scotland has to offer.

12:48

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I thank all those who have supported my motion on the Scottish Government's abolition of peak rail fares, which has allowed it to be debated today.

As a non-driver and regular rail and bus user in my constituency of Maryhill and Springburn, I am well aware that many of my constituents require an accessible, reliable and affordable rail service. The abolition of peak rail fares by our Scottish National Party Government sits at the heart of that ambition. It is not the only aspect, though—I will return to that later.

My local train station is Summerston, which sits on the Maryhill line. I used the train service to get to Edinburgh this week, changing at Queen Street station. Many of my constituents will have made a similar journey this week. Maryhill, Kelvindale, Gilshochill and other stations on the line all serve commuters heading into Glasgow city centre and onward destinations elsewhere. Before the abolition of peak rail fares, an anytime return journey from Maryhill to Edinburgh would have cost £35.50. Today, it costs £19.90, which is a 44 per cent reduction.

For those who travel to work in Glasgow city centre, an anytime return to Glasgow Queen Street cost £5.40 last week. It now costs £3.10, which represents a 43 per cent reduction. Of course, not all my constituents travel into Glasgow city centre. Some areas do not have access to a large supermarket and do not have alternative public transport that allows people to get to one.

They will make savings at former peak times when they travel to, perhaps, Summerston or Anniesland to use or work in one of the large supermarkets there. All those savings will make a real-life difference to my constituents.

The cost of living crisis that has swept across the UK has not gone away.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Mr Doris has extolled the benefits of the Maryhill line, which is a fantastic piece of infrastructure that was, of course, extended under the previous Labour Government. However, does he agree that it is badly in need of further upgrading, including electrification and an increase in frequency, so that we have turn-up-and-go frequencies and do not need to rely on timetables?

Bob Doris: I confirm that I am continuing to press to make sure that the Maryhill line is either electrified or is made carbon neutral in some other way, in order to meet our net zero aspirations and build resilience into the line. Of course, there should be a half-hourly service on that line. I will return to that later in my speech.

The measures that our Scottish Government has taken have made, and continue to make, a real difference for many in the face of the cost of living crisis. I will not reel off all the other policy initiatives, but, needless to say, the abolition of peak rail fares by the Scottish Government is a key contribution to helping rail users during the cost of living crisis. I very much hope that it will assist my constituents who have felt priced out of using Scotland's rail network at peak times.

The abolition of peak fares also has the potential to play a crucial role in Scotland's contribution to tackling our climate emergency and achieving our net zero ambitions, which I have just referred to. I say that it has a "potential" role because, unless we significantly drive up the number of commuters who would otherwise take a car for their journeys but who take the train instead, the contribution that our rail network can make to our climate aspirations will not be maximised. Decarbonising our railway is vital, and the Scottish Government is currently investing heavily in it.

I am keen to hear from the minister how he will monitor the impact of the permanent abolition of peak rail fares. Such monitoring and analysis must be done over the longer term, with no rush to judge the impact over the short term. This is a long-term, strategic approach.

I welcome the strong cross-party support for the abolition of peak fares, as well as the strong support from trade unions such as the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers and the Transport Salaried Staffs Association, and

from business, including from the Scottish Retail Consortium.

At the start of my speech, I said that my constituents require an accessible, reliable and affordable rail service and that the abolition of peak fares sits at the heart of that. ScotRail timetables must also meet the needs of commuters. When I was first elected, securing a rail service on the Maryhill line seven days a week was a major campaign effort of mine. There used to be a Sunday service only on the four Sundays before Christmas. Following my campaign, an all-year-round service on Sundays was secured for the benefit of my constituents, and it has made a real difference.

However, I note that the frequency of services on the Maryhill line during the week, outwith the rush hours, is still to return to pre-Covid levels. The services are hourly during the day. If there is a single cancellation for whatever reason—it is not always ScotRail's fault; often, it is due to Network Rail—it is often not practical, and it is certainly not desirable, for people to wait another hour for the next train. The frequency of the service used to be every 30 minutes. ScotRail tells me that, as passenger numbers continue to recover, it will continue to look at running a 30-minute service on the line once again. Can we have that as soon as possible, please? The abolition of peak rail fares can make an important contribution to the efforts to secure a greater frequency of services in my local communities.

Making rail fares more affordable across the board, be it through peak fare abolition or through other ScotRail initiatives such as kids for a quid or club 50, builds commuter confidence and loyalty in our publicly owned rail network. I hope that we will see more journeys being taken more often. That will build on the strong progress of ScotRail. In 2023-24, there were 81.2 million passenger journeys on ScotRail services, which represents an increase of 27 per cent on the previous year. However, the potential is clear, with numbers still being 16 per cent lower than in 2019-20. As passenger numbers continue to grow across the network, it must be a socially responsive railway, and it must invest in and enhance services for communities such as those that I represent, which use the Maryhill line. I am confident that it will do so.

12:55

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): Presiding Officer, I apologise to you and to Bob Doris, because I will not be able to stay for the whole debate. You should have received an email about that, Presiding Officer. With the Deputy First Minister, I have a prior engagement with my cross-party group.

I thank Bob Doris for bringing this important debate to the chamber. One of the reasons that I was keen to speak in the debate, despite the fact that I have a prior appointment, is that it is a policy that impacts greatly on my constituency, which has no fewer than nine very active train stations. That is probably one of the highest numbers in the central area of Scotland, and both of the main Glasgow to Edinburgh lines are included in that coverage.

Those stations are used regularly by my constituents, and, as members can imagine, the issue of rail fare costs has come up regularly. Over the years, a lot of people have said that the cost of the trains puts them off using them, so they stick with taking the car, which is something that we all want to move away from. Therefore, this policy is a very welcome step, and my communications on it in various channels over the past couple of days have been very well received and have led to an influx of emails to my office.

I will give an example of some of the local routes that people take regularly for work and leisure and the difference in price because of the change in policy. A return from Coatbridge to Glasgow Queen Street was £8.20 and is now £5.30; a return from Coatbridge to Edinburgh was £27.80, which was really high, and is now £16.40; a return from Kirkwood in Coatbridge to Glasgow Central was £8.70 and is now £5.40; a return from Gartcosh to Queen Street was £7.80 and is now £5.00; and a return from Whifflet to Motherwell was £5.90 and is now £3.30. Those are significant savings for people.

As a result of the comms that I have put out on the issue, a lot of people have got back in touch with me, because they are concerned about the fact that concession fares went up prior to the announcement. In particular, older constituents have got in touch to say that, although it is great that peak fares have been scrapped, concession fares have gone up quite significantly.

Because today's debate is a members' business debate, it is maybe not the right time to go into too much detail on that issue, but, given the correspondence that I have had on it, I am keen to write to the minister on the matter. Could he look at that today and perhaps go back to ScotRail to look at where the concession fares are? I do not think that anybody—whether from a Government or an Opposition point of view—would want such a fabulous and great policy to be undermined because vulnerable groups feel that they are almost paying the cost of funding it. I am sure that that is not the intention of either the Government or ScotRail; I simply ask the minister, when he is summing up, to have a wee look at that.

I can see that I have already used most of my four minutes, Presiding Officer, so I will bring my

remarks to a close. Again, I thank Bob Doris for bringing this debate to the chamber and I welcome the policy that the Scottish Government has brought forward. It will have a real impact on my constituents, and we are all here to make sure that that happens.

12:59

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): I thank Mr Doris for bringing the debate to the chamber. It is great to be back after our summer recess and to talk about something that people care about so much.

Nicola Sturgeon promised passengers that Scotland's rail service would improve under Government ownership, yet things are manifestly worse than they were under Abellio. Public transport has become unreliable and far too expensive. Taxpayer subsidies, ticket prices and the number of complaints have all soared, but the number of services and the number of passengers using them have plummeted.

It was the Scottish National Party's decision to reintroduce peak fares on ScotRail trains last year. That was a disastrous decision, because it punished hard-working Scots, who paid hundreds or thousands of pounds more simply to commute to their work.

Our party, the Scottish Conservatives, campaigned against that. Despite being defeated in the Parliament last September on a Scottish Conservative vote on the issue, the SNP at that time refused to budge, claiming that abolishing peak fares permanently was unaffordable. We have always campaigned to permanently scrap peak fares, because we want to ease the burden on hard-working Scots.

Bob Doris: I was disappointed when the pilot ended. At the time, the Scottish Government said that it had to put its policy on a firm financial footing and that, if the Government found the funds, it would return to the matter. It found those funds and put them in the budget this year, and peak rail fares have now been scrapped. Did the member support that budget?

Sue Webber: I did not, because the budget is not about one specific thing; it is about a collection of things. There were many things in the Government's budget that we would never prioritise ahead of other things.

I am pleased that the SNP has U-turned on peak rail fares. We have seen all the SNP's tweets and other social media posts congratulating itself on reversing its own decision. I am glad about the decision. However, sadly, some passengers will still miss out, despite the sudden SNP U-turn, as is always the way when we scratch underneath for the detail.

Those with a club 50—or over-50s—rail card cannot get a discount with that card until after the old peak time. We have had lots of numbers today, so I will give just one example. On a 9.15 am service from Waverley to Queen Street, they will pay £16.80, but, at 9.30 am, it will be £13.40. People with other rail cards can get that discount, so why is it not the same for everyone?

I want to make sure that the detail is provided and that everyone can benefit from there being no peak rail fares. We have also heard that consumers paying the anytime fare, no matter what time of the day they travel—I am getting a bit mixed up with my notes here. I apologise, Presiding Officer.

Mr Doris said that it is not just about affordability but about services being accessible and reliable. We know that cheaper rail fares in Scotland will contribute to our net zero goals and better connectivity, so we need to encourage people to leave their cars at home. We want them to choose rail travel, because we know that it reduces congestion, lowers emissions and will support our climate targets.

Although encouraging a shift from the car to the train is a worthwhile goal, it does nothing to address the underlying issues that Scotland's rail system faces overall—the unreliable services, the frequent cancellations and the underinvestment in key routes. We heard some of the specifics from Mr Doris, including the need for Sunday services at Maryhill. We need greater frequency rather than one train an hour.

Consumer Scotland research shows that 11 per cent of consumers feel that lack of safety is a barrier to adopting more sustainable travel methods. It is not just about fares but about accessibility, reliability and passenger safety.

13:03

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I begin by declaring my interest as the convener of the RMT Scottish parliamentary group. I thank Bob Doris for lodging the motion. I know that, like me, he is a regular passenger on the Glasgow to Edinburgh train, so maybe he should declare his interest, too.

I also thank the Scottish Government, because Abellio is gone, Serco is gone and ScotRail is in public ownership, the Caledonian Sleeper is in public ownership. I am not sure that the Government is building socialism, but it is taking steps in the right direction.

Bob Doris: I thank Mr Leonard for his kind words. I did not declare my interest as a regular Glasgow to Edinburgh rail user because I am privileged that the taxpayer steps in and funds my

rail travel. It is my constituents who do not have that privilege who will benefit, rather than me.

Richard Leonard: Yes, I take the point.

Let me return to what I was saying. I have said before in this Parliament and in these debates that ownership is power. The Scottish Government is now the sole shareholder in Scottish Rail Holdings Ltd, so it must use that ownership—that power—for the common good.

Let me be clear: I, for one, welcome the Government's conversion to the scrapping of peak fares once and for all. In my view, it is a victory for the RMT and the other rail unions, which have campaigned for it with tenacity and with banners bright, in the face of which the Scottish Government has maintained for the past year that it was only existing, undeserving and—worse yet—middle-class ScotRail passengers on above-average earnings who gained from the scrapping of peak fares, when in fact it was a benefit to all workers travelling to and from their work, which, by my definition, is the working class.

We know that this is about leading a long-term change in behaviour. As the Auditor General told Parliament earlier this year,

"it can take time to sustain positive behavioural changes, such as encouraging modal shift from car to rail use".

He also concluded that, when it came to getting people out of cars and on to public transport, the Scottish Government had carried out no consultation, had no clear costed plan, had no measurable milestones and had done no equality impact assessments, and he said that monitoring and scrutinising arrangements were insufficient. I hope that ministers will heed this warning and learn this lesson.

I hope that the Scottish Government will also dispel the dark cloud of funding cuts that is hanging over the alliance between Network Rail, Babcock Rail and Arcadia—the rail systems alliance Scotland—which has forced redundancies and is compromising safety-critical work.

I hope as well that the minister today will address the question of supporting the trade union campaign against cuts to British Transport Police in Scotland, and that he will make a statement against the outsourcing of ScotRail customer experience services to the anti-trade-union company Teleperformance.

Of course, I also hope that the Government will address and reverse the big cuts in ticket office opening hours in railway stations right across Scotland, which have been forced through as a political choice. They are not operational decisions; they have been signed off by the Scottish Government.

Let me conclude by saying this: the removal of staff from railway station ticket offices will not only deter passengers; it will deny many passengers access to public transport altogether.

I welcome this week's move, and I welcome public ownership, but we must have public ownership that is equal and inclusive, is transparent and accountable and is comprehensive and democratic—public ownership of our railways that is of the people, by the people, for the people.

13:07

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I join members in thanking Bob Doris for securing this very timely debate. It echoes the debate that I led on the same topic in February, but I think that we are now in much happier times on the issue. Alongside my Scottish Green colleagues, rail unions and commuters, I am delighted that peak rail fares are now gone for good.

It has been quite a journey to get here. A six-month pilot that introduced off-peak all-day tickets was secured by the Greens, working with the Government, in 2023. It was extended to nine months before ending a year ago. Now, the scheme is back, and commuters are enjoying those savings once again.

Scrapping peak rail fares is all about making travel cheaper and simpler at a time when many households are still struggling to make ends meet. Peak fares have always been a tax on workers who have no say in what time they travel to work. As pre-Covid work patterns started to return in 2022, the absurdity of spending £30 a day to travel from Edinburgh to Glasgow hit home for many workers. Workers having to spend most of their morning's wages just to pay for their commute was never right. It was simply not credible to run a nationalised rail service with fares set at extortionate levels. That marginalised rail as an option that was available only for the well paid or for those who, like us in this chamber, are on expenses.

The nine-month pilot got results. It resulted in a nearly 7 per cent increase in passenger numbers and an extra 4 million journeys by rail, half of which would have been otherwise taken by car. With transport accounting for a third of Scottish carbon emissions, it was a win for the climate, too. However, the policy clearly needed time to bed in to convince more people to make the switch.

The magic of the railways is that they shrink Scotland. They make job options viable that would otherwise require people to move house or to sit in spirit-crushing traffic jams for hours on end every day. As a result, they help to keep children in

schools in the communities where they are settled. They allow people to choose between having one or two cars—or even no car at all.

However, the power of the railways to shrink Scotland works only if rail is affordable. It takes time for everyone to take stock of a big change such as the scrapping of peak fares and to make choices about where to live and what job to take in the future. It will take time to bed in, but now that certainty has been given that peak rail fares are gone for good, it will enable more people to choose rail as a more attractive option for travel.

It is important that the simple daily savings are understood better so that people can make such choices. Perth to Glasgow is a popular fast commute by train, and it is now £20 cheaper than the old peak price. Stirling to Edinburgh is another really busy commute—it is the one that I take—and the cost of it is down from nearly £20 to about £12 a day.

The introduction last year of better deals on passes was also welcome for those who were prepared to make a commitment to regular travel by rail, but the passes were never a substitute for a cheaper flat fare that meets the demands of a post-Covid world.

I will always remember the queue of people at Queen Street station—I was in that queue—on the day that peak fares were brought back in by the Government. It was chaos. People were confused and angry about having to upgrade tickets because they had missed the off-peak fare by just a few minutes. That is gone now—peak fares are gone. I am pleased that the Government has listened to those passengers, to the rail unions, which have been persistent in their campaigning on the issue, and to the Scottish Greens. We have now ended peak fares for good.

13:11

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I, too, congratulate Bob Doris on securing the debate. I am delighted to speak, not only because I am a custodian—I jest—of the Borders railway but because I just love trains. That is particularly useful, as I am terrified of flying, but I digress.

The removal of peak-time rail fares is brilliant. It makes rail so much the better choice for commuters who travel to work or college, for example, and for commuting not just out of the Borders but into the Borders, where the cost of housing is much more reasonable than in the city and where there are excellent schools.

The story of the Borders railway, which on 9 September celebrates its 10th birthday, is one of unmitigated success. The passenger numbers that

I am about to give represent thousands of journeys off the Borders roads, reducing congestion into the city of Edinburgh. Here are just a few stats. Borders railway footfall was nearly 2 million in 2019-20, which significantly exceeds the initial projected 600,000 annual passengers. That demonstrates a successful reintroduction of all rail services to the area after decades of local campaigning—and failure of the union.

More recently published figures show that, at some stations, the number of travellers increased by more than 30 per cent during 2023-24. The highest percentage increases were at Tweedbank station, which saw a 32.4 per cent increase, and at Gorebridge station, which had a 32.9 per cent increase. Although, nationally, Scotland enjoyed a 16 per cent uplift in the number of passenger journeys, local figures for stations in that section of the Borders line exceeded that impressive rise by a considerable margin.

The reduction in the daily return fare from Edinburgh to Tweedbank, for example, which was £22.50 before the abolition of peak fares and is now £15.10, will only serve to increase usage and reduce congestion and emissions. Keeping with the day return—you can, of course, buy weekly, monthly, seasonal and other tickets, with even more cost savings—I note that its reduction in price of more than £7 a day equates to a saving of £35 for the week and, for a working month, say, £140. Take another step up and it could be £1,500 a year. That is a huge economic bonus in this time of raging food inflation and energy costs. Other concessions and discounts still apply, including the kids-for-a-quad £1 ticket, which has already been referenced.

The Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen supports the removal of peak-time rail fares. For me, that approach underlines the value of our railway system—although not the network—being in public ownership; we can avoid the costs and complexities that are so obvious in England, with its range of private companies and bewildering plethora of prices—all of which Sue Webber managed to dodge. On top of that, it adds to the argument for extending the line to Carlisle; there is a £10 million feasibility study to see whether an extension of the railway through the Borders to Carlisle would be financially viable—that case, I think, is proven. What has happened with the railway in the past 10 years shows that the extension is important. That is all a good thing and is assisted by the abolition of peak fares.

By the way—I am sorry that Sue Webber is the only Conservative here to hear this—the Conservatives initially opposed the return of the Borders railway. I have been here so long that I remember that.

13:15

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I thank Bob Doris for securing the debate. The removal of peak fares from Scotland's railways on 1 September is very much welcomed. In the rail debate next week, there will be an opportunity to discuss that policy, along with others, in our consideration of the future of Scotland's railways. I welcome the fact that Bob Doris took time this afternoon to highlight some of those other issues.

At the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26—in Glasgow, the rail trade unions launched a vision for Scotland's railways, recognising the significance of COP taking place in Scotland. That was a welcome document that firmly placed the future of Scotland's railways as part of the way in which we can tackle climate change and meet our ambitious environment targets. It included the removal of peak fares, which it argued were a tax on workers and a disincentive to using the train.

This week, ASLEF welcomed the decision on peak fares, saying:

"So while today is a victory and good news for passengers, more could and should be done to cut fares further and ensure Scotland's rail services are as affordable and accessible as possible. We urge the Scottish government to keep on working to this end."

Although today is an opportunity to highlight the change in fares, next week's debate may be the time to consider what more could and should be done to make rail more affordable and inclusive. Scotland and the UK have some of the highest fares in Europe, and reductions such as reducing a peak-time return from Kirkcaldy to Edinburgh from £19.60 to £12.60—a saving of £7 per journey—are to be welcomed. There is also an additional benefit for Fife travellers, as the peak fares applied over a longer period and did not just cover the morning rush hour but restricted travel in the evenings for almost two hours, which made a cheap day return less attractive.

The minister will have also heard me say that, in terms of price per mile, Fifers pay some of the highest fares, and that discrepancy will still remain. I appreciate that that is not always the best way to measure costs, but the fair fares review was designed to address some of those anomalies, and we need to see more progress on that.

It is fair to say that some of us might have been surprised when the Government announced the scrapping of peak fares. The pilot, which ran from October 2023 to September 2024, was deemed by Transport Scotland to not have been successful, and the Cabinet Secretary for Transport has previously defended in the chamber the decision to scrap the pilot. She recently said:

“Was modal shift part of the original intention of the pilot? Yes. Did the pilot achieve the shift that we wanted or desired? Unfortunately, and regrettably, no.”—[*Official Report, Public Audit Committee*, 23 April 2025; c 10.]

The cabinet secretary also said:

“the pilot did not achieve its original aim of encouraging more people to travel by train. The analysis shows that there was only a limited increase in passenger numbers—6.8 per cent—during the pilot. Consequently, insufficient levels of income were generated to justify continuing the pilot, which mostly benefited existing passengers who have above-average incomes.”—[*Official Report*, 26 February 2025; c 51.]

Some of us will be familiar with the argument that the pilot was flawed. It was not initially advertised or promoted, and it took place during industrial action, at a time when there was a reduced timetable and we were still in a post-pandemic period, when patronage of public transport was going through a transition.

The cabinet secretary also argued, just at the end of February, that

“the trial had limited success, and Parliament simply cannot and should not overturn a carefully crafted and agreed budget for transport this coming year, the day after agreeing to it.”—[*Official Report*, 26 February 2025; c 69.]

The plans were, therefore, not in the budget that Parliament passed in February. However, within a matter of months—coincidentally, before a crucial Scottish Parliament by-election—the First Minister announced a change of heart.

Next week will provide more time to consider the detail of the policy, but I will finish with one more quote from the cabinet secretary. She said:

“The Scottish Government would be open to consider future subsidy to remove peak fares should UK budget allocations to the Scottish Government improve in future years.”

Therefore, maybe it is the UK Government that we have to thank for the First Minister’s change of track.

13:19

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I thank Bob Doris for bringing the debate to the chamber today. East Lothian has seven rail stations: Dunbar, East Linton, Drem, Longniddry, Prestonpans, Wallyford and Musselburgh. I work closely with the Rail Action Group East of Scotland—RAGES—which was established in Dunbar in January 1999 and now has about 170 members. RAGES aims to improve rail transport in East Scotland in order to reduce social isolation, promote rail transport as an essential element in an integrated transport system that serves all sections of the community—I will touch on that later—and promote rail as an environmentally friendly, sustainable and affordable mode of

transport. Those aims were set out in 1999, and things have not changed.

In 2007, when I was elected as a councillor for the first time, one of my main objectives was to secure a rail station for the village of East Linton in my ward. With that in mind, I set up a steering group with councillors, MSPs, council officers, South East of Scotland Transport Partnership, ScotRail, Transport Scotland and Network Rail. We met four transport ministers in the campaign as we pushed for a rail station.

East Linton railway station opened on Wednesday, 13 December 2023, for the first time in almost 60 years. I had the privilege of travelling on the first train from Edinburgh Waverley to East Linton alongside Fiona Hyslop, the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, and Alex Hynes, the then chief executive of ScotRail. My enduring memory of that day was seeing the entirety of the East Linton primary school children meet the train and wave as we arrived, along with many local residents—it was a fantastic sight.

I continue to work with RAGES as we push for a new rail link from Haddington and Blindwells in East Lothian. We will meet the council next week to discuss the campaign. I also work with RAGES to push for more services and train stations in the rest of East Lothian.

East Lothian, along with Midlothian, has the fastest-growing population in Scotland. I mentioned Blindwells, which has the potential to be a new town in East Lothian, increasing the population by between 25 and 33 per cent. East Lothian has traditionally been a commuter belt for Edinburgh but Covid changed travel patterns, and those are continuing to change—many people now work from home in East Lothian and occasionally travel in to Edinburgh.

East Lothian has an amazing tourism offering, which is also important in relation to the abolition of peak rail fares. According to figures from the Scottish tourism economic activity monitor, the tourism industry in East Lothian generated £379 million for the local economy in 2024. It also noted that there were 1.56 million visitors to the county last year, a 9.5 per cent increase from 2023 and 14 per cent higher than pre-pandemic levels.

Overnight stays saw a significant rise, with visitor numbers increasing by 20 per cent. Overnight tourists contributed more than two million stays, adding £311 million to the local economy. Day visitors also played a crucial role, accounting for 63 per cent of all visits and generating £68 million. We are fortunate to have the Scottish open at the Renaissance club near North Berwick and the fringe by the sea in North Berwick, which have also boosted tourism. Many travel by rail.

The abolition of peak rail fares from 1 September saw an anytime day return from North Berwick drop from £15.60 to £9.10 and an anytime day return from East Linton to Edinburgh drop from £16.70 to £10.80. The decision to scrap peak rail fares will put more money in people's pockets in East Lothian. It will also drive forward tourism and support jobs in that sector. It will make travel by train more affordable and encourage more people to use sustainable public transport.

Once again, it is a better deal for people because they live in Scotland, thanks to the Scottish Government.

13:23

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): I thank my colleague Bob Doris for bringing forward this debate on the abolition of peak fares from ScotRail services. He has done something that we in the Government are sometimes not good at doing, which is celebrating success and making sure that we let people know that we are taking steps that will help make the lives of the people of Scotland better under this SNP Government.

Bob Doris asked about the monitoring of the programme. We will monitor it over a three-year period, but I point out that we have abolished peak rail fares for good. We will see what will happen over the three-year period, but those peak rail fares are gone.

I also want to congratulate Bob Doris, because he has an exemplary record of standing up for his constituents in the chamber on a regular basis, and I commend him for that.

Fulton MacGregor raised the issue of concessions. Despite the fact that he is not here, I encourage him to write to us. A lot of the fares that he was talking about are local authority and transport authority concessionary travel fares, but I am happy to have a further discussion with him on those.

Sue Webber was, unfortunately, disappointing but not surprising in making her miserabilist speech. I will correct her on one thing, which is that ScotRail is one of the top-performing train operators in the United Kingdom; it performed better than most operators in Great Britain. In 2024-25, ScotRail cancelled just 2.2 per cent of its trains, which is around half as many cancellations as the GB average of 4.1 per cent. I could read the entire list of other performance measures in which ScotRail is doing so well under public ownership, but I will spare Ms Webber's blushes.

I am delighted to welcome Richard Leonard's warm response and vociferous support. We may

not agree on some things, but we absolutely agree on this.

Mark Ruskell made a point about the Greens' involvement, which I absolutely accept, but he should remember that it was the cabinet secretary who extended the pilot scheme in order to see how it would work. He also talked about season tickets and the variety of ways—again, I have a full list—in which people can save money by using ScotRail. Christine Grahame pointed out the same thing.

Claire Baker made points about remarks that were made by the cabinet secretary, on which I will come back to my notes. Her last point was that perhaps we should be thanking the UK Government for the extra money. I go back to the point that the First Minister made during First Minister's question time, which was that the people of Scotland should have the right to choose; we should not have to wait for Westminster to do things in order to allow us to deliver for the people of Scotland.

I thank all the staff who are involved in Scotland's Railway for helping us to deliver our landmark policy commitment. It is a collective effort of the staff in ScotRail and Network Rail Scotland, and has resulted in ScotRail performing better than most GB operators.

Public ownership has created the opportunity to deliver a railway that is run for the benefit of the nation. ScotRail passenger numbers have increased by 75 per cent from 46 million in 2021-22 to around 82 million in 2023-24. That makes ScotRail one of the fastest-growing operators, with one of the best passenger satisfaction rates. We are building even further on that success by removing ScotRail peak fares for good.

We have always been clear that further initiatives on peak fares would be considered if money was available. Balancing our budget for the benefit of the people of Scotland is, and will always remain, a priority for the SNP Government. Removing the peak fares is a bold and pioneering initiative that has not been done elsewhere in the UK, and it was possible only due to the Government's bringing ScotRail into public sector control.

I applaud the unions for their role in helping the Scottish Government to deliver what is a pioneering policy and for their collaboration, which demonstrates that working together allows us to achieve more. That is a further commitment of our desire to be able to do more and to create a railway that is run in the interests of the nation and for the benefit of passengers rather than shareholders. An ambitious move such as scrapping peak fares from ScotRail services shows exactly what we can achieve with a

modern, efficient and sustainable publicly owned railway, and I again commend everyone who has partnered us in delivering it.

Getting more people to travel by public transport is crucial in tackling our climate emergency. To do that, we need to make public transport more appealing. Removing peak fares will do exactly that. The pilot demonstrated that more people chose to travel by train when fares were removed. By taking this step and providing certainty that peak fares are gone for good, we are confident that more people will take the opportunity to make sustainable long-term choices, choosing public transport, which will make public transport more sustainable as a result. That is a win-win for us all, but not only that; the decision to remove peak fares was taken against a backdrop of continuing global uncertainty—arguably, a period of even greater economic uncertainty than when the pilot was initially operated. That has had an impact on the day-to-day lives of the people of Scotland. That is why it is vital that we as a Government take direct action to reduce uncertainty and improve the lives of those who live in Scotland. Permanently removing those peak fares will help many passengers to cut down on their travel costs. That is the SNP Government working hard for the people of Scotland.

I understand that folk thought that we had not done enough to promote the pilot removal of peak fares, so I will be clear: we want as many folk as possible to take advantage of the excellent value that our railway offers. That is why significant promotional activity is under way right now so that we can maximise the uptake of the great value that the train offers. I am sure that many of you will have encountered advertising on television, radio or social media, spreading the message that peak fares are gone for good.

Indeed, I and almost every other SNP MSP were all over social media at the start of the week, highlighting the scrapping of peak rail fares with videos and memes, and even handing out tickets at stations, letting commuters know that the SNP Government had scrapped peak rail fares for good. Ironically—

Mark Ruskell: Will the minister give way?

Jim Fairlie: Yes, I will.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Briefly, please, because the minister is concluding.

Mark Ruskell: This time last year, the Cabinet Secretary for Transport talked about how flexi and season passes were going to be the way forward and the way to reduce costs. Was there any analysis of how successful that approach was, and did that lead the Government to changing its view and reintroducing off-peak fares all day? I just thought that that was the main answer that the

Cabinet Secretary for Transport gave this time last year.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: If you could bring your remarks to a close, please, minister.

Jim Fairlie: In the interests of brevity, I will continue what I was saying. The fact is that we have taken the decision to scrap peak rail fares, which will get more people on to public transport.

As I have said, I and every other SNP MSP were all over social media last week about this. In the interests of time, I will just say that I very much look forward to seeing every other member across the chamber celebrating this successful SNP policy and the fact that fares have been driven down for the people of Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate.

13:30

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Climate Action and Energy, and Transport

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is portfolio questions, and the portfolio is climate action and energy, and transport. I invite members who wish to ask a supplementary question to press their request-to-speak buttons during the relevant question.

Question 1 has not been lodged.

Data Centres (Support)

2. Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the energy secretary has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding how Scotland's energy policy and natural resources could support the establishment of new data centres in the country. (S6O-04891)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): Ministers and Scottish Government officials regularly engage with their counterparts in the UK Government's Department for Energy Security and Net Zero and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. I continue to ask the UK Government to address the high cost of electricity, as that will be a key driver in attracting data centres to Scotland.

Data centres are also identified in the Scottish Government's green industrial strategy. We are working with our economic agencies to identify data centre sites that utilise our renewable energy sources, while exploring opportunities to recycle waste heat from those facilities into the wider community. That is also in line with our vision and action plan for green data centres and digital connectivity, which seeks to position Scotland as a leading zero-carbon, cost-competitive green data-hosting location.

Stuart McMillan: Artificial intelligence is continually developing and an increasing number of data centres will be required. Clearly, energy and water are needed to operate them. As we have seen, Thames Water and Anglian Water have already highlighted their concerns about the Prime Minister's announcement of an additional 100 data centres. Does the cabinet secretary agree that Scotland would be an ideal location to host AI data centres that are powered by renewable energy, and is she confident that we

have enough renewable capacity to operate such facilities?

Gillian Martin: Given our dynamic innovation and tech ecosystems and abundant renewable energy capacity, which, at the moment, includes a lot of constrained wind energy—at various times, we have to shut off wind generation—that could be used to power new AI data centres, Scotland is certainly a natural home for them.

In May 2025, the Deputy First Minister wrote to the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology regarding the AI growth zone opportunity. She provided an open letter of support to all bidders in Scotland to accompany their final submissions, which evidenced the dedicated support that the Scottish Government and its economic agencies will provide to any selected AI growth zone in Scotland. I am keen that we promote all suitable areas of Scotland, particularly former industrial sites, as potential hosts for that key critical infrastructure. Mr McMillan's constituency would be an excellent location for such projects.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): This week, offshore Europe is taking place in Aberdeen, where the best of our energy sector are showcasing to the world the value and skills that an oil and gas sector provides. While I was there, it was put to me that the sector has been waiting more than 31 months for Scotland's energy strategy. That is 31 months of people having no idea whether the devolved Government still has a presumption against new oil and gas. There is even a petition calling on the Scottish Government to provide the strategy. Can the cabinet secretary commit to releasing the strategy before the end of the year or even before the next election? Can she provide some clarity on this important strategy?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is not directly related to the substantive question. Cabinet secretary, do you have anything to add?

Gillian Martin: I thank the Presiding Officer for making that point. It is not directly related to Stuart McMillan's important question about the importance of renewable energy generation to power Scotland's economy in the future.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): New infrastructure such as data centres requires land, but land ownership in Scotland continues to be concentrated in the hands of anonymous corporate investors such as Gresham House, which, according to research by Andy Wightman, is now the second-largest private landowner in the country. It is clear that, without a presumed limit on land ownership, remote corporate entities such as Gresham House will continue to monopolise Scotland's natural

resources, including energy. Does the cabinet secretary agree that Scotland's natural resources—which are, after all, public goods—must, at the very least, be used in the public interest?

Gillian Martin: Again, that is quite a tangential subject to the talk of data centres. Actually, the types of land that are probably more suitable for data centres are in urban environments, particularly industrial land that perhaps is not in use at all at the moment.

I agree that Scotland's decisions on energy should be in Scotland's hands, and that they should include Scotland's people.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members that supplementary questions need to relate to the original substantive question.

Commuter Trains (Fife)

3. Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to tackle the frequently reported overcrowding on Fife commuter trains. (S6O-04892)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): I recognise that the fleet serving Fife routes is aged, which affects its reliability and has a negative impact on commuters. We are committed to replacing the fleet and to decarbonising the routes. Work on that continues to advance.

In the meantime, ScotRail continues to take steps to improve fleet reliability in Fife as part of its broader strategic approach. That includes close collaboration between ScotRail and the train leasing company to implement a comprehensive fleet improvement plan, with a particular focus on enhancing the performance of diesel fleet operating in that region.

There were more than 800 additional train services in Fife in the most recent reporting period, compared with the same period last year, and further additional services were introduced on the Leven route, which increased capacity. My officials will continue to monitor Fife services closely to ensure that further improvements are made where possible.

Annabelle Ewing: The cabinet secretary will be aware of my long-standing calls, going back many years, for the serious overcrowding on Fife commuter trains to be sorted once and for all. Although the scrapping of peak fares by the Scottish Government will be very popular with my constituents, what would be equally popular would be a clear plan, with a clear timetable, to ensure that my constituents are not packed in like sardines when they are travelling to and from their work. Can the cabinet secretary therefore offer my

constituents an assurance that this constant problem of overcrowding will finally be tackled?

Fiona Hyslop: With the Scottish National Party Government's removal of peak fares, commuters in my colleague's constituency are making considerable savings. Those travelling between Cowdenbeath and Edinburgh Waverley are saving £7 on their return daily ticket and even more with a flexipass.

I appreciate Annabelle Ewing's—dare I say—dogged commitment to improving rail services for her constituents. She is right to do so. The Government shares her commitment to that goal of improvement and, as I have mentioned, plans to replace the ageing fleet and decarbonise the Fife rail routes are well under way. I will update the Parliament with further details very soon, and I hope that Annabelle Ewing will then be able to share them with her constituents.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Again, there are a couple of—I hope—highly relevant supplementaries.

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Statistics from last year reveal that there were more than 500 full train cancellations at Inverkeithing station alone, with a further thousand train services due to travel via Inverkeithing being more than nine minutes late, of which 615 were 10 to 14 minutes late. I am sure that the cabinet secretary will not be troubled by that in her upcoming visit, but passengers and commuters in Fife have a problem and they have been suffering for too long. I know that the transport secretary believes that the current situation in Fife is unacceptable, but it is also unreliable. Can we have some timeframes from the Government for how quickly we will be able to get this sorted for the people of Fife?

Fiona Hyslop: As I referred to in my initial answer, ScotRail has been working on timetable, train crew and fleet resilience. I remind the member that ScotRail performs better than most Great Britain operators: in 2024-25, ScotRail cancelled only 2.2 per cent of all trains—around half as many cancellations as the average of 4.1 per cent on the GB rail service, as run by her party at the United Kingdom level. There is a particular issue—

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): No, it was not.

Fiona Hyslop: All right—as run by private operators following the Conservative Government's privatisation of the rail service. I am pleased to see that the new Labour Government is looking to copy Scotland and to take the rail service into public ownership.

We can try to make improvements on both track and train. If we are to improve them on the Fife line in particular, we need to make sure that we are progressing on the electrification. The work between Edinburgh and Dalmeny is already under way, so those improvements are being made. We will also see improvements to the service that, as I indicated to Annabelle Ewing, we will set out in the plans shortly.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Short-forming is often the cause of the overcrowding. As the cabinet secretary has recognised, there is a need to increase capacity in Fife. Given that short-forming is not measured in the public performance measure, would she support the PPM being changed to recognise the issue? Although peak fares have been removed, which is to be welcomed, overcrowding could work against that policy and make it less attractive to travel by train.

Fiona Hyslop: I have been very concerned about those areas where there is short-forming and what impact reduced rail fares could have on that. Short-forming could happen when units are affected by issues such as door cracks or wheel flats. That is why replacement is really important.

Claire Baker makes a reasonable point about what impacts are measured. I know that, before the Glasgow to Edinburgh line was electrified, short-forming was an issue, so it is not unreasonable to ask for the impact of short-forming to be measured. I will speak to ScotRail about whether it could consider that.

Hydrogen Action Plan

4. Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the progress being made in relation to its hydrogen action plan. (S6O-04893)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): Significant progress has been made in delivering the actions and commitments in the hydrogen action plan. The building blocks of a hydrogen economy in Scotland are being laid, technology is advancing and projects are entering construction. More than £35 million has been awarded to support hydrogen development. We have published our hydrogen sector export plan and have launched a national hydrogen planning hub, and we will shortly publish planning and consenting guidance.

We are also working with the United Kingdom Government on the role of hydrogen in the energy mix and on the development of the policy that is required to address deployment challenges, including in areas such as regulatory frameworks, market mechanisms and infrastructure.

Audrey Nicoll: As the cabinet secretary knows, the north-east of Scotland's TH₂ISTLE hydrogen valley project bid for European Union funding of €9 million, which will bring together a consortium of 29 partners led by Aberdeen City Council, aims to stimulate demand for hydrogen, thereby helping sectors including transport, agriculture, construction, new green industries and industrial test facilities to decarbonise. Given the significant opportunity that that bid creates for the north-east, what assurance can the cabinet secretary provide that the hydrogen action plan includes tangible support mechanisms to help projects such as TH₂ISTLE, which is critical to the emergence of the hydrogen economy in the region?

Gillian Martin: As Audrey Nicoll might know, the former Acting Minister for Climate Action, Dr Alasdair Allan, was very pleased to offer a letter of support to the TH₂ISTLE hydrogen valley project's bid for EU funding. It is good to note the positive progress that Audrey Nicoll informs us has been made on the initiative. I look forward to receiving more updates as the project moves forward.

That project is a good example of energy transition harnessing north-east Scotland's long-standing history of developing expertise in the oil and gas sector to take advantage of the new green hydrogen opportunities and, in doing so, helping to stimulate economic growth and job creation and to support the hydrogen supply chain to develop.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: A number of members wish to ask supplementaries. I will try to get them all in, but they will need to be brief, as will the responses.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): The 2020 Scottish hydrogen assessment suggested that Scotland could deliver up to 126TW of hydrogen energy per year by 2045, with up to 96TW of hydrogen being available for export to Europe and the rest of the UK in the most ambitious scenario. However, the most recent Climate Change Committee carbon budget reduced that forecast to 60TW in 2040. Does the minister think that that reduction in budget is a result of not being able to properly connect suppliers and offtakers?

Gillian Martin: I am trying to piece together the parts of that question. Brian Whittle mentioned the Climate Change Committee's estimate. The Climate Change Committee does not fund any hydrogen projects—it is up to Governments to do that. We are working with the UK Government on what it is doing in relation to the hydrogen allocation round support that it provides, which is absolutely vital. We are concentrating on the innovation side of things, which involves supporting companies.

As far as I am concerned, we need to aim as high as we can on the production of hydrogen. There is a great market for it in Germany, in particular, but there is also a great need for it in decarbonising Scotland's industrial complexes. Many jobs will come with that if we aim high.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I ask the cabinet secretary to focus on the issue of creating green jobs in the area of green hydrogen, in which there is huge economic interest. Green hydrogen could be used in supply chains, in heavy goods vehicles, on our railways and in industry, and it could also be used to produce sustainable aviation fuel for future use by aeroplanes.

Gillian Martin: I assure Sarah Boyack that I am concentrating our efforts on green hydrogen, because that is very much where the market is. There may be some instances of developers initially choosing to produce blue hydrogen but moving on to green hydrogen over time. We know that, if we are to export our hydrogen, any European countries that might buy from Scotland are interested only in green hydrogen, so it is fair to say that that is where our efforts lie.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I recently visited the Binn ecopark at Glenfarg, which neighbours my constituency and has a really interesting hydrogen project coming on stream. Green Cat Hydrogen is particularly anxious about incentives for the demand side. Although those are in the action plan, the company is nervous that the emphasis on that is not sufficient. What can the minister say to reassure Green Cat Hydrogen and other companies that are interested in becoming involved in the sector?

Gillian Martin: I would say that there is a really large potential market for green hydrogen in Scotland, on top of the export plans that I mentioned.

We must first decarbonise our own industry, and there are many opportunities for companies with high energy use to diversify into using hydrogen. We should shout from the rooftops about companies such as the one that Willie Rennie mentioned in order to send a signal to those with high energy use that are looking to change their fuel. For example, the whisky industry is one of the first movers in that area. We should signal that there is an opportunity to buy hydrogen from developers such as the one that Willie Rennie mentioned and from many more across Scotland and that they can only grow.

Borders Railway (Extension)

5. Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the 10th anniversary of the Borders railway, whether it will

provide an update on the progress of the feasibility study to extend the line beyond Tweedbank to Carlisle, via Hawick. (S6O-04894)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): I pay tribute to Christine Grahame for her early, continuous, and passionate support for rail in the Borders over many years, and I look forward to joining her and others over the coming week as we celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Borders railway.

The Scottish Government recognises that extending the Borders railway is a regional priority. We have already seen the positive social and economic impacts that reopening the railway to Tweedbank has had on the region in the past 10 years. I am pleased that Scottish Borders Council, which is leading the business case work on the proposed extension, has now appointed a project manager from Turner & Townsend.

Officials from both the United Kingdom and Scottish Governments recently met with the project manager to agree next steps and will continue to engage and support the work as it develops.

Christine Grahame: I thank the cabinet secretary for her kind words. Earlier today, I emphasised the success of the Borders railway. It was once opposed by the Conservatives, but we all love sinners who repent.

The extraordinary level of passenger usage, which goes way beyond what was predicted in the early days, has now had added to it the huge benefit of the discarding of peak fares. Does that not add to the case for extension?

Fiona Hyslop: More than 13 million passengers have used the Borders railway since it opened. It is a major success, reflecting experiences in other areas, including with the Bathgate to Edinburgh line and the Bathgate to Airdrie extension, which have also encouraged more passengers than were originally forecast. Investment in rail is important.

The case has been made for the work that is required, which is why the project manager is now producing the business case. When that is delivered, we expect it to reinforce what Christine Grahame and others want to see. Any decisions about how an extension might be taken forward will be made in the future, but the delivery of the business case is the key next step.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Will the cabinet secretary address concerns that the Scottish Government feasibility study will concentrate predominantly on multimodal options, rather than looking at what the people of the Borders want, which is a

transformational connection by rail, via Hawick, to Carlisle?

Fiona Hyslop: It is the project manager who will take forward that work, on behalf of Scottish Borders Council. If the member has any concerns about what Scottish Borders Council is looking at, it would be best for her to take those up with the council.

When we are developing transport enhancements, as we did with East Kilbride, multimodal use and encouraging passengers to use buses or cars to reach railway stations is part and parcel of the plans that we expect nowadays, so I will not traduce the use of multimodal transport in combination with rail. It will be best if the member addresses her question to Scottish Borders Council.

Energy Price Cap

6. Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government, regarding any impact on its energy policy and strategy, what its response is to Ofgem's announcement on 27 August regarding the energy price cap. (S6O-04895)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): The Labour Party's election manifesto pledged to cut bills by £300, but bills are higher than there were this time last year and they have just risen again. We need urgent action from the United Kingdom Government to set out how it will cut bills and keep its promise. We believe that the UK Government must immediately deliver a social tariff in the form of a targeted unit rate discount, while progressing much-needed wider reform. We urge it to deliver a package of measures that addresses fuel poverty while securing investor confidence and a level playing field for renewable generators in Scotland.

Gordon MacDonald: Scotland produces far more electricity than it consumes, but nearly half a million Scots are living in extreme fuel poverty. What financial support will be available from the Scottish Government this winter for people who are struggling to pay ever-increasing energy bills? I thank the cabinet secretary for welcoming Advice Direct Scotland's call for a social energy tariff.

Gillian Martin: This coming winter, the Scottish Government will provide an estimated £28.3 million through our winter heating payment and £11.4 million through our child winter heating payment, and there will be £187 million priority payment recovery from pensioners who have a taxable income of more than £35,000 through our pension-age winter heating payment. That is in addition to the Scottish Government's significant capital investment of more than £150 million in the current financial year in our energy efficiency

programmes—the warmer homes Scotland and area-based schemes, which are targeted at people in fuel poverty, making homes easier and cheaper to heat.

I commend the work of Advice Direct Scotland, which is a member of our consumers working group. ADS has consistently, over many years, called for a social tariff for those whom it represents.

Rail Fares (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn)

7. Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what impact the abolition of peak rail fares is likely to have on people living in, working in or visiting the Maryhill and Springburn constituency. (S6O-04896)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): The Scottish National Party Government's initiative to remove for good peak-time fares from ScotRail services will have a strong positive impact on passengers not only in Bob Doris's constituency of Maryhill and Springburn but across the country. For example, passengers travelling during peak times between Springburn and Glasgow will save around 27 per cent on their daily return ticket, and those travelling from Maryhill will save 42 per cent on the same journey, and there will be more savings on flexipass fares.

With this initiative, we are helping household incomes as people face increases in food and energy bills. We are providing more choices for where people might want to work, and we are encouraging more people to travel into our cities and spend money on retail and hospitality. We are also, of course, tackling the climate emergency by encouraging new potential passengers on to the train and to leave the car at home.

Bob Doris: I welcome the significant cost savings that abolishing peak-time rail fares will provide to my constituents. As the cabinet secretary has highlighted, the saving is more than 40 per cent for many of those using the railway in my constituency. Does the cabinet secretary agree that this is a real opportunity to drive up commuter numbers across the rail network more generally? As railway patronage grows, I highlight the importance of restoring a 30-minute service during the day on the Maryhill line Monday to Friday, which is still to return to its pre-Covid frequency.

Fiona Hyslop: We monitor the growth in passenger numbers and will continue to do so. We recognise the importance of the role that rail travel plays. Bob Doris might appreciate that passenger travel patterns have changed since the Covid pandemic, but they are recovering, and we expect further growth. We will identify what might be

needed in the future, but as the service is meeting the current passenger demand, there are no immediate plans to deliver any significant changes to the timetable on the Maryhill line. However, as I have said, ScotRail will continue to review the timetable and, at some point in the future, it might adjust it.

Public Transport Safety

8. Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on work to improve safety on public transport. (S6O-04897)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): Everyone has the right to be and feel safe when using or working on our public transport network. Transport Scotland is working to make travel safer for all. ScotRail is delivering an on-going programme of conflict management training for all front-line staff and has recently expanded its travel safe team. To support that, a Scottish Government working group has been established to review how police enforcement powers are applied on the railway and where they can be strengthened.

The First Minister has set out a programme for government commitment to remove free bus travel from any person of any age who does not act responsibly. Work is on-going to develop a behaviour code for scheme users, with legislation planned to suspend access to free bus travel. Alongside that, work is on-going with bus operators to explore the use of travel safety officers on the bus network, along with enhancing education materials for bus passengers on safety.

Claire Baker: I think that we all agree that there is no place for antisocial or abusive behaviour on public transport and that no one should feel unsafe or threatened in their place of work or when travelling.

The cabinet secretary recognised the concerns that were raised by bus drivers last year, and the Parliament agreed that the potential to remove concessionary bus passes from individuals who engage in antisocial behaviour should be progressed. I welcome her indicating that that work is on-going. Can she indicate when that work will be completed? Can we expect it to be completed by the end of this session of Parliament?

Fiona Hyslop: The answer to that is yes, that is our intention. However, I am in the hands of Parliament, its clerks and the committee on that, so I cannot give you certainty about that now.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): Police Scotland figures, which were obtained by the Scottish Conservatives during the summer, have revealed that assaults and threats at bus stations have

soared by 65 per cent in one year. The number of police call-outs to assaults at Glasgow's Buchanan bus station rose by 85 per cent, while the number of call-outs to Dunfermline bus station increased by 133 per cent. Does the cabinet secretary believe that that is acceptable? What action is being undertaken to ensure that hard-working commuters feel safe?

Fiona Hyslop: Clearly, criminal behaviour needs to be dealt with by Police Scotland. Individuals are responsible for their own behaviour. It is more telling that people carry out such behaviour in environments in which there is a single bus driver, for example, and they are not in the company of others. Obviously, bus stations are owned by different operators.

In my initial answer, I mentioned that we are considering putting in place travel safety officers. Obviously, the issues that the member raises are for Police Scotland, but in general—this is a plea to the United Kingdom Government—the cuts to British Transport Police are not helpful, particularly to rail. However, I understand that the member asked about buses; I am sure that Police Scotland will give its attention to that area.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Will the cabinet secretary update the Parliament on progress on extending concessionary travel to people seeking asylum?

Fiona Hyslop: Work and funding are progressing on that, and my colleague Jim Fairlie—who will be taking the lead because of his responsibility for bus services—will inform Parliament at the appropriate time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on climate action and energy, and transport. There will be a short pause before we move to the next item of business.

Drug-related Deaths

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a statement by Maree Todd on drug-related deaths in Scotland in 2024 and the national mission to reduce deaths and improve the lives of people who are impacted by drugs. The minister will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:58

The Minister for Drug and Alcohol Policy and Sport (Maree Todd): Thank you for the opportunity to update the Parliament on this week's publication of the 2024 figures on drug-related deaths in Scotland.

First and foremost, I express my deepest condolences to the families, friends and loved ones of the 1,017 people who tragically lost their lives to drugs in 2024. Although this week's publication is released as accredited official statistics, those 1,017 people are not simply statistics—they are parents, children, partners, siblings, friends, colleagues, loved ones and neighbours. They are lives cut far too short by the devastating impact of drugs. To all those who are suffering and who have suffered loss, I want you to know that you matter and that I am determined to continually improve how we support you.

Although it is welcome that the statistics show a 13 per cent fall in the number of drug misuse deaths from 2023, to the lowest level registered since 2017, let me be clear that the figures are still far too high. Every drug death is a profound tragedy, every drug death is one too many and every drug death is preventable.

Some aspects of the information that was released this week give us particular cause for reflection. In Glasgow, it is welcome that the statistics show a 25 per cent fall in the number of drug deaths from 2023, and we recognise the work that is being done locally to put in place strong systems of care. However, the city continues to have one of the highest rates of drug deaths in the country, which is why we are supporting further life-saving improvements, such as funding the pilot of the United Kingdom's first safer drug consumption facility, which opened in January. The Thistle has been recognised globally for its work and, since opening, has overseen more than 4,000 injecting episodes, while also being able to respond to a number of on-site overdose incidents. I have no doubt that lives have been saved.

The increased prevalence of new highly potent synthetic substances, such as nitazenes, not only in Scotland but throughout the UK, is of real

concern. We are working with Public Health Scotland, the Scottish Drugs Forum and other partners to address the threat, including by communicating vital information and advice to those who need it. I encourage members in the chamber and anyone who might be affected to familiarise themselves with that advice. I also urge anyone who carries naloxone to consider carrying extra life-saving kits with them, because we know that, due to the high potency of nitazenes, repeat doses might be required.

Last week, I saw at first hand how naloxone is administered when I visited Springburn ambulance station to mark international overdose awareness day. I learned about the Scottish Ambulance Service's successful take-home naloxone programme, which has issued more than 4,000 kits to people who are at risk and their families, who can use them to deal with any future overdose while they wait for the ambulance to arrive. The work that has been done by the Scottish Ambulance Service, the third sector, the police and other partners has been instrumental in saving lives.

This week's figures highlight specific demographic challenges that we must address. The deprivation gap persists, with people in the most deprived areas being 12 times more likely to die from drugs than those in the least deprived areas. The figures remind us of the critical importance of tackling the root causes of poverty and inequality and of delivering the Government's mission of eradicating child poverty.

We must continue to address the unique challenges that are faced by women who use drugs. With that in mind, I am pleased to announce that we are directing some of the additional funding in the drug and alcohol budget for that purpose. We are providing an additional £1.1 million to Aberlour Children's Charity to expand its intensive perinatal support services and improve support and targeted recovery services for women and their babies. In Glasgow, we are delivering £750,000 through the Corra Foundation to support the development of a whole-system solution to address the barriers that women affected by substance use often face when they are accessing services.

For young people, we know that there is much more that we need to do, which is why, later this year, we will publish a set of treatment and support standards specifically for young people aged 25 and under. To support early intervention and prevention, we are allocating an additional £750,000 to continue to fund Winning Scotland's planet youth model of primary prevention. Primary prevention activity such as that can stop harm before it takes root, meaning fewer people losing their homes, being caught up in the justice system

or having negative health outcomes. That is why our population health framework with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities focuses on primary prevention. Reducing the harm that is caused by drugs is critical for our whole-system aim of increasing—and reducing the gap in—life expectancy.

Since taking on this ministerial role in June, I have had the opportunity to visit a number of projects and services that are funded by the Scottish Government. Earlier this week, I visited the Scheme Livi, which is an innovative project that offers creative workshops as an alternative source of support for people who are impacted by drug use. That is one of more than 300 local and grass-roots projects that have been supported by Scottish Government funding that is administered by the Corra Foundation since the start of our national mission. Work such as that in the third sector is essential in tackling the drug deaths crisis, because it is a crisis that no single organisation can solve alone.

I do not shy away from this challenge. This week's publication offers a stark reminder that 1,017 people lost their lives to drugs, and that demands that we all collectively step up our efforts. Since launching our national mission in 2021, we have taken a range of actions, but I am determined that we do more. We have made £38 million available between eight projects across Scotland to provide additional residential rehabilitation beds. The latest published figures report a rise in capacity of 88 beds, and we have expanded capacity even further since those figures were released.

We have invested more than £4 million in widening access to life-saving naloxone. Thanks to our support, the latest figures indicate that more than 80 per cent of people at risk of opioid overdose have been supplied with a kit.

Work continues on implementation of the medication assisted treatment standards. In June, Public Health Scotland's benchmarking report showed that, across all alcohol and drug partnership areas, 91 per cent of MAT standards 1 to 5 and 75 per cent of MAT standards 6 to 10 were assessed as fully implemented. The report highlights the innovation and hard work that is being undertaken by services and people in driving change, and I take a brief moment to thank all the services and organisations in communities across Scotland that are working to save lives and providing the challenge that the Government needs to drive action forward.

I also thank those with lived and living experience and their families who work with us and so generously share their perspectives and experiences with us so that we get the support

that we provide right for people who are impacted by drug use.

As I have outlined, our national mission on drugs has delivered a number of positive developments, but this week's figures remind us that there is much more to do. To support the continued delivery of the national mission, we are providing record funding of more than £160 million for alcohol and drugs work in 2025-26. We will also accelerate the delivery of new initiatives such as the drug checking pilot project, and I will welcome ministerial counterparts from the UK and devolved Administrations to Edinburgh next week to discuss that and many other important issues. I will make it clear to the UK Government that it is imperative that it moves at pace as we seek to deliver drug checking.

As the first phase of our national mission draws to a close in 2026, our commitment to reducing deaths and improving lives will remain. Our work with partners on a plan for the next phase covering both alcohol and drugs is progressing well, and we intend to publish it at the beginning of next year. The plan will embed a more intense focus on person-centred support to aid recovery. It is our intention that funding is maintained to support the delivery of the plan, and final budget allocations will be subject to the Parliament's agreement as part of the 2026-27 budget process later this year.

I opened my statement with thoughts for all those impacted by drugs and with condolences to the loved ones of the 1,017 people who lost their lives to drugs in 2024. Although there is nothing that we can do to bring back those whose lives have been so tragically cut short or to ease the unimaginable grief that their loved ones must feel, we will continue to do all that we can to end the devastating impacts of drugs in Scotland. Let us work together, share ideas, confront challenges and go forward with an unwavering commitment to stop deaths, reduce harm and improve lives.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on the issues that were raised in her statement. I intend to allow about 20 minutes for questions, after which we will need to move on to the next item of business. I encourage members who wish to ask a question but have not already pressed their request-to-speak buttons to do so.

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): I thank the minister for advance sight of her statement. It is a tragedy that Scotland remains the drug death capital of Europe. Although the minister will speak about the fall in the number of drug deaths, experts predict that they will rise again this year and will hit the most deprived communities the hardest. We need to remember that there are still 1,017 empty seats at dinner tables, that 1,017 birthday parties have been missed, and that the

lives of 1,017 mums, dads, brothers and sisters have been lost.

In Glasgow, the Thistle was held up as the flagship pilot—a model that would supposedly transform lives. However, in the time that it has been open, families in the Calton area have seen nothing but discarded needles and overgrown spaces. I have visited the area many times and have seen that the £5,000 that was spent on two needle bins has achieved nothing.

Meanwhile, people and families are still crying out for access to real recovery services. According to the most recent data that I received in response to a freedom of information request made to the Thistle, not one person has been put on to a recovery pathway. If the minister has updated information on that, I would like her to tell me how many people have been put on to such a pathway—not one for help with housing or finance, but an actual recovery treatment pathway.

Given the lack of data gathered from the Thistle, the facility cannot be considered a success and the pilot certainly cannot be rolled out in Edinburgh. If the Government is serious about reducing deaths, it must back the Right to Addiction Recovery (Scotland) Bill, which would guarantee access to residential rehab and life-saving treatment. In light of that, can the minister explain why the Government continues down the path of failed schemes such as the Thistle, instead of delivering real recovery services that people across Scotland desperately need?

Maree Todd: I recognise the fears and concerns that Ms Wells raises from people who live around the Thistle, but I assure her that the facility is saving lives. There have been more than 4,000 injection episodes in the Thistle since it opened its doors, which means that 4,000 fewer needles, syringes, spoons and other paraphernalia have been on the streets in the area around it. Since it opened its doors in January, 56 medical emergencies have happened at the facility. Those 56 people might well have died had they been injecting elsewhere.

The Thistle pilot is funded as an additional resource. It does not reduce or replace investment in abstinence-based rehabilitation or community recovery pathways. *[Interruption.]* The primary focus is harm reduction—keeping people alive through a compassionate, health-led, non-judgmental approach that is centred on dignity and safety. *[Interruption.]* It is part of a balanced response.

On the Right to Addiction Recovery (Scotland) Bill, the Government is looking carefully at the evidence that has been given during the parliamentary process. We are also talking to and hearing from stakeholders, including those with

lived and living experience. Ms Wells will be aware that concerns have been voiced about the bill's approach. At the Scottish Drugs Forum conference last week, the member who is leading on the bill acknowledged that there are concerns about its proposals.

However, we are all agreed on the need to respect rights. Although there might be concern about whether the bill would deliver the stated outcomes, we all support those outcomes. I look forward to reading the parliamentary report.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We will listen respectfully not just to the questions but to the responses. We will also have slightly briefer questions and responses.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I associate myself with the minister's remarks and send my condolences to every one of the thousands of families who have been affected.

Earlier this week, the minister referred to the progress that has been made in light of the latest drug deaths figures. In truth, such progress has been far too slow. Last year, 1,017 people lost their lives to drugs, and more than 6,000 have done so since the Scottish Government declared a public health emergency six years ago.

The level of funding for alcohol and drug partnerships amounts to a real-terms cut, the impact of which is that local projects, in turn, are being cut, including in West Dunbartonshire.

However, a new danger is happening right now—the rise of synthetic opioids in our communities. They do not respond to typical doses of naloxone, and the number of deaths is increasing. We need only look at the scale of the problem in America to see what is coming here.

In that context, does the minister accept that the Scottish National Party policy on decriminalising drugs is completely wrong-headed at this point, and that time would be better spent on providing routes out of addiction and improved access to rehabilitation services?

Maree Todd: I certainly recognise the increased risk of harm and death from nitazenes. We have seen increased clusters of drug harms in 2025, including fatal and near-fatal drug overdoses. That is a cause for concern for each and every one of us.

In response to the growing threat from highly dangerous synthetic substances such as nitazenes, which we know are present in the drug supply in Scotland—what people think they are buying is not necessarily what they are getting—and which have been responsible for some of the recent increases in the number of overdoses, we are ensuring that information on emerging trends is shared with all local areas. We also have a

public health alert system, known as the rapid action drug alerts and response—or RADAR—system, which is second to none in quality.

On reforming the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, I am afraid to say that we have seen no discernible change in approach between the current Labour UK Government and the previous Tory UK Government. It would be really good if the member could join me in pushing for sensible reform of the 1971 act. We are all aware of the barriers that it presents to a rights-based public health approach to drug deaths.

I would also appreciate Scottish Labour's support in pushing for pace in relation to drug-checking facilities, particularly in Glasgow, but also in Aberdeen, Dundee and Edinburgh. The member is well aware that powers to achieve solutions to many of the challenges that we face sit with Westminster.

The Deputy Presiding Officer:

Understandably, a large number of members want to ask questions. I hope to get every one of them in, but that will require members to keep their questions relatively brief and the responses to be similarly brief, as far as possible.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): My heart is sore for the families and communities who have lost loved ones to entirely preventable drug deaths. It is imperative that we remain focused, given the rise in the number of suspected drug deaths in this current year, in part due to the increasingly toxic supply.

One of the most powerful yet underused tools that we have is advocacy, which is an essential part of the MAT standards. It takes a human rights-based approach that gives people a voice, support and a fighting chance. People knowing their rights and exercising them will be absolutely key to the success of that mission. Organisations such as Reach Advocacy Scotland have been leading the way in delivering high-quality advocacy training in that field. People need to know their rights, and they need to be supported to claim them. Does the minister agree that advocacy must remain non-negotiable as part of Scotland's drug policy? Will she update us on the support that the Government has given?

Maree Todd: The member is absolutely correct. The Scottish Government recognises the vital role that independent advocacy plays in ensuring that people are supported to access housing, welfare and income. That is why MAT standard 8 sets out a clear expectation that everyone should have access to independent advocacy.

The Public Health Scotland benchmarking report, which was published in June 2025, showed that MAT standard 8 was fully implemented in 90 per cent of ADP areas and partially implemented

in the remaining 10 per cent. It is essential that people are made aware of their rights and the support that is available to them. Local ADPs are empowered to commission advocacy services and training that reflect the needs of their communities.

Through the national drugs mission, we are investing in advocacy to uphold human rights and improve outcomes. On top of the funds that are allocated to ADPs, funding is being made available for that specific purpose. For example, the Corra Foundation awarded Reach Advocacy Scotland £480,000 to deliver a human rights-based approach and advocacy training until March 2027.

Via the Corra Foundation, we are investing £65 million over five years. That funding has supported 141 projects that aim to ensure that people can receive high-quality treatment and recovery services and supported 58 projects that have a focus on equalities and human rights. We continue to engage with third sector partners.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We will need greater brevity than we have had so far.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I was speaking to representatives of third sector organisations in East Ayrshire, who stated that the way in which drug death statistics are compiled means that the actual figures will be much worse. Those organisations are the ones that are most likely to interact with the most vulnerable people long before statutory services do. They continually tell me that they are being starved of resources and that too many people are falling through the cracks.

What research has the Scottish Government undertaken to establish what impact the £7 million investment in the Thistle centre would have had if that money had been invested in the third sector, instead of asking those organisations to operate on ever-decreasing budgets?

Maree Todd: I emphasise again that there is not a binary choice between the Thistle safer drug consumption facility, which is definitely saving lives and has already saved lives, and alternative treatment approaches. We need to invest in all the approaches—the multiplicity of approaches. The drug death challenge and the crisis that we are in are complex. We need a multitude of answers and responses to them, and the Thistle is merely one of those. As I said in my answer to Mr Whittle's colleague Annie Wells, the Thistle facility is funded as an additional resource. That ensures that it does not reduce or replace investment in any other local community recovery pathways.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I remind members that I am the chair of Moving On Inverclyde, a local recovery service.

The 13 per cent reduction in drug misuse deaths across Scotland is welcome, but I am deeply concerned that Inverclyde once again has one of the highest drug misuse death rates in the country. I welcome the fact that the minister will attend my recovery round-table meeting later in the month. In advance of that meeting, will the minister advise members how the Scottish Government is working with grass-roots organisations and local partnerships, such as Inverclyde alcohol and drug partnership?

Maree Todd: I share the member's concern about the persistently high rate of drug misuse deaths in Inverclyde. I welcome the opportunity to attend the upcoming recovery round table to hear directly from local agencies, stakeholders and people with lived and living experience.

Local accountability and strong partnerships are absolutely key to driving meaningful change and ensuring that services meet the needs of the community. It is vital that we listen to those who are working on the ground and learn from the excellent work that is being done to support recovery and reduce harm.

The Scottish Government continues to work closely with all alcohol and drug partnerships, including Inverclyde ADP, to maintain a direct, open and on-going dialogue to strengthen local delivery. We are also renewing the partnership delivery framework, in collaboration with COSLA and ADPs, to ensure that governance and planning structures are robust, consistent and responsive to local needs. Inverclyde ADP's experience and leadership will be vital in shaping that work.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I place on record my condolences to the family and friends of Peter Krykant, who passed away in June. He was a pioneer in starting the first overdose prevention pilot in this country. *[Applause.]*

I am deeply concerned that, although the minister acknowledges the increased prevalence of new highly potent synthetic substances such as nitazenes, the only action that is proposed in her statement is further discussion between the Scottish Government partners around communications and advice on measures such as take-home naloxone. The drug deaths statistics released on Tuesday noted that the number of deaths from synthetic opioids had tripled, and the chief executive of the Scottish Drugs Forum, Kirsten Horsburgh, has warned that the worst is yet to come. This is an alarming situation that needs urgent and comprehensive action now. Will the minister set out more precisely what she will do to counter the emerging crisis of synthetic opioids in the drug supply chain?

Maree Todd: I thank the member for offering his condolences to Peter Krykant's friends and family. He was an absolute powerhouse in this area. I am sorry that I never met him, and I was very sad to hear of his death earlier this year.

On the question of nitazenes, the member is correct that they present a substantial threat. Scotland is not the only country that faces that threat—those potent synthetic opioids are a threat the world over.

One of the challenges in Scotland, as in many countries, is that drugs are illegal, so there is an unregulated market. As I have said, the majority of people who buy drugs in Scotland today do not know what they are getting, and the majority are getting something other than they think they are getting when they buy drugs. That poses an immense challenge, and we are taking a range of responses to it. As I mentioned, we have invested in Public Health Scotland's RADAR alert system, which is really fast at getting information to the front line about the particular challenges and what might be useful in an emergency situation for people to be aware of.

RADAR works closely with facilities such as the Thistle—the supervised drug consumption unit. Back in March, there was a cluster of near-fatal overdoses in the Thistle, and it was very quickly able to disseminate the information learned from those near-misses right across the country. Unfortunately, the same batch of drugs resulted in deaths when used in other parts of the country.

There is other work that we are doing—we should remember the world-leading naloxone programme. We have front-line—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Briefly, please.

Maree Todd: —emergency responders who carry naloxone left, right and centre. The drug-checking and drug-testing facilities are a crucial part of our response to the particular threat that the member has raised, particularly to ensure that we give personalised harm reduction advice to individuals who are using drugs—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister.

Maree Todd: —including recreational users, too.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. I am going to need greater brevity. I call Audrey Nicoll, to be followed by Maggie Chapman.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): In light of the latest drug deaths figures, and reflecting the clear message from the Scottish Drugs Forum's stop the deaths conference that people with living experience must be central to solutions, can the minister set out

how their voices will be prioritised in leading and shaping policy and practice, not only as consultees but as partners in building the strengthening movement that is needed to end preventable deaths?

Maree Todd: I absolutely welcome the clear message from the SDF living experience groups. It is clear that the efforts of the SDF and others to empower people with living experience are having an impact, and our commitment to put lived and living experience at the heart of everything that we do has been an integral part of the national mission. For example, their voices—not least that of Peter Krykant—drove the design and delivery of the Thistle safer drug consumption facility, the work of the national collaborative and the development of the charter of rights, and the development and on-going monitoring of the medication assisted treatment standards.

We also continue to fund a variety of grass-roots organisations through £13 million administered by the Corra Foundation. It supports a wide range of activity, much of which is focused on peer support. The meaningful participation of people with lived and living experience has been, and will continue to be, fundamental to the design and shape of our strategy as we move beyond 2026.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I associate myself with comments that have already been made. Every drug death is a preventable tragedy, and I extend my sympathies to everyone affected by such a death.

It is right that prevention is a priority, with poverty, inequality, deprivation, trauma and alienation being tackled, but there is an urgent need to expand life-saving services such as the Thistle that support people with addictions and help them towards recovery. Can the minister provide timelines for the expansion of safe consumption rooms? Will she join me in calling for the next such service to be located in Dundee?

Maree Todd: I recognise the member's interest in the issue. The development and delivery of safer drug consumption facilities must be done by local communities and local integration authorities, in conjunction with the communities and to the guidelines that the Lord Advocate has set. Thus far, I am not aware of a proposal coming from Dundee, but given its statistics, I am very open to hearing from it.

I know that Edinburgh is developing proposals for such a facility; it has been looking at a couple of locations close to where there have been a high number of drug deaths in the past few years, and it seems that it might have found the right locations. However, it has work to do with the communities who live in those areas, and it has work to do to meet the Lord Advocate's guidelines.

I am certainly open to interest from other parts of the country, particularly from those with such high death rates as Dundee.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I associate myself with Paul Sweeney's remarks on the sad passing of Peter Krykant, who was a friend to many in the chamber.

We are talking about 85 people a month who are dying in Scotland's drug death emergencies—the figures are the worst in Europe. It is why Liberal Democrats put the issue at the heart of our budget negotiations last year, with extra money now going to services such as recovery services for women and their babies.

I was glad to hear the minister talk about work towards long-overdue drug-checking pilots. In speaking with Home Office ministers, will she also consider rolling the pilots out to festivals and concerts? We know that, as has happened in my constituency, they have been blighted by this tragedy, too.

Maree Todd: I thank the member for his interest in this area, and I am grateful to the Liberal Democrats for working with us to deliver the investment in Aberlour and in Glasgow, and for supporting our budget, which delivers real change on the ground.

On the issue of making drug-checking facilities available at festivals, there is a specific barrier to that being done, as the UK Home Office is wedded to the idea of those services being available only to people who are dependent on drugs. I seek support from across the chamber to shift the view on that issue.

I am really concerned about the threat to people who call themselves recreational drug users, who are buying drugs on an illegal market that may not be what they think they are and which could well contain synthetic opioids. If an opioid-naïve person takes those, that is catastrophic.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We are now beyond our 20 minutes, and there are still eight members who want to ask a question. I will get them all in, as we have a bit of time over the course of the afternoon. However, the questions—and, in particular, the responses—will need to be more brief.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the minister's continued commitment to delivering initiatives that save lives, such as the Thistle centre in Glasgow, the delivery of naloxone kits and the new drug-checking facilities. I note that the minister will meet the UK Government and representatives of other devolved nations to discuss drug-checking facilities. Will she provide an update on how that is progressing and what

further action we need to see from the UK Government to instil some pace?

Maree Todd: The drug-checking facilities that we have proposed in all our pilot cities will mean that we can get substances tested while people receive personalised harm reduction advice as well as the results. That will enable services to respond faster to emerging drug trends, which is essential given the threat that we face from synthetic opioids.

My understanding is that the Glasgow site is ready to receive approval of its licence application, and I will raise that with the UK Government next week when the UK and devolved Administrations meet in Edinburgh.

We are also working to develop sites in Aberdeen and Dundee and the proposed national testing and research laboratory at the University of Dundee. We have agreed funding for a fourth pilot site in Edinburgh, and we are working with local partners to support them to prepare their own licence application. As I have said, we think that those facilities should be available to everyone who needs them, rather than being restricted to people who are dependent on drugs. That is vital.

Sandesh Gulhane: I make a declaration of interests, as I am a practising GP.

The Thistle opened in January 2025 at a cost of £2.3 million annually. In this first quarter, there has been an estimated 33 per cent increase in suspected drug deaths, and, between March and May, there has been a 19 per cent increase in drug-related accident and emergency visits. However, there has been no evaluation or feedback from residents. How can the minister look to open more consumption rooms in Edinburgh, with zero evidence showing that the Thistle has been a success?

Maree Todd: As he is a GP, the member will be absolutely aware of the challenges that are being faced here and across the UK and the globe from synthetic opioids, which are a new and dangerous threat to life that we need to take cognisance of, rise to and respond to.

The Thistle pilot will take some time to evaluate, but I can tell the member that, for the 56 people who have been treated for medical emergencies in that facility since it opened its doors, the support that has been provided by the Thistle has undoubtedly been vital, and, for some of them, it has been life saving. We know that, when other people used drugs just like those that were used in the Thistle, they died.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): As the minister has said, every drug death is a tragedy, although I note the decrease in drug deaths last year, which is to be welcomed.

Although substance abuse is sometimes characterised as an urban issue, drugs clearly affect rural communities acutely as well. Indeed, I must commend the work of the police in their operation last week in Barra, where £10,000-worth of cocaine was seized. Can the minister outline how the Scottish Government is continuing to support agencies across rural and island areas to continue to make progress in that area?

Maree Todd: First, I agree that the recent seizure of cocaine in Barra is well worth highlighting, and I thank the member for raising it in the chamber.

The Scottish Government remains firmly committed to supporting health services and third sector organisations in rural and island communities. We recognise the unique challenges that are faced by those communities, including geographic isolation, workforce pressures and access to services. That is why we are continuing to invest in flexible, community-led solutions that reflect local needs and circumstances. As an example, the Scottish Government provided £2.4 million to support the development of the CrossReach Nevis house in Inverness as part of our aim to increase residential rehab capacity. Nevis house will provide six beds, equating to 22 placements a year, with a specific aim to support referrals from the most remote parts of the Highlands, alongside the Western Isles, Orkney and Shetland, where it has traditionally been more challenging to access residential rehab. Ultimately, our aim is that people in rural and island areas can access the same high-quality support as those in urban centres.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): The Parliament, the whole of Scotland and the people of Dundee remain deeply concerned about the glacial pace of progress. I take the minister back to the issue of synthetic opioids. Researchers from the University of Dundee and the Leverhulme Centre for Forensic Science have raised serious concerns about the efficacy of nitazene-testing strips. The minister has already stated how crucial that is to the early warning systems. Has she engaged with the research that the Leverhulme Centre for Forensic Science has published, and what is her response to it?

Maree Todd: I absolutely agree with Michael Marra that there are profound concerns about the efficacy of drug-testing strips. We are talking about having a national drug-testing laboratory based at the University of Dundee, which would underpin the local drug-checking facilities that are available through pilot sites in Dundee, Aberdeen, Glasgow and Edinburgh.

Michael Marra has merged two different issues. I am more than happy to pick up those issues with him, and I am always happy to engage in research

in that area—as I am a pharmacist, it counts as continuous professional development for me.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): As the local MSP covering the drug consumption rooms, I very much welcome the existence of the Thistle in Glasgow. Will the minister confirm that the centre is there because there was already a drugs problem and there was paraphernalia in my constituents' closes? That is why it is the right location for it. Will she commit to the full three-year pilot? It is far too early to make judgments other than that lives have already been saved.

Maree Todd: John Mason is absolutely correct to identify that, and exactly the same process has been taken with the proposal that may be brought forward by the Edinburgh integrated joint board. It has looked at where the challenges, paraphernalia, drug-related chaos, violence, overdoses and deaths are, and that is where it is choosing to site the facilities. The facilities are a critical first point of engagement for the people who are most at risk of drug-related death and overdose, many of whom are disconnected from wider health and support systems. They are a vital tool in the box against the drug death challenge that we are facing in Scotland.

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): Millions of pounds have now been invested in drug services, but it unfortunately does not seem that that is in fact tackling the problem that is devastating so many lives and communities across Scotland. I would like to hear more from the minister about what she will do differently that could increase that rate of progress that we are all desperately looking for. I believe that we need to measure success by the lives that have been recovered. Will the minister back the right to recovery so that people can escape the disease of addiction?

Maree Todd: Ash Regan will be aware that there are a number of strands of work that we have put forward since we declared the national mission in 2020. I believe that we are on the right track. I do not think that we need to find something new to do; we need to do more of what we are doing more consistently and in every part of Scotland.

Since then, as well as the Thistle, we have widened access to treatment and improved the quality of treatment by enhancing MAT standards. We have developed the naloxone programme and the Thistle facility. We have done a power of work in looking at supporting people into recovery, expanding the capacity of residential rehab and expanding the number of funded places. We need to do more of that more consistently in every part of Scotland, but we also need to think about primary prevention, which we are doing, and about cohesive services that wrap around individuals so

there is that person-centred experience and those individuals do not fall through the net.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes this item of business. There will be a brief pause before the next item of business to allow front-bench teams to change.

Water Industry Commission for Scotland (2022-23 and 2023-24 Audits)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-18680, in the name of Richard Leonard, on behalf of the Public Audit Committee, on the 2022-23 and 2023-24 audits of the Water Industry Commission for Scotland. Members who wish to speak in the debate should press their request-to-speak buttons. I call Richard Leonard, on behalf of the Public Audit Committee, to speak to and move the motion.

15:40

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): Being the convener of the Public Audit Committee is a privilege, and it is one which I will never take for granted. So I am grateful to be opening this afternoon's debate on the committee's findings, on our conclusions, from our extensive scrutiny of the Auditor General's two section 22 reports following his annual audits of the Water Industry Commission for Scotland between 2022 and 2024. At the very start, let me put on record the thanks of the committee, past and present, to the clerks, past and present, and to the entire support team for the hard work that has gone into the production of this report.

What we have exposed is an extreme example, in the words of the Auditor General, of governance and financial issues falling

"far short of what is expected of a public body".

And as we gathered evidence over the course of a year, we uncovered a catalogue of failures by WICS, by its former chief executive, by its board and by the Scottish Government. All of them—all of them—failed to meet the core minimum standards that are required of them. And by their action, and by their inaction—conscious choices both—they all contributed to an extraordinary and flagrant misuse of public funds.

Significant sums of public money—our money, the people's money—were splashed out on expensive training courses for senior staff, on unauthorised Amazon gift vouchers to all staff, and on excessive and unreceipted hospitality claims, or "business entertaining costs", racked up by the most powerful staff in the organisation. Time after time, the audits uncovered fundamental weaknesses in financial controls, where expenses claims were paid out with missing or non-itemised receipts. At one point at the start of 2023, unbelievably, the limit per head for spend on these "business entertaining costs", including meals and alcohol, was done away with completely.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Reform): On that last point, does the convener agree that the committee never had an adequate explanation as to why the limit was removed?

Richard Leonard: I thank Graham Simpson, who has been a very active member of this inquiry by the committee. I agree with him that there are still many unanswered questions.

We revealed, over the course of the inquiry, both a careless neglect and a wilful indifference toward policies and procedures for things like the procurement of services like legal advice, recruitment searches and the booking of business-class air travel. And of course, this was all from the body that was created in statute by this Parliament to

"promote the interests of Scottish Water customers to ensure long-term value and excellent levels of service."

You could not make it up.

So this is, rightly, a matter of serious concern for this Parliament, but the fundamental question which has to be addressed today, which must also be a matter of serious concern to this Parliament and to this Government, is not just that these things happened; it is that these things were allowed to happen. Where was the challenge to these behaviours by the board of the Water Industry Commission for Scotland? Where was the challenge from the Scottish Government's sponsorship team? And how on earth was it that WICS drifted into a culture of spending public money in ways that were directly and blatantly in breach of the rules of the Scottish public finance manual? I know that the Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy accepts this, and the new leadership team at WICS accepts it, too.

But let me turn to some of the most egregious examples identified by the audits. It has been widely reported that a senior member of staff attended a training course at the Harvard Business School in Boston, at a total cost of over £77,000. What has been less widely reported is that there was no competitive tendering exercise; that there was no business case made and no value-for-money case made; that there was no lock-in period for that member of staff involved, so they could just have left their job the day after the course was finished; and that, even though it breached the spending threshold of £20,000, there was no Scottish Government approval sought, either. In fact, when it was applied for retrospectively, we were told by a senior civil servant that

"there was no material benefit ... in challenging"—[*Official Report, Public Audit Committee*, 21 March 2024; c 13.]

the expenditure, as the money had already been spent.

The Government has since backtracked on this, but this was not an isolated incident. Freedom of information requests later revealed that it was common practice for senior staff at WICS to attend expensive management training courses, in locations as far flung as not only North America but South America, too, where once again the total cost exceeded £70,000. Now, do not get me wrong: in our report, we recognise the importance of staff training and development to any public sector organisation. Of course we do, but this excessive expenditure was clearly unwarranted, unauthorised and unpardonable.

Let me turn to another wider lesson from what happened at WICS. The commission is a small public body. At the time of these audits, it employed just 25 members of staff. We heard that the Scottish Government sponsorship team did not view WICS as “a high-risk body”. In fact, the Government’s director general for net zero himself told us that he thought that, out of all the public sector bodies he is responsible for, WICS would have been

“the one to operate in a highly efficient way”.—[*Official Report, Public Audit Committee*, 21 March 2024; c 25.]

This proved to be nothing less than a monumental error of judgment.

The work undertaken by Audit Scotland prompted WICS to carry out its own reviews into its financial transactions and its governance. It forced the Scottish Government to commission further independent reviews into these areas and into its own sponsorship oversight. But let me make the point again: the members of the WICS board who presided over this need to take a long hard look at themselves and ask if they performed the job and if they set the standards of corporate governance we expect and demand in the public sector.

In the report, we also make other recommendations, which I am sure other members of the committee will refer to. But let me be absolutely clear: WICS may be a small body, but the lessons to learn here are big ones. They are about governance, accountability and the proper use of public money. These lessons must be applied across all of Scotland’s public bodies and not just at WICS.

At the heart of a properly functioning democracy must be accountability, and accountability demands transparency. Where that is in short supply, it is the job of this Parliament to force it out of the shadows into the light. That is what the Public Audit Committee has done with this investigation and with this report. These are matters not only of public interest; these are matters of public trust. On behalf of the Public Audit Committee, I move the motion in my name.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations contained in the Public Audit Committee’s 1st Report, 2025 (Session 6), *The 2022/23 and 2023/24 audits of the Water Industry Commission for Scotland* (SP Paper 783).

15:50

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak about the matters that are raised in the Public Audit Committee’s report on the Water Industry Commission for Scotland, or WICS, as I will refer to it from now on. I commend the committee for its scrutiny of the issues and for its report, which I found to be balanced and constructive.

Before I get into the substantive content of the committee’s report, I want to be absolutely clear that nobody was more disappointed by the issues at WICS than the Scottish ministers. It bears restating that the cases of inappropriate expenditure were completely and utterly unacceptable. We rightly expect far higher standards from our public bodies. To help to address those issues, we commissioned and published reviews of WICS’s financial governance and culture and of the Government’s sponsorship function. My officials also provided evidence to the committee across three sessions.

As accountable officer during the period in question, the former chief executive of WICS had responsibility for the propriety and regularity of the organisation’s finances. We have learned that, regrettably, that responsibility was not always met. Similarly, the board of WICS failed to meet its responsibility to ensure that appropriate governance arrangements were in place, which was inexcusable.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD): I make this intervention as a member of the Public Audit Committee rather than as its deputy convener. What do the failures of governance at executive or senior management level and at board level say about the sponsorship relationship between the Scottish Government and WICS? What does it say that such irregularities were allowed to happen year after year? Who in the Scottish Government was paying attention to what was happening at WICS? Why was no attention paid to that?

Gillian Martin: Jamie Greene makes a fair point, which is one of the reasons why we carried out a review of the sponsorship arrangements between the Scottish Government and public bodies. In the WICS situation, the Government was found to be lacking when it came to the sponsorship arrangement and the feeding back of information from the individual in the Government who was responsible for that arrangement to

Government ministers. The review showed that the process was too reliant on one individual. One of the changes that will be made is that multiple people will be involved in the sponsorship arrangement. That is a fundamental change.

Ministers were not aware of the issues until the Auditor General's first section 22 report and the freedom of information releases in the months that followed. On publication of the first section 22 report, officials—alongside the leadership of WICS—took immediate action to drive improvements and hold WICS to account for the delivery of its action plan. As we discovered further examples of completely inappropriate expenditure, it became clear that a more forensic investigation should be undertaken. One key conclusion of our review is that compliance and cultural issues were long standing and deep rooted. As we said at the time, the tone from the top needed to be reset, and we acted quickly to do that.

In July 2024, we appointed two experienced interim board members, neither of whom had any previous connections with WICS. One of those interim members, Ronnie Hinds, became interim chair last October, and the recruitment of a permanent chair is under way. I put on record my personal gratitude to Mr Hinds and his fellow board members for their hard work in steering WICS reforms.

To the credit of the new board and leadership team, significant progress has been made in redeveloping the organisation's structures and governance and changing its culture. Our role review has resulted in a restructured senior team. A permanent chief executive is now in post, and new directors will join WICS in the autumn. Crucially, financial policies and processes have been fully reviewed and the ambiguous and outdated rules of the past have been removed. I hope that those measures will support an improved culture of compliance.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): Has there been any review of other organisations to see whether there have been other breaches of policies and processes similar to those that we have seen at WICS?

Gillian Martin: As I said, the sponsorship arrangements between the Government and public bodies have been completely reviewed. As part of that, we are ensuring that there are plural oversight relationships and that there is communication about what is happening at board level in all public bodies. If the member wants to ask about any specific public body, he can write to the minister concerned to get information. I have oversight of WICS.

Ministers have reflected on the Scottish Government's role in relation to the issues at WICS. We have formally reviewed the sponsorship relationship and very much agree with the committee's conclusion that it was, unfortunately, nowhere near as robust as it should have been. The issues at WICS should have been brought to our attention sooner. We recognise that officials should have taken a more proactive approach to potentially novel or contentious expenditure and, similarly, we recognise that the sponsor team should have been more proactive in supporting the WICS board to consider all the available options in relation to the departure of the former chief executive.

We have acted decisively to make changes, including by addressing all the actions that were identified in the internal sponsorship review. That has included publication of a revised framework between Scottish ministers and WICS in order to make the respective roles and responsibilities clearer and to ensure that there is a systematic approach to engagement, rather than an overreliance on any one individual. My officials regularly attend WICS board meetings as observers. We have further increased the capacity of the sponsorship team for 2025, and all its members have completed the required training.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): One of the committee's key recommendations was that a robust whistleblowing policy should be put in place for staff. It is one thing to have a sponsorship team engaging, but it is critical that that team can hear from staff who feel able to report matters without fear of losing their jobs.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: It would be helpful if you could bring your remarks to a close soon, cabinet secretary.

Gillian Martin: Sarah Boyack makes a very good point. One issue that was uncovered was that those in the lower ranks at WICS were afraid to speak out. That was part of a culture that was allowed by senior management and that flourished unchecked by the board.

All those measures are fundamental to ensuring that the relationship between the Government and WICS functions properly and that any support is accompanied by critical challenge. I note that the Auditor General for Scotland intends to monitor WICS closely and to look at the sponsorship of public bodies more broadly. We welcome that scrutiny.

I wholly endorse the committee's findings and thank its members for their important scrutiny. I recognise the positive steps that my officials and the new board and senior management team of WICS have taken in order to address historical

issues, and I assure the Parliament that lessons have been learned.

15:58

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): It gives me no pleasure to make this my first speech after recess.

I thank the committee for its forensic analysis of what went wrong at WICS. I welcome the convener's contribution and the cabinet secretary's words, which recognised the significant failings at the organisation.

The committee's report catalogues a litany of errors that, at best, pushed the limits of the financial rules and that were, at worst, fraudulent. From a public viewpoint, there was clearly a massive waste of taxpayers' money, which was used to line the pockets of quango fat cats who acted without fear of being caught or had some idea that they were untouchable and were simply taking what they were entitled to. From Mulberry wallets to lavish dinners, the culture of entitlement was rife. It is that spurious waste of taxpayers' money that continues to undermine the confidence of the Scottish people in this devolved Government.

When those activities came to light and the chief executive was forced to resign, the Government continued to cost the taxpayer money with an ill-thought-out severance package. Audit Scotland said that that decision was taken too quickly and without considering the wider options. He should have been sacked for gross misconduct, not given a package to leave.

In Audit Scotland's scathing report and in the committee's report, we can see a culture of misspending, expenses claims that do not fit with policy and a flagrant disregard for ensuring benefit for the public purse. Audit Scotland found that WICS demonstrated poor governance over its finances, that there was little to no due process and that there was no concept of ensuring value for money. The way that senior officials used public money was simply "unacceptable".

Audit Scotland also found that WICS needed to do more to ensure that it was delivering best value for money to the taxpayer. The board seemed to be disengaged with the day-to-day operation of the organisation, and oversight was not happening at any level. People need to understand that board membership for organisations such as WICS brings with it serious responsibilities, which seem to have been overlooked. Spending decisions were made without consultation with anyone, and the chief executive and senior management did not seek sign-off for large items of expenditure that should have been discussed.

Policies were in place but were ignored by the senior management team. That is a shocking state of affairs for any public body to be in. However, the list goes on. The committee's report criticised the Scottish Government for not intervening on the WICS training policy. The Government was aware of the high cost of training, including—let us not forget—courses at Harvard University, which included all flights and accommodation, and we heard today that it was business-class travel.

The committee notes that there have been

"significant weaknesses and failings in the Scottish Government's sponsorship of WICS. These have led to a failure to ensure appropriate safeguarding of public funds."

More public money has been wasted. The report goes on to further criticise the Government for appearing to encourage the chief executive to negotiate an early exit date. That meant that a full disciplinary process that would have examined a full account of the failings at WICS by the chief executive never happened.

Although the financial irregularities are bad enough, there were also significant failings in the culture of the organisation, with high levels of bullying being reported by staff. There was a poor work culture after Covid, and there were failings by management to address issues among the staff. All that speaks to a breakdown in the operation of WICS and to a failure in oversight by the Scottish Government. That has led to massive waste of taxpayers' money and a decline in trust in our public bodies among the Scottish people. Responsibility for that lies solely at the feet of the Scottish Government.

Although the committee has received a helpful response from the new chief executive that accepts the committee's recommendations and talks about enacting remedial policies to fix the financial irregularities, the Scottish Government's assurances fall short. The Scottish National Party has created a quango culture of organisations delivering services that should be under the purview of the Scottish Government.

Gillian Martin: I invite Douglas Lumsden to tell me what was missing in my speech. What more would he like to see from me by way of answering any of the questions in the report?

Douglas Lumsden: The first thing that I would like to hear is an apology to the people of Scotland for all the money that has been wasted. WICS was under the remit of the Scottish Government, and the Scottish Government has failed in looking after the organisation.

I also asked whether you knew of any other organisations being reviewed. Perhaps some of them are not under your remit.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Douglas Lumsden: I would like to know whether the Scottish Government is doing a full review of all organisations to see whether such a culture exists in other places. Outside agencies are acting with impunity, and this devolved Government must either take control of outcomes or oversee them more robustly.

The cabinet secretary's letter to the committee talks about establishing a peer-led sponsorship network. I suggest to the cabinet secretary that we might need a bit more than another talking shop. The narrative around WICS is not the only story of taxpayers' money being wasted by this out-of-time Scottish National Party Government. Whether it is ferries, prisons, spin doctors or equality and diversity champions, time and again, the hard-earned money of hard-working Scots has been squandered. Quite frankly, it is a disgrace, and the Scottish public are well and truly sick and tired of seeing their cash disappear under the SNP's watch. Only the Scottish Conservatives are offering commonsense solutions to the issues that Scotland faces. *[Interruption.]*

Some members think that money being wasted on Mulberry wallets is funny, but the people I represent do not find it funny at all.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): *[Made a request to intervene.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is concluding.

Douglas Lumsden: That is set against the SNP Government's never-ending preaching on what it thinks is best for the Scottish public. The cabinet secretary should hang her head in shame in coming to the chamber today and giving her response to the committee's report, which highlights all too clearly the failings of this Government and its cosy network of quangos that deliver poor public service to the people of Scotland.

16:04

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I thank the members of the Public Audit Committee for their work, and the clerks to the committee for their support.

This is a damning committee report. There is clear evidence from the Auditor General for Scotland that WICS and the Scottish Government consistently failed to lead by example in ensuring value for money due to significant weaknesses in governance, financial management arrangements and accountability. There was spending on overseas training courses costing more than £70,000 and Christmas gift vouchers bought

without proper approval, and a culture that tolerated excessive hospitality and poor accountability. That matters to all of us, because Scottish Water is a publicly owned utility that people across Scotland depend on every single day. We should be able to take clean, affordable water for granted. It is vital that lessons are learned from today's debate, that the Scottish Government is held to account for the failures and that the culture in WICS fundamentally changes. It is also important that other public bodies are made aware of the issues so that the failures are not repeated.

The areas that the committee investigated and the work of the Auditor General for Scotland are wide ranging. There was poor governance in WICS's expenditure approval and weakness in its financial control. There is also the role of the Scottish Government's sponsorship team, the role of the board and the departure of the former chief executive. This is about accountability and value for money. WICS is the organisation tasked with holding Scottish Water to account—what an irony. Its job is vital in that regard. WICS is there to determine the lowest reasonable cost that Scottish Water will have to incur to meet ministers' environmental, quality and service objectives for the industry. WICS's decisions must be consistent with the guidelines that are set by ministers in their principles of charging. The repeated failures that the committee has highlighted and that Audit Scotland identified need to be addressed urgently.

In a powerful opening speech, Richard Leonard highlighted the extreme examples of governance and financial issues. The Auditor General noted that WICS fell far short of what is expected of a public body. It is deeply concerning that the committee and the Auditor General also highlighted Scottish Government failures to hold the commission to account in decisions that involved expenditure that did not meet standards of value for money and accountability. Taxpayers' money was being spent in ways that did not meet the Scottish Government's guidance. We have had numerous debates during recent months about the Government wasting taxpayers' money. Those huge failures must be addressed urgently.

We should be proud of the fact that we have a publicly owned water company in Scotland. WICS is meant to be the economic regulator for the industry and to promote the interests of Scotland's water and sewerage customers. We should be using our time today to talk about Scottish Water, because it is key to producing high-quality clean water for our constituents across Scotland. However, affordable bills have gone up by inflation-busting increases of almost 10 per cent this year after 8.8 per cent last year and there have been large bonuses for senior staff who already have big salaries. There are concerns

about the widening gaps between the wages of workers who do the daily work that keeps our infrastructure working and those on the top salaries. I was concerned to hear from Unison members about the fact that they are seeing privatisation by stealth and an increase in private contracts and tenders. We need support for concerned staff across the public sector who want to be whistleblowers. That was emphasised in the committee's report.

We should also be talking about sewage. Research that was carried out by Surfers Against Sewage highlighted the need for more reliable data and monitoring of sewage outflows and the need for increased action on extreme weather events causing heavy rainfall and water shortages. As was discussed at First Minister's question time today, we now have water shortages that are impacting on our constituents, farming and business communities.

That all means that WICS has to work properly by holding Scottish Water to account through value for money in the bills that we all pay. It means that WICS needs to deliver value for money and be accountable. The committee's report highlights significant repeated failures by WICS and the Scottish Government. The lessons need to be learned, not just by WICS but across the public sector. How did this happen? The committee's recommendations need to be implemented urgently and consistently across the public sector.

16:09

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I join members in thanking the Public Audit Committee. I am not a member of the committee, although I sit on the Scottish Commission for Public Audit. The work that the Auditor General for Scotland has done underlines the importance of Audit Scotland and the AGS. I thank the convener for his powerful comments at the beginning of the debate.

Reading the committee's report, the word "egregious" springs to mind. At the root of a raft of bad decisions by WICS, there was clearly a lack of focus on its core role as a public body and a deep cultural problem within the organisation. WICS had been encouraged by the Scottish Government to expand its remit into acting as a private sector consultancy on the international stage. Unfortunately, with that came a total indifference to upholding the standards that are required of a public body. There should have been no confusion at all on the part of the chief executive officer, the chair and the board—they should all have known better. The Scottish Government's arrangements should have worked to rein in excessive and inappropriate spending from day 1, and the

Government should have heard the alarm bells ringing far earlier.

The fact that the chief executive officer at the time resigned to avoid scrutiny by the Public Audit Committee is distasteful—that his pay-off cost the taxpayer more than £100,000 even more so. The £70,000 Harvard training courses, funded masters in business administration, £200 dinners and Christmas gifts are all symptoms of an organisation that had lost its sense of responsibility to act in the public interest and deliver value. The whole affair has undermined trust in the regulator and has been damaging to the water industry in Scotland more broadly. However, I am pleased that lessons have now, belatedly, been learned. The organisation has been refocused back on to its public role and will move forward, with further monitoring from the Auditor General.

As Sarah Boyack outlined, now is the time for a renewed focus on the water industry and its regulators. It is 20 years since the Water Environment and Water Services (Scotland) Act 2003 was passed, which established WICS. We are also in the early days of a climate crisis that will be driving huge investment decisions for generations to come. The director general net zero told the committee that WICS provides

"the impetus to deliver on efficiency savings, reduced taxpayer bills and the improvement of the asset",—[*Official Report, Public Audit Committee*, 19 February 2025; c 68.]

but there is no fundamental reason why that impetus cannot come directly from Government, with no economic regulator in place. Arguably, WICS helped to bring a focus to Scottish Water in those early days, especially in reducing costs and improving performance. However, is it still fit for purpose? Why cannot that regulatory capacity be built within Government? Other states around the world regulate their nationalised utilities by Governments setting out formal agreements on performance, pricing and other obligations. They manage to focus on improving governance, robust auditing and citizen engagement, without an economic regulator. They manage to get the balance right between the necessary technical decisions and the more political choices.

When WICS was established, at a time when the Scottish Executive was flirting with privatisation, Ross Finnie, the Lib Dem minister, was keen on turning Scottish Water into a mutual, like Welsh Water—public on the outside and private on the inside. In effect, it would have been a public shell company with a business being operated by private contractors. I can see the benefit of an economic regulator in that context, but that is not a model that was ever fit for Scotland. Moreover, the context of the water industry has changed dramatically around the

United Kingdom, even in just the past couple of years. With a water bill inevitable in the next session of the Scottish Parliament and further regulatory reforms coming in England, it is time to consider whether WICS is still fit for purpose.

It is a separate issue from the historical bad practice that the Auditor General has reported on, and it should remain so, but there are broader questions about the future of water industry regulation in Scotland, and we should not be afraid to discuss them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate. I advise back benchers seeking to speak in the open debate that I require speeches of up to four minutes.

16:14

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): I begin by thanking my colleagues in the Public Audit Committee, and the committee clerks, whose hard work helped to produce the report. The report is about more than just one public body that has gone wrong; it is about trust—trust that public money is spent fairly and wisely and that Parliament can effectively hold public bodies accountable.

The report's findings are worrying. For example, the spending of some £77,000 of taxpayers' money on a Harvard Business School training course was not subject to proper assessment and control procedures. That is simply indefensible. That money could have been spent on our public services—on teachers or apprenticeships—rather than on a costly business course. That may sound like a small amount of money in the grand scheme of the Scottish Government's budget, but it represents the yearly wages for three entry-level nurses. I am sure that we all know which of those options would offer better value for the public.

There were also incidents involving gift vouchers for staff being issued beyond agreed limits, non-compliant spending on recruitment, very generous hospitality with expensive meals and air travel, and staff pay-offs that were not properly authorised. Those were not simple mistakes or one-offs. They all point to the growth of a culture where responsible monitoring by the board was lacking and management oversight was weak or incompetent over an unacceptably lengthy period. That period ran into several years, during which neither internal nor external audit challenged breaches in either policy or processes. I would encourage the audit process to be revisited so that lessons may be learned to ensure that such a blatantly unacceptable situation does not arise again.

Households across the country are feeling the pinch of the cost of living crisis and cutting back on

their outgoings, and they rightly expect public bodies to do the same. Instead, they have seen news reports of irresponsible spending and lavish entertainment. That is why the Public Audit Committee strongly recommended strengthening the WICS board, tightening financial and governance policies and ensuring robust whistleblowing protections.

I welcome the fact that the Scottish Government has listened and responded, but we must not grow complacent. WICS has revised its policies and brought in new board expertise, but vigilance is essential. I am pleased that updated policies will require any international consultancy work to receive ministerial approval and that both the Auditor General and the Scottish Government will continue to monitor WICS's progress. Oversight cannot be something that we do once and then walk away from; it should be built into the culture of how public bodies are run.

As I stated in my introduction, the report is not only about WICS, as it also carries wider lessons. It is a reminder of why transparency matters and why Parliament must hold public bodies to account. It is also a wake-up call to the Scottish Government on deficiencies in its sponsorship model as it affects WICS. The sponsorship model must be proactive and alert so that potentially questionable practices are challenged at an earlier point.

It is vital that we remember that every pound of public money matters. We all know of the difficult financial situation that not only our Government but our constituents are in. As they are having to tighten their belts, it is more important than ever to reduce public bodies' waste. The report's message is clear: never again should we see this failure in oversight. The report lays bare failings at WICS, but it is also a worthwhile lesson for other public bodies and the Scottish Government on the need to reform and improve. We must ensure that the lessons are learned across the board.

Our public bodies must deliver value for the people of Scotland. The people deserve to have public bodies that are transparent, accountable and efficient, and I am grateful that they have a Parliament that challenges and holds our public bodies to account. The public deserve every penny of public money to be spent wisely and fairly, and that is the standard that we must uphold in this chamber.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Tim Eagle, who is joining us remotely.

16:18

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I apologise for not being able to be present in the chamber for this debate. I intend to keep my

remarks brief, as Douglas Lumsden outlined perfectly the many failings that are identified in the Public Audit Committee's very well-written report on the Water Industry Commission for Scotland.

It is worth noting that this debate comes only a week after the Scottish Environment Protection Agency issued an alert warning that six areas of Scotland now face significant scarcity, with several areas in the Highlands and Islands region facing moderate scarcity and alerts. Although I appreciate that prolonged periods of drought are not things that this Government can control, fears about access to water in some of the most rural parts of Scotland are not helped when my constituents simultaneously hear that the people in charge of Scotland's water have received taxpayer-funded bonuses on top of already good salaries and that the regulator that is supposed to have oversight of that is failing.

I received a response to a written parliamentary question by the cabinet secretary, Gillian Martin, which has left me somewhat shocked. In the Highlands and Islands, in July alone, 40.7 megalitres of water were estimated to have been lost per day due to leakages. That is more than 40 million litres of water lost every day. Since the last election, billions upon billions of litres of water have been lost due to leakages in my region, let alone across the rest of Scotland. That means that, while the Scottish Environment Protection Agency is telling the public to cut down their water use, Scottish Water is literally leaking out water.

How do members think the public feel when they know that, rather than infrastructure being appropriately fixed, large bonuses are instead being awarded? That is why the Public Audit Committee's findings about Scottish Water's regulator are particularly damning. The report highlights the extravagance of the Water Industry Commission for Scotland, including the spending of £2,600 on Christmas gift vouchers, hundreds of pounds on meals and alcohol, and more than £40,000 on items that did not meet the requirements of the Scottish public finance manual.

Audit Scotland summed it up perfectly in its 2022-23 report when it concluded that

"Value for money should be a key consideration for ... expenditure incurred by public bodies and the findings of the auditor highlight unacceptable behaviour, by senior officials within the Commission, in the use of public funds."

Audit Scotland is right. Evidently, this was lost on those who were in charge at the Water Industry Commission for Scotland, but perhaps more worrying is the lack of oversight of all of that, which has been mentioned several times so far. It is evident from the report that far more oversight is needed, but, perhaps more broadly, it is about how much scrutiny other agencies and non-

departmental public bodies require with regard to how they spend their money.

Although others will disagree with me, I am more and more convinced that, under this Government, Scotland has a culture of bloated quangos and a lack of proper oversight, whether it is in the Water Industry Commission for Scotland or the many other bodies that have been set up to take decisions instead of elected members. It is clear that more must be done to rein in and keep a check on those organisations.

16:21

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I suspect that most of my constituents had never heard of WICS until this scandal erupted. Many more of them are now aware of this important regulator because of what they have heard in the media, but it is for all the wrong reasons. That is unfortunate, because WICS has a really important job to do.

Given what we now know, it is astonishing that the former CEO was at the helm of the organisation for almost a quarter of a century. I did not have a lot of interaction with WICS, but, as a member of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, I have been involved in panels where we questioned that organisation. At the time—and I think that other colleagues shared my view—I felt that there was a hostility to scrutiny and to questions, so perhaps that should have been a red flag.

I welcome the cabinet secretary, who has inherited a lot of this work, letting the Parliament know that lessons have been learned and changes have been made, but I share the concerns of other members, including Colin Beattie, that the approach cannot be short term. How can we be confident that this situation can never happen again and that it never happens in any other organisation?

Colleagues are right—today, we are looking not just at the culture of the organisation but at all the infrastructure around it. We have seen massive failings in governance and financial control. It is about greed and entitlement. Those people thought that they could go to their work and go out for dinner with their colleagues and cronies and spend hundreds of pounds on booze and fancy meals in luxury hotels and restaurants.

As we talk about this today, I am reminded that tomorrow is national food bank day. Many of our constituents, including many people who are in work, rely on food banks to feed themselves and their families. That is why people are angry when they hear about these kinds of scandals.

Colleagues have talked about the importance of Scottish Water. WICS is the economic regulator of the water industry, and Sarah Boyack set out why it is important that we have a properly functioning regulator. Over the summer, but also over the past few years, industrial relations have been at an all-time low in Scottish Water. The workforce has lost confidence in the senior management team at Scottish Water, and the regulator does not seem to care.

In the cabinet secretary's reply over the summer to my letter to the First Minister, I think that there was a recognition that things have to improve at Scottish Water. However, I would like to say to the cabinet secretary today that, if the regulator was not doing its job and we cannot rely on the judgment of that organisation in recent times, we must look again at decisions that have been taken at Scottish Water that affect the current workforce, and consider the very real fear that we are seeing backdoor privatisation. I am looking at the cabinet secretary's face and I can see that she is disagreeing—I am happy for her to intervene. If we look at some recent reports on this and listen to the workers—I urge the cabinet secretary to do so—we see that they are very unhappy and that they are raising the issue because they believe that it is in the public interest to do so.

We all want world-class water in Scotland. We want safe, high-quality water—the issues about water scarcity were rehearsed at First Minister's question time—but we need to have confidence in the regulator, Scottish Water and the Government, and confidence that they will not take their eye off the ball again. I would be happy to hear the cabinet secretary's response to that.

16:26

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I, too, thank the committee for its dogged investigation into the matter. Proper spending of public money is of the utmost importance. The principle is not optional or aspirational; it is fundamental to public trust in Government and public bodies. The financial governance that we have seen at WICS was, to be frank, gobsmacking.

The findings laid out in the Public Audit Committee's report paint a scandalous picture—one of serious failures in financial management, in board oversight and in culture at the very top of a public body. As has already been rehearsed today, all the lavish spendings that we have heard about are not appropriate uses of public funds—they do not reflect public sector values, they fail to deliver value for money and they absolutely erode public confidence.

The failures in governance were just as stark. The report found that the WICS board did not exercise the oversight that was expected of it. Any of us who are or have been members of boards must absolutely understand the responsibility that comes with it when it involves careful management of public resources. Decisions in this case were taken without any due process, without any challenge and without reference to value. The culture that developed within the organisation, which was described by staff as “toxic”, further compounded those governance breakdowns.

My thoughts are with the staff who endured the reported toxic environment, as I know how damaging it can be, especially when there appears to be no clear path to challenge or change it.

Acknowledging those failures is only part of the response. The Scottish Government must expect the highest standards from its public bodies. In the light of the issues raised, action has now been taken. The Government commissioned and published and is now implementing the findings of both internal and independent reviews, which have led to concrete changes in how WICS is governed, in how the Scottish Government exercises its sponsorship responsibilities and in how whistleblowers are supported.

We have seen some progress. WICS has accepted responsibility and has begun the hard work of reform, by tightening financial controls, strengthening internal assurances and refocusing its leadership on transparency and accountability. The Scottish Government, for its part, has taken steps to ensure that its oversight of all public bodies, WICS included, is stronger, clearer and more robust. It is good to hear from the cabinet minister today that reliance on one person's reporting and sponsorship arrangements will no longer happen.

Public money must always be treated with respect. The reforms are not just about process but about trust—trust that public bodies are acting in the public interest, trust that decisions are taken with integrity, and trust that, where there has been a failure, there is accountability.

Going forward, the focus must now be on embedding a culture of compliance in WICS—one that values scrutiny, upholds standards and earns public confidence.

I echo the calls for a focus on the future of Scottish Water. As it is a beloved institution, we need to make sure that it is fit for purpose. On the operations of other quangos out there, we need certainty that we can have confidence in our public bodies and how they use public funds.

16:29

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Reform): Let us be clear: this was a major scandal. We have had some robust meetings, but these were some of the most astonishing meetings that I have ever been involved in. It was not just a case of a few minor missteps; it was a catalogue of serious failings—failings in financial control, in oversight, in leadership and in culture. Those failings have cost the public purse and, more important, have cost public trust.

The reports from the Auditor General laid bare the reality. Splashing the cash was rife, and there was no one to turn the taps off. We saw that public money had been spent on overseas training courses, including £77,000 to send a staff member, who has now left the organisation, to Harvard. That was approved without proper scrutiny, competitive tendering or prior Government approval. What was the Scottish Government's response? Retrospective approval—not because the spending met the standards of the Scottish public finance manual, but because the money had already been spent.

Douglas Lumsden: Will the member take an intervention?

Graham Simpson: If it is brief.

Douglas Lumsden: I have a question on that £77,000. Was any of that able to be clawed back from that employee once they had left the company?

Graham Simpson: The answer is no—the money had been spent. That was not an oversight; it was rubber stamping.

We saw that Christmas gift vouchers had been handed out that were in breach of delegated limits. We saw expense claims without receipts, alcohol spending reimbursed and subsistence levels removed. Those were not isolated incidents. There were lavish dinners, including one dinner for two at the posh Champany Inn in Linlithgow that cost £400 and another at the Road Hole Restaurant in St Andrews that cost £370. We also learned that a London-based KC was on a retainer, at huge cost, for more than a decade.

What of the sponsorship team? Its role is to challenge, scrutinise and uphold standards, but it failed to do so. It failed to escalate concerns. It failed to intervene. It failed to protect the public interests. That is not good enough.

The former chief executive's departure is another example. A settlement agreement was signed in haste, bypassing proper procedures and removing the possibility of disciplinary action, and more than £105,000 was paid out with no clear justification and no accountability. Incredibly, a public relations agency was appointed, at even

more cost to the taxpayer, to advise on how to counter negative headlines about it. You could not make it up.

WICS has now taken steps to improve financial controls. The Scottish Government has committed to strengthening sponsorship arrangements—not before time. We must also look at WICS's international consultancy work, which has been put on hold for now. It generated income, but it contributed to the drift in culture.

There is also the bigger question, raised already in the debate, of whether we should have the organisation at all. I think that the Government needs to look seriously at that question and consider getting rid of WICS altogether.

Parliament has the job of holding public bodies to account. We have to ensure that they operate with integrity, that oversight of them is robust and that public money is treated with the respect that it deserves. Let the report be a turning point, and let us work together to restore the standards that the people of Scotland expect and deserve.

16:33

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I, too, thank the committee for the hard work that was put into the report.

We are here to discuss audits of the Water Industry Commission for Scotland, but it would be remiss of me not to reflect on some other aspects of water in Scotland, given the public coverage that there was over the recess. In case colleagues do not recall it, I remind them that the UK environment secretary, Steve Reed, made some very daft comments—in my opinion—about Scottish water. He claimed wrongly that pollution levels are worse in Scotland than in England. I would expect better from a UK minister than to share such misleading claims, to talk down Scotland and to talk down the value of Scottish Water being in public hands in the process.

I am not going to suggest that everything to do with water in Scotland is perfect. Clearly, we have a report in front of us that recognises what has not gone right—in this case, in the Water Industry Commission for Scotland. However, I want to make clear a few things that are undeniable. In Scotland, we have less pollution in our waterways than England has. A recent report found that 66 per cent—two thirds—of Scotland's water bodies are of good ecological status, compared with just 16.1 per cent in England and 29.9 per cent in Wales.

Moreover, water bills are lower. Water bills in Scotland average just £490 compared with £603 across England. In addition, Scottish Water being in Scotland's hands is working because public

ownership means not having to pay out millions in dividends. As a result, it costs folk less to have the cleaner water that we have in Scotland.

My final point is that tap water in Scotland is tastier. I have tried tap water in other places and it has not been that great. When we get to a tap in Scotland, especially in the north-east and the Highlands, and pour ourselves a glass of cold, crisp Scottish water, we soon find out that it is delicious.

Having covered that off and said my piece about Scottish Water, I want to go on to the substance of the report. It highlights a number of failures at the Water Industry Commission for Scotland—which I am going to call WICS from now on, as I just stumbled over saying it. There were a number of financial management and governance failures at the commission; there was retrospective authorisation of high-cost training; there were improper staff gifts; there were weak financial controls; there were cultural issues with bullying; and there was a lack of challenge to leadership. All of those things were unacceptable. We expect our public bodies to have the highest standards, and that was not the case here.

I am pleased that the Scottish Government has acted decisively by strengthening the WICS board, resetting the organisation from the top down and appointing interim members to get the organisation on a path to rebuilding public trust. The report is part of that process, too.

Monica Lennon: Will the member give way?

Jackie Dunbar: I am not sure whether I have time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is no time in hand.

Jackie Dunbar: My apologies.

I thank the Public Audit Committee for taking the time to consider all of this and for asking the difficult questions that need to be asked when public money is not being spent properly. I want Scottish Water, WICS and every aspect of water in Scotland to remain something for us to be proud of—well run, affordable, delicious and publicly owned. I hope that the work that we have seen from the Scottish Government and the committee to help WICS with its reset will ensure that, for years to come, Scotland's water remains in Scotland's hands.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you. We now move to closing speeches, and I call Alex Rowley to close on behalf of Scottish Labour.

16:37

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I commend the Public Audit Committee for its

excellent report and the detail that it has gone into. Richard Leonard has set it all out very well, so I will not simply repeat it.

As others—Mark Ruskell, Sarah Boyack, Graham Simpson and Monica Lennon—have made clear today, the Government needs to look at its role in this. A memory that will always stick with me goes back to when Thatcher was in power and wanted to privatise Scottish Water. The then Labour MEP Alex Falconer hired buses and we all bussed it up to Glendevon reservoir and launched the campaign to stop the privatisation of Scotland's water. It is important to look not just at what WICS has been doing but at what it has not been doing. The Government needs to take a closer look at that.

This morning, I spoke to my trade union, Unison, which represents workers at the commission, and I want to put on the record what it said to me. It said:

"On decisions affecting the workforce, Scottish Water has taken decisions on whether to deliver operations directly or through procurement without any form of consultation with the staff trade unions or, indeed, acknowledgement that this is necessary. There has also been no consultation with the trade unions on Scottish Water's plans for 'transformation'."

The First Minister

"and cabinet secretary have both endorsed Scottish Water's publicly owned delivery model, but it is increasingly not a publicly delivered service.

Given the failures revealed at WICS, including the failures in Scottish Govt sponsorship of the regulator, these decisions, which have a direct impact on employed staff, deserve detailed scrutiny. This is especially timely and necessary as planning is in train for the new regulatory planning cycle 2027-2033. Scottish Govt should be asked to investigate the evidence that outsourcing decisions taken by Scottish Water deliver value for money."

It is certainly clear that WICS has not been doing its job in that regard.

It is time for the Scottish Government to intervene and take the lead by reminding Scottish Water that it is a publicly owned company that the public expect to be properly run. The First Minister and the Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy continue to express confidence in Scottish Water's executive leadership team, but they should be reminded that their confidence is not shared by the Scottish Water workforce. In the most recent staff survey, there was a very low level of confidence in the direction that the executive leadership team is taking the company in.

We should be proud of Scottish Water, and I agree with the point that Jackie Dunbar made earlier, as I was appalled when I heard the Labour minister attack Scottish Water. Scottish Water is a public company—we fought for that and stopped

its privatisation—and we need the Scottish Government to show leadership, because there are serious concerns about the leadership in Scottish Water at this time. It is a public company, it is under public ownership and, therefore, the Government must take more of a lead.

I agreed with Mark Ruskell when he questioned whether WICS is the right model. That is a serious question that the next Government must look at in the next session of Parliament.

We are proud of Scottish Water and we prevented it from being privatised. Let us ensure that it is not privatised by the back door by management that is, it seems, accountable to nobody.

16:41

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): My thanks go to the Public Audit Committee and its clerks for the report, which was published in May, and to the Auditor General for his earlier work in looking at the functioning of the commission.

Sadly, we are dealing with a report that, as we have heard, details what the committee has called a “catalogue of failures” in a Scottish Government quango. Where public bodies fall short, we should all have an active interest in putting things right, particularly in cases where public money is misused. This chamber has a responsibility to taxpayers to ensure that their contributions are put to good use.

I welcome the committee’s report and, in particular, its recommendations, which build on and develop the work of Audit Scotland. It is an important step in setting things right after this very public scandal.

We should consider, however, that the issues at WICS happened in plain sight. This was not an organisation gone rogue; it was not some obscure institution hidden away or forgotten about. We heard of regular communication with the Scottish Government at a variety of levels. There was no shortage of red flags. Rather, this seems to be a story of two organisations—the Scottish Government and the commission—operating at cross purposes and of the role of oversight being consistently neglected.

Other members have detailed many of the individual issues with the commission, and I do not intend to rehash them. However, this was more than just bureaucracy being circumvented or a lack of diligence in reporting. Many of those situations are essentially inexplicable.

What should be surprising is the number of opportunities that existed to have the commission change course. We find several examples where

proper procedures were not followed, but approval for actions taken by the staff was given retrospectively. Although there are occasions when that sort of retrospective permission will be necessary, I suggest that they should be few and far between. In repeatedly authorising such actions, the Scottish Government effectively opened the gates for the commission to act how it pleased. I am encouraged, at least, that the committee’s report notes that that has been recognised and that a different approach will be taken towards retroactive approvals by the Scottish Government.

Overall, the report recognises significant failings and weaknesses in the Scottish Government’s sponsorship role. It is likely that there are issues that go beyond the commission, given that the report notes the Auditor General’s evidence that there is

“wide variation in the quality of sponsorship of public bodies.”—[*Official Report, Public Audit Committee*, 8 February 2024; c 18.]

There has been public concern about the use of quangos and whether true accountability is provided by having those organisations at arm’s length from Government. Regardless of what view we take on that debate, where autonomy is needed, it must be accompanied by high standards of governance, communication and conduct—something that has been sorely lacking.

Although progress has been made, it is clear that there are still many issues to address. I will briefly turn to some of my colleagues’ contributions. Douglas Lumsden’s speech focused on the importance of the oversight role and the clear evidence in the report that certain staff were behaving in a way that suggests that they saw few consequences for their actions. He also dealt with the departure of the previous chief executive, which, of course, had a considerable cost, and the positive response from the new chief executive, who will most likely face additional scrutiny as he attempts to turn things around at the commission. All in all, Douglas Lumsden pointed to the situation being a far from isolated example of taxpayers’ money being lost in Scotland’s public sector. In many ways, it seems that the Scottish Government is a little too comfortable with seeing people’s money wasted and siphoned off.

Tim Eagle spoke about the context of the water industry here in Scotland and the importance of proper regulation. The provision of water is, as he highlighted, of fundamental importance in regions like ours in the Highlands and Islands. He also touched on a quango culture in Scotland—that is, the abundance of public bodies of various types operating without the proper care and oversight of Government. Although today’s debate is only one example, members’ concerns—on this side of the

chamber, anyway—about the governance of public bodies extend more widely.

I will turn briefly to the convener's speech. He rightly said that it was a matter of serious concern for the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government both that this incident happened and that it should have been allowed to happen. He highlighted the case of a civil servant who said that there was "no material benefit" in retrospectively challenging the £77,000 spend on staff training at Harvard University. I am sure that that will worry members; it would certainly anger many members of the public.

It is notable that the commission is at least partly a regulatory body. It is a problem that business and other organisations are expected to look to the commission for regulation when it has taken such a slapdash approach to its own rules and standards. As the convener rightly highlighted, there will clearly be an on-going issue of trust. That trust will have to be carefully rebuilt not only by the commission but by the Scottish Government.

16:47

Gillian Martin: I welcome all the contributions from members across the chamber today. They have, of course, been largely to do with WICS and the committee report, but I have been listening very carefully to all that has been put to me. I have heard valid criticism of WICS and the Scottish Government. I have also heard criticism that is not so valid. I asked members who said that there were still gaps in the Scottish Government's response what they are, and if they are legitimate, I will look into them, but I do not think that they are. We have acted swiftly to address the concerns.

I had great concerns about the sponsorship issue. I wanted to make sure that it was fit for purpose going forward. As a cabinet secretary, I do not ever want to be in the position of finding out the things that I found out about WICS when I took up the post. I was as shocked as anyone else and, to be honest, very angry. I am very angry that public servants—who are no longer working for WICS and are now long gone—allowed that culture to exist. Some have pointed to reasons why that might have happened, but I will be keeping a very close eye on the new leadership. A new chair will be appointed—they are recruiting right now. The various report's recommendations and actions were taken. I have really tried with my directorate to do all that we can to avoid a repeat of any of the issues at WICS. Again, I thank Ronnie Hinds for taking up the post temporarily to oversee those reforms.

Douglas Lumsden: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Gillian Martin: No—I have only six minutes.

Now is the time to look forward. I will take the comments of Monica Lennon, Alex Rowley and Mark Ruskell into account as I work with the new team, because legitimate questions have been posed. Alex Rowley asked what the old guard were not doing or perhaps not scrutinising. As we recruit the new chair and I speak with the new chief executive, it is very important that we ask those very pointed questions.

I also want to say how refreshing it is to hear a Labour member, Alex Rowley, call out the misinformation that Steve Reed has put out about Scottish Water. The nationalisation of Scottish Water should be a source of pride for all of us. We rightly have to scrutinise how that is done, but our water is of a very high quality. It is unfortunate that even today, in environment, food and rural affairs questions, Steve Reed repeated the same misinformation.

As a Government, we have learned lessons about sponsorship, which I want to talk about. Our approach is now robust and systematic, with appropriate senior scrutiny that is supported by a team that is properly resourced and trained. The team will continue to monitor progress and ensure that long-term change is embedded. The reset of WICS continues with three new board members formally appointed last month, which takes the board to a full complement.

Graham Simpson pointed out that its global consultancy work has been paused, and asked whether that was a driver of the culture, which is a legitimate question. I would have to be convinced that the activity has a positive effect on the performance of the regulator and WICS as a whole before it were to restart that work. Good governance will enable WICS to focus on its core functions, which is what I want it to do. I want the new board and management team to prove to me that it is an informed organisation. WICS has been a highly respected regulator—it had the global consultancy work because it was asked for its opinion throughout the world. Its work has informed some of the conclusions in the Independent Water Commission's recent review of the sector in England and Wales. I want to see it being a respected organisation again.

A comment was made about whether it was not just small mistakes that were made. Buying expensive meals and allowing ridiculous expenses were not mistakes: that was part of a culture that had to change. Those were not errors; wilful decisions were taken.

Graham Simpson: The cabinet secretary may be coming to it, but several members have raised

the question of whether we need a water industry commission, at least in its current form. Does she agree that that is a valid question to address?

Gillian Martin: I can understand why that question has been asked, given what has happened. For want of a few individuals at the top who have perpetrated a culture that is unacceptable in a public body, I think that we need to give WICS a chance to re-establish itself, and I want to give it that chance, because the core role that it performs is widely respected. Obviously, I will listen to what members have said in the debate.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Gillian Martin: I am afraid that I do not have time; I have 20 seconds left, so I will close.

I hope that the debate and the committee's report will draw a line under the historical issues that have been raised and that members will join me in looking forward with enhanced scrutiny of WICS. The task that I put to WICS now is to rebuild public trust by governing itself appropriately, while delivering effective regulation for the people of Scotland. I will personally take a direct interest in ensuring that that happens.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I call Jamie Greene to wind up on behalf of the Public Audit Committee.

16:53

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD): I thank all members for their contributions. I quote three words from the debate for those who are just joining us: "gobsmacking", "scandalous" and "egregious". Those are some of the comments that have been made about the outcomes of our committee's report.

I thank Audit Scotland for its detailed and forensic analysis of this public body. Had it not sanctioned a section 22 report, perhaps none of this would have come to light. Let me be clear: the Parliament's Public Audit Committee was united across political party lines in its criticisms of what occurred at the Water Industry Commission for Scotland. We were united in calling out the failures of the Government, both by the regulator, its board and its leadership and management teams, and by the Scottish Government's sponsorship team which, I may add, reports directly to ministers. Our committee was united on the numerous examples of careless financial controls, none of which presented value for public money or the sort of fiscal prudence that we have come to expect from well-paid executives who are in positions of trust.

Much of our deliberation focused on the arrangements concerning the departure of the

former chief executive. We have heard some of that today. Here is what happened: the day before the Auditor General for Scotland published his first report on WICS, the former chief executive took the decision to resign. The board fast-tracked that resignation in a matter of days. He was then paid for his six-month notice period.

There are so many unanswered questions about that entire process. The chief executive's exit hampered our ability to scrutinise and to hear a full report of what happened—not only about his departure but about the events that led to his departure. That is really what mattered. What was the cause of his departure? What happened in that body that led to the section 22 report?

I was extremely concerned, as was the committee, to learn that the chief executive was potentially advised to resign ahead of the Public Audit Committee inquiry. In fact, he said—it is in our report—that the deputy director of water policy at the Scottish Government

"reiterated the likelihood of PAC inquiry and that I should perhaps negotiate an earlier exit."

What on earth happened in that conversation? Which senior civil servant should ever offer advice like that to a chief executive of a public board?

Douglas Lumsden: Will the member take an intervention?

Jamie Greene: I have not got time. I am sorry.

Let me be clear: the PAC expects accountable officers in such organisations to remain in post, in so far as is possible, to be accountable for their actions and the actions of the body that they oversee. This whole ordeal speaks to a wider issue, which is the relationship between senior civil servants and the chief executives and board chairs of public organisations. Our committee report makes that clear, and I am pleased that the cabinet secretary acknowledged that, both in the report and in the response to it, saying:

"We recognise there were shortcomings in the way the Scottish Government carried out its sponsorship role".

That is a welcome admission.

However, it goes further than that. In our evidence sessions, we witnessed direct contradictions in evidence from witnesses. During one evidence session, in September last year, the former chair of WICS was asked whether the board followed due process. He said that it did. A senior civil servant from the Scottish Government, sitting two feet away from him, said that it did not. So the back and forth went during the committee session—he said, she said. That does not strike me, nor did it strike the committee, as an effective, productive or even healthy relationship between a public body and the Scottish Government.

Not only did the Auditor General find that the culture at WICS did not focus on best value for public money; he highlighted issues with behaviour and culture. That should also be of concern to us all. It says in the Government's own review that senior officials

"were aware of issues relating to behaviour and culture ... there was a lack of evidence to demonstrate action taken as a result."

I hope that something has been learned from that process. Whistleblowers cannot be dealt with in the manner that they were in this case. Evidence was sent to us by former members of staff of WICS, who talked about a "toxic" culture in the organisation.

The other issue that has arisen today looks forward at what happens next. That is the inherent conflict of interests that arose at WICS. WICS was acting as an industry regulator—an economic regulator, not an environmental one, I should add—a task which, no doubt, has some merit and is necessary. It was also operating as a quasi-commercial organisation, which directly arose off the back of the Scottish Government's hydro nation strategy. Indeed, the very role of WICS moving forward is a live debate, and one that we should have before the election.

The chair of the board of WICS himself said:

"It is not unreasonable to ask questions about whether an organisation such as WICS is needed".—[*Official Report, Public Audit Committee*, 19 February 2025; c 69.]

Does Scotland need an organisation to regulate the water industry when Scotland has no commercially competitive residential water industry? That is a valid question.

WICS's own website—if members look at it right now—focuses entirely on its international consultancy remit, and less on the regulatory role that we expect it to play. The website says,

"we really enjoy meeting others who work in the field of regulation!",

as some sort of rationale for how Scottish customers benefit from its international commercial activity. That will come as no comfort to those who are seeing their water bills rise or their rivers polluted.

Public bodies that behave like private companies—in terms of their remuneration packages, perks, expenses, culture and management style—will inherently and undoubtedly result in the very failures that we have heard about today, and which our report highlights. I welcome the fact that that activity has been put on pause, but we recommend that a full business case be put together before any decision is taken about whether it should resume.

The committee's report is one of the most damning that I have had the pleasure of drafting in my nine years in the Parliament. Our forensic work and that of Audit Scotland shone a light on practice that had hitherto gone unnoticed. It should not have taken a section 22 report to unearth such fiscal mismanagement in a public body.

The report does two things. As well as highlighting the importance of good audit, it highlights the importance of the Parliament's Public Audit Committee. I am proud and pleased to be the committee's deputy convener, because we take a convivial and constructive attitude to the scrutiny that we do. We park our politics at the door, we roll up our sleeves and we get on with it. The 48-page report before Parliament today is testament to that. My only hope is that the Government, WICS and all other public bodies take heed of today's debate. We say to them: we are watching you. We want our findings and our criticisms to result in tangible and concrete action and change to ensure that such errors never happen again.

Employment Rights Bill

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of legislative consent motion S6M-18704, in the name of Tom Arthur, on the Employment Rights Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the amendments tabled on 7 July 2025 to clauses 44 to 46 and 49 of the Employment Rights Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 10 October 2024, in relation to the establishment of the Social Care Negotiating Body for Scotland, so far as these amendments further alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.—[Tom Arthur]

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

Decision Time

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S6M-18680, in the name of Richard Leonard, on behalf of the Public Audit Committee, on the 2022-23 and 2023-24 audits of the Water Industry Commission for Scotland, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations contained in the Public Audit Committee's 1st Report, 2025 (Session 6), *The 2022/23 and 2023/24 audits of the Water Industry Commission for Scotland* (SP Paper 783).

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-18704, in the name of Tom Arthur, on the Employment Rights Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

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

17:02

Meeting suspended.

17:05

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We come to the vote on motion S6M-18704, in the name of Tom Arthur, on the legislative consent motion on the Employment Rights Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation. Members should cast their votes now.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)

Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Abstentions

Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)

Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-18704, in the name of Tom Arthur, on the Employment Rights Bill, is: For 71, Against 0, Abstentions 26.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the amendments tabled on 7 July 2025 to clauses 44 to 46 and 49 of the Employment Rights Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 10 October 2024, in relation to the establishment of the Social Care Negotiating Body for Scotland, so far as these amendments further alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Meeting closed at 17:07.

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The deadline for corrections to this edition is:

Thursday 2 October 2025

Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

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