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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 25 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.

Homelessness

1. Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the latest homelessness in Scotland statistics. (S6O-04978)

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): The statistics demonstrate the scale of the challenge that we face to reduce homelessness. Earlier this month, I delivered my housing emergency action plan, which sets out the direct and immediate measures that we will be taking to prevent homelessness, deliver more affordable homes and make better use of existing stock. That includes up to £4.9 billion of investment over the next four years, to deliver around 36,000 affordable homes; doubling our acquisition funding this year to £80 million, allowing councils to act now to acquire family-sized homes and get children out of temporary accommodation; and a £4 million investment in the expansion of the housing first approach.

This week, we have been considering stage 3 of the Housing (Scotland) Bill, which, if passed, will create a gold standard anti-homelessness law in the form of the ask and act duty.

Roz McCall: I am glad to hear that the cabinet secretary agrees that there is a problem. There are currently 10,000 children in temporary accommodation, some of whom are spending years in limbo, and the figure is stagnant. We also recently found out from a report in *The Herald* that there have been “nearly 40,000 violations” of homelessness regulations by Scottish local authorities in the past eight years, with the number almost doubling in the past year alone.

We have a housing emergency; there is a homelessness crisis; and nothing seems to be changing. When does the cabinet secretary believe that the money and the policies that she continually champions will finally improve the situation for the people of Scotland?

Màiri McAllan: I will never claim that the statistics that came out last week are anything other than stark, and they require urgent action. In

recent years, we have been dealing with a perfect storm of difficulties, with the prevailing economic situation being stagnant or on a downward trajectory and household finances being put under severe pressure from inflation, the cost of living, the pandemic, Brexit and so on. That has meant that, despite Scotland having some of the most protective anti-homelessness laws in any country, we are in a difficult situation.

That is why the housing emergency plan that I set out takes action across three pillars: ending the practice of children living in unsuitable accommodation; supporting the housing needs of vulnerable communities; and building our future by investing in new and affordable homes. I hope that that, combined with the actions that we have been taking since May last year, will quickly make a difference.

However, much of the situation—not least the social security aspect—is outwith our control, and I take this opportunity to urge the United Kingdom Government to reverse the bedroom tax, for example.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Ind): As we have just heard, it has been reported that more than 16,000 housing violations have happened in the past year alone. Will the cabinet secretary acknowledge that report, which calls its housing emergency declaration a sham, given that breaches of the legal duty to provide for homeless people, including children and pregnant women, have doubled in only one year?

Màiri McAllan: No, I would not agree with that characterisation. Breaches of statutory obligations by councils are not acceptable. That is exactly why I am working with local authorities—and, in particular, with the top five with the most strained homelessness services—to drive action now.

We drive action with the acquisition fund that the Government has been providing for several years and which, in my statement on 2 September, I doubled to £80 million. That fund is about asking councils to go now, acquire family homes that are on the market and use them to get children out of temporary accommodation. Another instruction that was part of that plan was to ask councils to adopt the guidance from the Association of Local Authority Chief Housing Officers on flipping temporary accommodation—that is, to contact people living in temporary accommodation that is otherwise suitable, except for the fact that it is temporary, and to discuss with the household whether it can be flipped to become their permanent accommodation.

Such measures are about taking action, and they are all backed up by investment over the next four years.

The Presiding Officer: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Free Personal Care (Delivery)

3. Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how many free personal care hours were assessed by local authorities to be needed, but were subsequently not delivered, in 2024-25. (S6O-04980)

The Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing (Tom Arthur): The information that the member has requested for 2024-25 has not yet been published. However, the data that focuses on the uptake of free personal nursing care in previous years is available on the Scottish Government website, which provides published statistics. The 2024-25 data has a release date of November 2025.

The Scottish Government recognises that the cost of care can be high for people who are self-funding their residential care. That is why we have increased the rates paid for free personal and nursing care by 29.5 per cent since April 2020, providing an additional investment of £40 million over the past three years.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I thank the minister for his answer, but I would welcome a little more detail in future.

Local councils assess the need for, and deliver, free personal care, but it was legislated for by this Parliament. The Scottish National Party's website hails the policy as one of the landmark achievements of devolution, but too many old and vulnerable people across my Highlands and Islands region are being left waiting for months, if not years, for the support that they have been assessed as needing. Some are left languishing in already-crowded hospitals, because there is no care support available to get them home or no place available in one of our pressured care homes.

Does the minister accept the seriousness of the situation across the Highlands and Islands and across Scotland? Without repeating the usual excuses, what does he say to those who are waiting for care support that they have been assessed as needing but have been left waiting to receive it?

Tom Arthur: I make it clear that I do not want to see anyone waiting unduly for care that they have been assessed as requiring. We are working constructively and collaboratively with our partners across local government. That work is, intentionally, being led by the cabinet secretary, with support from me, and we will continue to do that work.

We have put significant additional investment of £21.7 billion into health and social care this year, which includes £2.2 billion for social care. Those figures exceeded our original commitment, and we will continue engaging constructively with our partners to drive forward improvements.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Has the Labour Government's increase in employer national insurance contributions had an impact on the delivery of free personal care?

Tom Arthur: Regrettably, it has. Since the start of the year, the sector has been making clear the costs that will be incurred as a consequence of the United Kingdom Government's decision to increase employer national insurance contributions. The move will have a material impact, and we estimate that it will cost the sector more than £80 million this year.

It is, of course, further compounded by the UK Labour Government's decision to restrict international visas for care workers. The decision has been roundly condemned by those operating in the sector, and I urge the UK Government to reverse its course.

Ophthalmology (NHS Orkney)

4. Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with NHS Orkney regarding reported delays in ophthalmology appointments for patients. (S6O-04981)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): During a visit to the Balfour hospital on 15 July, the cabinet secretary met with NHS Orkney's senior team to discuss its operational improvement plan and the progress being made following our additional investment of almost £73,000 for ophthalmology. That money was allocated to NHS Orkney to ensure that no patient waits longer than 52 weeks for a new out-patient appointment or for an in-patient day case admission by 31 March 2026.

Additionally, the Scottish Government commissioned the national centre for sustainable delivery and officials to meet regularly with the health board. This year, NHS Orkney has had a clinical services review and a clinically led ophthalmology peer review, which have made recommendations on the delivery of sustainable services for patients.

Liam McArthur: I am sure that the cabinet secretary was made aware, during his meeting at the Balfour, of the significant backlogs in ophthalmology appointments in Orkney. I have been contacted by constituents who are reporting waits for treatment of up to or exceeding three years.

I know from my discussions with NHS Orkney that it is trying to take steps to reduce those backlogs. However, given that some patients face permanent sight loss while waiting for treatment, will the Scottish Government commit to providing additional support in the short term to help tackle those unacceptable waits?

Jenni Minto: Those exact topics were discussed with the cabinet secretary when he visited Orkney in July. I am happy to consider the proposal that Mr McArthur makes. I know that NHS Orkney has had access to the global citizen post for ophthalmology, which it shares with NHS Highland and NHS Western Isles, but that post is currently unfilled.

NHS Orkney and NHS Highland have been working together on looking at how additional capacity can be delivered, but I absolutely recognise the concerns that have been raised. In other areas of healthcare, we are able to work across boundaries, and I hope that something similar can be worked out in this case.

Asylum Accommodation (Protests)

5. Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on any discussions that it has had with Police Scotland about the policing of protests outside hotels and other accommodation for people seeking asylum. (S6O-04982)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): Scottish ministers have regular discussions with Police Scotland on a range of issues including the policing of protests. Operational policing is a matter for Police Scotland, and it has confirmed that it has the appropriate resources to ensure the safety of those who are in attendance and to mitigate disruption to the wider community. Police Scotland is a rights-based organisation and it is committed to facilitating peaceful protests and counter-demonstrations to allow those who are seeking to protest to exercise their human rights. However, let me be clear: there is no place for criminality or hate crime on our streets, and I fully support Police Scotland taking the appropriate and proportionate action in response to such behaviour.

Maggie Chapman: In the north-east, we have seen anti-immigration protests in Peterhead, Westhill, Aberdeen and Dundee. The Stobswell forum in Dundee issued a statement highlighting the fear and alarm that were caused by these so-called protesters following their actions in a public park. The same protesters marched in an unorganised way over the A90 Kingsway and held an intimidating and hate-filled protest outside the homes of asylum seekers. They spread false anti-immigration information online, causing fear and

alarm among parents of young children, and they hurled stones and other missiles at anti-fascists.

What proactive action is being taken to respond to the far-right influence on these protests and the intimidation that they cause to residents and local communities?

Siobhian Brown: I am deeply concerned about some of the rhetoric that we are seeing across the United Kingdom, which should have no place in our society. It is therefore vital that factual information is also placed in the public domain. As elected members across the UK—as democratically elected representatives with a platform—we have a duty and a responsibility to ensure that we call out any dangerous misinformation, and certainly that we do not perpetrate it.

In a democracy, people have the right of peaceful protest, but the protests outside the hotels go far beyond what is acceptable in our country, which has historically had a humane approach, and one that we should be proud of, to those fleeing conflict and persecution. The protests are creating a sense of real fear and alarm for those who have already gone through so much.

In saying that, it is important that we engage with the people who are protesting in order to hear their concerns and understand the reasons that are driving them to protest. I know that Police Scotland continues to engage with protesters through liaison officers, and the Scottish Government has funded the Centre for Good Relations to work with those who are protesting to hear their concerns.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): We have brought in legislation to create boundaries—buffer zones—around clinics to prevent people who are accessing services from being harassed. What consideration has the Government given to establishing some kind of boundaries around residential dwellings to prevent people from being harassed in their homes?

Siobhian Brown: The right to free speech and protest is at the heart of a healthy democracy and the Scottish Government is committed to upholding that right, but it understands the distress that the protests are causing to residents across asylum accommodation. Creating buffer zones similar to those that have been introduced in relation to abortion clinics would require new legislation. We have no current plans to do that, but we will continue to monitor the situation.

General Practice Service Capacity (NHS Grampian)

6. Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will

provide an update on the steps that it is taking to increase service capacity in GP practices within NHS Grampian. (S6O-04983)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): In August, I announced initial additional investment of £15 million in general practice. GP practices in Grampian will receive £1.5 million of that funding, which builds on the increased investment of more than £100 million that we have already made in general practice over the past two years.

We have been listening carefully to the views of GPs, and the new investment will help to ease financial pressures, support workforce retention and recruitment, build service capacity and support the day-to-day running of GP services in Grampian and across Scotland.

We remain in discussions with the sector on the provision of further support in the future, but the initial instalment demonstrates the Government's commitment to making it easier for people to see their GP and to ensuring that more NHS funding goes into primary and community care.

Jackie Dunbar: The cabinet secretary will be aware of the recent pressures that NHS Grampian has been facing, and I know that he will join me in thanking all of the NHS staff in Grampian who have been working hard to manage those pressures. Can he provide a further update on how the Scottish Government is supporting NHS Grampian to relieve its pressures and ensure that patients are receiving the care that they need in a timely fashion?

Neil Gray: I am aware of the pressures, and I echo the member's thanks to staff in NHS Grampian for their commitment, their hard work and their dedication to providing the best care possible.

There are people still waiting too long in Grampian and elsewhere, and that is not good enough. Our budget provides a record £21.7 billion for health and social care, with more than £100 million to tackle the longest waits. NHS Grampian is receiving more than £9 million to support specialties that have the longest wait times, and we have established an assurance board to agree an improvement plan.

Grampian has also welcomed a new chief executive this week, and we will ensure that the board has support to deliver the plan and address any further opportunities for improvement.

Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): Constituents are becoming concerned about the lack of oversight of privately contracted GP surgeries, such as the Alford Medical Group practice, which has a ratio of one GP to 6,000

patients—more than three times higher than the national average.

The company poorly delivering that NHS Grampian contract is also serving Ayrshire. Although health boards have visibility of who they contract GP services with, they do not have visibility of contracts that are held with other health boards. That makes it impossible to hold accurate data on GP-to-patient ratios, as GPs might work across different practices and in different health board areas. What steps will the cabinet secretary take to ensure full transparency on contracted medical practices across Scotland?

Neil Gray: Alexander Burnett understands the nature of the contractual obligations that are in place through the contract, and the obligations that are on boards to ensure that GP practices deliver on their contractual obligations.

The point that he raised about that particular practice is concerning. I am keen to be furnished with more detail from him on that, so that everything possible can be done to ensure that we have a GP to patient ratio that is commensurate with the type of service that we expect and the access to services that we expect, which has been made plain to GPs and health boards.

Youth Employment Support (Rutherglen)

7. Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it supports youth employment in the Rutherglen constituency, including through employability services. (S6O-04984)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): Employment support for young people begins in the school setting through Skills Development Scotland's careers services and its developing the young workforce programme.

Additional support for those who have left school without a positive destination is available through devolved employability services. That support is available in every local authority area in Scotland.

Clare Haughey: Routes to Work South, which is based in Cambuslang, in my constituency, is an award-winning employment champion that offers packages of tailored support and training, including to many young people, and it is celebrating 20 years of operation this year.

Does the minister share my concern that if the Department for Work and Pensions' proposed closure of Cambuslang jobcentre goes ahead, a vital link between the services is at risk in a sector where partnership working is vital?

Kate Forbes: I absolutely understand and share the member's concern about the proposed jobcentre closure. Access to support could become more difficult if it goes ahead.

I also recognise the importance of Routes to Work South's 20 years of support in Cambuslang. It is important that there is cross-sector partnership in delivering services; collaborations through community-led initiatives, local organisations and integrated services will continue to evolve and provide vital support.

Distress Brief Intervention

8. Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the distress brief intervention programme. (S6O-04985)

The Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing (Tom Arthur): Since November 2024, the distress brief intervention programme has been live in all 31 health and social care partnership areas across Scotland for those aged 16 and over.

We also have three national referral pathways to DBI, via NHS 24 and call handling centres operated by both the Scottish Ambulance Service and Police Scotland. Those provide additional options for key services to refer people for DBI support.

Emma Roddick: I would be interested to know what data has been collected on re-presentation rates for individuals who have received DBI support, and how it compares with previous re-presentation rates for people in distress.

Tom Arthur: I will be happy to write to the member to provide that specific information.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes general questions.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Innovation

1. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con):

This is Scotland's first-ever national innovation week, with a series of events including today's national innovation summit in Edinburgh. We can all agree that innovation is critical to business growth, creating jobs and a healthy economy.

When the Scottish National Party Government launched its innovation strategy two years ago, it produced a scorecard to measure performance. The scorecard was updated this morning, and I have it here. It shows that performance is declining across more than half of the Government's own key measures. Is that really good enough?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government takes forward a range of measures to encourage innovation in our economy, because economic growth is central to the Government's policy agenda, as I have explained to the Parliament on countless occasions.

The Deputy First Minister took part in the innovation summit this morning, and I have had some recent discussions on the matter. Just last week, I met representatives of the games industry, which is a sparkling example of innovation in Scotland through which collaboration between the business sector and our universities is generating substantial economic growth for Scotland. That is just one example of how the Government takes forward its innovation agenda.

Russell Findlay: Let us look at the issue in a little more detail. One of the measures on the SNP's scorecard is the number of Scottish businesses that are innovating. That is measured using well-established rules from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and it reveals a deeply worrying fact: under the SNP, Scotland is ranked behind every single region of England. In the week of Scotland's first-ever innovation summit, can John Swinney explain why Scotland is trailing behind the rest of the United Kingdom?

The First Minister: Recent data indicates that Scotland has the highest rate of start-ups in the United Kingdom apart from one part of England, which indicates the culture that we are creating in Scotland to encourage business growth and expansion. The collaboration between our universities and the gaming industry, to take the example that I cited in my first answer, is a clear example of how our university community

collaborates with the business community to generate economic growth.

The Government is always attentive to supporting, encouraging and nurturing innovation in Scotland, because that is the route to prosperity for our country. The Government is delivering on that agenda.

Russell Findlay: It is innovation week and I asked about innovation, but John Swinney starts talking about something completely unrelated. He seems to be in a state of denial. The SNP marked the scorecard itself, and that shows that it is failing.

Even when we look at one of the measures in the scorecard that the SNP claims is improving, we find that it is not much to shout about. The SNP claims that the performance of high-growth businesses is improving, but the scorecard reveals that Scotland is ranked 23rd out of 28 European countries. Under the SNP, we are behind Romania, Bulgaria and Lithuania. Within the UK, we are behind Wales and almost every English region. Is that really a record to be proud of?

The First Minister: Our assessment of high-growth companies has found that that activity is at its highest level since 2019. That indicates that we are making progress beyond pre-pandemic levels in Scotland.

Mr Findlay gave me a range of examples of other European countries. I simply make the point to him that those other European countries are all independent countries, with the full range of economic powers at their disposal. I am delighted that Mr Findlay has come to the Parliament today to make the economic argument for Scottish independence.

Russell Findlay: The independence klaxon after question 3—I had expected it after question 4.

We need innovation to grow the economy. That is how to deliver more jobs and more money for public services, but I have lost count of the number of hard-grafting Scottish businesspeople who tell me about their despair at the SNP Government's anti-business actions. They are being stifled by a torrent of regulation. The SNP has imposed more red tape on businesses in hospitality, oil and gas, house building, food and drink and more. SNP income tax rates are punishingly higher than they are elsewhere in the UK. All that means that there are fewer opportunities for aspirational Scots to get on in life. Will the First Minister accept that his Government is actively harming Scottish business innovation and putting jobs at risk?

The First Minister: No, I will not accept that doom-laden analysis of Scotland's position,

because the facts do not support Mr Findlay. Since 2007, when the SNP Government came to power, gross domestic product per person in Scotland has grown by 10.3 per cent, compared with growth of 6.1 per cent in the rest of the United Kingdom, while productivity has grown at an average rate of 1.1 per cent, compared with the UK average of 0.4 per cent, so growth in Scotland has been stronger compared with growth in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Mr Findlay was surprised that I picked up on his open support for Scottish independence in his question to me, but let me give him a practical example. One of the issues that businesses are wrestling with today is the increase in employer national insurance contributions, which is stifling growth in our country. That was not a decision of my Government; it was a decision of the hopeless United Kingdom Labour Government, which is damaging our economy.

I rest my case—if we had the powers in Scotland to take our own economic decisions, we would be better off through independence.

Accident and Emergency Departments (Waiting Times)

2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): In every part of the country, our national health service is in crisis. This week, the Royal College of Emergency Medicine warned that, last year, long waits in A and E departments caused more than 800 deaths that could have been prevented—that is more than 800 families grieving a loved one.

Dr Fiona Hunter of the Royal College of Emergency Medicine said:

"Behind this statistic are stories of heartbreak. Because these are people. Mums, dads, brothers, sisters, grandparents—their deaths shattering the lives of families and friends."

Why, year after year, is this happening under the Scottish National Party Government?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The first thing that I want to say is that, in any circumstance in which an individual loses their life while in the care of the national health service, especially if they have experienced a long wait in an accident and emergency department, I express my regret and my apology to the families of the affected individuals, because I accept that people are waiting too long in accident and emergency—whether that is for four hours, eight hours or 12 hours.

I say to Mr Sarwar that the Royal College of Emergency Medicine's contribution contains challenging information, but the Government welcomes the royal college's challenge, and we are addressing the issues that it has put to us.

It is encouraging that the latest monthly A and E figures, for July 2025, showed the lowest number of 12-hour waits for any month since September 2023. Of course, that whole period was affected by the recovery that we are having to make from the effect of the pandemic on the operation of the health service.

Anas Sarwar: To be clear, that is 818 apologies from the First Minister, because that is the number of excess deaths as a result of the Government's failure to properly operate our national health service. The sad fact is that, despite the heroic efforts of NHS staff, the SNP is failing patients across Scotland.

John Swinney will be aware of the case of Brooke Paterson, a 19-year-old footballer who broke her leg while playing in North Lanarkshire on Sunday. Despite the clear medical emergency, Brooke was left lying in pain on the pitch under jackets and coats for five hours until an ambulance arrived. The Scottish Ambulance Service blamed the five-hour delay on hospital turnaround times, which it said range from 90 minutes to three hours in the area. The Ambulance Service has apologised, but it is not the Ambulance Service that has broken the system. Is it not John Swinney who should be apologising to Brooke?

The First Minister: I apologise to Brooke Paterson. This morning, I read the story and made some investigations into the issue. I very much regret her experience. Further scrutiny will have to be done, because I have had limited time to look at what happened, but it appears to me as though an error was made in the classification of the call, which was not given the priority that it should have been given. That is not acceptable. We have to look into whether an error was made and whether steps need to be taken to remedy the situation.

The Government's efforts to resolve the challenges that sometimes affect the Ambulance Service's ability to respond, which relates to the congestion of ambulances at hospitals, require a whole-system response. We need to reduce any delays that individuals experience when leaving hospital—97 per cent of patients leave hospital without any delay to their discharge. It is also about the availability of social care and the throughput of different accident and emergency departments to ensure that the Ambulance Service is able to respond timeously.

Those issues are all at the heart of the points that were made by the Royal College of Emergency Medicine. As I said earlier, the Government is addressing those issues, which reflect the whole-system challenges that we face in the aftermath of Covid.

Anas Sarwar: That is 819 apologies in just a few minutes from the First Minister to people whom he has failed across the country.

Across Scotland, our NHS is on life support. In 2018, on the SNP's watch, the maternity facility in Stranraer was temporarily closed. Seven years on, it is now permanently closed, putting women at risk. The mothers whom I met are distraught. Claire Fleming said that her cousin had to travel from Stranraer to Dumfries to give birth. She ended up having to pull into a farm drive and have her baby there. Angela Armstrong, who is a retired general practitioner, added:

"My fear is that we are going to have a death".

Every part of our NHS is struggling on John Swinney's and the SNP's watch. What does John Swinney say to all those families who have lost loved ones due to long waits, to all those who have waited for hours in pain for an ambulance and to mothers in rural communities who cannot access the maternity care that they need because of his Government's incompetence?

The First Minister: As I have indicated since I became First Minister, I recognise that there are challenges and weaknesses in the provision of healthcare in the aftermath of the pandemic. Along with the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, I am absolutely focused on addressing those issues.

As I indicated in my previous answer, 97 per cent of discharges from Scottish hospitals happen without delay. It is expected that there will be 213,000 extra appointments and procedures, which exceeds our commitment, as promised in our programme for government, by more than 60,000; the number of operations that were performed in July was the highest in five years, with an increase of 8.9 per cent compared with July last year; and the number of hip and knee operations reached an all-time high in 2024.

Mr Sarwar raised issues in maternity care. Some of those will be assessed following clinical advice about the sustainability of services in some rural areas in Scotland. That is a difficult issue, but the Government listens carefully to clinical advice, as the Parliament would expect it to do.

There is another issue that is difficult. Our national health service depends on the flow of staff coming from other countries to support us, and our challenge in that respect is being made extraordinarily more difficult because of the immigration policies that are being pursued by the United Kingdom Government. Those policies are absurd and are making it more difficult to deliver public services. In Scotland, 26 per cent of social care staff are people who have come from other countries to this country, and the UK Labour Government is making such movement much

more difficult. I suggest that Mr Sarwar should try to get his Labour Government in London to take a different stance on immigration; we would all be better off as a consequence.

Child Poverty (Council Tax Debt)

3. Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Yesterday, the First Minister said that it is our “moral imperative” to eradicate child poverty. He is right to highlight the fact that Scotland is the only part of the United Kingdom where child poverty is decreasing. However, one in every five children here still lives in poverty—in one of the richest countries in the history of the planet. They arrive at school hungry and will sit in freezing homes this winter because their parents cannot afford their increased bills. They need the Scottish Government to do more.

Many of those children’s families are in huge amounts of debt, which often includes council tax debt. A few weeks ago, I shared with the First Minister the fact that the rules on council tax debt in Scotland are nearly four times harsher than those in England. Debts can be held and chased for up to 20 years here, as opposed to for up to six years in England. The same councils that provide free school meals to children in poverty at lunchtime are sending sheriff officers to their doors after school. Does the First Minister think that it is right to chase desperate people for debts that, often, they cannot pay, for four times as long in Scotland as would happen in England, or does he agree that it is time to change the law and wipe out those toxic, unpayable debts?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Mr Greer knows the absolute focus that I have on eradicating child poverty. When I became First Minister, I was asked what the clear mission of my Government was, and I said that it was the eradication of child poverty.

I lead a Government that is taking measures such as the abolition of the two-child limit, which we will abolish in March next year. The Labour Government has failed to abolish that policy in the United Kingdom, but we will do so here next March. The Scottish child payment is already in place. We are adopting a range of measures, in addition to what we are doing on housing, childcare, transport and a variety of other issues.

I have a lot of sympathy with Mr Greer’s point about long-standing council tax debt. I know that related provisions are being considered in the context of the Housing (Scotland) Bill; those proposals have not been subject to the amount of consultation that would normally apply for legislation. The Parliament rightly pressurises the Government to ensure that there is proper consultation—as do stakeholders, including our local authority partners.

Having said all that, I am sympathetic to Mr Greer’s point, and I am open to further dialogue on how we might pursue his ideas in that respect.

Ross Greer: The First Minister is absolutely right to list the policies that the Scottish Government is delivering here that are not available to families in the rest of the UK. The Greens were proud to work with his party to deliver a number of them. However, his mission is to eradicate child poverty, and he knows that everything that he has announced so far will not do that.

Not long ago, SallyAnn Kelly, the chief executive of Aberlour, the children’s charity, said:

“It is meaningless for ministers to prioritise child poverty and promise to help families struggling to get their heads above water while other public sector organisations are pressing them down.”

SallyAnn is right. That is why Aberlour wrote to the Government to support a Green amendment to the Housing (Scotland) Bill to bring Scotland’s time limit on council tax debts down from 20 years to five years. I hear the First Minister’s support for the principle behind that, but I point out that the Parliament is due to vote on the amendment next Tuesday. It would wipe out millions of pounds-worth of toxic, unpayable council tax debts that are trapping families in cycles of poverty and financial crisis. Will the Scottish Government support that Green proposal, wipe out that debt and give thousands of families the chance that they desperately need to escape from poverty?

The First Minister: Mr Greer quoting SallyAnn Kelly, the chief executive of Aberlour, provides me with a welcome opportunity to record, in the Parliament, my appreciation for her work. She has been a formidable champion for the children of Scotland and for Aberlour. *[Applause.]* I record my warmest thanks and my good wishes to her on her impending retirement from that role, and I am grateful to Mr Greer for providing me with the opportunity to do so.

As I said, I am very sympathetic to the point that Mr Greer puts to me, but we have to go through the detail to make sure that we can take such a course of action, which involves a great deal of dialogue with our local authority partners. Mr Greer will know about that because he and I spent quite a lot of time wrestling with issues of liaison with local authorities—if I can put it as delicately as that—while the Green Party was in Government with us. He knows what we have to go through. I say to him in all clarity that I am very sympathetic to his suggestion, but we have to ensure that we take all the steps to do that correctly. We will use our best intentions as we consider the bill and take any action as a consequence.

Older People (Poverty)

4. Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what assessment the Scottish Government has made of any implications for its work to address poverty amongst older people of recent findings by the Living Wage Foundation that a majority of people on a low-income pension in the United Kingdom are unable to cover basic living costs. (S6F-04335)

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am concerned by those findings, which underline the hardship that older people are facing during the cost of living crisis. That is precisely why we are investing in support for low-income pensioners, including an estimated £157 million for pension-age winter heating payment and pension-age disability payment, which helps with additional costs for those who are living with a disability. Unlike in the rest of the United Kingdom, eligible low-income households, including pensioners across Scotland, are also guaranteed to receive support through our winter heating payment. Unlike the UK Government's cold weather payment, it provides a guaranteed payment every year to eligible clients, rather than relying on sustained periods of sufficiently cold weather.

Elena Whitham: The findings in the report should concern all of us. Labour promised no austerity and more support for pensioners, yet, in the midst of a cost of living crisis, it tried to slash winter fuel payments, attempted to cut disability payments and blocked WASPI women—women against state pension inequality—from getting compensation. All of that was during a time of rising energy bills, food prices and inflation—pressures that are hitting struggling households the hardest.

What assurances can the First Minister provide to pensioners in Scotland that the Scottish Government is squarely in their corner and recognises the immense strain that many of them are under?

The First Minister: The assurance that I can provide to Elena Whitham and older people in our society is that the provisions that the Government has put in place are part of the package of support that we believe is necessary for vulnerable pensioners.

I point out that, sometimes, Parliament faces a call for us to clamp down on social security expenditure—I think that I have heard that language before—but nobody ever follows it up with specific suggestions about how that expenditure should be cut. So, of course, the benefits that I refer to could be under threat from the challenges that other parties put to us. However, let me be absolutely crystal clear to

Elena Whitham that this Government stands in support of those payments and the support that we put in place, and that will remain the case in the Government's provisions.

National Health Service (Waiting Times)

5. Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to reports that proposed changes to the counting method for NHS waiting lists will result in numbers falling despite no more patients being seen. (S6F-04327)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The change to official statistics is about ensuring that a patient's wait is reflected accurately. Public Health Scotland made that decision to align with the latest waiting times guidance, which was published in 2023. The Welsh Government announced a not dissimilar move in April of this year.

Previously, some long waits might have been recorded as such due to patient unavailability, multiple missed or cancelled appointments, or the refusal of two reasonable offers of appointments. Under the guidance, in such a scenario, the patient's waiting times clock may be reset or adjusted where clinically appropriate. That change will result in a small drop in waiting times statistics for those waiting for more than 52 weeks, but no change to the overall waiting list numbers.

Public Health Scotland has been clear that the change will support transparency and allow patients to identify a more accurate waiting time for their procedure.

Brian Whittle: I thank the First Minister for that answer. I have to be honest, Presiding Officer—I was ready to stand up here and quote the unofficial motto of the Scottish National Party as being, "Why solve the problem when you can move the goalposts?" However, the truth is that that would do no more to reduce waiting times than the Scottish Government's statistical tinkering will.

Meanwhile, the Royal College of Emergency Medicine is saying that more than 800 people died last year because they had to wait for more than 12 hours in accident and emergency. Despite the numbers of patients coming through the doors of A and E staying broadly the same, more people are waiting for longer to receive care.

We need to bring forward serious, substantial plans to modernise the national health service. We need policies that reduce the need, we need to seize the opportunity that tech and artificial intelligence bring, and we need to vastly improve working conditions for those who care for us.

Is the First Minister prepared to bring forward those substantial plans for us to debate? That

approach would bring constructive support from across the chamber.

The First Minister: I very much welcome Mr Whittle's engagement on these questions. Mr Whittle has developed a contribution to Parliament that has focused unreservedly on the importance of early intervention and on the measures to reduce demand in healthcare services. Those messages are very much part of the population health framework that the Government set out earlier this year, so I welcome Mr Whittle's engagement on that issue.

The NHS is being reformed by the steps that we are taking. As I recounted in my answer to Mr Sarwar, we are undertaking more procedures within the national health service. However, there is a need for us to concentrate much more on early intervention and on good health protection. As I said, those steps are inherent to the Government's policy programme.

There is also the need to ensure that the NHS is well funded. The Government has put in place a record funding settlement for the service to address the fact that we have an ageing population and consequently greater healthcare need. However, the budget needs to be supported in Parliament. I encourage Mr Whittle to use his influence in his party to secure support for the Government's budget this year—such support was absent last year. If Mr Whittle is interested in having a collaborative discussion to ensure that we have all-party support for investment in our NHS, the Government is willing to take forward those proposals.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the fact that the Scottish Government remains focused on reducing waiting times, including by promoting the preventative approach that is mentioned in the population health framework. How will the Scottish Government's targeted investment of more than £110 million this year enable patients across Scotland to access the treatment that they need more quickly?

The First Minister: We expect the funding to deliver 213,000 more appointments and procedures than in 2024-25, which will exceed our programme for government target of delivering 150,000 extra appointments and procedures. That greater capacity will help to address the issues affecting waiting times that Emma Harper has put to me.

Various investments will be made to deploy that expenditure to ensure that we can make developments in certain specialties, including investments in Gartnavel hospital in Glasgow, Inverclyde royal infirmary, Perth royal infirmary, Queen Margaret hospital in Dunfermline and Stracathro hospital in Tayside. Those sites will

deliver more than 2,500 additional orthopaedic and 9,500 cataract procedures, which will help us to erode the waiting list that we are experiencing.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): As the Scottish Government fiddles with waiting list statistics and Neil Gray rolls back on promises to end the longest waits, it bears repeating that, this week, the Royal College of Emergency Medicine warned of a continuing crisis in A and E, by highlighting an estimated 818 excess and avoidable deaths in emergency departments.

The First Minister has been in government for the past 18 years. When will he get serious and wake up to the reality that patients and hard-working staff face? When will we see the end of eight-hour and 12-hour waits in Scotland's NHS?

The First Minister: As I indicated, in the data for July 2025 we have seen the lowest level of 12-hour waits since 2023, in the aftermath of the pandemic. That is just one illustration of the Government's focus on addressing those issues.

Jackie Baillie has railed against me for the technical changes that Public Health Scotland has decided to make, independently of the Government, to ensure that the statistics are accurate. What she did not rail against was the Welsh Labour Government's doing exactly the same thing when it looked at the issue. That just tells us what we have long known—that when Jackie Baillie comes to the Parliament to posture on the health service, she is full of hypocrisy in the stance that she takes.

Dementia

6. Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what urgent action the Scottish Government is taking in light of Public Health Scotland's estimate that dementia in Scotland is set to rise by more than 50 per cent by 2044. (S6F-04336)

The First Minister (John Swinney): I recognise the evidence that the member references. Many in the chamber will personally know an individual or a family impacted by dementia. That is why I recently held a round-table discussion in Bute house to discuss how we can better unlock innovation in supporting people with advanced dementia. That was suggested to me by Sir Iain Anderson, a distinguished Scottish businessman. I have asked the Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing to take forward work on that.

We will also build on efforts that we are already undertaking to better understand what interventions can make a difference to people's dementia risk, learning from initiatives such as the Scottish Government-backed pilot of the brain health service and clinic in Aberdeen. Our 10-year

dementia strategy focuses on enhancing support in our communities, including through investing in grass-roots support, challenging the stigma that people face following a diagnosis, and improving the training and expertise of our health and social care workforce.

Foyso Choudhury: Public Health Scotland estimates that by 2044, as many as 53,800 more people could be living with dementia compared with in 2019. Alzheimer Scotland has rightly warned about the state of investment in dementia now, let alone in the future. Is that any wonder, given that, under this Government, integration joint boards face an estimated funding gap of £560 million this year?

Does the First Minister accept that it is time to wake up to the dementia time bomb that Scotland is facing and prioritise prevention, early intervention and support for people who are living with the disease?

The First Minister: Yes, I agree that those measures should be taken—they are in the population health framework and the dementia strategy and are exactly the approach that the Government is taking. There is a link between what Mr Choudhury has put to me and what Mr Whittle put to me a moment ago about the need to shift to early intervention and community support. I acknowledge the importance of the expansion of care to ensure that we deliver much more of it at home and in the community, where people want to care for their loved ones, according to their circumstances. That will be the focus of the Government's activities in this area.

We will be helped by the dialogue that has been initiated by the round-table discussion that I held in Bute house, by the considerable impetus to our thinking provided by the formulation of the dementia strategy, and by Sir Iain Anderson's intervention to support me in that activity.

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): Dementia affects not just those who are diagnosed, but the hundreds of unpaid carers across Glasgow and Scotland who provide them with vital support. What urgent steps is the Scottish Government taking to ensure that those carers get the financial, emotional and respite support that they need as dementia cases continue to rise?

The First Minister: Support is available for carers in Scotland that is not available in other parts of the United Kingdom. That is because of the investment that the Government makes in our social security system.

I welcome Annie Wells's support for the social security measures that the Government is taking, and I look forward to her supporting the Government's budget as we protect those measures in the forthcoming period. Perhaps she

can also persuade the front bench of her party to stop arguing for cutting social security, because doing that would undermine the availability of the support that she wants me to ensure. The Conservatives cannot have their cake and eat it. If we want to have support for carers, we have to be prepared to vote for it in the budget.

The Presiding Officer: We move to constituency and general supplementary questions. If all members are concise, we will be able to involve more members.

Journalism (Job Losses)

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): STV has this morning announced plans to cut 60 jobs, which is 10 per cent of its workforce, and regional news programming across Scotland. That follows the news that the *Daily Record* publisher, Reach plc, plans to cut more than 300 jobs.

Does the First Minister agree that local news journalism plays a more vital role than ever in our democracy? Will he outline what steps the Scottish Government is taking to protect journalism jobs?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I very much agree with the concern expressed by Rona Mackay, who brings her formidable experience as a journalist before she became a member of Parliament. Local journalism is absolutely important for the scrutiny of public policy at all levels in Scottish society. I was concerned to hear this morning's reports about STV and the recent news about the *Daily Record*.

This morning, the Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, Angus Robertson, has indicated to the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee that he will engage with STV, Ofcom and the trade unions to highlight our concerns. We will give whatever assistance we can in that respect. It is absolutely vital to our democracy that we have sustained media engagement, and the Government will do all that it can to support those who are affected. This will be a very worrying time for all the affected employees. They have my understanding and my support.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): I have a follow-up to the question about STV. It is good to hear the First Minister give his support on the issue, because one of the big consequences will be far less local news that is relevant to the north and the north-east. Does the First Minister agree that the proposed change is bad news for Scottish viewers, especially those who live in rural communities, and that it should be reconsidered as a matter of urgency?

The First Minister: I share Mr Lumsden's specific concern, because I understand that one of the components of the STV proposals is that the Aberdeen news programme would potentially cease broadcasting. Different issues affect different communities around the country, and I acknowledge that STV is very successful at reflecting the different issues in different parts of the country.

Mr Lumsden raises the particular issue of how different parts of the country might be affected, and I entirely agree with him on that. I will make sure that that is reflected in the representations that the cabinet secretary makes on the matter.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): This morning's news from STV will have a significant impact on Scottish media workers, the economy, our democracy and the viewing public across Scotland. It will have a particularly serious impact on the one in 10 STV staff who face redundancy.

The proposal in relation to the Aberdeen news programme requires specific approval from Ofcom. Will the Scottish Government make specific representations to Ofcom on the future of the Aberdeen news programme?

The First Minister: I assure Mr Bibby that we will, but we will also make representations on a range of other issues.

Mr Lumsden and Mr Bibby have both made an important point about the need to reflect the different issues that affect different parts of the country. Those matters must be considered by Ofcom, and they will feature in the representations that Mr Robertson makes.

Inflation (Cost of Living Crisis)

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): A new report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has forecast that the United Kingdom faces the highest level of inflation of any major economy this year. It has predicted that the annual rate of inflation will soar to 3.5 per cent by the end of the year, with higher food prices being cited as a factor.

Households across Scotland face significant pressures right now, but the Labour UK Government seems to be incapable of acting to provide any meaningful support. Does the First Minister share my concern that Labour is lost on the cost of living crisis? In the face of Westminster's economic mismanagement, what steps is his Scottish National Party Government taking to support families during the cost of living crisis?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Scottish Government has taken a number of steps, in our policy programme and in our

decisions on public sector pay, in an effort to address the legitimate issues that Mr Stewart has put to me. In our public sector pay policy, we have put forward settlements that I believe are appropriate and which take into account the inflation pressures that Mr Stewart has set out.

As part of our policy programme, a range of provisions are available in Scotland, such as free prescriptions and free eye examinations, free bus travel, free tuition for university students, and early learning and childcare support that is estimated to have a value of up to £6,000 for every eligible child. In recent weeks, the Government has abolished peak rail fares, which will save a commuter from Glasgow to Edinburgh nearly 50 per cent of their costs on a daily basis. That is concrete action that the SNP Government is delivering to support people in the cost of living crisis.

Christies of Fochabers

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

Last week, Christies of Fochabers—a nursery that grows around 20 million trees a year—went into administration. Christies has been growing trees in Moray since 1820 and is crucial to the forestry industry across Scotland. Will the First Minister agree to meet me and those who are involved with the company at the moment to see what support the Scottish Government might be able to make available to ensure that, after seven generations of the Christies operating in Moray, they can continue to do so into the future?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am very familiar with Christies, which is a long-standing business in Fochabers. Richard Lochhead, who is the local MSP, has kept me up to date with the worrying situation that is being faced there.

As Mr Ross will know, the Government has extensive tree-planting commitments as part of its climate change agenda. I was in the Moray area during the summer recess to open a very significant tree nursery that will support that activity. Despite the scale of investment in that tree facility, private sector capacity through Christies and other companies—I should not refer just to Christies—will still be needed to meet our tree-planting targets.

The issue that Mr Ross raises is significant. The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands, Mairi Gougeon, will happily engage with him on that question. The support of the Government and Highlands and Islands Enterprise in engaging with Christies, in recognition of its contribution towards the climate change activity, is merited, and I will make sure that it happens.

Alcohol-related Deaths

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):

National Records of Scotland revealed this week that 1,185 people died from alcohol-related causes last year. Of those, 48 deaths occurred in parts of Ayrshire, in my South Scotland region. Although a national decline in that figure is welcome, we cannot be complacent. The number of alcohol-related deaths remains significantly higher than it was decades ago, and those who live in our most deprived communities are four and a half times more likely to die from alcohol-specific causes than those in the least deprived areas. Will the First Minister provide an update on the targeted intervention that his Government is taking, or might take, to address that inequality?

The First Minister (John Swinney): That is an important issue. As Carol Mochan indicated, the fall in alcohol-related deaths is welcome. However, there remain a large number of deaths as a consequence of alcohol harm. The Government has made strategic interventions around minimum unit pricing, which are designed to address the issue. I am pleased to see the progress that has been made as a consequence, and we have updated that policy approach.

The Government will take other steps in relation to public health education and advising individuals of the dangers of excess alcohol consumption. We also need to work collaboratively to ensure that all parts of the public and private sectors are working together to convey those messages. That will underpin our approach to the limitation of harm through taking steps on alcohol marketing and promotion. I am keen that we engage constructively with the industry to make sure that that is the case.

Freight Vessels (Northern Isles)

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD): The First Minister will be aware that the shortlist for the two new freight vessels for the northern isles will be announced shortly. I welcome the fact that new vessels are coming—I do not know anyone who does not. However, it has been reported that the shortlist will contain two shipyards in China and two yards in Turkey. Meanwhile, there is a shipyard some 70 miles from the Parliament that is owned by the Scottish Government, funded by the Scottish taxpayer and absolutely desperate for new work. When will the Scottish Government's procurement policy give adequate weighting to the economic benefits that awarding Scottish shipyards some contracts would reap? When will it finally give that yard some contracts?

The First Minister (John Swinney): No yard in the United Kingdom submitted returns on the northern isles freight contracts. Ferguson Marine did not enter the competition, as the vessels are

too large to be accommodated at the shipyard, so there is a reason why that was the case.

I am very sympathetic to the rest of the point that Mr Greene makes. The Government is engaging on the question of enabling every consideration to be given to ensure that the Ferguson Marine yard is able to receive work in due course; I have confirmed that to Parliament before.

We are seeing developments in the delivery of new ferries that have been commissioned. The MV Isle of Islay is currently on its final acceptance trials before coming from the yard in Turkey, and we look forward with anticipation to the vessel joining the fleet in due course. That is the first of four vessels that are coming to replenish the larger vessels in the Caledonian MacBrayne fleet, along with the Glen Rosa, which is close to completion at Ferguson Marine.

Mr Greene can be assured that the Government is investing substantially in the ferry network. I was delighted also to see the MV Caledonian Isles return to Ardrossan, from where I hope that, very shortly, it can recommence sailings to Arran. I am sure that that will bring much joy to Mr Greene and to his constituents.

ScotRail (Performance)

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): New figures from the Office of Rail and Road show that Scotland has the lowest rate of train cancellations in the United Kingdom. Can the First Minister advise what assessment the Scottish Government has made of those findings? How is the Scottish National Party Scottish Government investing in our publicly owned rail services to deliver the best services for rail passengers in Scotland?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The data that Clare Haughey puts to Parliament is very significant indeed. The average across Great Britain for rail cancellations is 4.1 per cent, and the lowest cancellation level of any part of the United Kingdom is in the ScotRail network, at 2.2 per cent.

Performance has remained consistently strong, with punctuality at around 90 per cent across all three years of public ownership. I therefore say a very warm thank you to the staff of ScotRail, who work incredibly hard to ensure that we have a first-class rail service in Scotland. That service is outperforming those in the rest of the United Kingdom, with cancellation rates that are half those in the rest of the UK. That just shows what public ownership and SNP leadership can deliver.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time. There will be a short suspension to allow people to leave the chamber and the public gallery.

12:47

Meeting suspended.

12:48

On resuming—

Shipbuilding (Glasgow)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-18709, in the name of Paul Sweeney, on "Norway selects a Glasgow-built type 26 as its next generation frigate". The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite those members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak button.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes the reported £10 billion deal for the UK to supply at least five Type 26 class frigates to Norway, which will be built by the Govan and Scotstoun shipyards on the River Clyde in Glasgow; notes with optimism the potential for the largest shipbuilding export deal in Scottish history to secure and create a significant number of highly skilled jobs in the shipbuilding industry and associated advanced manufacturing supply chain; understands that Scotland's shipyards now hold an orderbook for an expected 18 frigates and 13 Type 26 vessels for the Royal Navy and Royal Norwegian Navy, and five Type 31 vessels for the Royal Navy; further understands that that is the largest surface naval shipbuilding programme in Europe, and that it is rivalled only by those in the United States and China; recognises what it sees as the vital role of this industry to Scotland's economy; notes calls for the Scottish and UK governments to work collaboratively to aim to ensure that Scotland's firms and workers are at the forefront of this project, and to maximise the economic benefit and long-term security for communities across Scotland, and further notes the calls on them to consider ways of building on this with a comprehensive national shipbuilding strategy for Scotland that will secure further naval and commercial shipbuilding contracts for the country's shipyards.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): On Tuesday, I was pleased to return to my old workplace, BAE Systems naval ships in Scotstoun, with the newly appointed Minister of State for Defence Readiness and Industry, Luke Pollard MP, to celebrate the £10 billion deal to supply at least five type 26 frigates to our Norwegian friends. The deal has brought with it a wave of optimism to the shipyards on the River Clyde, in stark contrast to when I worked there a decade ago. I think that I express the will of the whole Parliament in extending our gratitude and thanks to our Norwegian neighbours for their vote of confidence in our shipbuilders and the world's best frigate design.

Both the Scottish naval shipyards—in Govan and Scotstoun, and Rosyth—now have a formidable order book with an expected 18 frigates in the pipeline: 13 type 26 vessels for the Royal Navy and Royal Norwegian Navy, and five type 31

frigates for the Royal Navy, with export prospects for the latter including to Denmark and Sweden.

Glasgow is now at the very heart of the largest surface naval shipbuilding programme in Europe, a programme rivalled only by those in the United States and China. This is not only about building ships; it is about building a future. It is about supporting Glasgow's largest manufacturing industry, which has always been a vital engine in the west of Scotland's economy. Not only will the deal with Norway directly sustain more than 2,000 jobs at the Govan and Scotstoun shipyards, providing a stable workload for the next 15 years; it will cascade work to 103 businesses across the shipbuilding supply chain in Scotland. Together, those businesses support more than 12,000 jobs in this country.

Like many Glaswegians, I come from a family with a proud history of working in the Clyde shipyards. My dad, my uncle and my granddad all worked in the shipyards, going right back to the building of the Queen Elizabeth 2 in the 1960s. I recall the pride of launch days, sitting on my dad's shoulders, looking at those vast ships being launched into the river and hearing the clatter of the drag chains, but I remember that pride in the industry and the achievement of our families being overshadowed by the fear that the ship that my dad was building would be the last one—the precarious nature of shipbuilding in the 1990s meant that there was a sense that every ship might be the last one. When my dad eventually lost his job, I saw his purpose ripped away from him and the devastating effect that that had on my family. That is the source of my motivation to play my own part in reviving Glasgow's shipbuilding industry.

The United Kingdom Labour Government shares my ambition for reviving the industry right across Scotland. The £10 billion deal with Norway represents the largest shipbuilding export deal in our country's history. It will give people across Scotland confidence that shipbuilding has a secure future, giving young people confidence that a career on the Clyde will be a prosperous and fulfilling one, working on some of the world's most complex engineering projects. I am hopeful that the Norway deal will also signal to other countries that Scotland is leading the way with its specialist naval shipbuilding capabilities. Indeed, a United States Navy delegation, led by the US Secretary of the Navy, was on a tour of the Clyde shipyards this week. The delegation was hugely impressed with how far ahead we are in skills development and facilities investment, with that confidence in long-term orders.

We should seize this generational opportunity to reposition Scotland as a leading force in world shipbuilding again, leveraging the critical mass of

the naval shipbuilding programme to drive commercial shipbuilding growth too. It should be a springboard for growth, not just a hammock where we can get complacent. This Government's decision earlier this month to scrap its ridiculous ban on support for naval shipbuilding is a welcome first step to grasping the opportunity that the deal with Norway represents for the nation. However, there are still deep concerns in the industry that the new policy amounts to a shadow ban of defence firms. Industry tells me that greater clarity is needed from the Government on its new policy.

Although the UK Government is backing Scottish shipbuilding, the Scottish Government's outdated, laissez-faire public procurement policy is handing an unfair advantage to state-supported overseas competitors. It is frankly absurd to export Scottish skilled work and jobs to shipyards in Poland and Turkey by awarding contracts for CalMac ferries to them rather than to Scottish shipyards that can do the job. It leaves one with the impression that the Norwegian Government seems to have more confidence in Scotland's shipbuilding capabilities than this Scottish National Party Government has—that is the reality.

We need a specific shipbuilding strategy for Scotland, and at the heart of that strategy must be a change to Scottish public procurement law to include a mandatory social value weighting in tenders for shipbuilding programmes. That would ensure that Scottish ships are more likely to be built in Scotland. Take, for example, the current procurement process for the two new freight flex vessels that will serve the Aberdeen to Kirkwall/Lerwick route. Four shipyards have been invited this week to tender for the contract: two in Turkey and two in China. Why are the Scottish Government-owned Ferguson Marine, Babcock in Rosyth, or Harland & Wolff not in contention for that £200 million contract? The irony is that the only work that is keeping the lights on at Ferguson Marine today is the subcontract steel work fabrication from BAE Systems for the type 26 frigates. Even the promised capital investment to improve Ferguson's antiquated shipyard has not yet been made, despite it taking years to install critical equipment such as a panel line.

Although the UK Government's national shipbuilding strategy sets out that a minimum 10 per cent social value weighting should be applied to evaluations of all new shipbuilding competitions, the Scottish Government has no equivalent. It considers only quality and price, which means that, as we have just heard during First Minister's questions, Scottish firms often do not even bother to tender for the work, fully aware that they cannot compete with the competitive shipbuilding finance provided by state investment banks in Spain, Turkey, Poland and China.

I also note that the minister mentioned size. If Ferguson Marine leased the Inchgreen dry dock, it could easily assemble the ship for the northern isles project.

The tender for the Northern Lighthouse Board vessel replacement project was won by Gondán, a Spanish shipbuilder. Although BAE and Ferguson Marine were invited to tender for that contract, they withdrew shortly after being informed that they were among the six suppliers to be selected, and for the following reasons. BAE said that a UK-based social value consideration was not regarded as essential in responding to the tender and Ferguson's said that the Northern Lighthouse Board's stated position on economic and social impact scoring would make no distinction between impacts in the UK and other countries, weighting apprentices in foreign countries the same as those at home. That is crazy.

I asked the Scottish Government to accept the UK Government's generous offer of a legislative consent memorandum to update Scottish public procurement law and to introduce mandatory local industrial social value weighting in all public procurement competitions. There is a real opportunity for Scotland to build on that £10 billion contract with Norway. If we are to rejuvenate Scotland as a leading shipbuilding nation, we must use the Scottish National Investment Bank to remove the financial barriers that impede Scottish shipyards from competing with those in Turkey, Poland and China and must add minimum social value weighting to all tenders.

This is personal, not political, for me. One of the main reasons why I am here in this Parliament is to help Scottish shipbuilding succeed and I hope that the whole Parliament can agree with that endeavour.

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

12:56

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I thank Paul Sweeney for bringing the debate to Parliament. As someone who is known to take an interest in both maritime and Norwegian matters, I regard it as welcome news, but no surprise, that the Norwegian Government has recognised the talents of BAE Systems in Glasgow by asking it to deliver at least five type 26 frigates for the Norwegian Royal Navy.

The design of the type 26 is seen as a successor to previous anti-submarine warships in the NATO fleet. The platform design has been shared by the UK, Australia and Canada and I understand that this is the first time that that has been done in such a way since the design of the Tribal class destroyer during world war two.

I have visited the company and seen for myself the truly impressive scale of the operation and have also had the pleasure of meeting some of the many apprentices.

As I am sure members are about to say, BAE Systems builds on a venerable tradition of shipbuilding at its locations in Scotstoun, formerly Yarrow's; and in Govan, formerly Kvaerner, Govan Shipbuilders, Upper Clyde Shipbuilders and, before that, Fairfields. The latest order is the largest single defence capability investment in Norwegian history and certainly represents a vote of confidence in the company and in the wider Scottish economy.

Paul Sweeney: The member mentioned Kvaerner. It is important to recognise that the Norwegians played a critical role in rejuvenating and saving the Govan shipyard in the late 1980s and that there is a fabulous legacy in seeing that investment come full circle.

Alasdair Allan: I happily acknowledge that point and recognise the part that Norway has played in the history of the yard.

Norway and Scotland share many maritime and historic links—not least since Norway's conspicuously successful independence from Sweden in 1905—and the existence of the Sjømannskirken, which is the Norwegian seafarers' church in Aberdeen, is just one of many signs of that continuing connection with Scotland.

News of the contract was warmly welcomed by the Scottish Government and by the First Minister. I was pleased to see the UK Prime Minister correcting the record on that—albeit without apology—after twice claiming otherwise in the House of Commons.

I am encouraged by how, thanks to support for BAE Systems from both the Scottish and UK Governments and the hard work of its skilled workforce, the shipyard and the type 26 design are attracting interest from overseas. This debate is also an opportunity to remind ourselves that the decision to award the contract was ultimately made by the Norwegian Government on the basis of the yard's excellence, rather than because of political factors. It also shows that all such large military contracts operate in an international context.

The Royal Navy's tide class tankers were built in South Korea, and some parts for the Royal Navy engines are fabricated there, too. Today also serves as a reminder that Norway—a country of 5 million people in northern Europe that is a non-nuclear member of NATO—is perfectly capable of having a first-rate royal navy of its own. I will resist the strong temptation to say more than that.

The fact is that it was BAE's excellence that ultimately drew the investment and not, as I said, the political environment. As a Parliament, we should all agree on that. I wish the company and its workforce, as well as the armed forces of Norway, every success for the future.

13:00

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I congratulate Paul Sweeney on his motion and join him in celebrating this landmark moment for Scottish shipbuilding. I also personally endorse his words about the need for there to be a more level playing field for procurement rules. I advocate very strongly that we should maximise those Brexit freedoms, and that means redrawing the lines around how we procure in the public space. There has been a reluctance from government at all levels to properly embrace the opportunity to do exactly what Paul Sweeney advocated in his remarks.

The £10 billion contract for at least five type 26 frigates to be built for the Royal Norwegian Navy at Govan and Scotstoun is the largest shipbuilding export deal in Scotland's history, representing a vote of confidence not only in BAE Systems, but in the skills, resilience and ingenuity of the Scottish workforce. The order was not won by accident. Norway had other options. Designs from France, Germany and the United States were all under consideration, but it chose the British type 26 because it is world class. It is unrivalled in sonar, strike capability and NATO interoperability. The choice is a direct endorsement of Scotland's proud tradition of shipbuilding excellence.

We should acknowledge the policy framework that made the order possible. The UK's national shipbuilding strategy, which was launched by the Conservative Government in 2017, provided a focus on exports, with the 30-year pipeline giving our yards the ability to expand and compete globally. Norwegian and British vessels will now be built side by side at the Janet Harvey hall. Such work is possible thanks in large measure to the Conservative UK Governments that worked hard to ensure that BAE Systems in Govan was properly equipped to handle such orders, and the fact that Scotland now holds an order book for 18 frigates and 13 type 26 vessels is a measure of that foresight.

Since 2014, the order books in Scottish shipyards have boasted orders for 25 vessels—five offshore patrol vessels, 18 frigates and two carriers. That is more than double what was promised during the independence referendum. More than 2,000 highly skilled jobs at Govan will be directly sustained into the 2030s, and when we consider the wider supply chain of more than 100 Scottish businesses, including 54 small and

medium-sized enterprises, the total rises to around 12,000 jobs. The Clyde is now a serious contender for even more work, with the building of the Royal Navy's next generation of air defence destroyers.

However, it is not just about the Clyde. Rosyth, too, stands on the cusp of further international contracts. Type 31s have already been exported to Poland and Indonesia, with the yard poised to build frigates for Denmark and Sweden. The type 26 is now a truly global combat ship. Canada and Australia are building a further 23 vessels to the same design, and Scottish SMEs are therefore embedded in the global supply chains to support those construction projects for decades to come.

This is a story of Scottish success on the world stage—success that is built on excellence, innovation and the deep wells of skill that we have in our workforces in our country. We must give credit to those who had the foresight to invest, and we must ensure that Scotland's two Governments—the UK and Scottish Governments—work together to maximise those benefits for the future.

13:04

Davy Russell (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab): I thank my good friend and colleague Paul Sweeney for bringing this debate to Parliament. I welcome the news of the £10 billion deal to supply ships to our friend and ally Norway and to our Royal Navy, which will secure more than 2,000 well-paid jobs.

The deal secures employment for the next decade and a half, restoring Glasgow's shipyards to their place as the pride of the United Kingdom and Scotland. This is not only about economic windfall; it is about a show of confidence in the capabilities of our workforce. The Scottish Government must now do the same and show that it has confidence in Scotland's shipbuilding industry by backing that up with a comprehensive shipbuilding strategy and placing direct orders of any future ships and ferries, and, ideally, that should be backed by a dynamic, aggressive industrial policy.

We are all aware that our NATO allies will be increasing their defence spending substantially during the next decade or so, which presents a major opportunity to our defence industry. With the right industrial strategy and defence contracts, the Scottish Government can embrace that growth area by enabling a suitably funded skills and training programme to rectify any gaps that exist.

Sectors and industries throughout Scotland are all in the same position. Members are quite familiar with the lack of specialist tradesmen, technicians and engineers. A sturdy and steadfast industrial policy that could link up defence, green

energy and house building—to name but a few—and their common need for highly skilled personnel would achieve more than the lacklustre approach that is being taken by the Scottish Government at present.

Funded training and industrial placements, and secure, highly paid careers for those involved are the way forward. In addition, there could be increased protection from the globalist economy by ensuring that Scotland has the skills and political will to build its own ships and infrastructure.

The Scottish Government might be happy with Chinese steel and buses, Turkish boats and Spanish firms running our power and trunk road networks, but when it comes to our workforce, that is not going to cut it anymore.

The Scottish Government should take the UK Labour Government's lead and embrace a Canadian-style procurement strategy that not only balances cost and value for money but ensures that partners invest in the local economy, upskill their workers, outsource to Scottish third-party organisations and generally ensure that the benefit of large-scale procurement is felt at home as much as possible and for as long as possible.

I hope that every colleague here agrees with most of what I am saying. We have the utmost faith in the hard-working, inventive and industrious people of Scotland. After all, we are team Scotland. We have the resources and the players. We just need the manager—the Scottish Government—to get its act together.

13:07

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am pleased to be able to contribute to this afternoon's debate, and I thank Paul Sweeney for bringing it to the chamber.

It goes without saying that the £10 billion deal to supply five type 26 frigates from Norway should be welcomed whole-heartedly. The debate is an excellent opportunity to do so, and everyone who has spoken has welcomed it. However, it is also an opportunity to look at the success of the UK's defence industry in Scotland.

The industry has gone from strength to strength, and that needs to be celebrated. The new deal will support around 2,000 jobs at BAE Systems shipyards in Glasgow, as well as around 2,000 jobs across the maritime supply chain. More than 100 businesses will benefit directly from the agreement, nearly half of which are small or medium-sized businesses. That is a real boost to the economy and a shot in the arm.

The new deal for the Clyde is a landmark moment for the Scottish shipbuilding industry. It is

also a call to action for the Scottish and UK Governments. We now need to see them working hand in glove with industry in Scotland to ensure that that fantastic sector can capitalise on the opportunities that lie ahead. That includes supporting opportunities not only on the Clyde.

Babcock in Rosyth, which is in my region of Mid Scotland and Fife, is in the running to win a £1 billion deal to build ships for Denmark. It should be supported, too. The chief executive, David Lockwood, said that he is “confident but not complacent” about the bid. It would follow on from the previous deal to build five new type 31 warships for the Royal Navy, which was worth £1.25 billion.

Part of the investment in the Rosyth yard includes building a new assembly hall, which will allow two frigates to be parallel assembled. That is another huge investment. Such investments in state-of-the-art infrastructure will support organisations and structures in Rosyth and on the Clyde.

Paul Sweeney: The member is making a very important point about the capital investment that is required to get the shipyard infrastructure up to scratch. The investments at both Govan and Rosyth demonstrate visionary capacity growth through bringing more shipbuilding indoors—Scotland having a very rainy environment. Does the member agree that that is needed at Ferguson Marine, too, and that the commercial yards also need investment to get their facilities up to scratch?

Alexander Stewart: The member makes a valid point. If we are to create that kind of environment, we must ensure that other yards can fulfil orders and provide capacity within the system.

As I said, that investment will support thousands of jobs and will lead to more opportunities. It will cost about £250 million to build a frigate—which is about the same as what it costs the SNP to build a car ferry.

Such investment does not just happen by itself or by chance. There is a real opportunity here to work with the UK Government. In the past, the Conservative UK Government was very much involved, through its national shipbuilding strategy. I pay tribute to what it did. That strategy, with its focus on creating new technology and new jobs, needs to continue. I hope that the current Labour UK Government will continue to support Babcock and other firms to ensure that that remains the case.

The SNP Government needs to take a more positive approach when it comes to the realities of the defence sector. As we know, it takes an ideological stance, and that can make waves within the sector. We do not want to see that, and

we need to ensure that the Scottish Government is adopting a more positive approach.

The investments that have been made are putting Scotland firmly at the centre of the global defence industry, securing thousands of jobs for the future. We have arrived at this point through proactive, bold and ambitious investment by Governments that recognise the importance of the industry. The onus is now on both the Scottish and UK Governments to show the same recognition into the future. If that happens, this success will continue.

13:12

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): I congratulate Paul Sweeney on securing this important debate. The shipbuilding industry is of historic importance to many communities across Scotland, and it continues to play a significant part in our economy today.

The deal that has been secured by the UK Government with Norway to provide at least five frigates will bring jobs and continued work for Scotland’s shipbuilding industry. The deal follows on from other contracts secured from the Royal Navy by Scotland’s shipyards, including Ferguson Marine, which will be involved in fabricating components for HMS Birmingham.

There is still a clear need, however, for a comprehensive national shipbuilding strategy for Scotland, particularly when we consider the current position that Ferguson’s finds itself in as the Clyde’s last non-naval shipyard. Ferguson’s employs around 300 highly skilled workers and apprentices, and it has been a vital part of Scotland’s shipbuilding industry for more than a century now, delivering a third of the current CalMac Ferries fleet.

The yard is also vital for the local economy in Inverclyde; continued failure by the Scottish Government to deliver on the promised investment or to help the yard secure work is creating uncertainty about the yard’s future. Last year, the Scottish Government pledged to invest £14.2 million in modern equipment at Ferguson’s, yet only £600,000 has been invested so far, and procurement notices for new machinery have lapsed.

I would therefore be grateful if the minister could provide an update today on when the remaining promised investment will be delivered at Ferguson’s. The yard lost out on the CalMac order for seven small electric ferries earlier this year, not because of doubts about the quality of the yard’s bid, but because its bid was undercut on price. Concerns have been raised that social value was not considered—or was not considered sufficiently—in that decision, or indeed in other

decisions that have been made. In other parts of the UK, the UK Government has now placed a minimum 10 per cent social value weighting element into the assessments of bids for shipbuilding contracts, and I support the points that Paul Sweeney made in his speech in that regard.

When I raised that very point with the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government last week, she said that social value weighting was already included in current procurement legislation. I would be grateful for clarity from the minister on social value being included in procurement and at least matching the 10 per cent minimum that is required in other parts of the UK, because we know that that has not been the case in previous processes.

I also made the case for direct awards last week, which is lawful for essential infrastructure such as ferries. I understand that the UK Government has written to Scottish ministers about extending UK procurement legislation to Scotland. It would be helpful if the minister could outline what engagement, if any, is taking place with UK ministers on procurement legislation, the ability to make direct awards and the ability to maximise social value in any procurement policies.

Last week, I urged the cabinet secretary to make a direct award to Ferguson Marine for the replacement of MV Lord of the Isles. That call is supported by the workers, unions, Ferguson Marine itself, businesses and the local community across the west of Scotland.

Alasdair Allan: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is concluding.

Katy Clark: I apologise—I cannot take one.

I ask the Scottish Government to consider making a direct award under section 45 of the Subsidy Control Act 2022 in relation to that specific procurement exercise, and I reiterate the calls in Paul Sweeney's motion for a national shipbuilding strategy in Scotland that recognises the strategic importance of shipbuilding to this country.

13:16

The Minister for Business and Employment (Richard Lochhead): I welcome the debate and congratulate Paul Sweeney on securing it. We are discussing a very important part of the Scottish economy and an exciting new chapter for this sector; indeed, Paul Sweeney eloquently outlined the sector's deep heritage. Often, when I talk about Scotland's industrial heritage, I recall that, at the beginning of the 20th century, the Glasgow

and Clyde shipyards were producing around a third of the world's ocean-going vessels. It is exciting to be here in 2025 talking about this new chapter in the story of shipbuilding in Scotland.

We have a proud history in shipbuilding, and, of course, manufacturing capability lies at the heart of it. As a Government, we are committed to ensuring that shipbuilding, marine engineering and ship servicing on the Clyde continue to flourish, and that we continue to support our innovative marine technology companies to grow. Much of the focus in the debate has been on naval shipbuilding, which, as we have just discussed, remains a particular strength in Scotland.

The recent announcement from the Norwegian Government of a £10 billion investment in naval ships to be built on the Clyde has, of course, been welcomed by the First Minister and members across the chamber today. I add my support to Paul Sweeney's thanks to the Norwegian Government for placing that order with the Clyde. I certainly support that sentiment, because the contracts will mean significant investments in the yard, opportunities for people in the area, and a significant boost to employment in the defence sector in Scotland. It is also, as Alasdair Allan and others have said, a vote of confidence in the workforce.

Stephen Kerr: It is quite right to give thanks to the Norwegian Government for this extraordinary vote of confidence in Scotland's shipbuilding, but will the minister join me in recognising, as I said in my speech, the significant part that the national shipbuilding strategy of 2017—a strategy that came from the UK Conservative Government—played in leading to this moment? At the time, it was pretty much derided by his members of Parliament at Westminster.

Richard Lochhead: It is clear that I am surrounded by political parties that want to take credit for what is happening, so I will focus on paying tribute to the workforce at the yard. As I—and others—have said, it shows that our shipyards are competitive in what is a global industry. It is important to make that point.

We continue to work with the UK Government to ensure that Scotland benefits from the increased defence spending that is included in the planned defence growth deals. Two or three months ago here in Edinburgh, in my role as business minister, I joined the former Secretary of State for Scotland, Ian Murray, to meet business organisations. Clearly, that was prior to the announcement that we are discussing today, but one theme of our discussion was the massive potential for Scotland's supply chains from the forthcoming increase in defence expenditure and the need to ensure that our very well equipped supply chains benefit greatly from such contracts.

Paul Sweeney: The minister has made an important point about the supply chain. Around 80 per cent of the value of those ships is bought into the shipyard through the supply chain, so maximising that content is key. Will the minister outline what Scottish Enterprise, other enterprise agencies and the Scottish National Investment Bank could do to get patient finance in place to support investment and get more Scottish content into those ships?

Richard Lochhead: As I have said, a lot of discussion is going on at the moment to make sure that we can capture as much of those contracts for the Scottish supply chain as possible. That is also part of the UK discussions, because one theme that has been raised by members of the business community in Scotland is the need for clear visibility of and timelines for what is coming down the pipeline, so that they can take advantage of that in Scottish supply chains. That issue has been highlighted, and we are keen to bring it into our discussions with UK colleagues.

We have a growing supply chain that can take advantage of support for advanced manufacturing and high-tech jobs. All of that will be part of those discussions, and we will continue to do whatever we can to support commercial shipbuilding as well as attract the naval contracts that we hope will come to Scotland.

As evidence of our commitment, our action in taking Ferguson Marine into public ownership saved the last commercial shipyard on the Clyde and rescued more than 300 jobs—something that we have heard many times in the chamber. As Katy Clark also mentioned, we committed to investing up to £14.2 million over two years in Ferguson Marine, subject to due diligence and the meeting of commercial standards, and we look forward to hearing further from the shipyard about proposals for investing that money. We remain firmly committed to supporting Ferguson Marine to competitively bid for future contracts in order to secure its long-term future.

Paul Sweeney: Does the minister recognise, however, what the shipyards have been telling us, which is that, to win commercial work, they need social value weighting and patient finance? The Scottish National Investment Bank does not really offer any shipbuilding finance products that are competitive with other countries. Can we address that fundamental issue?

Richard Lochhead: Those are all parts of ongoing discussions, but the £14.2 million pledge for investment is a clear commitment. In addition, we are engaging with the UK Government on the next steps of its industrial strategy and its planned review of the national shipbuilding strategy, to emphasise Scotland's strengths in shipbuilding and marine technology. We are also engaging with

the UK Government's National Shipbuilding Office to maximise support for the Scottish commercial shipbuilding sector.

As we know, access to skilled labour is a challenge for shipbuilding companies, particularly when it comes to fabrication and welding, so we have invested up to £2 million in developing engineering skills in Glasgow under an initiative that was designed by the Clyde maritime cluster in partnership with Skills Development Scotland. Scottish Enterprise has also recently provided more than £9 million to BAE Systems to support a training and skills academy. In addition, we have been working with the Clyde maritime group on future workforce planning. A huge amount of activity is under way to address the skills pipeline so that we can take advantage of all the potential that is under discussion in the debate.

As members will be aware, we are undertaking a major reform of the skills system so that it meets Scotland's needs. Ministers continue to engage with all the relevant industries, including shipbuilding and the defence sector, that are looking forward to that reform. A recent report that the group that I mentioned commissioned from defence and marine expert Hans Pung and the RAND group, through a project managed by Skills Development Scotland, mentions a number of workforce planning measures for the regional cluster on the Clyde that align with the recommendations of the UK Government's shipbuilding skills task force.

The National Manufacturing Institute Scotland, industry partners and Innovate UK's workforce foresighting hub have developed a report that highlights the need for updated training to equip the workforce with the skills that will be required as the industry evolves and adopts new technologies. That report recommends actions for the shipbuilding industry to prepare its workforce effectively for the needs of the future. That will be a key focus for the sector and for partners.

With all the support that we can and do provide to our shipbuilding sector in Scotland, we must also be cognisant of the facts that shipbuilding is a competitive global market and that any direct award of a public contract must comply with procurement rules and be capable of withstanding legal challenge. I say gently to members that the focus of today's debate is on Norwegian investment in Scottish shipyards, which is evidence that this is a global, international and competitive industry.

Paul Sweeney: Will the minister take an intervention?

Richard Lochhead: Yes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Make it brief, as the minister will be concluding.

Paul Sweeney: Will the minister consider investigating making further use of section 45 of the Subsidy Control Act 2022? There have now been two incidents of the Russians sabotaging undersea cables around the Northern Isles. In the case of the Northern Isles ferry, there is a strong rationale for considering the national security implications and making that a direct award—or, at least, a UK-only competition. Will he look into that case?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please start to conclude, minister.

Richard Lochhead: As the First Minister indicated during First Minister's questions in relation to some of those themes, we are sympathetic to doing what we can, and we are looking at procurement issues closely. However, we have to do that within the legal constraints of public subsidy control legislation. We continue to discuss this with the UK Government and we also engage with the National Shipbuilding Office on proposed procurement exercises.

I realise that I am running out of time, but I just want to say that we are all in the same place, which is that we all want to support Scottish shipbuilding going forward. We are on the cusp of an exciting new chapter for shipbuilding in Scotland. We want to maximise the advantages of that and ensure that we secure as much economic benefit from it as we can, so that we are talking about not just the contracts that we are discussing today but the many more contracts coming to Scottish shipyards in the years ahead. I am sure that, if we can collaborate and work closely together, we can achieve that for Scotland.

13:26

Meeting suspended.

14:00

On resuming—

Business Motion

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The first item of business this afternoon is consideration of business motion S6M-19081, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on changes to the business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revision to the programme of business for Thursday 25 September 2025—

after

followed by

Financial Resolution: Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill

insert

followed by

Financial Resolution: Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill—[*Graeme Dey.*]

Motion agreed to.

Portfolio Question Time

Climate Action and Energy, and Transport

14:00

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is portfolio question time. The portfolio on this occasion is climate action and energy, and transport. There is quite a bit of demand for supplementary questions, so brevity in questions and responses would be welcome.

I note that, for question 1, Michael Matheson is not present in the chamber. I have not received an explanation for that; I expect one in due course.

Sustainable Aviation Fuel Production

2. Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what engagement it has had with stakeholders regarding the development and scaling up of sustainable aviation fuel production, in light of the need to support the infrastructure, skills, and supply chains required to make Scotland a leader in the sector. (S6O-04987)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): The Scottish Government, along with economic development agencies, regularly engages with aviation stakeholders, including on matters relating to sustainable aviation fuel. The Scottish Government's aviation statement sets out our vision for aviation and recognises the potentially significant economic and environmental benefits of using SAF.

Foyso Choudhury: Thank you for that answer, minister. Will you organise a meeting with me to see how we can work together with stakeholders?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Jim Fairlie: A number of stakeholder engagement meetings are already in place. I am not sure whether Foyso Choudhury has looked for another means of holding such a meeting. I am quite happy to have a meeting with him, but I am not entirely sure what that would lead to.

Energy Infrastructure (Community Engagement)

3. Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what engagement it has had with community groups that have raised concerns regarding the proliferation of energy infrastructure,

including pylons, battery energy storage systems and wind farms. (S6O-04988)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): It is vital that communities can have their say on proposed developments. Through public consultations, ministers invite representations from community councils on applications under the Electricity Act 1989 and carefully consider the views of community groups.

Our fourth national planning framework ensures that we assess potential cumulative impacts on communities and nature. Although they do not comment on applications, officials have engaged with MSPs and community groups—and Michael Shanks, the United Kingdom Minister for Energy, and I co-chaired a recent round-table meeting that had community group and developer representatives in attendance—to encourage best practice in community engagement and the co-ordination of development.

Rachael Hamilton: Despite what the cabinet secretary has said, communities feel that their voices are being ignored and that the Scottish National Party Government is riding roughshod over their concerns. Will the cabinet secretary put in place a moratorium, as asked for by my Scottish Conservative colleagues, on all new renewables applications until she has met all interested parties—all such parties, not just developers—and brought forward a coherent and transparent energy policy?

Gillian Martin: To meet groups that are opposed to or in favour of a development would risk breaching the ministerial code, as I have explained time and again. NPF4 already takes into consideration cumulative effect—

Rachael Hamilton: On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will take the point of order at the end of the cabinet secretary's response.

Gillian Martin: It is important to point out that regulation of electricity transmission infrastructure is reserved to the UK Government. Indeed, the planned build-out of new transmission infrastructure was set in train by the UK Government under the Conservatives. In addition, when Conservative ministers were in post, I repeatedly called for mandating community benefits and for community engagement guidelines, but my calls were ignored.

Rachael Hamilton: On a point of order, Deputy Presiding Officer. I have looked carefully at the ministerial code, which says that the minister involved in a planning decision

“should only hold such a meeting if it is possible to meet all interested parties in respect of a particular proposal or, as an absolute minimum, to offer all parties the opportunity of such a meeting”.

I cannot understand why the cabinet secretary continually gives us the wrong information regarding the ministerial code.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Hamilton. You will know that the content of ministerial responses is not a matter for the chair.

United Kingdom Energy Policy (Impact)

4. Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the impact of the UK Government’s energy policy, including licensing decisions and investment priorities, on jobs in Scotland’s offshore energy sector and on progress towards a just transition. (S6O-04989)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): Decisions on offshore oil and gas licensing, consenting and the associated fiscal regime are all currently reserved to the UK Government. The Scottish Government, along with the industry, workers and communities, is awaiting the UK Government’s responses to its recent consultations, which will have a major bearing on the future of the North Sea energy sector. In particular, we are calling for an end to the energy profits levy, which is having a negative impact on investment in clean energy, oil and gas decommissioning and the shared energy supply chain.

We continue to call on the UK Government to support a just transition by approaching its decisions on North Sea oil and gas projects on a rigorously evidence-led and case-by-case basis, with climate compatibility and energy security as key considerations.

Karen Adam: Given that up to 400 energy jobs in the north-east are at risk every fortnight, does the cabinet secretary share my concern that the UK Government’s incoherent energy strategy is destabilising Scotland’s workforce? Does she agree that Scotland has all the energy but none of the powers and that only with independence can we properly manage our offshore mix of oil, gas and renewables to protect jobs and deliver a fair transition?

Gillian Martin: I agree that only with the full powers of independence will we be able to fully deliver a just transition. In the meantime, workers must be at the heart of the transition, and the Scottish Government will support the energy workforce with the limited powers that are available to us.

More than £120 million has already been invested in the north-east through the just

transition fund and the energy transition fund. That investment has helped to create green jobs, support innovation and secure the highly skilled workforce of the future.

The energy profits levy is not only putting oil and gas jobs at risk but having an effect on decommissioning activities, which would also provide work for the energy workforce, particularly in the north-east. More concerning is the effect that the levy will have on the development of offshore wind projects, because companies with licence agreements with oil and gas companies have also been involved in ScotWind projects.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): As much as I do not like the Labour Government’s energy policy, at least it has the bottle to publish one. John Swinney’s Government has a presumption against new oil and gas projects, but wannabe First Minister Stephen Flynn seems to want the drilling to continue. Can the cabinet secretary state when the energy policy will be published, so that the devolved Government’s position will finally be clarified?

Gillian Martin: We have published many policy decisions on energy. Douglas Lumsden asked for policy decisions, and he need only go to the Government’s website to view a plethora of energy policy decisions.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The Scottish Government does have power in relation to consent for offshore renewables projects. It took quite a long time for the Berwick Bank consent process to be concluded, and there were previous concerns about the number of professionals and planners in the marine directorate. Has that shortage of personnel now been resolved, and will we have a swifter consenting process from now on?

Gillian Martin: As a result of feedback from the sector, we have doubled the capacity of the energy consents unit, and we have done so during a cessation of recruitment in the Scottish Government because of pressures on spending. We also now have apprenticeships associated with the ECU, so we hope to have a pipeline of even more qualified personnel coming into the Scottish Government. In addition, we have introduced a commitment to make decisions on consents within 11 months.

Biodiversity Strategy (Riparian Woodland Planting)

5. Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): Deputy Presiding Officer, I thank you for your permission to leave before the end of the question session, and I apologise to you and to members for having to do so.

To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the “Scottish Biodiversity Strategy to 2045”, including in relation to riparian woodland planting. (S6O-04990)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): We published our strategic framework for biodiversity in Scotland in November 2024. The framework has three elements: the long-term strategy to 2045, which sets out the ambition for halting the loss of and substantially restoring biodiversity; the first in a series of delivery plans, which contains more than 100 actions; and statutory targets for nature restoration to drive action and delivery.

Native riparian woodlands are a very important habitat in Scotland for both biodiversity and people. The woodlands support a wide variety of plants and animals, with diversity increasing as the woodland matures. They have a critical role in cooling and maintaining water quality in burns and rivers to the benefit of rare and vulnerable species such as freshwater pearl mussel and Atlantic salmon. They also provide people and communities with natural flood management by moderating the flow of water from the hills into the rivers.

Elena Whitham: A lot of good work is being done in my constituency of Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley on riparian woodland planting. I refer specifically to the work of Symington community council, in partnership with other groups, to introduce extensive areas of woodland along the upper Pow Burn in order to create natural habitats and nature networks to reduce the flood risk downstream. What support is being provided to communities to support such endeavours?

Gillian Martin: I commend Symington community council's ambition for nature restoration through planting riparian woodlands in the upper Pow Burn, as Elena Whitham has outlined. I hope to see other communities throughout Scotland follow its lead if we are to address the twin crises of biodiversity loss and climate change.

Crucially, such initiatives can also benefit communities and individuals downstream with natural flood management and improved water quality. Eligible applicants can apply to the forestry grant scheme to support riparian planting, through which an enhanced payment rate is available. Our nature restoration fund has also supported riparian planting as part of wider, landscape-scale restoration projects.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): Invasive non-native species are one of the key drivers of biodiversity loss in Scotland, including through the spread of invasive tree seed to adjoining land such as peatland. Research from

the Royal Society of Edinburgh into public subsidies for tree planting and forestry shows that large, dense stands of non-native conifers, such as Sitka spruce, are having an adverse effect on biodiversity. What consideration has the cabinet secretary given to the recommendations in the RSE report to discontinue subsidies for commercial non-native conifer planting?

Gillian Martin: With regard to woodland planting, I will have to defer to my colleagues in the rural affairs portfolio. However, the responsibility for action on invasive non-native species lies with me, and Mercedes Villalba knows that the matter has my full attention.

Night-time Public Transport Connections

6. Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what measures it is taking to improve night-time public transport connections between city centres and suburban areas, including support for late-night bus and rail services to improve affordability, safety and service reliability. (S6O-04991)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): The Scottish Government delivered all the powers in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 to enable local transport authorities, working with stakeholders, to improve local bus services over the longer term, according to their local needs.

The complexity of rail network management and maintenance does not currently allow for night-time rail operations. However, recent ScotRail timetable changes introduced later services and increased evening frequency on some suburban routes, including the East Kilbride, Lanark and north Clyde routes. Additional late services from Exhibition Centre station and for specific events have also been added where possible.

ScotRail closely collaborates with its travel safe team and with the British Transport Police, which, along with staff hired for specific events and late services, are enhancing passenger safety. The removal of ScotRail peak fares for good and the planned £2 bus fare cap pilot will further improve affordability for passengers.

Annie Wells: Although I welcome any steps that the Government is taking to improve late-night transport links, will the minister acknowledge the added pressure that is caused by the significant number of black hackney taxis in Glasgow that have been taken off the road because of low-emission zone regulations? The reduction in licensed taxis makes it even harder, particularly for women, to get home safely at night.

What additional support or urgent interventions will the Government consider to ensure that safe, affordable and reliable options are available to

everyone who is travelling after hours, especially in areas where late-night buses or trains are limited?

Jim Fairlie: Many factors lead to business decisions not to provide services. However, as I have already outlined, ScotRail and the Scottish Government have put in place a number of interventions to allow safe, affordable travel for people at all times of day and evening.

Heat Networks

7. Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its progress on the development and expansion of heat networks across Scotland, including any plans it has to accelerate deployment to meet heat network decarbonisation targets. (S6O-04992)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): The Scottish Government has supported local authorities to prepare local heat and energy efficiency strategies, which have identified opportunities for district heating schemes in every area of Scotland. Scotland's heat network fund has awarded £11.9 million since 2022. Our Government's heat network support unit is building a pipeline of investable projects, having so far supported 42 projects with funding of £2.3 million.

We are undertaking a strategic review of the role of the Scottish Government, local authorities and the private sector in deploying heat networks, and we will inform Parliament of our next steps in due course.

Sarah Boyack: In Sweden, over half of homes are now heated by district heat networks, which are expected to use energy that comes almost entirely from renewable or waste sources. In the Netherlands and Denmark, municipalities have had statutory heat planning in place for decades.

Will the cabinet secretary outline what additional investment the Scottish Government will now allocate to our councils, given the huge financial and staff pressures that they face? That would make it possible for us not only to meet the Scottish Government's targets by 2030, but to have municipally owned heat networks, which would have accountability and could reinvest profits back into their communities.

Gillian Martin: Given the number of heat networks that need to be built in Scotland, we are trying to put a strategy behind this work. Heat networks are very investable propositions. Local authorities will be able to invest in getting them off the ground, but they also need to be able to crowd in private finance.

I can point to a couple of councils in particular. Glasgow City Council is well ahead with heat network plans, and Aberdeen City Council is planning to extend existing heat networks, which are powered by waste-to-energy plants. There are plans across the whole of Scotland. Our strategy will try to bring those all together into a portfolio of investment, because we will need to crowd in private finance in order to get the scale of the development that we need, for exactly the reasons that Sarah Boyack has outlined.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): As we move towards electrification to facilitate the decarbonisation of our homes, it is vital that we ensure that clean heat is affordable and accessible. Will the cabinet secretary join me in calling on the United Kingdom Labour Government to act urgently to lower energy bills, alleviate fuel poverty and facilitate the investment and take-up of clean energy technologies?

Gillian Martin: A country such as Scotland should not have fuel poverty. The Labour Government pledged to cut bills by £300, but now those bills are, on average, more than £280 higher than at the time of the general election.

UK ministers should immediately deliver a social tariff in the form of an automatic and targeted discount on energy bills to address unaffordable bills at source. In tandem, it is critical that we see urgent action on decoupling the cost of gas from the price for electricity that consumers pay. Both those actions will make a material difference in eradicating fuel poverty.

Those critical policies are necessary to support long-term energy affordability, protect consumers from volatile global fossil fuel prices and support investment in new heat network projects.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I wonder whether the minister is familiar with the B-Neatpump project, which has been developed by the Malin Group and Star Refrigeration in Glasgow. It would be a massive industrial opportunity for Scotland if we could manufacture at scale those river-based heat pumps, which can be not only used along Scottish coastlines but exported around the world. If the cabinet secretary observes that the pricing signal is correct, will she encourage that kind of manufacturing opportunity in Scotland as best she can?

Gillian Martin: Absolutely. A number of projects are transferring heat from rivers into heat for homes. Paul Sweeney makes a very good point that, where we are building out heat networks, we should do as much as possible of the manufacturing for them in Scotland.

Textile Waste (Recycling and Repurposing)

8. Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to ensure that Scotland is ready to recycle and repurpose textile waste when the landfill ban comes into force at the end of this year. (S6O-04993)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): The Scottish Government has been supporting local authorities in their preparations for the ban on landfilling biodegradable municipal waste, including by increasing the amount of waste that they recycle through our £70 million recycling improvement fund.

We recently consulted on the approach to the collection of textile waste by local authorities. That consultation closed on 17 June this year, and the results are currently being analysed.

We have also confirmed that textile products will be a key focus of our product stewardship plan, and we will consider the textiles sector in our forthcoming circular economy strategy.

Stephanie Callaghan: I thank the cabinet secretary for that response and for recognising the innovative work by ACS Clothing in my constituency when she responded to my written question earlier this month. The company was delighted, and I trust that she will keep championing its work and the work of other companies as we all strive to close the loop on textile waste.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that Scotland has a once-in-a-generation opportunity to lead globally on textile recycling and on repurposing technologies that can help to prevent textiles from going to landfill or being incinerated or exported elsewhere? Will she give serious consideration to establishing a Scottish industry academic consortium as part of the upcoming circular economy strategy for Scotland that she mentioned, to help to accelerate the turning of textile recycling technologies into commercially viable solutions?

Gillian Martin: As Stephanie Callaghan will know, I was very pleased to visit ACS Clothing last year to see at first hand the fantastic work that it does, which is truly incredible. The company was able to tell me not only about the amount of clothing that it prevents from going to landfill, but about the work that it is doing to reduce the emissions that are generated from the cleaning of the products that it resells and the amount of water that it uses. It is working hard to reduce its own emissions.

Textile products will be a key focus of the product stewardship plan. We will also consider

textiles as part of the forthcoming circular economy strategy consultation. I can confirm that our proposals will include working closely with the sector, including trailblazing businesses such as ACS Clothing, to address barriers to circularity. Future actions to support the sustainable textile sector in Scotland will be guided by those plans and by the results of the consultation on approaches to local authority textile waste collections.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): What carbon budgeting has been carried out in relation to assessing the impact of transporting waste from Scotland to England when the landfill ban comes into force?

Gillian Martin: I am working hard with my officials and the waste sector to ensure that we keep as much of our waste as possible in Scotland to be recycled. I will not countenance the idea of waste being sent to landfill in England. We will have a landfill ban, and I am working with the sector at pace to ensure that everyone is ready for that. Local authorities have already done a great deal of work to reduce the amount of waste that goes to landfill, and I am confident that we will have a solution in place.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): On a point of order. Presiding Officer. Can you offer me guidance on how I can get an answer to my very simple question: when will the Government release its energy strategy? On 17 occasions in the past year and a half, I have asked ministers to bring forward a timeline. If the cabinet secretary has time to jet around the world selling Scotland's countryside, surely she has time to come to Parliament and release a strategy that has been three years in the making.

Presiding Officer, I believe that the cabinet secretary's failure to do so is discourteous to this place, that it falls far short of the standards that you yourself set for this place and that it shows a lack of the courtesy and respect to members and the chair that the MSP code of conduct demands. I seek your guidance on what other methods I can use to get an answer, which my constituents and business deserve.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you for providing advance notice of your point of order, Mr Lumsden. As you will be aware, the content of ministerial responses—as I suggested to your colleague Rachael Hamilton earlier—is not a matter for the chair; it is a matter for the Scottish Government. You have put your point on record.

There will be a brief pause before we move on to the next item of business, to allow front-bench teams to change over.

One Scotland, Many Voices

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a statement by Kaukab Stewart entitled “One Scotland, Many Voices: A Shared Future”. The minister will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:25

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): At a time when hostile rhetoric is creating real fear and uncertainty, it is vital that we recognise its impact on communities across the country.

When people feel excluded or marginalised, communities suffer. Tensions rise, trust erodes, and we begin to see the normalisation of resentment and division and the entrenchment of othering, in which communities are excluded and alienated. The effects are direct and lasting. They echo through families, schools, workplaces and the everyday interactions that define our shared lives. The shared bonds that hold communities together begin to fray. If targeting of minorities goes unchallenged, we undermine not only our values but Scotland’s hard-earned international reputation as a welcoming country—one that is known for understanding the desperate situation of those fleeing conflict and persecution and for responding to them with compassion and kindness.

Over the past fortnight, we have welcomed six families from Gaza who have arrived with children who are in need of urgent medical care. That is part of the First Minister’s commitment that Scotland will treat up to 20 child patients from Gaza. The Government has always taken seriously its responsibility to promote safe and connected communities, and we will continue to work together with partners and local authorities to ensure that all communities have the means to contribute, to feel safe and to have a sense of belonging in Scotland.

Looking out for one another is not just a policy goal. It is not optional or idealistic; it is part of the fabric of our lives in this country. We value diversity not just as a principle but as a strength that enriches our society and our economy. As a country, Scotland has real and pressing demographic needs. We need inward migration to support our communities, our public services and our economy. That is why we have consistently called for the creation of regular, safe and accessible visa routes that reflect Scotland’s needs and that allow people to come here not only to work but to settle and to contribute to our society.

We completely reject the disgraceful comments made earlier this week by Nigel Farage, who set out desperate and despicable plans for mass deportations, and callously and blatantly blamed migrants for the economic state of broken Britain. Farage’s plans threaten to collapse our national health service and crash our economy all over again. We do not accept that and, to be clear, he should be ashamed of such blatant demonisation. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There should be no interruptions or interventions.

Kaukab Stewart: The Scottish Government has made detailed, constructive proposals to the United Kingdom Government on safe and accessible visa routes. Unfortunately, the response so far has been disappointing. Once again, the immigration system that we are tied to does not reflect Scotland’s interests or values.

However, the UK Government’s approach has not deterred us from doing what we can within our powers. We have established Scotland’s migration service to support employers, investors and individuals to navigate the UK immigration system. Our new Scots strategy sets out a clear and integrated approach to supporting refugees and people seeking asylum—from day 1, on their arrival. It is a model of partnership that is embedded at the local level across national and local government, third sector organisations and communities. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees commended that approach when he visited Scotland earlier this year.

Last month, I experienced the excellent community development and refugee integration work that is taking place across Perth and Kinross, which brings communities together through community cafes and shared passions such as football. I also learned of the support that Perth and Kinross Council gives to young people who are seeking asylum, by helping them to understand and access the support to which they are entitled, delivering local orientation and English classes and supporting them to integrate into the local community through volunteering opportunities and sport. In October 2024, that work led to Perth and Kinross Council being awarded council of sanctuary status, as one of the many places in Scotland that are recognised for their efforts in welcoming people who seek sanctuary here.

Our shared aim is clear: to ensure that all new Scots have the opportunity to rebuild their lives here and to feel part of our nation. That approach not only supports individuals but strengthens the communities of which they become part.

The Scottish Government remains dedicated to a path that is rooted in the power of community and committed to dignity and inclusion. In tough times, we should not turn against our neighbours—we should turn towards one other. It is not acceptable to vilify and exclude communities. We must never allow fear to erode our humanity, nor Scotland's reputation as a proud home to many different communities living side by side.

My commitment to that is not just rhetorical—it is practical, visible and on-going. I am fortunate to have seen at first hand the good and collaborative efforts of communities across our country to ensure that Scotland is a place where everyone belongs and feels safe. Just recently, I was honoured to attend the pitch-to-plate multicultural meal at Hibernian Football Club—an example of how faith and sport can come together to build community. That monthly event, which is led by the Scottish Ahlul Bayt Society and the Hibernian Community Foundation, brings together new Scots, refugees and those who are facing hardship, to share a warm meal and meaningful connection.

On Tuesday morning this week, I visited the Maryhill Integration Network, which supports integration in communities, providing space for people to come together through music, art, gardening and language classes. That organisation and many others like it all do vital work in their local areas to support integration, build community support and bring people together through community projects. They engage locally, to help to share factual information and build awareness and understanding through training sessions. They also focus on new challenges that have developed in recent years, whereby misinformation that is shared online has significant impacts on individuals and communities. In my discussions with the team at Maryhill, it was clear to me that their staff and the people whom they serve are being directly impacted by the climate of fear that has been building. That is simply unacceptable, and it goes against everything that Scotland stands for.

Strong communities do not happen by accident, and we must never take them for granted. There is no room for complacency. All that work shows the impact of community-led support that brings people together across cultures, faiths and experiences. Those are spaces in which our shared values of compassion, solidarity and mutual respect thrive. Such success stories rarely make the headlines, but they are the stories that shape a better future.

Building and nurturing cohesion requires investment in services, in support and—most of all—in people. We will continue to support and

fund organisations that are embedded in communities across Scotland—organisations that know their people, understand their challenges and work every day, throughout the length and breadth of Scotland, to respond, adapt and engage in ways that bring people together and challenge exclusion.

We recognise, too, that challenges remain. We are committed to addressing the shared difficulties that many people feel, and to fostering a sense of collective belonging and purpose. In line with the themes that were discussed at the First Minister's gathering in April, we have been actively listening to and engaging with communities. As a result, we are working closely with partners to refocus our efforts towards building meaningful links among communities, broadening our approach to cohesion and ensuring that it reflects the diverse realities and strengths of Scotland today.

That is why, today, I am pleased to announce further funding of £300,000 this year, in addition to the £7.9 million for 2025-26 that my portfolio already provides, to support organisations that work across Scotland to support community cohesion. That additional funding is intended to support organisations, activities and initiatives that bring local communities together to address shared issues and counter division.

My intention is to support work that builds connections across different communities and fosters greater understanding, meaningful dialogue and intercultural activities, in order to enhance mutual respect and understanding at a local level. The aim is to strengthen our social fabric and contribute to common goals such as promoting collective wellbeing, bridging divides and countering misinformation.

Focusing on what unites us, this funding seeks to benefit all communities and to help to heal divisions through inclusive, collaborative action. We cannot, and will not, allow division and hostility to define us. I am determined to work with our partners to build on and support the excellent work of local community organisations and projects that bring people together to build the strong, resilient and connected communities across Scotland that we all want to see.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on the issues raised in her statement. I plan to allow around 20 minutes for that, after which we will need to move on to the next item of business. I would be grateful if members who wish to ask a question and who have not already done so would press their request-to-speak buttons.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank the minister for prior sight of her statement. In it, she indicates that the Scottish

Government has always taken seriously its responsibility to promote safe and connected communities, and that it will continue to support and fund organisations that are embedded in communities across Scotland and engage in ways that bring people together. Although the announcement of additional funding is welcome, local authorities are facing financial constraints as they deal with the influx of individuals.

What measures will the Scottish Government put in place to support local authorities; what discussion has it had with the UK Government about dealing with the number of refugees and asylum seekers; and what is its long-term approach to dealing with the number of refugees and asylum seekers, given the possible impact on local services?

Kaukab Stewart: I think the member for his questions—I will do my best to pick up on as many of them as I can.

I reinforce the point that this Government will talk about neighbours and human beings and take a human rights-embedded approach. Therefore, our focus is not on numbers; it is on making sure that we fulfil the needs of Scotland. We understand the pressures that are faced as a result of a failed immigration system that is being perpetuated by decisions that are made in the UK. The UK Government has enhanced and sped up the processing of applications, but it has not provided adequate funding to enable the move-on period.

We have had negotiations with the UK Government. As I said in my statement, the response has been disappointing.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I welcome the minister's comments on the need to promote strong and resilient communities. I, too, reject the hostile rhetoric of Nigel Farage and Reform UK, who only offer division and hatred, rather than bringing people together.

The first issue for the Government is promoting inclusion. In 2002, Scottish Labour launched the one Scotland, many cultures campaign, a public-awareness campaign celebrating the diversity of Scotland and Scots, which ran in cinemas, on television, at bus stops and in schools, right the way across the country. It challenged perceptions and promoted understanding between cultures. Will the minister repeat a population-wide awareness campaign?

The second issue is dealing with the problems that Scots feel disappointed with every day: the lack of housing, waiting lists in the national health service and declining town centres—all things that are the responsibility of the Scottish Government. What will the minister and her colleagues do to fix

public services, rather than have more people attracted to the politics of division?

Kaukab Stewart: I acknowledge that campaign, which people continue to talk to me about. Through my portfolio, I have the pleasure of meeting many faith and belief groups, older people's organisations and disability networks, and they all express to me the point that in every aspect of our society people are feeling the rise in negative rhetoric. I am listening carefully to those groups. Although they, rightly, challenge the Scottish Government to show visible leadership and give a strong, clear and consistent message on cohesion and protecting our communities, my challenge to everybody is to fulfil their responsibilities and their leadership roles—in their organisations, on the streets with their neighbours and in their communities—and make sure that we treat people with compassion and kindness. That is how we can counteract division.

The funding will support conversations about the difficulties that people are facing because of rising food bills. We must ensure that we deal with misinformation and realise that the challenges faced by different parts of our community are actually challenges that we all face and that we have more in common than what separates us.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I welcome the announcement of Scottish Government funding for organisations working on community cohesion because we know the importance of that work in promoting inclusion. Will the minister expand on the type of work that the funding will support in order to build integrated communities in Scotland?

Kaukab Stewart: We want to support organisations that bring local communities together to tackle exclusion and division. The additional funding stream will support grass-roots organisations working across shared interest areas such as sport, health, wellbeing and cultural activities, bringing communities together to build trust and connections through meaningful dialogue and engagement. We want to support activities that unite and that deliver outcomes that can benefit everyone, regardless of their background.

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): Communities in Aberdeenshire are tolerant, respectful, welcoming and understanding, but they face a situation that was supposed to be temporary. Aberdeenshire Council is at a disadvantage because it is the fourth-lowest-funded council in Scotland and is now making swingeing cuts to its creaking services, which are already at capacity. How much of the £7.9 million, and of the additional £300,000, will go to Aberdeenshire Council?

Kaukab Stewart: Tess White raises the important pressures faced by councils. However, and as I think I said in answer to a previous question, she will be fully aware that immigration is a wholly reserved area. Local councils do not fund hotel provision, which is meant to be temporary. We have repeatedly called on the UK Government to provide funding directly to local authorities, which we believe are best placed to provide all the services required to ensure that we have full integration.

We have seen examples of that. We had the Afghan relocation scheme, and one for Syrians. We have stuff that works and I urge the UK Government to give serious consideration to the examples that we already have of good practice that supports local authorities.

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I welcome the new Scots integration strategy launched by the Scottish Government last year. Will the minister update Parliament on the implementation of that strategy and on how it is working with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Scottish Refugee Council to ensure that the lived experience of refugees and people seeking asylum is central to its delivery?

Kaukab Stewart: As I said in my opening remarks, the Scottish Government completely rejects the language and proposals of Nigel Farage, who has threatened mass deportation for people who have rightfully come to the UK and have established their lives, work and families here as part of our communities.

I suppose that new Scots integration—I am sorry, Presiding Officer, but I have lost the thread of Marie McNair's question, although I am doing my best to answer the substance of it. Is it okay if she repeats the question for me?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that we cannot go backwards, minister.

Jackie Baillie: It was about new Scots integration.

Kaukab Stewart: Thank you.

As I said, the new Scots integration plan has been widely acclaimed and acknowledged as an example of good practice. It is shared equally—we worked with third sector stakeholders and with COSLA—and is multiportfolio, covering areas such as health, transport and education. We believe that it is an excellent example that the UK Government could learn from.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I associate myself with the sentiments in the minister's statement, and in particular her commendation of the Maryhill Integration Network, which does excellent work in Glasgow—I think that its annual general meeting will be held this afternoon. It also

provides the secretariat to the cross-party group on migration, which has been a fantastic addition to the Parliament in recent years.

Does the minister agree that this is fundamentally a question of housing supply, that we cannot allow a housing crisis to translate into an issue of social cohesion and that we need to build out housing and expand cities such as Glasgow, which has plenty of latent capacity? Does she also recognise that we need to have measurable outcomes from the new Scots integration strategy, in particular around skills? We have heard Ukrainians and others who have settled status say that they are struggling to access skills-appropriate work. We have had dentists cycling around delivering for Uber in Glasgow—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Briefly.

Paul Sweeney: —when they could be training at pace. Can we get that sorted?

Kaukab Stewart: Paul Sweeney picks up many threads. The big difference with the Ukrainian resettlement scheme was that Ukrainians had the right to work, which we called for. There are big differences between them and asylum seekers who have no recourse to public funds. I commend the work that Paul Sweeney did in campaigning to secure a free bus travel pilot, for instance, which we are delivering on.

I understand the point that he makes about housing pressures. This Government has declared the housing emergency, and it is investing record amounts of funding not only in bringing on new bills, but in dealing with void properties. However, the bigger issue in this context is that we must not use the unhappiness that people are feeling and pit communities against one another. We must reject that division.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): Migration to Scotland provides substantial economic benefits by boosting labour supply, increasing productivity, filling skills gaps and raising tax revenue, which supports public services and a growing economy. It is also crucial for sustaining and growing the population, particularly by addressing the projected fall in the working-age population. Beyond economics, migrants enrich communities and contribute to cultural life.

Does the minister agree that it is the duty of all of us in this Parliament to ensure that debate on the subject is balanced, compassionate and fact based in order to ensure that our shared future is built on coalitions of solidarity, and does she agree that faith groups, the private sector, schools and civic organisations must stand together?

Kaukab Stewart: I absolutely agree that we all have a responsibility across this Parliament to ensure that our leadership and language are factual and respectful. Now more than ever, it is vital that we continue to stand in solidarity with all communities across Scotland against exclusion and division.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I thank the minister for her statement. I called for the statement during the recess, after we saw vile hate and outright fascism on our streets. Whipping up anti-migrant fear, whether in blocking family reunions or tearing families apart because of changes to indefinite leave to remain, is sold as the answer to poverty, inequality and an economic system that fails too many. However, it is another false solution, just like austerity and Brexit. It is pushed by politicians and the media and left unchallenged by a weak UK Government that is drifting to the right.

Can the minister be more specific about how we can ensure that asylum seekers who are being accommodated in Scotland feel welcomed and supported despite the demonisation that they face by the UK Government and too many others?

Kaukab Stewart: I am hopeful. We have worked to build cohesive communities, which have been hard fought for and hard won, and this Government will do everything that it can to protect our cohesive communities and reject any kind of negative narrative. Communities are our allies. Working in partnership with our delivery partners and communities is core to the approach that we have already taken, and it will underpin how we will use the additional money to support work among all our communities, so that they can come together and be connected. Our approach to cohesion is built on that solid foundation of equality, inclusion and human rights.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests, having been a host for Ukraine for nine months under the homes for Ukraine scheme.

I welcome the tone of the minister's statement, particularly her remarks about the fact that we have a proud tradition of offering safe harbour to people through our asylum system. However, does she recognise that there is a crisis in the asylum backlog because of processing times, which was caused in large part—and deliberately—by the last Conservative Government, and does she agree with Liberal Democrat plans to activate the Civil Contingencies Act 1998, so that we can double the number of caseworkers processing asylum claims and start up Nightingale-style processing centres in order to reduce the number of claims in only six months?

Kaukab Stewart: I thank Alex Cole-Hamilton for the question and for taking the opportunity to highlight one of the Liberal Democrat policy areas.

The UK immigration white paper set out policy intentions that aim to reduce the levels of net migration to the UK. However, our demographic evidence makes it clear that Scotland's population growth and its working-age population growth rely wholly on sustained positive net migration to Scotland continuing. The UK immigration system is focused on sectoral approaches, but we have argued for visa routes that are differentiated by geography rather than sector or work status, such as the rural visa pilot or the Scottish visa.

Although our Scottish graduate visa proposal looked to extend the duration of the visa for two or three years for graduates in Scotland, the UK Government opted to reduce it. In a similar vein, we argued for the move-on period to be 56 days as a matter of permanency, but the UK Government has gone for 28 days. Any measures that get people through a system that fits the needs of Scotland sound good.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): The labour force survey by the Office for National Statistics indicates that there are 63,000 unfilled vacancies in Scotland, particularly in the health and social care and hospitality sectors. The unemployment rate in Scotland is lower than the UK's, and that is coupled with an ageing population. So, what steps is the Scottish Government taking to welcome people from other countries who decide to make Scotland their home? How would a separate Scottish immigration system address those issues and support our economy and our population's health and wellbeing?

Kaukab Stewart: Population figures consistently show that Scotland's population and its working-age population are growing only because of positive net migration. The move to end international recruitment of care workers will be devastating for the care sectors in Scotland and the UK.

Scotland needs talented and committed people from across the world to be able to work across all sectors of the community without excessive barriers, but the UK Government's white paper proposed changes to the immigration system that will only make it harder. Migration policies should support mobility, collaboration and innovation and must suitably reflect the skills requirements of all of the UK.

We require a tailored approach to migration to meet our distinct challenges. I call again on the UK Government to work with us to deliver that.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): When the Scottish Conservatives led a debate on

hotels and housing asylum seekers, I said that discussions about illegal immigration—no matter how difficult—are important.

I also raised the horrific attack on a 15-year-old girl in Falkirk, in my region, who was raped by an asylum seeker who entered the UK illegally. Distrust in politicians, locally and nationally, is rising because they are choosing not to listen to the valid concerns of communities.

Today's debate does not address questions about the pressures on public services that are fuelling division in our communities. Minister, what is your response to my constituents who are concerned about what happened in their community, and what additional protections—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair. Minister.

Kaukab Stewart: As I have stated, we, in the chamber, all have a responsibility to use our leadership and our language very carefully and respectfully. Meghan Gallacher has raised that incident before, and I responded to it. I accept that it is an appalling situation.

At this point, I would like to share the stories of young Pakistani girls who are getting attacked and racially abused on their way to school, and of old-age pensioners who are now too frightened to go out in various communities. We need to be very careful not to pit communities against themselves but to use our platforms to bring people together.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): As the minister has said, in recent months we have witnessed a deeply concerning rise in levels of divisive anti-migration rhetoric across the UK, largely driven by misinformation. The spread of that rhetoric is isolating, and it stigmatises vulnerable people who have come here in search of safety. What assurances can the minister provide that Scotland continues to be a welcoming nation for asylum seekers, and can she outline how the Scottish Government is working to counter that dreadful misinformation?

Kaukab Stewart: We are working with our partners, including the Scottish Refugee Council, local authorities and third sector partners, to challenge what is an increasingly stigmatising narrative and to find ways for communities to come together in respectful dialogue and shared understanding. We are also working with the Home Office to tackle the sources of misinformation and disinformation that perpetuate the harmful narratives.

I take this opportunity to make a point about the human condition. While none of us is perfect, unfortunately, and some people go into criminality, we must not divide or target people or blame entire communities for the actions of a few.

Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-19027, in the name of Ben Macpherson, on the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.

14:57

The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Ben Macpherson): I am pleased to open today's debate on the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill as my first contribution to parliamentary business in my new role as Minister for Higher and Further Education. I thank colleagues for their kind welcomes as I move into the brief. I pay tribute to my predecessor Graeme Dey for his extensive work in the post, including on the bill.

I also thank the Education, Children and Young People Committee for its stage 1 report, and all the individuals and organisations who contributed evidence. Their input has been invaluable.

In that constructive spirit, I emphasise that I am highly committed to undertaking my responsibilities as minister with a very constructive approach, across the Parliament and across the country. In recent days I have been pleased to meet a number of MSP colleagues and some key stakeholders to discuss the bill, including those representing Skills Development Scotland and, from the business community, representatives of the Scottish Chambers of Commerce.

It is evident to me, in picking up the task on the bill, that there is strong agreement that we need to make changes in the skills landscape, including structurally. That message came through loud and clear in the evidence that the committee heard, with 80 per cent of people who responded to the bill consultation choosing reform over business as usual. Indeed, the committee's report makes it clear that the way that we currently run and deliver apprenticeships needs to change if we are to meet the needs of our dynamic economy, secure investment, achieve net zero, enable our learners to fulfil their potential and make the changes that are required as we commence the second quarter of the 21st century.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I welcome Ben Macpherson to his new role. When he met Dr Liz Cameron from the Scottish Chambers of Commerce, did she express her strong opposition to the bill in the way that she

expressed it to me? What did the minister say to her in response, and did he convince her?

Ben Macpherson: My engagement with the Chambers of Commerce and with Dr Liz Cameron has been extensive over my years as an MSP, and I respect her and the organisation very much. It was great to meet her at such an early juncture. I am keen to listen to the business community's thoughts, reflections and ideas, not just on the bill but on the skills landscape. I note that the Federation of Small Businesses has come out in support of the bill, so there are different approaches to the legislation among the business community. However, it is clear across the business community that we need to make changes, and I want to work collaboratively with it in the weeks and months ahead. I will meet Liz Cameron again shortly.

As I say, the understanding of why we need to change is largely agreed. The considerations about how to do so is where there are differing opinions. I respect those differing opinions, and I have appreciated listening to the reflections on the issue in recent days. I also look forward to hearing from MSP colleagues today.

I want to make it clear at the beginning, as I take up my tenure in this role, that I will not wait to pass and implement the bill before seeking to take initiatives to drive forward the skills agenda, because we do not have the time or the luxury of standing still. For example, I recognise the strong demand for the expansion of graduate apprenticeships, and the need to make the development process faster and simpler. The Government will therefore work at pace to implement changes to how frameworks are developed, from assessing demand to shaping content. That work will start imminently, in close collaboration with universities and employers. The bill will ensure that the streamlined process is effectively overseen by the SFC, which will be tasked with leading it. That is a good example of how and why structural changes must be considered as part of the reform of the skills agenda.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Does the minister accept that Universities Scotland and others have said that those changes could happen now, and that there is money associated with the bill that could be better used to deliver those improvements, support universities to deliver those graduate apprenticeships and deliver opportunities for the young people who access them?

Ben Macpherson: I was pleased to speak with Universities Scotland yesterday, and I was pleased to see the support for the bill that it issued in advance of today's debate.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Will the member give way?

Ben Macpherson: I need to make some progress, but thank you.

At its core, the bill intends to make impactful changes to ensure that funding goes directly to where it matters most, supporting the skills, services and innovation that our economy needs to thrive. The bill is, of course, founded on evidence from James Withers's review, and from Audit Scotland's 2022 report. The Withers review was informed by extensive engagement with stakeholders, and it made a compelling case for change. That case for change has directly shaped the bill.

As a Government, we have kept engagement at the heart of developing the bill and, as I say, I intend to continue that proactively. Over the summer, ministers were out and about speaking to partners about the bill and how it can be shaped by those who know the system best, including a range of trade union organisations, business organisations and others who work in the economy. We have listened to their views on how we can make the most of this opportunity, and I am grateful that two of those organisations—the Federation of Small Businesses and the Scottish Training Federation—have come out in support of the bill, alongside Universities Scotland, which I mentioned, and Colleges Scotland.

The SFC has also undertaken its own extensive engagement on the bill, and its role in the consideration of the bill is obviously key. I want to be clear that the changes that are proposed in the bill would simplify the funding landscape and everything that would flow from that. The changes would require the SFC to evolve significantly in its structure, culture and role. The bill would not simply enable a merging of responsibilities. It would be a fundamental redesign of how we fund and govern tertiary education and training in Scotland. That enhanced body would lead to a unified, integrated sector that is better aligned to the needs of learners, employers and the economy, and a key part of that will be building strong, lasting partnerships with employers.

Apprenticeships must continue to reflect the needs of business and the wider economy, with significant input from, and collaboration with, business. It is important that apprenticeships are made more accessible to young people with disabilities and those facing other barriers. The bill also proposes putting apprenticeships on a statutory footing, which I believe is significant.

I want to address concerns that have been expressed about the risk of diluting apprenticeship funding. Let me be clear: we are absolutely committed to continuing funding for all types of

apprenticeships. We have given careful thought to protecting the apprenticeship budget. Funding provided to the SFC under the bill would be used by the SFC only for that purpose. Funding allocations for further and higher education and apprenticeships are set in the Scottish budget process, but we will ensure that the funding priorities are clear.

In the evidence-taking process for the bill, we heard concerns about foundation apprenticeships. I reassure the Parliament that we greatly value the opportunities that they provide. The bill makes provision for work-based learning, which largely covers what is currently delivered through foundation apprenticeships. I am keen to work with the Parliament and stakeholders to address any genuine concerns about how those provisions will work in practice.

I appreciate that the committee raised reasonable and important concerns about costs in the financial memorandum, which I want to address directly. We have worked closely with SDS and the SFC to refine the figures and, with the latest information, I am pleased to emphasise that the upper cost estimate has reduced by around a third to around £22 million. Work is ongoing to finalise costs, but I hope that the additional financial detail in the letter from my predecessor offers reassurance. I remain committed to keeping the Parliament updated as the analysis progresses.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): Will the minister give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister should be starting to conclude his remarks.

Ben Macpherson: We want to consider what improvements can be made to the range of different models for vocational pathways so that we can build on good practice and protect a variety of approaches, while making improvements where we can. In my closing remarks, I will touch on SDS staff, trade union engagement, sector sustainability, governance and widening access.

In conclusion, the bill has the potential to be an important step towards simplifying and modernising the funding landscape for tertiary education funding in Scotland.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Douglas Ross to speak on behalf of the Education, Children and Young People Committee.

15:07

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Education, Children and Young People Committee about our scrutiny of the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill. I take the opportunity to warmly welcome Ben Macpherson to his new ministerial role, and I thank Graeme Dey for his many appearances before the committee and his input to our work.

It is quite an introduction to a new brief for the minister to have to lead a stage 1 debate during his first week. He will also be appearing before our committee next Wednesday. I assure him that he will receive the same warm welcome that we give to all his colleagues when they come to the committee. *[Laughter.]* That was not a joke—it was very sincere.

I thank everyone who provided evidence, either in person or by responding to our call for views, as well as those who gave evidence to the Economy and Fair Work Committee on skills delivery, which informed our report. Thanks, too, go to my committee colleagues for their work on the bill so far and to our team of clerks and researchers, as well as to members of the Finance and Public Administration Committee and of the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee for their work.

As the minister has outlined, the Scottish Government's main objectives for the bill are to consolidate funding for the provision of apprenticeships and national training programmes; improve the operation and governance of the Scottish Funding Council; and designate private providers for student support.

On the consolidation of funding, the Education, Children and Young People Committee could see the benefit in streamlining funding to remove duplication and reduce bureaucracy. However, we repeatedly heard concerns about a potential reduction in the number of apprenticeships at a time when demand for many apprenticeships outstrips supply. Several contributors also pointed to a lack of growth in the SFC-administered graduate apprenticeship scheme in recent years. In response, we heard from the then minister, Graeme Dey, that apprenticeship funding will continue to be prioritised in the future, which the current minister has reiterated today. However, the committee urged the Scottish Government to provide more detail on that to the sector, in order to provide the reassurance that is evidently needed.

The minister stressed that the current system needs to be improved in terms of the agility of modern apprenticeships, the graduate apprenticeship model and the consistency of the

vocational education offer across the country. In his response to our report, Graeme Dey stated that the bill will enable

“an increase in the range, quality and quantity of apprenticeships and work-based learning”.

He said that it is the Scottish Government's intention to expand the graduate apprenticeship offer to

“cover a wider range of sectors and occupations”.

It is welcome that that work will progress immediately, and the committee looks forward to being kept informed of that progress. However, it would be helpful to hear more today from the new minister about modern apprenticeships, including the plans to develop a new delivery model and how that will be used to expand their availability.

The committee heard concerns that the Scottish Funding Council does not have expertise in modern apprenticeships or working relationships with employers and industry. In our report, we emphasised our belief that

“the voice of employers in Scotland's skills system”

must be

“at least maintained if not strengthened by this Bill”.

It will be critical for the Scottish Funding Council to have the necessary skills and knowledge to cover not only its current responsibilities, which we all acknowledge are extensive, vast and under significant pressure, but those that will be added as a result of the SFC's new functions should the bill progress.

We called for employers to be represented on the council and for there to be employer involvement in the SFC's apprenticeship committee, which the bill will establish. We therefore welcome Graeme Dey's determination to ensure that the employer voice is enhanced by the bill. In his response to our report, he stated:

“The SFC is developing proposals for the potential role, remit and membership of the apprenticeship committee”.

It is disappointing that, ahead of today's debate, we did not have more information about how the apprenticeship committee will work, but I know that there is a commitment to provide that detail ahead of stage 2, which the committee and, I am sure, all MSPs will appreciate.

One of the most profound concerns for the committee is the lack of certainty about the costs involved in the bill, particularly given how significant they could be. I note that the minister took a number of interventions, but there was only a very short section in his speech about the main issue that the committee is particularly troubled by, so I think that we would appreciate more information. There is a lack of clarity about how many staff members it is proposed to transfer from

Skills Development Scotland to the Scottish Funding Council; what the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations—TUPE—implications would be; and, critically, what pension arrangements would be put in place.

The committee believes that the Scottish Government should have and could have done more work to accurately estimate the costs in advance of the bill's introduction, and we believe that it was imperative that members had accurate costings for the bill ahead of today's debate. I know that work has been done on that. The fact that the minister has said that the costs have been reduced by a third raises serious questions about how the initial costs were calculated and presented in the financial memorandum. The committee could not get to the bottom of that during our deliberations, either with our witnesses or with the minister and his officials.

I am not sure that we, as a Parliament, should be celebrating a massive reduction in the costs, because that clearly means that there was a significant error in the original cost and in the financial memorandum that was presented alongside the bill. It is hoped that the Government will reflect on that strongly because, as we work to determine future legislation in the Parliament, it must be with the most accurate financial information that is available.

I understand that there were significant issues with discussions and collaboration between Scottish Funding Council and Skills Development Scotland officials, but it was clear to committee members very early on that there was an issue. I believe that it should also have been clear to ministers, the Scottish Government and Government officials, and that work could have started on that at a far earlier stage.

We note the information that Graeme Dey provided in his response to our report—reiterated today by the new minister—that the range of potential costs has been substantially reduced, but the costs remain significant. The Parliament needs more detail on that as soon as possible, so I hope that the minister does not think that the response that the committee has received is the end of the matter. It is welcome progress, but we need more detail.

Because of the lack of detail about the scale of the potential costs that are involved in the bill as introduced, the committee was unable to make a judgment as to the cost benefit of making the proposed changes that are outlined in the bill. As such, we as a committee took the relatively unusual step, in relation to a Government bill, of not making a recommendation to the Parliament on the general principles and of reserving our position at this point.

I am sure and certain that committee members will listen intently and with great interest to the debate as we hear how the bill may or may not progress. If it progresses, we will seek more information from the Government as we move into stages 2 and 3.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call on Miles Briggs to open on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives.

15:15

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I welcome the minister to his role, as I did on Tuesday.

I also thank Graeme Dey for his constructive work on the bill both cross party and with the Education, Children and Young People Committee, and I wish him well in his new role. I also thank the organisations that have provided useful briefings ahead of today's debate.

On Monday, I visited Leith academy. I know that the minister, as the constituency member, is a regular visitor, too. I enjoyed a tour of the school and a very constructive conversation with the headteacher, Mike Irving. I believe that the cabinet secretary is also visiting the school next week—

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): This morning.

Miles Briggs: Oh—this morning.

The work that the school is undertaking with young people in that part of the capital—especially those with attendance challenges—is exemplary, and I was really impressed with the school's focus both on delivering positive outcomes and on making sure that we work to realise our young people's potential.

That is why Scottish Conservatives want a radical new approach, with the development of a hybrid education—we want to give young people the opportunity to access college and take up an apprenticeship earlier in their learning careers. That has been missed from this bill, and I hope that we can pursue it at stage 2.

When Scottish ministers introduced the bill, we on the Conservative benches were open to the reasons and rationale behind it. It is worth reflecting on why the Scottish Government decided to legislate in this area. The independent review of the skills delivery landscape by James Withers in 2023 highlighted the need to focus on a new vision to meet the challenges of future needs. Principally, we need flexibility to be delivered across the post-school learning system in order to achieve genuine agility and to ensure that learners at all stages of life are accommodated.

Members from across the chamber will be hearing about or seeing the opportunities that

apprenticeship schemes are delivering every week—they are critical to the skills that our economy needs now and in the future. I believe that they must be protected and nurtured, and not only so that we can grow and deliver more opportunities. We must ensure that we continue to fund those that are being delivered now.

Often, the key to success in the delivery of apprenticeships has been our fantastic college sector. Indeed, in his report, James Withers advocated

“a colleges and universities first approach”,

and I agree that there are opportunities to do more with the college sector in order to deliver them.

However, the sector itself has raised some concerns. For example, for every pound that leaves the Scottish Government, only 40 to 50 per cent is received by the colleges that undertake to provide the training for apprenticeship contracts in certain key sectors of the Scottish economy. As the committee heard, there is, in between the Scottish Government and the college, a managing agent that takes significant amounts of that funding.

I welcome the opportunity to streamline, and bring more money into, the college sector, and to deliver apprenticeships, even within the existing overall education and skills budget.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Miles Briggs: Yes, very briefly.

Daniel Johnson: Although some sectors might well value the delivery of the skills system through alternative provision, specifically private provision, is there not also a risk that they will see a reduction in the flexibility in what skills funding delivers, if it is given to the SFC?

Miles Briggs: Yes, and I will come on to that. That is, as the committee highlighted, one of the main concerns.

According to Audit Scotland's report “Scotland's colleges 2024”, colleges face increasing financial challenges and a lack of clarity on their role from ministers, which hinders reform and sustainability. Funding has decreased in real terms since 2021, forcing colleges to cut costs and staff. It has been well documented that, under this Scottish Government, we have seen the loss of more than 100,000 college places.

I have met representatives from colleges across Scotland, and they expressed real concern about the limits that college credits are putting on many institutions. Indeed, the waiting lists for people to get on to courses often mirror directly the skills shortages that face our local and national economies.

Therefore, I believe that we need a review of college credits and a more agile delivery of credits for courses that are clearly needed in our economy today, net zero being one of them. Many meetings are taking place in the Highlands, for example, to discuss that very issue. Colleges Scotland states in its briefing that

“there is nothing else on the horizon which would bring significant change to the apprenticeship landscape in particular: this needs reform and colleges can support more people to gain an apprenticeship”.

During the committee’s evidence taking, it felt as though the Scottish Government did not have a vision of where it wanted apprenticeships in our country to go. I feel that the bill has not provided a route map for a genuine transformation of the delivery of apprenticeships. Fundamentally, the Government has not answered the question of what is wrong with the system; after all, we are currently delivering 25,000 apprenticeships when, last year, the demand was for between 35,000 and 40,000, according to the number registered.

The potential loss of the apprenticeship advisory board, as Douglas Ross mentioned, would have represented a backwards step, so I welcome some of the changes that the Government has outlined in that regard. However, there is nothing in the bill that focuses on the skills shortages that our national and local economies face. There is also nothing about targets that will help achieve the skills, the jobs and, ultimately, the economic growth that we hope that they will drive.

We must acknowledge the significant and important contribution of private training providers, particularly in the delivery of certification and registration services. Universities Scotland stated in its briefing that

“The current operation of the framework approach for new GAs effectively prevents universities from responding”

as well. I welcome what the minister has outlined, and I am sure that he will provide more details on graduate apprenticeships to members.

I agree with the concerns expressed by the Confederation of British Industry Scotland and the Scottish Chambers of Commerce, which were mentioned by Willie Rennie, that the bill has the potential to dismantle what already works and leaves employers in the dark in relation to the future of apprenticeships and the wider workforce system.

As Scottish Conservatives believe that the bill requires significant amendment, we will not be supporting it at decision time this evening. As drafted, it is problematic and poorly costed, and I believe that it represents a missed opportunity to take forward a radical and ambitious new approach to skills in Scotland.

That said, we believe that there is an opportunity here for the new minister, and I hope that he will genuinely work with MSPs from across the chamber to try to fix the bill. He will find an open door from Scottish Conservatives if he wants to do so, but we cannot support the bill at decision time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Pam Duncan-Glancy to open on behalf of Scottish Labour.

15:22

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): We have a proud history of skills in Scotland. Our people are among the most talented in the world, and we punch above our weight when it comes to our contribution to technology, science, healthcare and much more. That is down to the hard work of our people, our colleges, our universities, our training providers and our employers, which work their socks off day in and day out to ensure that we are a nation of innovators, pioneers and leaders. The truth is that they are doing that against the tide, because the Government has given colleges and universities—which are the real engines of skills and the anchors in their communities—a “burning platform”.

The Government has failed to connect education to careers or to match demand for apprenticeships with supply, and it has presided over huge skills gaps, while tens of thousands of young people are not in education, training or employment. Colleges are closing campuses, universities are shedding staff and courses, and employers cannot see where their apprenticeship levy funds go when it comes to Scotland. That is why it is being called a “burning platform”.

Ben Macpherson: As I outlined in my opening remarks, there is a shared understanding that, across the chamber, we need to make improvements throughout the country. Does the member agree—I also say this in response to Miles Briggs—that the current situation with funding is very complicated and that we can achieve better outcomes by bringing provision together, creating coherence and collaborating to design things properly, using industry as well as providers?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I welcome the minister’s intervention. Forgive me, but I should have started by welcoming him to his place and congratulating him again on his new role.

Of course we would agree that making the system much easier, more flexible and more responsive is crucial. However, as many people who gave evidence to the committee have told us, we do not need lengthy legislation that restructures organisations and comes with a costly

price tag of tens of millions of pounds in order to do that. That money could be better spent on the front line, and on delivering opportunity for all, now.

More than half of Scottish businesses report skills shortages. Only one in six employers in Scotland take on apprentices and many say that the apprenticeships do not feel relevant in their sector or that they are not available for their industry. Apprenticeship completion rates are not what they need to be, disabled people are not accessing them equally and the gender imbalance persists.

Meanwhile, the pipeline into degree-level work and integrated learning is far too small; there were just over 1,000 graduate apprenticeships in Scotland in 2021-22, compared with more than 43,000 degree-level apprenticeships elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

Scotland can and must do better. It is clear that the status quo is not working. Those in the sector are telling us plainly that the system is strained and that change is needed.

The bill before us does not meet the moment. It moves responsibilities between public bodies without a convincing plan to expand capacity. There is no plan for school or employer pathways to be improved. It delivers no additional training places and it will not help to deal with today's pressures in classrooms, workshops and labs.

If we get this wrong, projects slow, costs rise and opportunity narrows. If we get it right, we can unlock growth, wages and living standards across Scotland. That is the choice that is in front of us today. I will set out where Scottish Labour stands on it.

We support the ambition to make the system more responsive. We share the goal of a coherent, demand-led approach that puts learners and employers first. However, we cannot support a lengthy, costly rejig of quangos over delivery of opportunity now. The Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill is an organisational restructure that is pulling resource to the centre at a time when we should be using every pound and every ounce of focus for delivery on the ground in the regions of Scotland.

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

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Presiding Officer, do I have time to take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you a bit of time back.

Ben Macpherson: It would be helpful for me at this juncture to understand whether the parties that are opposing the bill today have a

determination to work with the proposed legislation. Does the Labour Party think that there needs to be structural change in this area, or does it believe that we do not need to legislate on it? I would be grateful for clarity on that.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: We are, of course, always happy to work with members across the chamber during the progress of any bill and to improve any piece of legislation. We will not support this bill at stage 1, as I will come to describe. However, if the bill passes, of course we will be prepared to work with others to look at ways to make it as good as it can possibly be, as we always will try to do.

Our approach to skills education starts with three simple principles. First, it should be industry led, delivered in partnership with education providers, and employers must have a genuine voice in its design and provision so that our education system matches people with the jobs of today and tomorrow. Yet, as has been mentioned, the Scottish apprenticeship advisory board, whose work has been a well-respected way of doing that, may or may not be wound down—we have no clarity on that. We also have no clarity on what its replacement could be, or a coherent plan to address key public sector skills gaps, such as those in the national health service or in education. Many of those sectors rely on colleges and universities being supported to deliver the skills that are needed in those sectors. We have to reform the system now.

Secondly, the system must be individually focused, flexible and dynamic. The bill will not make it so. Learners of all ages need flexible routes that value technical and vocational learning as much as academic pathways. That means having taster apprenticeships, to improve matching and to reduce dropout rates; teaching Scottish industry standards in the senior phase, so that pupils can see how subject choices connect to real jobs; and offering a digital skills passport, so that employers and other people can recognise skills consistently.

Thirdly, our skills system must deliver opportunity. To do that, we must expand, widen access to and speed up approvals for new apprenticeship frameworks. That will include empowering the speedy development of more apprenticeships, including at graduate level. Students want to earn and learn. Apprenticeships could be a faster route to solving our skills gaps and universities are ready to innovate with them.

All that would help now, and we could do it all now without a lengthy and costly rejig of quangos. We could be using this time to get people into jobs, which would give employers access to the skills that they need and give colleges and universities the money that could save them.

Colleagues, I do not doubt the intent behind consolidation, but Parliament has heard evidence that raises concerns about cost, capacity and risk during the transition. Unison said that the proposals are “fraught with risk”, and Unite the Union and the Public and Commercial Services Union said that they were not consulted properly. All that led the Education, Children and Young People Committee to the conclusion that it could not recommend the bill.

We need change now—urgent, practical, front-line change. The Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill does not do that. It risks pooling resource and focusing on machinery, not delivery. Scottish Labour cannot offer our support for something that will not deliver front-line, tangible change now, especially when what is at stake is whether we will widen opportunity, close skills gaps and grow Scotland’s economy. Those aims are too important to divert time, energy and action from.

15:29

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): As colleagues have done, I congratulate the minister on his appointment. Ben Macpherson and I worked together on the Education, Children and Young People Committee not too long ago, and I am looking forward to working with him in his new position. As colleagues have also done, I thank Graeme Dey. I am sure that he was looking forward to the challenge of getting the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill through the Parliament, but he has escaped that and now has the far more interesting challenge of figuring out how the Parliament can get through 29 bills in the 66 sitting days that are left before dissolution. I do not envy him in that regard.

I make it clear from the outset that the Scottish Greens will support the bill at stage 1, primarily because we are excited about the opportunities that stage 2 presents. Colleagues will appreciate that I love a stage 2 process—I enjoy testing the patience of conveners as I try to maximise the scope of a bill and the potential for it to be amended.

However, I want to repeat the reasons for the bill’s introduction. There is misalignment and—this has not been touched on yet in the debate—a dysfunctional relationship between the Scottish Funding Council and Skills Development Scotland. In part, the bill represents an attempt to address a problem of culture through the statute books. That is difficult to do—legislating on culture is not always a good idea—but we have just been through a not dissimilar process with the Education (Scotland) Bill, to address issues of

culture and relationships at the Scottish Qualifications Authority.

Daniel Johnson: I am grateful to Ross Greer for giving way so early in his contribution. He is right on the point about culture, but would he acknowledge the points that Audit Scotland made in its 2022 report about the capacity of the Scottish Funding Council and its lack of focus on industry engagement? Is that a concern for him as he looks at the bill?

Ross Greer: I am grateful for Mr Johnson’s intervention, because it leads me exactly to where I am about to go. As much as I have a lot to say about the functions and the performance of SDS and the Funding Council, Audit Scotland and James Withers made it clear in their reports that the core issue is a lack of clear leadership from the Scottish Government. If the Scottish Government was instructing those bodies to engage far more effectively with—to use Mr Johnson’s example—industry, they would do so. SDS and the SFC are not independent organisations. They are arms of the Scottish Government. They are public bodies. However, in both cases—more so in the case of Skills Development Scotland—they have operated far more independently than is appropriate if they are to be part of a system that is well aligned across the board.

I will quote from the James Withers report. In paragraph 4.17, he said:

“there must be a clear articulation of the areas that are a national priority. This goes beyond signalling ‘economic transformation’ or ‘net zero’ into a specific articulation, aligned to strategic policy intentions, of the sectors and occupations that will be critical to their delivery and their workforce needs.”

In essence, he was saying that the Scottish Government was not providing a clear direction to the public bodies involved or for the economy at large.

John Mason: Ross Greer is arguing that SDS and the SFC are two arms of Government and that there needs to be a change of culture. Is it worth spending £22-odd million simply on changing that?

Ross Greer: That is a fair question. I am not entirely convinced that it would cost as much as £22 million. For example, I think that some of the costs in relation to redundancy payments, pensions and so on have been overestimated, because they are based on pessimistic assumptions about staff not TUPE-ing over from one organisation to the other.

The bill presents other opportunities, which I will probably not now have time to address in my opening speech, but which I will cover in my closing speech. I am thinking in particular of the role of the Scottish Funding Council and how that

relates to the situation that we have seen at the University of Dundee. The bill will be our last opportunity in this session of Parliament to consider whether legislative change is required in relation to how we oversee higher and further education institutions and whether the SFC has the means to do so.

I want to return to my point about Government leadership. Two documents have been produced in this session of Parliament that represented opportunities to provide such leadership, but those opportunities were missed. The first document was "Purpose and Principles for Post-School Education, Research and Skills". I contributed to the development of that document and was excited about the opportunity that it represented, but it was a missed opportunity, because it did not provide the direction that colleges, in particular, were crying out for.

Upstream of that purpose and principles document, there was a far more fundamental issue with the national strategy for economic transformation. If the Government is to provide leadership to the bodies that provide the skills and training opportunities for the kind of economy that we need, it must make a decision on what kind of economy we need and what kind of economy we want. The national strategy for economic transformation is a document that is not strategic or transformative, because the Government has not taken the difficult decisions by saying, "Here are the sectors that we will prioritise. Our resources are finite. Here is where the greatest opportunity is. This is where the investment must be." That is the direction that is, ultimately, required.

The bill is not perfect, and I will set out the range of reasons why in my closing speech and when discussing potential amendments. However, even a perfect bill would not be enough. There is a need for a clear economic strategy from the Government and for clear ministerial leadership. The Greens will support the bill at stage 1, because there are opportunities to make significant improvements before we get to the final vote at stage 3. We have no fixed view yet on how we might vote at that stage, because my hope is that, by that point, the bill will be very different. We want to take the opportunity to add to and change the bill.

I urge colleagues to come to stage 2 with the kind of ideas and proposals that we heard in the collection of evidence at stage 1 and that we will hear in this afternoon's debate. This is an opportunity to get the level of alignment that we all agree is required in our skills development sector and that we know is required for our economy. It is also an opportunity for us to get far better value for money from what is currently being delivered.

Ultimately, we are trying to meet the needs not just of our economy but of our society at large. The bill might not be the opportunity to do that, but we should take it one further stage to identify whether it is an opportunity that we should not miss out on.

15:36

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): We have quite incredible demands for skills from a variety of sectors that are desperate for good workers. The renewables sector, the defence sector—in which there will be significant growth—the housing construction sector and a range of others are desperate for skills. We hear regular complaints from those sectors on a variety of levels: that they are short of what they asked for, that there is a lack of transparency, that their management costs are very high and that many of them pay significant contributions to the apprenticeship levy but do not feel that they get their money back. We hear lots of complaints. That was epitomised in Audit Scotland's report, which was very critical of the Government and the two agencies, the SFC and SDS. The report criticised them all for a lack of leadership, strategy and co-ordination on skills.

That is why I was attracted to the Withers report. It was a good report that set out a compelling case for the need for change. It set out the need for a single source of funding, simplification, regional and national planning on skills and the sort of careers service that the minister's predecessor was particularly passionate about. He thought that the key to all this was having a careers service through which young people get the right advice at the right stage to ensure that they go into the right job or training opportunity. After the report's publication, the minister took a very cautious approach in trying to get those agencies to work together behind the scenes. So far, so good.

However, the committee's evidence sessions on the bill were an utter disaster. On the one hand, those who were supposed to be in favour of the reform were lukewarm, pretty insipid and uncertain about what they wanted. That included the Funding Council, to which we are supposed to be transferring the responsibilities. On the other hand, we had people who were strongly against the bill. Boy, were they strongly against it—passionately so. Some of them had a spell over other people, but, nevertheless, they were passionate about it. That set me back a bit and, like John Mason, I had to ask significant questions.

There are several questions for me. First, does the SFC have the headspace to take on the responsibilities? We have seen all the fires that are going on in further and higher education—at Dundee and at Perth this week—with college funding, with reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete and with international student volatility.

Any one person or organisation would struggle to cope with all those issues at the best of times. Does the SFC have the headspace to take on this job, as well?

Secondly, does the SFC have as good a relationship with employers as SDS has? Whatever its flaws, SDS is recognised as having decent relationships with employers. Is it possible for the SFC to create those relationships in the same way and give confidence to the sector, so that people who might otherwise focus on the problems in the higher and further education world will be able to cope with the change?

John Mason: A lot of what Willie Rennie has said is exactly what I am thinking, too. Does he think that the many SDS staff who will transfer to the SFC will give the SFC the good relationships with industry that it needs?

Willie Rennie: That could well happen, but SDS staff are pretty annoyed. I have met some of them, and they are pretty upset about how they have been treated. We need to get them in the right headspace to be able to contribute and make the change. That is possible, and the reform of the SFC board might improve the situation. It is a possibility, which is why my response this afternoon is nuanced.

SDS has a greater focus on employers, and it is SDS's job to run modern apprenticeships, so there is a single focus in that regard. Do we want to remove that?

We then come to the costs, which are about £22 million to £25 million. That is a lot of money when things are tight. The figure includes costs of up to £8 million for pensions; £4 million for information technology; potentially up to £8.5 million for restructuring; and transition costs of up to about £5 million. Those costs are not insignificant.

Ross Greer: Will Willie Rennie take an intervention?

Willie Rennie: I want to make a few more points.

That is quite a lot of money, and we have to work out what we will get in return. I have challenged a number of people, including those in the SFC, to give me some tangible examples of what will improve. I get vague answers about articulation and simplification, but I want an example. What cannot be done just now, with SDS, and what will be done with the SFC? The answers are all vague, and we need more than vague if we are going to spend up to £22 million or £25 million.

As the bill progresses—the Greens will vote with the Scottish National Party, so it will pass stage 1—we need to hear a more convincing case from those who are involved about what we will get for

our money, because we are looking for a return on our investment.

Does structural change deliver the big bang that we are looking for to address all the concerns of employers that I set out at the beginning of my speech? It is over to the minister to get the system in order and ensure that he can convince members that it is all worth it.

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

15:42

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): First, as is always the case, I thank the committee clerks, the witnesses and my fellow committee members for their work in scrutinising the bill to date. Secondly, I welcome Ben Macpherson to his new role as Minister for Higher and Further Education. I am looking forward to working with him to ensure that our ambition to give everyone the best start in life extends right through to college, university or an apprenticeship. I also pay tribute to Graeme Dey for his work as the former minister and thank him for all that he did while he was in post.

I know that a few folk feel that the bill is just about rejigging how things work behind the scenes, as they can already see a steady stream of well-educated, well-skilled young Scots coming out of our education system. Some have even suggested that the bill is a little bit boring, but they are wrong.

So often in the chamber, we talk about Scotland's future and building a better country for the next generation. What we are doing today is about not just building a future for the next generation, but ensuring that they have the skills and knowledge to build their own future.

Let us take the example of the building industry—

Daniel Johnson: Will the member take an intervention?

Jackie Dunbar: I will take an intervention from Daniel Johnson.

Daniel Johnson: I am grateful to the member for giving way, but in her opening remarks, does she not demonstrate the exact problem? The skills system needs to become about more than just young people acquiring skills and entering the workforce. It needs to be about people who are already in work acquiring skills. Does she not in fact demonstrate the problem with the bill, in that it misses that point altogether?

Jackie Dunbar: The bill is about college, university and apprenticeships, and it encompasses everybody, not just young people. I

was just—*[Interruption.]* Sorry—would you like to come back in, Mr Johnson?

Daniel Johnson: At the beginning of your remarks, you were referring explicitly and exclusively to young people.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Jackie Dunbar: I am at a bit of a loss about why that intervention was needed. I will always speak up for young folk.

As I was saying, let us take the example of the building industry. Just now, the funding to train architects and town planners comes from one organisation, the Scottish Funding Council, while the folk who turn that into reality—our bricklayers, joiners, sparkies and so on—have their apprenticeships funded by a different organisation, Skills Development Scotland. It makes sense to me that those should all be funded by the same organisation.

That is what the bill seeks to do. It will ensure that Scotland's whole education and skills system works as a single, easy-to-navigate system. That is the principle of what we want to achieve. This is stage 1, which is about agreeing to principles, and I will be supporting that principle today.

Before I get any more interventions from members saying that the Education, Children and Young People Committee did not take a position on the bill and that I am the deputy convener of that committee, I will cover that point now. Let me start with the first point in the conclusion of the stage 1 report, which says:

"Apprenticeships offer valuable opportunities to learners and businesses across Scotland, and make a vital contribution to Scotland's economy. It is clear from the evidence the Committee heard, that the current approach towards administering and delivering those apprenticeships needs to be improved."

That is my starting point. It is something that was said by many of the folk that the committee spoke to when they offered their support—or their caveated support—for the bill.

One reason that our committee did not take a position on the bill relates to the cost benefit of what it proposes. What has changed? Graeme Dey, in what might have been one of his final acts as Minister for Higher and Further Education, responded to the committee's report and offered a range of assurances. For those who do not fancy reading the full 53-page letter before decision time, I will draw out a couple of the highlights.

The first is that

"the higher cost estimate has been reduced ... by around a third".

If we are basing our decision on cost benefit, cost makes a big difference.

On the benefits, I also welcome the comprehensive assurances in relation to apprenticeships. If I had time to read out that section of the response in full, I would, but I do not think that I do. It says:

"The Bill enables an increase in the range, quality and quantity of apprenticeships and work-based learning in Scotland",

and there are commitments to working with and ensuring the involvement of employers.

There are also commitments to continuity beyond 2027 in many areas in which that was asked for, which will allow employers to make decisions about apprenticeships now, as—I hope—the bill progresses. I am happy to see a recognition of the demand to expand graduate apprenticeships. I am keen to see where that goes and what doors it opens up, not only for young Scots but for all Scots.

Therefore, I have been convinced. I recognise that there are issues that still need to be addressed and question marks over exactly how some things will work. This is not the finished article but, as I said, the principles are sound and today's debate is about agreeing to the general principles of the bill.

Further detail can be given and scrutiny can, and will, happen if the bill progresses. However, that can happen, and the benefits of the bill can be realised, only if the bill passes stage 1 today. Let us make that happen. Let us move forward with a simpler funding system and make it easier for colleges, universities and training providers to focus on what they do best, which is delivering the high quality of education and training that gives the Scottish workforce such a strong reputation. Let us get the bill to its next stage.

15:48

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I, too, welcome Ben Macpherson to his new position. Although he is well liked across the chamber—as was evident the other day, when we approved his appointment as a minister—I agree with Douglas Ross: I do not envy him having to pick up this particular bill. It is not the kind of present that someone wants to find when they get a new job, put their feet under the table and open the desk. To put it mildly, the bill is a bit of a mess.

I miss being on the Education, Children and Young People Committee—I enjoyed that committee. I particularly miss Willie Rennie's contributions. He has just summarised rather well the report that the committee produced. It was kind of a "meh" sort of—

Willie Rennie: Will the member give way?

Stephen Kerr: As ever, I am happy to give way to Willie Rennie.

Willie Rennie: The committee misses the member too.

Stephen Kerr: I think that Willie Rennie is crossing a line, given that we are supposed to tell the truth in the chamber.

Setting that aside, the spirit that Willie Rennie conveyed when he gave his speech kind of covers how I feel about the bill. When we get down to it, there is a question about the bill and its associated costs that must be answered. We cannot dismiss it, given that we do not even really know how much the bill will cost. How can we possibly legislate responsibly if we do not know how much it is going to cost?

The key question is this: what will the bill improve? Evidence that was presented to the committee comes down to one thing: there seems to be a fairly unanimous opinion that the bill will not change anything. Jackie Dunbar is no longer in her seat to hear this, but if the bill does not empower learners or employers and if all that it does is move things around and re-badge a bureaucracy, I really cannot see the point of it. There is nothing in the bill that would achieve anything.

I cannot even see what the principles are. If we talk about simplification but do not actually simplify, what is the point?

Ben Macpherson: I thank Mr Kerr for giving way and apologise that I could not give way to him during my opening speech.

Does Mr Kerr appreciate that the intention behind the bill is to ensure that the SFC will have oversight provisions and will therefore be able to flex and innovate to meet employer and business needs in a way that the system does not at the moment?

Stephen Kerr: I want to use the time I have to talk about apprenticeships, because I really want to see a demand-led apprenticeship system in this country. There is a need for that—people are crying out for it—but it is not being satisfied. It is not the job of Government to determine what the economy needs; the people who do the business of the economy—those who head up organisations and businesses—should decide that.

In the time that I have left, I will look at SDS, which currently supports 40,000 apprenticeships and administers training programmes. Under the bill, responsibility for all of that would go to the Funding Council. What will be left of SDS? Why not go the whole hog and just collapse SDS? If we

want to simplify and to reduce costs, we could just do away with SDS and find another way of taking care of what is left. I have previously suggested some radical adjustments to the Scottish education landscape, and here is an opportunity, but the Government is just standing blinking in front of it. If it is going to talk about simplification or streamlining, it actually has to do that—it cannot just use those words; it has to do what the words suggest. The bill will mean that we end up with one overstretched body—and we would be justified in asking whether the proposal is suitable for the task—and another body that is completely hollowed out.

Let us look at and properly learn from what people do in other countries where they know what apprenticeships are all about. I am not alone in reaching for the examples of Germany and Switzerland, where employer associations are totally embedded in the system and actively design and update apprenticeship qualifications.

The apprenticeship levy, which is absolutely a bone of contention, has been mentioned. People in Scotland pay the levy but do not see that money coming back in the form of the investment in apprenticeships that they need for the future of their businesses and our economy. In England, employers are all over the design of apprenticeship qualifications, but the bill seems very much to leave that in the hands of ministers and the Funding Council. The bill says that employers will be consulted, but they need more than to be consulted; they need to be in the driving seat. That is what a truly demand-led system looks like.

Disappointingly for me, I have run out of time. I have a number of questions that I would like to ask and, if I may, I will close with them.

Will the Government ring fence the apprenticeship money that goes into the Funding Council pot, and will that money come back out to fund apprenticeships? What about making a commitment that every penny that is raised in Scotland through the apprenticeship levy be spent on apprenticeships and training? We can calculate the amount, so let us not hide behind the idea that we do not know how much it is.

Why has the Government rejected international best practice models? I really do not understand that. Why would it reject success stories in favour of just another version of what we already have?

What about SMEs? Where will their voice be heard? There is learning to be had from other economies about them. The vast majority of people who work in the private sector in this country work in SMEs. Where will their voice be properly heard?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr—

Stephen Kerr: There are lots of questions.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, thank you.

Stephen Kerr: I cannot see how anyone can vote for the bill today.

15:55

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I will get the niceties over first, like everyone else. I thank Graeme Dey for his work and I say to the minister, Ben Macpherson, “All the best, mate.”

My original version of the speech was quite ragey, because certain individuals who gave evidence on the bill created an inner rage in me. Willie Rennie was quite right when he suggested that those who supported the bill were very “meh” about it and that those who were against it were extremely passionate in giving their reasons for that. It was one of those individuals who almost created my “George smash!” moment with his comments.

Ross Greer is right that the bill should proceed to stage 2 to allow us to look at other ideas and see how we can take it forward. The bill was supposed to declutter, tidy up and provide a better version of our skills systems. Currently, we have too many agencies tripping over one other, with too much duplication and not enough focus on the important people—those who are being trained. I get that. I support the Government on it, and that is what the bill is about.

During the stage 1 evidence, we heard many of those who are involved in the sector trying to come up with better ways of working and ensure that we have a robust process that can deliver. We then heard from Skills Development Scotland, whose views were made plain—and painfully—regarding its role in apprenticeships. SDS has delivered many apprenticeships over the years and has done a good job up to now, but we have to move on and see what more we can do.

While the committee was taking evidence, we heard from Skills Development Scotland’s Damien Yeates. Some may say that he had a positive story to tell us and some may add that it was a story about the delivery of key Scottish Government goals on training and skills. That would have been a sensible way forward, but it was not the one that Mr Yeates took. He came here to say that the cost of moving the staff and pensions across to the Scottish Funding Council would be more like £30 million. I do not know which fag packet that was written on the back of, but it shows part of the problem with the debate on the bill. Who do we believe? Which figures do we believe in this scenario?

It is important for those who we represent and those who are on the training schemes that we have clarity about the figures, and it is also important for those who work for Skills Development Scotland. The Scottish Government’s figures in the financial memorandum are illustrative, but somebody’s figures clearly do not add up. Somebody is at it and, from what I have heard, I believe that it is Mr Yeates and SDS. Others may come to another conclusion.

This is important, because of all the people who I mentioned, including the more than 200 staff who will be transferred, who deserve straight answers and not scare stories. As someone who has gone through a TUPE process when I worked in the real world, I know that what is being said at the moment is not what people want to hear when such a process is happening. They want to hear clear facts. I blame SDS, as much as anyone else.

Miles Briggs: The amount of money that we are talking about has been at the heart of major concerns. Does George Adam believe that the Government figures should now be subject to independent financial analysis to determine whether they show the right amounts, in order to move the process forward?

George Adam: I will tell the member one thing: I believe that SDS has been part of the problem. We have an organisation not playing ball, fighting for its very survival in any way that it can and not giving the information that we need. That may be the reason why the Government is struggling to get the bottom-line figures that we all need. I ask SDS to get its head together, get into the game and make sure that we can deliver.

SDS talks up the risks. The bill is about taking apprenticeships out of SDS’s hands and putting them into the SFC’s. SDS can see its empire shrinking, and what better way is there to make folk nervous than by just flinging out a cost of £30 million? We are dealing with people’s lives and their livelihoods—those doing their training and those who work for SDS. Of course I suspect that it is a tactic from SDS; if you cannot win with principle, chuck in a scary number and hope that Parliament loses its nerve. I do not buy it, and I do not believe that anybody else buys it, but we need to ensure that the figures are solid.

It is not as if SDS has a clean record. For years, it has been referee and player—delivering training programmes while also shaping the system. It has handed out contracts to training providers that are also trade associations that represent employers while taking public money to train their workforce. That is a built-in conflict, and surely that alone is a reason for some sort of reform.

I have further concerns with trade associations providing training. When I asked questions about that at a committee meeting, we heard that 40 per cent of the money that SDS receives—public money—goes into back-of-house costs rather than into the training. That is in comparison to colleges, where more than 90 per cent of the money received goes into training. I have a concern about that as well. It is not right, and there must be another way of doing it.

At the committee meeting, Damien Yeates of SDS presented a narrative that suggests that SDS is the only organisation that is capable of delivering apprenticeship services effectively. He then doubled down, and throughout the meeting, dismissed the independent Withers review as only a point of view, despite it being an extensive and credible piece of work.

The Government is already considering some of the stuff in the Withers review, such as consolidating funding bodies, addressing system fragmentation, improving transparency and responsiveness, supporting parity of esteem and enabling better data and outcomes. If we get this right and deliver those things, that will ensure that we can build the economic model and that we have the right trades and people in the right place at the right time. We should go forward with the bill. There is much work to be done, particularly on the figures, but it is important that we get it and move on.

16:01

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I welcome Ben Macpherson to his new post and thank the committee and all those involved in the scrutiny of the bill for their hard work. The bill is critical, because Scotland urgently needs an adequately funded and responsive system for post-school education and training.

Our further education sector is at crisis point and, in some cases, far beyond it. Although the aims of the bill are laudable, it is unfortunately yet another example of the Government failing to do the heavy lifting to create a bill that answers the big questions about our further education system. We—and, most importantly, our young people—need those questions answered.

The Government has yet again proposed legislation—as it has with the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill—that fails to address the systemic issues that children and young people face in this country. It is absolutely shocking that one in 10 of our 16 to 24-year-olds are currently not in employment, education or training, according to the Government's figures.

This bill was decried by unions as “fraught with risk” for apprenticeships, and running those risks does nothing for the young people who are being failed by a system that does not work for them. Creating a much larger Scottish Funding Council without adequate assurances about its ability to continue functioning properly does nothing for those young people.

Not only does the bill fail to deliver for young people but, at a time when further and higher education institutions are under so much pressure, the bill entirely fails to deliver the sustainability supports that the sector is crying out for.

Stephen Kerr: The Government talks a lot about so-called positive destinations. The member referred earlier to the statistics about those aged 16 and 17. Does she believe that further work needs to be done to convince the Government that there is an issue with where young people are spending their lives and their time?

Sarah Boyack: Absolutely. In my portfolio of climate and net zero, there are missed opportunities in retrofitting homes, which young people from every single community in Scotland could be leading on. That is not being addressed.

Ben Macpherson: Will the member take an intervention?

Sarah Boyack: No, thank you.

The concerns heard by the committee from Unite, the PCS union and UNISON that their members are being left in the dark about the ramifications of the bill are another damning indictment. We still have no clear answers about which workers, or even how many, would transfer between Skills Development Scotland and the Scottish Funding Council.

I acknowledge the difficulties that have been presented by Skills Development Scotland's unwillingness to produce figures. How can we honestly be expected to back a bill that fails to provide those basic and fundamental facts? Without answering simple questions such as how many workers the bill will affect, the Scottish Government cannot seriously expect us to support the bill. Without those questions being answered, we cannot ask the bigger, better questions such as how the bill will enable our young people to thrive or support Scotland's long-suffering further and higher education workforce.

A more responsive and coherent funding system for post-school education and training is an aim that we share across the chamber, and it is one that the sector has long called for, but the bill does not convincingly deliver that aim, and it potentially risks making matters worse for learners and providers.

If we are to have successful apprenticeships, it is vital that the expertise of trade unions and businesses is drawn on in delivering those apprenticeships. A bill that has such an important aim must be backed up with strong stakeholder support. If stakeholder support is heavily caveated, as was shown throughout the consultation on the bill, it will not truly meet the aims for students and learners, now or in the future. Those are the questions that the Parliament should be asking, and the bill does not come anywhere close to allowing us to do that. That is why Scottish Labour cannot support the bill.

16:06

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I am glad to speak in the debate, and I welcome Ben Macpherson to his position. It is good to see him back in government.

I will touch on some of the briefings that we received today, but I am a bit concerned at the Tory and Labour position on the bill. At the Education, Children and Young People Committee, members decided to reserve judgment on the bill, yet today they have come out against it—there are committee members who have come out and said that today. They should work with the minister on the bill, rather than opposing its principles. The pragmatic approach that is being taken by Ross Greer and the Greens is a better one.

One of the briefings that we have received is from Guy Hinks, the FSB Scotland chair, who said:

“One in five small businesses in Scotland was forced to reduce the services they offer customers in the last year due to staff shortages.”

We have been talking about what employers are saying, and this is what the FSB has said:

“Modernising the training system in a way that encourages smaller employers to hire apprentices would be an important step towards tackling the skills gaps, which are a big part of this problem.”

Mr Hinks added:

“We can’t afford to miss the opportunity the Bill offers to ensure apprenticeships in Scotland work for the country’s small businesses”.

Stephen Kerr made the point that we should hear directly from small businesses, and they are telling us that we should support the bill at this stage. Of course we need to work on this. Mr Hinks said:

“In order to do that, it is essential to listen and learn from the experience of small employers, including those who are hesitant to take on apprentices.”

Small businesses are at the heart of the Scottish economy. The Scottish Government is committed

to streamlining and improving the frameworks for funding post-school education and skills, and the bill is part of that. As I think was mentioned by the minister at the start of the debate, the bill helps to ensure that the annual £3 billion investment in this area delivers the greatest impact for Scotland’s young people and learners.

As it has stated in its briefing, Edinburgh College believes that the bill should be supported and that work should be expedited to ensure that the recommendations of the Withers review are taken forward in full. The college stated:

“It is our view that perpetuating the ‘status quo’ position is not an option”.

Edinburgh College is probably the closest college to East Lothian. The south-east of Scotland is the fastest-growing region of Scotland: 84 per cent of Scotland’s population growth in the next 10 years will be in Edinburgh and the south-east of Scotland, with East Lothian forecast to grow by about a third. Edinburgh College stated:

“It is imperative that apprenticeship provision is expanded if we are to take advantage of the substantial economic opportunities”.

Other members have mentioned renewables, and that has already been pursued in East Lothian. Last year, Edinburgh College carried out its own skills survey research with regional employers. That is another example of speaking to business. The college stated:

“Lack of apprenticeship places in key disciplines was raised as an acute skills shortage issue.”

Skills gaps continue to cause issues for employers across the region, with 88 per cent of employers saying that some of their vacancies are hard to fill due to difficulties in finding applicants with the required skills. Where hard-to-fill vacancies are concerned, the main things that employers struggle to find are the specialist skills or knowledge required for the role, but employers also struggle to find applicants.

Stephen Kerr: Paul McLennan is making the case for a demand-led or demand-sensitive system. The bill does not deliver that, but that is the reform that we need.

Paul McLennan: Both the FSB and Edinburgh College say that we need to support the bill at this stage. Mr Kerr and other members have raised issues, but they should work with the minister. Do not oppose the bill in principle at this stage, but work with the minister and listen to what employers and Edinburgh College are saying.

I also want to talk about Colleges Scotland. It commented:

“We support the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill because, although the devil is always in the detail, we see

opportunities in apprenticeships being funded through the SFC, forming one collaborative funding model.”—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 18 June 2025; c 18.]

Those three organisations have come out and said that we should support the bill at this stage. I come back to the position of the Labour Party and the Conservative Party. They might have issues with the bill, but they should support it and work with the minister. They have heard the offer and heard what is already coming in support of that.

The bill places learners at the centre of the Government’s approach to the tertiary education system, and it is work that needs to be done—of course we realise that that work needs to be done. For the first time, a statutory framework for apprenticeships in Scotland will be established, which will introduce improvement while leaving room to develop future policy with stakeholders.

I joined the Education, Children and Young People Committee, but I missed some of the evidence that Mr Adam talked about, although I have listened to some of the discussions. The committee talked about reserving its judgment. I will come back to the point that both the Labour Party and the Conservative Party should work with the minister; they have heard the offer.

Importantly, work is already under way to invigorate career services, which are an important part of this, strengthen the skills approach with SDS and the SFC, reform apprenticeships and improve the qualifications offer.

Clare Reid of Prosper, with whom I have worked in different roles, emphasised that

“the bill is an important step in the reform of the skills landscape.”—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 7 May 2025; c 3.]

Prosper engages with employers quite a bit, and it supports the bill. I have talked about four organisations that support the bill at this stage.

Miles Briggs: Will the member give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The member is just winding up.

Paul McLennan: In recognising that apprenticeships provide vital opportunities for young people to acquire key skills, more than £100 million of this year’s budget will be allocated to modern and foundation apprenticeships. That is an important step in ensuring that Scotland has the most skilled workforce that can meet the opportunities that are in front of us now and in coming years. Work is needed on the bill, but we must support the bill at decision time and work with the minister going forward.

16:12

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I join other members in welcoming Ben Macpherson to his new position. I wish him well in what are, I suggest, very challenging times.

I have always highlighted my support for education in all its forms. I have often said that education is the solution to health and welfare issues and, in fact, that it is the cornerstone of every portfolio. I absolutely believe that getting education right would pave the way to effective solutions to many of the current problems that society faces. Many of those issues have been created or at least exacerbated by the Scottish Government, which seems unable to create policy that is linked to need or create policy across portfolio.

The potential for apprenticeships in Ayrshire, for example, would demonstrate the point in question. In my region, there are many exciting opportunities in engineering and trades, along with all the soft-skill jobs that come with those expansions. Every engineering company that I have spoken to in the aerospace cluster in Prestwick airport is desperate to expand and develop its business. The common stumbling block is the availability of workforce. In fact, parent company investment in those businesses demonstrates the need for a consistent supply chain of people.

The chief executive of Ryanair flew into Prestwick to open its training academy and he met me specifically to speak about that recruitment prospectus. His position was that, although the company’s desire was to expand its aircraft maintenance facility at Prestwick because of the engineering crew’s experience, without sight of a workforce plan it has had to look at other facilities across Europe.

Woodward cited a similar situation. It has made a strong case for investment in expansion at Prestwick, but access to a consistent apprenticeship pipeline is a concern. A key point to note is that the availability of places is not the only obstruction in the pipeline. Many businesses would welcome the opportunity to recruit more apprentices but are hamstrung by the difficulty of accessing the resources that are needed to expand their facilities, grow their business and bring through more apprentices as a result. Although the bill focuses on reforms to the education system, in order for it to function as intended, it is vital that we look beyond the confines of the system and ensure that businesses are in the right position to provide those leaving the system with their desired destinations.

When Patrick Harvie was a minister, he introduced a bill to retrofit 1 million homes with heat pumps by 2030. I kept asking him where the

heat pumps would come from, who would fit and service them and who would pay for them. There were never any answers to those questions, with the industry suggesting that it was 23,500 tradespeople short if it was to deliver on the Government's targets. It is no surprise that the legislation was quietly slipped on to the dusty shelves that are marked "unworkable".

Ross Greer: Mr Whittle says that there were no answers to those questions. I presume that he did not read the workforce strategy for the green heat task force that the Government published?

Brian Whittle: Yes, I did, but it had no answer on the 23,500 shortfall in tradespeople.

We have fantastic tertiary education facilities in Ayrshire College and the University of the West of Scotland. They are able and more than willing to take on those challenges. Ayrshire College told me that 831 students were successful in an interview to apply for college-based programmes, including 400 applicants in engineering, 280 in aerospace, 171 in construction and trades, and 71 in health and social care. We desperately need those students in the workplace. That would be such a success story, if it was not for the fact that the college was unable to offer places to those students, in large part because of a lack of funding to deliver its programmes. The college does its bit in delivering for 56 students over its allocation, at a cost of more than £280,000 to the college. It has advised that, if the constraints on the contracted volumes were lifted, it is confident that it could increase new starts in engineering programmes from around 130 to more than 200 per year. What is the Government thinking? Surely, in sectors such as engineering, construction trades, and health and social care, which are crying out for new recruits, whether that is through apprenticeships or training places, we should be doing everything that we can to increase the intake.

Another piece of the jigsaw is to connect career advice in secondary school to tertiary education and local opportunities, because there is a disconnect. In the engineering sector, there is potential for 2,500 new jobs in Ayrshire in mechanics, engineering and all the soft skills that such expansion demands. Prestwick cluster, along with the XLCC development in North and East Ayrshire, will be fishing from the same pond. There are huge opportunities in the green and blue economies, which require retraining of the workforce and the development of a stream of talent in the sector. Where is the workforce plan? We cannot just will that to happen; we need to make a plan.

The Scottish Government must build the apprenticeship pipeline, not restrict it. I started by stating that education can have a huge impact on

health inequalities, welfare, justice, the economy, the energy market, and the green and blue economies. I have tried to cajole, encourage and push the Government to join the dots to support our FE sector and match careers advice with fantastic opportunities in local communities. Surely there must be an element of logic.

In welcoming the Minister for Higher and Further Education to his new role, I urge him to consider what could be achieved if we recognise the opportunities in engineering, the energy just transition, trades, and so on, and connect those opportunities to education and careers advice. I have the greatest respect for Ben Macpherson. I know that he understands the problems. Will he be the minister who finally delivers the obvious solutions for our students and our businesses?

16:18

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): I welcome Ben, son of Pherson, to his new role. I also welcome the opportunity to reiterate and summarise the aims of the bill and to offer my support for it at stage 1. In a nutshell, the bill will reform how funding and governance work across the tertiary education landscape in Scotland. I believe that it represents a serious and timely effort to strengthen our system of post-school education, training and apprenticeships. It is about providing clarity, stability and fairness to learners, institutions and employers alike.

Although there are always areas for improvement in bills, I strongly believe that this one deserves support at stage 1 to get things moving in the right direction. We all know that the present system is complex and, at times, fragmented. Funding routes overlap, responsibilities can be blurred and reporting is inconsistent. Learners and employers alike often face confusion when they should face clarity.

On funding, the bill will place a duty on the Scottish Funding Council to ensure the availability of apprenticeships and work-based learning, and it will give ministers clearer powers to support training for employment. On governance, it will make important changes to how the SFC operates, and it will create a new apprenticeship committee to ensure that apprenticeships get the focused oversight that they deserve. On student support, it will clarify the rules for Scots studying at private institutions in the UK, putting those arrangements on a clear statutory footing. In short, the bill will simplify, strengthen and steady the framework for how Scotland supports learning beyond school.

The current financial pressures on colleges and training providers are very real. By embedding financial monitoring and sustainability checks in

statute, we will help to protect institutions from sudden crises, thereby reassuring learners and staff that colleges and providers will remain stable and resilient.

At the same time, we must remember that Scotland's future workforce needs to be adaptable. Our economy is changing rapidly, through digitalisation, the green transition and the ever-growing demand for lifelong learning. The bill must help to align post-school education with those wider priorities. Fairness is also at stake: Scots studying at private institutions should not face uncertainty about their support, and the bill will give them the clarity that they deserve.

That being said, no bill arrives in a perfect state. The committee's task is to take away what we have heard in the debate, alongside the evidence of witnesses and institutions, and to further refine the bill's provisions. There are a few key areas for us to focus on. First, we must ensure that reporting requirements are proportionate. Institutions must of course be transparent, but smaller or rural colleges must not be buried under bureaucracy. Secondly, we must strike the right balance between flexibility and prescription. Strategic alignment is vital, but local providers must retain the freedom to innovate and respond to community needs. Thirdly, we should seek greater clarity on student support rules, ensuring that eligibility and appeals are straightforward and transparent. Fourthly, governance reform must include the voices of learners themselves, and in particular those from underrepresented or disadvantaged backgrounds. Finally, implementation matters: we need a phased and careful transition, with regular review, so that the reforms strengthen institutions rather than destabilise them.

Our education system is one of Scotland's great assets. It provides a bridge to opportunity for young people, a second chance for adults and a lifeline for communities that seek renewal. To keep that bridge strong, we must ensure that our funding and governance systems are not just fit for purpose today but resilient for tomorrow. In my judgment, the bill can provide that foundation. It will put apprenticeships and skills on the statutory map; it will give the Scottish Funding Council a stronger framework; and it will ensure fairness for learners and do so with an eye to sustainability and accountability.

There is polishing to do, and I will work with colleagues from across the chamber to make improvements to the bill at stage 2. However, its rationale is sound, its intent is clear and the opportunity that it presents is one that we should not squander. Let us seize this chance to provide clarity where there has been confusion, stability where there has been fragility and fairness where

there has been doubt. That is what the bill sets out to achieve, which is why I support its principles at stage 1.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the final speaker in the open debate. John Mason, you have up to six minutes.

16:23

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): I was not expecting to get as long as six minutes, so I will certainly be prepared to take interventions along the way.

I agree with much of what has been said already. I, too, offer my commiserations to the minister on his being thrown in at the deep end on the bill.

Overall, I am supportive of the bill's aims, because it will somewhat simplify the public body landscape in Scotland even though, as Stephen Kerr has pointed out, it will not reduce the number of public bodies. It could be argued that the Government might have gone further by abolishing Skills Development Scotland altogether.

It seems that there is scope for developing the apprenticeship landscape, including by rolling out a wider range of graduate apprenticeships, as well as foundation apprenticeships, which seem to be strong in some parts of the country but not in others.

As we took evidence at committee, I and others had concerns about the one-off costs for the bill—especially the pensions figure, which was shown in the financial memorandum as being between £1 million and £23 million. I am pleased to see that the upper limit for that has now been reduced to £8 million.

However, at the same time, considerable new costs are appearing. Information technology system costs are up from nil in the financial memorandum to £4 million, and SDS restructuring costs are up from nil to between £4 million and £8.5 million. I find it remarkable that such substantial costs did not appear in the financial memorandum at all. It makes me wonder whether it would cost less if SDS were just to be merged with the SFC and, therefore, took on its existing IT system.

Douglas Ross: I return to the point that I made in my speech, which was echoed by Miles Briggs. The finance committee was not able to do a full report and asked the education committee to look specifically at the finance elements of the bill. There have been massive changes, but there are still further questions about its financial aspects. Therefore, does Mr Mason think that the updated financial memorandum—and the new figures from

the minister—should go back to either of those committees for further scrutiny?

John Mason: Even some of the new figures that we have from the Government, which are dated 19 September, are provisional and are still estimates, so I absolutely agree that somebody needs to look at them in more detail. That is very much a theme that I want to emphasise.

From a Finance and Public Administration Committee perspective—Mr Greer and I are still here—we have repeatedly asked for an improvement in the quality and detail of financial memorandums, yet, once again, we see significant costs not appearing in the FM at all.

Most of the members of the finance committee are visiting Lithuania this week so, perhaps fortunately, members listening to the debate are not having to hear the same message from all of them.

As the education committee's convener and other members have said, the one-off costs were a major factor in our not endorsing the bill in our report. Although it is now only £21 million, that is still a lot of money for internal restructuring that is not affecting the front line.

I am particularly intrigued that SDS should now come up with intentions to restructure and potentially make a number of staff redundant. That suggests that it has not been operating very efficiently until now. However, the Government paper on revised costings, which apparently quotes SDS, says, among other things,

"This efficiency will diminish."

I do not know exactly what that means. It also says:

"SDS has identified that there is likely to be the need for restructuring after the transfer has completed and taking at least three years involving headcount reductions which might cost £4 million to £8.5 million".

We certainly need to know more about that.

The Government says that it wrote to SDS and the SFC in June, asking them to develop a plan for staffing arrangements. That seems a bit late in the day. In its response to the committee report, SDS argues that it has been as helpful as it could have been all the way along, but, as George Adam said, it still appears that it has been dragging its heels a fair bit.

Having said all of that, I welcome the Government's letter of 19 September. Although it does not represent the final picture, it is a lot more specific about costs than what we had before.

My view is that the SFC needs to be much more proactive about monitoring the health of our universities. From the evidence that we received, it seems that the SFC has largely been passive and

has waited for universities to report any problems that they faced. That is fine for an institution such as Queen Margaret University, whose principal, Sir Paul Grice, we heard from. However, it has certainly not worked at the University of Dundee, where it seems that some senior figures did not understand their responsibilities let alone flag up problems to the SFC or anyone else.

Going forward, I want the Funding Council to be much more proactive in that regard. It is true that universities are independent institutions and are not in the public sector. However, if something goes wrong, as it did at Dundee, they clearly expect the public sector to bail them out, so we need to pick up such problems earlier on.

Overall, I am prepared to support the bill at stage 1 and will vote for it at decision time. However, this is the second time this week that we are being asked to give a bill the go-ahead when we are still very much in the dark about the details and the actual costs—the other instance being the Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill introduced by Liz Smith. I am not at all happy about that way of doing things, where we head into stage 2 with so much uncertainty. I am not guaranteeing that I will vote for either bill at stage 2. I, for one, will look for a lot more certainty to emerge before then.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You rose to the challenge of completing your speech within the six minutes admirably. We move to the closing speeches.

16:30

Ross Greer: In opening, I laid out some of the general principles that the Scottish Greens subscribe to in relation to the bill, but there were specific points that I did not have time to get into, so I will do that now.

The first is on data sharing, which came up very often during stage 1—it is something that John Mason and I are familiar with from being on the Finance and Public Administration Committee, and it is a recurring issue in the public sector. There are huge limits on the sharing of public information—information that belongs to the public but is not available to them. I have taken to doing a litmus test when I am trying to get a sense of whether a public body is effective at sharing information and making its public data available—and that is simply to check whether its website is copyrighted. The Scottish Government leads by example on that; it operates an open government licence. Any information that is held on its website, other than the Government's logo and brand, is freely available for others to use as they see fit.

Both the Scottish Funding Council and Skills Development Scotland have copyrighted websites.

They are restricting access to even the most basic information that they have. Is it any wonder that they cannot communicate with each other effectively when they have taken the unnecessary step of copyrighting their websites? That is an issue on which some clear ministerial direction would be of significant benefit.

The David Hume Institute has estimated that north of £2 billion in value is lost to the Scottish economy every year due to the sheer volume of public data that is not available to the public. That makes processes more inefficient and more costly, and it makes public bodies' costs much higher than they need to be because those bodies are not sharing that information with one other. That is an easy problem to solve, but it requires a bit of ministerial direction.

I recognise the upset felt by a number of individuals in Skills Development Scotland about what is proposed here. In many ways, it feels familiar to the upset in the leadership of the Scottish Qualifications Authority during the process that we went through to replace it. I absolutely believe that far more substantial trade union engagement than originally took place is essential. I believe that more substantive engagement has taken place since the unions gave us their initial views, which I welcome.

I urge some self-reflection on the part of senior management at SDS—far more self-reflection than we heard at stage 1, in particular when it was confronted with the outcomes of Audit Scotland's review of SDS's work and its relationship with the SFC. There was simply no engagement with the pretty scathing judgments that Audit Scotland came to.

There is one striking example of where leadership at SDS would have resulted in far more effective delivery and better value for money; it relates to the share of apprenticeship funding that goes to managing agents, which George Adam and others mentioned. We heard in evidence from one trade body that it takes 40 per cent of the funding per apprenticeship; that funding goes to the trade body acting as the managing agent. That is 40p in every pound that is not going to the apprentice or to the college. I have heard elsewhere that the figure is above half in some cases, and is potentially as high as 60 per cent.

I believe that in England, there is a cap on how much money the managing agent can take. SDS could have taken such action long before now, but it did not; however, the bill is an opportunity for us to take action. All the money that the managing agents take means less money going to the apprentice, less money going to the college and less money for the businesses that are involved in the system. The bill is an opportunity for us to get

far better value for money, which would align with the Government's medium-term financial strategy.

The bill is also, let us be frank, an opportunity for us to maximise the amount of money that is going to our colleges in what is otherwise a really squeezed financial situation. John Mason posed the question to me whether it is worth £22 million. That is still one that I am wrestling with. There is the question whether the one-off cost is worth it for potential significant recurring value, better alignment, better value for money and more effective use of the money that is being spent.

I recognise that the bill splits opinion. I respect some of those with whom I disagree but who are arguing on the basis of quite specific concerns. However, I am not at all convinced by the argument that some have made that, if the system is not broken, we should not fix it. Audit Scotland and Withers have shown what is broken about the system. I respect those who believe that we can fix it without the bill, but some of the voices who have contributed to the debate outside the Parliament to argue that everything is absolutely fine should reckon with the fact that it simply is not fine—that is not the case. I think that that is why the Federation of Small Businesses says that the bill is a way to align the apprenticeship system with the needs of our economy.

I will briefly pick up on a couple of things that have been mentioned in the debate. Willie Rennie was right to say that Skills Development Scotland has a good relationship with employers, but I would caveat that by saying "with some employers". If you are a member of a trade body that got its foot in the door some time ago, you have excellent access to SDS and you get what you need from it. If you are not from one of those sectors—particularly if you are a small business that is not from one of the sectors that has an assertive trade body that has its foot in the door—you have a very different experience of Scotland's apprenticeship system.

Willie Rennie and John Mason both mentioned the £4 million cost for IT that has suddenly emerged late in the process. I am deeply suspicious of that figure and the motivations that might have been behind it. I cannot understand for the life of me how, when no new functions are being created and some systems are simply being moved from one organisation to another, there is a £4 million IT cost. Again, those organisations are both arms of the same Government. That cost does not ring true at all.

As I think I have made clear, the Greens are not completely sold on the bill, but we think that there is a significant opportunity with it. We do not want to miss that opportunity, as it is the last one of the parliamentary session. We want to see more alignment in the system, more access to

apprenticeships for small businesses and far better value for money. The bill could do at least some of that.

Our list of amendments is growing, and I look forward to speaking to the minister about them. That is why we will vote to progress the bill to stage 2 to give us a final opportunity to see whether we can get such alignment and value for money before the dissolution of the Parliament at the end of this session.

16:36

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):

Two points were made in the debate that united everyone in the chamber, the first of which was the welcome of the new minister. At times, it felt like the front step of the Caledonian hotel, because so many welcomes were issued, although I think that the minister will need to reflect on the fact that most speakers went on to commiserate with him on the job that is in front of him. He can make of that what he will.

I also agree with the more fundamental point that was made, which is that there absolutely is a need for change in the skills system. It needs to do an awful lot more. The issue is whether the bill will deliver that and whether it will provide clarity. Our fundamental objection is that there is a real risk that, without a road map and a vision, the bill will deliver a change in form without providing any clarity around a change in function—and let us be clear that it is the function that we need to change.

I intervened on Jackie Dunbar, and I ask her forgiveness for pressing her on a point that maybe I did not make clearly enough. A number of members who articulated their positions on the skills system made the assumption that the skills system is about young people almost exclusively. That is precisely where the change needs to happen. The skills system is vital for young people because it gives them the right start in their careers; however, given the changes that are happening in the economy, the change that we need to see is a skills system that is just as much about giving people who are already in the workplace the ability to upskill and reskill as technology changes how they do their jobs and makes certain industries and sectors obsolete. The need to make that change to the system has become equally important, but, frankly, I do not see that in the bill. As I said to Graeme Dey in private—and I will say it again to Ben Macpherson if we have the opportunity to speak together—the Government badly needs a route map, whether it is in a green paper or a white paper, because we do not have that clarity.

There are other fundamental objections to the bill. If it is going to be effective, a skills system has

to include the voice of industry not just as a consultee or as part of on-going engagement, but at the heart of its governance. Stephen Kerr rightly pointed out that the systems in Germany and Switzerland have exactly that. The bill will scrap the Scottish apprenticeship advisory board without providing any clarity on its replacement and, critically, without putting industry's voice at the heart of the system's governance. To articulate clearly what I mean: that will leave out the voice of not just employers, but of trade unions and wealth in the shaping of the system's content and direction. For that reason, we have a major problem with the bill.

Ben Macpherson: A number of members have raised the issue of the board. I appreciate that my predecessor gave reassurance on that to the committee. I am happy to give an undertaking to Parliament now that I will follow up on that issue and give further reassurance and information on that important point.

Daniel Johnson: I am very grateful for that, because that is absolutely central.

The other issue is the question of whether the Scottish Funding Council is the right vehicle—the right custodian—to take the system forward, given both the SFC's track record and its other challenges. Ross Greer was absolutely right to delve back into the Audit Scotland reports and some of the other work that was done. Indeed, I did the same thing. The genesis of what is being proposed was in the enterprise and skills review that was undertaken in 2017. There are voices that say that we need to get on with it, but the urgency has been created by a lack of urgency on the part of the Scottish Government for almost a decade.

Furthermore, it is clear from the work that Audit Scotland did that there were some issues between SDS and the SFC. Maybe the bill will sort those out. However, Audit Scotland also made the point that structural change was not necessary. The Audit Scotland report was explicit in saying that there needed to be changes in ministerial direction; more importantly, it said that ministers needed to provide clarity and oversight in holding the two agencies to account. We can amalgamate them, but, unless the Government provides oversight and direction with a view to guaranteeing delivery, we could well end up having the same problem with a single body that we have with two.

Willie Rennie made the very important point that the current situation has not arisen in the absence of other considerations. We have a university funding crisis, which the Scottish Funding Council is having to look at urgently. Does it have the capacity to take on board a very significant merger?

I would go further than Willie Rennie. It is not only a university funding crisis that we face. Many of the speakers in the debate treated skills funding as a problem that needs to be solved, but that issue is dwarfed by the colleges' budget. Part of the problem is that colleges' spend is incredibly rigid. Anyone who has taken any time to look at the credit funding mechanism for colleges will realise that it is simply not structured to help the skills system. Today, we should have been debating how we fix colleges' funding and how we make sure that colleges' funding helps the skills system instead of debating how we merge the skills system with college funding. I think that the debate that we are having is the wrong way round.

Stephen Kerr: The point that Daniel Johnson is making goes to the heart of the lack of parity of esteem in the different directions, which the bill does nothing for.

Daniel Johnson: Absolutely. We need to have a clear framework for how people can study at university and acquire skills and apprenticeships and how they can study at college and do the same thing. Critically, graduate apprenticeships, which are the only part of the skills system that the Scottish Funding Council has been responsible for, have been static for a number of years. Moreover, the Government does not provide those figures on an annual basis—we are well behind England and Wales in that respect.

The Economy and Fair Work Committee, of which I am now the convener, held a number of evidence sessions on skills, and the voice of employers was pretty clear. At best, they were confused by the proposed change, and, at worst, they rejected it outright. Paul Sheerin of Scottish Engineering said, "Don't do this. The things that we need to do are too urgent, and this will be a distraction." We should listen to organisations such as the CBI, the Scottish Chambers of Commerce and Scottish Engineering. We need to stop and rethink the bill, because unless we are clear about what we want to achieve and we have a road map, structural change may well be costly and get in the way of the very thing that we are seeking to achieve.

16:43

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): It gives me great pleasure to close this stage 1 debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives. I, too, warmly welcome Mr Macpherson to his ministerial post, and I thank Graeme Dey for his work in the role.

When James Withers published his independent review of the skills delivery landscape back in 2023, his message was clear: Scotland's skills system was too fragmented, too bureaucratic and

too confusing for learners and employers alike. He called for a single funding body, for simpler pathways and for more money to flow directly to the front line, where it could support apprenticeships, colleges and young people.

The Scottish Conservatives agree with that vision. Reducing duplication and slimming down bureaucracy are not just tidy governance but financial prudence. The argument that money is restricted is well rehearsed in this chamber, and we are often asked to highlight budget cuts that we would make. If we truly want to release funding to help people back into work and to help them into apprenticeships and positive destinations, that is an avenue that Conservative members would strongly support our going down.

The bill that the Government has introduced does not live up to that ambition, however, and risks being a missed opportunity. It will create upheaval without offering a clear plan, as was mentioned by Daniel Johnson; it will transfer responsibilities without identifying transparent budgets; and it will leave unanswered questions about costs, pensions and staffing.

Let us look at the record. Data from His Majesty's Revenue and Customs shows that employers have paid at least £875 million into the apprenticeship levy since 2020. At this time, the Government has spent £704 million on apprenticeships, so there is a missing amount of £171 million. That money could—or should—have gone into training opportunities for young people. Meanwhile, 60 to 80 young people chase every apprenticeship place, and businesses tell us that the demand is closer to 40,000 places each year than the 25,000 that are actually delivered. The point was well made by my colleague Brian Whittle. It is shocking to hear that 831 students, who all wanted jobs in sectors that were crying out for more staff, were prohibited from taking places due to a lack of funding. If evidence is needed of the issues that we are facing in our tertiary education system, there it is.

If the bill was truly aligned with a vision for Scotland, we would see those levy funds transparently channelled into apprenticeships, bureaucracy stripped away so that more money would go straight to training rather than being swallowed up in overheads, and a system built around learners and employers rather than institutions and ministers.

I thank the committee for its work on the report. However, the report states that, collectively, the committee was not able to make a recommendation on the bill at stage 1 and that it reserves its position on the general principles of the bill. The report warns the Government that the committee does not know the full cost of the proposals. That has been well debated today. The

pension liabilities for staff transfers could run to tens of millions of pounds, yet no figure for them has been offered. The Scottish Funding Council is already overstretched. Doubling its size overnight, with the risk of duplication that doing so would bring, is reckless without clear resources and a path forward. We believe that the principle is right, and the ambition is shared, but the execution has been found wanting.

Going back to the contributions made in the debate, I say thank you very much to the minister—I am delighted to hear that there will be collaborative work as the bill progresses. To Mr McLennan, I say that, as the bill progresses, we will be open to working to improve it at its further stages. As Mr Briggs stated, our doors are open.

I also welcome the minister's comments on collaboration with businesses, which we agree is absolutely essential. I have previously mentioned in the chamber that Fife College had to cancel a full year-long social care course due to a lack of care home and business buy-in, based on funding. A lack of joined-up processes is adding to the issues that are before us, and we must address that.

Bill Kidd commented that some "polishing" is needed. I could ask him to tell me what it is that he thinks needs polishing, but that might be a bit flippant.

Miles Briggs asked a good question about why we are delivering 25,000 places when 40,000 are needed. If we do not answer that question, are we sure that we are fixing the problem?

Ross Greer pointed out the dysfunctional relationship between the Scottish Funding Council and Skills Development Scotland, saying that the Government should step in to address that. Is legislation the right way to do that? Legislation is about making a fundamental change to structure; perhaps we should be looking at legislation to do that.

Stephen Kerr highlighted, quite eloquently, that the whole process should be demand led, and I certainly agree with that.

The Withers review gave us a route map to a simpler, fairer and more effective skills system. We should be seizing that opportunity, cutting bureaucracy, reducing duplication and putting money where it matters—into apprenticeships, colleges and places where people will drive forward Scotland's economy. The bill does not do that. It risks confusion, cost overruns and lost opportunities. Unless it is significantly strengthened, we will not support it. The Scottish Conservatives will continue to champion the principle of reform, but one that works—a system that is simpler, leaner and built to deliver

opportunity. That is what Scotland deserves, and it is what we will fight for.

16:49

Ben Macpherson: First, I emphasise my thanks to all colleagues for their thoughtful and robust contributions and to all those who contributed to the stage 1 evidence and report. I genuinely appreciate the feedback on the bill and, in my concluding remarks, I will respond to as much as possible of what has been said today.

Taking all that into consideration, with all the constructive criticism respectfully acknowledged, I maintain that the bill could be an important and impactful step towards reforming Scotland's post-school education and skills funding system, and I believe that Parliament should consider it further by passing the stage 1 motion today.

As many members, including Paul McLennan, emphasised, many stakeholders are supportive of the bill. With respect, I say to colleagues in the larger Opposition parties that, by not voting for the bill today, they would in effect be voting against legislating in this area before the end of the current parliamentary session.

Daniel Johnson: Will the minister take an intervention on that point?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Will the minister take an intervention on that point?

Ben Macpherson: Yes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Daniel Johnson.

Daniel Johnson: I apologise to Pam Duncan-Glancy. Does the minister recognise that Audit Scotland was clear that the Government does not need to legislate in order to deliver the reforms, which could be done without legislation? To say that we would be voting against legislation may be correct, but it is not correct to say that we would be voting against change.

Ben Macpherson: I challenge that. I acknowledge the points that the Audit Scotland report makes. However, a number of points that were made in the debate by Opposition members—including the member to whom I am responding—would require to be addressed by legislative change. I say that in good faith, in that, if the bill passes stage 1 today, I want all members to really engage on it as we move forward together.

For learners, providers and employers, the bill has the potential to make funding simpler and more flexible and transparent so that the system meets Scotland's growing demand for a variety of skills. The bill will lay the foundation for a stronger future for apprenticeships, as Bill Kidd set out;

reform Scotland's post-school education and skills funding system; and consolidate responsibility and funding for apprenticeships in the SFC. It will thereby strengthen the SFC's governance powers, too, in order to provide more effective oversight and institutional sustainability.

The bill will enable better monitoring of the sector's financial stability, which John Mason raised. I know that that is of great interest to many members, and I would look to work on that issue ahead of stage 2 to strengthen the system further. It is also worth noting that the SFC would not be constituted as it currently is if the bill was to pass—that is worth bearing in mind.

The bill will provide a statutory definition of “apprenticeship”, as I said in my opening remarks. Crucially, in my view, that will help to build much better parity of esteem between career paths—which George Adam, Stephen Kerr and Daniel Johnson rightly highlighted as a priority—thereby boosting confidence for employers and learners alike.

I emphasise again that the bill is the product of years of listening, gathering evidence and responding to a clear call for change, which has been expressed by members across the chamber today. The Scottish Government has been listening, and I commit to doing so even more, starting from today. I have been listening carefully in the chamber, and I will respond to some important points that members raised.

The convener of the Education, Children and Young People Committee raised the issue of modern apprenticeships. We will work with stakeholders to consider the delivery models for modern apprenticeships, including funding, over the next few years. I am happy to share more detail on that with the committee and with Parliament in due course.

The convener rightly emphasised the situation with SDS staff. I will take a moment to acknowledge the significant and valued contribution of those staff and what they have done over the years in building Scotland's apprenticeship programme, particularly through their leadership and employer engagement, which I have experienced at first hand as a constituency MSP. The bill aims to build on that strong foundation, and the Government is committed to doing that by transferring apprenticeships and national training programmes to the redesigned funding body in April 2027, if the bill is passed.

Others have raised the important question of trade union engagement. I agree that unions must be meaningfully engaged at every stage. They have a pivotal role in shaping the changes that are needed to implement the bill, and we want to ensure that their voices, and those of all staff, are

heard. That is why we have established a regular forum with trade unions to discuss implementation. We will continue to engage with the public bodies involved, their staff and the unions at every milestone, should the bill progress and be enacted.

The convener and others raised the issue of costings. I appreciate that issue. The figures that my predecessor provided in a follow-up to the committee's report are refined ones. I commit to continuing to engage with the committee through the bill process and to probing the costs further. We need to provide reassurance about implementing IT and pension transfers, because there are two pension schemes in play. I take those points on board.

Ross Greer talked about the need to consider the bill as an opportunity for alignment and better value for money. Willie Rennie asked—rightly—what cannot be done in the current situation that the bill will enable to be done. If the bill is passed, the SFC will have oversight of all provision and will be able to flex to employer and business needs—as many have emphasised the need for. It will enable innovation of the right provision for the need—whether that is a short course or an apprenticeship. The bill will provide that breadth of options.

Willie Rennie: Will the minister take an intervention?

Ben Macpherson: I will, if I have time to do so.

Willie Rennie: I understand that point in principle, but we need tangible examples. Everything is theoretical just now; we need something more tangible.

Ben Macpherson: I appreciate that that is the call to me. I have tried to give that to the Parliament at a high level today, but I am enthusiastic about following up on that as we progress.

Others raised points about SMEs. The FSB has stated its support for the bill. We need to ask ourselves whether SMEs are being catered for properly in the current system. That is one of the strong reasons for progressing with consideration of the bill. It was either Sarah Boyack or Brian Whittle who asked questions—this is relevant to what I said in response to Mr Rennie—about how we provide focus to specific skill areas. That is exactly what bringing all the provision together is intended to enable.

Brian Whittle: Will the minister give way?

Ben Macpherson: I am sorry—I am pressed for time, otherwise I would do so.

To answer a question about SDS staff—I should have done so earlier—should the bill progress,

around 150 to 180 people will be expected to move from SDS to the SFC.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Will the minister give way on that point?

Ben Macpherson: I am afraid that I need to make progress.

The committee highlighted widening access and the use of free school meals data to measure that. Ross Greer referred to the use of data. I am keen to make progress on that and I am cautiously optimistic that the bill provides an opportunity to make appropriate provision for data sharing. That is another reason to continue to consider legislating in this area.

A vote for the bill is a vote for significant change that will put learners at the heart of a system that works for them and, in turn, for employers, the economy and our society. It is a vote for cutting through bureaucracy, improving funding flows and maximising public value, and for a better-joined-up system, with colleges, universities and training providers all playing a vital role in delivering high-quality, future-ready education and training. It is a chance to create a more efficient, more innovative and truly collaborative system.

Let us act together to take the bill forward and support our learners and employers to better serve our people and our economy. For all those reasons and more, I ask the Parliament to support the bill.

Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill: Financial Resolution

16:59

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-18687, in the name of Shona Robison, on a financial resolution for the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill, agrees to any expenditure of a kind referred to in Rule 9.12.3A of the Parliament's Standing Orders arising in consequence of the Act.—[*Ben Macpherson*]

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

Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill: Financial Resolution

16:59

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-19067, in the name of Shona Robison, on a financial resolution for the Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill, agrees to any increase in expenditure payable out of the Scottish Consolidated Fund in consequence of the Act.—[*Jenny Gilruth*]

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

Scottish Fiscal Commission (Appointment of Commissioners)

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-19035, in the name of Shona Robison, on the appointment of commissioners to the Scottish Fiscal Commission.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees with the recommendation of the Scottish Government and the Finance and Public Administration Committee that Dr Eleanor Ryan and Justine Riccomini be appointed to the Scottish Fiscal Commission.—[*Shona Robison*]

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

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S6M-19027, in the name of Ben Macpherson, on the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill, 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.

17:01

Meeting suspended.

17:04

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We move to the vote on amendment S6M-19027, in the name of Ben Macpherson. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I was unable to log in; I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Martin. We will ensure that that is recorded.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I was unable to vote; I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Carson. We will ensure that that is recorded.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am ashamed to say that I have done it again—I forgot to vote on behalf of Beatrice Wishart. She would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Rennie. We will ensure that Ms Wishart's vote is recorded.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)

Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, 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)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Fulton MacGregor]
Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)

Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD) [Proxy vote cast by Willie Rennie]

Abstentions

Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-19027, in the name of Ben Macpherson, on the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill, is: For 62, Against 39, Abstentions 2.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-18687, in the name of Shona Robison, on a financial resolution for the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Willie Rennie: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I have a different excuse this time. My app would not connect at all. Beatrice Wishart and I would both have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Rennie. We will ensure that both votes are recorded.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Johnson. Likewise, we will ensure that your vote is recorded.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, 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)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Fulton MacGregor]
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)

Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD) [Proxy vote cast by Willie Rennie]

Abstentions

Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)
Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (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)
Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (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-18687, in the name of Shona Robison, on a financial resolution for the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill, is: For 63, Against 18, Abstentions 23.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill, agrees to any expenditure of a kind referred to in Rule 9.12.3A of the Parliament's Standing Orders arising in consequence of the Act.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-19067, in the name of Shona Robison, on a financial resolution for the Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill, agrees to any increase in expenditure payable out of the Scottish Consolidated Fund in consequence of the Act.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-19035, in the name of Shona Robison, on the appointment of commissioners to the Scottish Fiscal Commission, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees with the recommendation of the Scottish Government and the Finance and Public Administration Committee that Dr Eleanor Ryan and Justine Riccomini be appointed to the Scottish Fiscal Commission.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Organ Donation Week

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-18544, in the name of Christine Grahame, on organ donation week, 22 to 28 September 2025. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises Organ Donation Week, which runs from 22 to 28 September 2025, as what it sees as a vital moment to highlight the life-saving power of organ and tissue donation; understands that the opt-out system for organ and tissue donation in Scotland, which was implemented in 2021, still relies on family agreement; considers that many refusals happen because wishes are not discussed in advance; understands that in 2024-25, 274 people in Scotland benefited from a transplant compared with 390 in 2023-24, which, it believes, is a worrying trend; welcomes the Scottish Government's "Don't Leave Your Loved Ones in Doubt" campaign, which urges registration and open talks; notes the support for engaging young people and the view that colleges and universities should help educate through the use of QR codes; values the reported role of faith leaders in confirming that there are no religious barriers to donation and clearing up myths; understands that nearly 8,000 people in the UK, including people in Scotland, await transplants, and notes the encouragement for all eligible individuals to register, share their wishes and help to save lives.

17:10

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I thank all of the members who signed the motion to allow the debate to proceed, the people who are manning the exhibition in the lobby this week and those who are attending in the public gallery, including members of the transplant team, health professionals and, in particular, Audrey Cameron, a donor's mother, about whom I will say more later. I also thank those who have remained in the chamber after a very long week because of late sittings.

My contribution extends only to transplants following a death. Talking about death is always a difficult topic in any circumstance. One might say that it is grisly, and we in the western world prefer to avoid it. However, one death can save a life or allow a better life to someone else, and sometimes to many strangers.

Let me first set out the legislative background. The Human Tissue (Authorisation) (Scotland) Act 2019 was passed in July 2019. It provides for a deemed authorisation, or opt-out, system of organ donation for transplantation. It applies to most adults aged 16 and over who are resident in Scotland, but it does not apply to everyone.

There are exemptions: adults without capacity to understand the law, adults who have lived in Scotland for fewer than 12 months before their death and children under the age of 16. If a person in one of those groups dies in a way that means that they could donate, their closest family member will be asked whether they wish to authorise donation.

Otherwise, if a person dies in circumstances in which they could become a donor and have not recorded a donation decision—either to agree or to reject—it will be assumed that they are willing to donate their organs for transplantation. Even then, a person's family will always be asked about their latest views on donation to ensure that it would not proceed if that was against their wishes.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): I thank the member for giving way. Does she think that most of the public understand that? I have to say that I was a bit confused about it until I spoke to the folk today.

Christine Grahame: The reason for the debate is partly to highlight that.

That is where understandable difficulties arise. Specialist nurses must—without delay, for obvious reasons—raise the issue of consent to use some of the deceased's organs in the most distressing of circumstances. If a person has registered their wishes one way or another, it makes that discussion much easier.

Therefore, although there is presumed consent, it is still better to register. Let me also stress that only 1 per cent of the population who die can be considered to become an organ donor—only those who are in intensive care and ventilated—so it is a niche set of circumstances.

The specialist nurse whom I referred to is one of a team of 23 who are based in intensive care units across Scotland. They support consultants and nurses who are having end-of-life discussions with families. They cover all aspects of the donation process, from the initial referral from the intensive care unit team, to building a patient's profile—bloods, electrocardiogram, chest x-ray, medical notes—organ matching, offering and placement; organising theatre; and organising for the national organ retrieval service team to arrive at the donor hospital. Time is always of the essence.

Those nurses co-ordinate the retrieval operation to the very end, when they perform last offices with donors and ensure that organs are safely dispatched to their recipients. They also provide a bereavement follow-up service for donors' families.

There are currently around 600 people waiting for an organ transplant in Scotland at any one time. Those patients are in urgent need of life-

saving or life-enhancing organs, with the majority waiting for a kidney transplant. One donor can save up to nine lives.

Nothing illustrates the significance of organ transplant better than an example. Audrey Cameron is here in the Parliament today. Her son James Borland died in February 2024 at the young age of 25. Audrey chose to donate James's organs, as she felt that that was fitting for him, as a kind and gentle young man. James went on to donate his heart, lungs and both kidneys, saving the lives of four people. His becoming an organ donor has given his family so much comfort amid their grief. James's story has not ended, and he has changed so many people's lives. He left behind his young son, who one day will know how brave his daddy was and how he is a true hero to so many. Audrey now works closely with the specialist nurse in the organ donation team, promoting and sharing her passion for organ donation, and I thank her for this permission to make public her experience. I thank all others who, in similar circumstances, have done that. Nothing can illustrate how important organ donation is more than that example. *[Applause.]*

17:16

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): My congratulations to Christine Grahame on bringing the motion to Parliament. I regret that the debate is being held on a Thursday evening, as it deserves a more prominent place in our schedule. Nevertheless, it is a highly appropriate debate. Everything that needed to be said was said in the story of James. Christine Grahame is right: he is a hero indeed.

I am pleased to speak in support of the motion, which rightly recognises organ donation week as a vital opportunity to highlight the life-saving power of organ and tissue donation. I agree with John Mason—who is not in his seat now—who is absolutely right that there is a lot of misunderstanding about the current situation in Scotland in relation to the opt-in/opt-out arrangements.

The motion reminds us of the striking and sobering truth that, in 2024-25, only 274 people in Scotland benefited from a transplant, as compared with 390 the year before. That downward trend is noteworthy and a concern, particularly as nearly 8,000 people across the United Kingdom, including many here in Scotland, continue to wait for a transplant that may be the difference between life and death.

The opt-out system was introduced in 2021 and has been a step forward. However, as the motion makes clear, and as Christine Grahame made clear in her speech, it relies on the agreement of

families. Too often, transplants do not proceed because loved ones have never had a conversation. That is why I fully support the Scottish Government's "Don't leave your loved ones in doubt" campaign. It is so important, and it is why we should use this debate, and every opportunity that we have as elected members of the Scottish Parliament, to encourage people to register their wishes and speak openly with their families.

I am one of the people John Mason referred to, and he identified himself in the same way. When I first learned about the matter, because of organ donation week and this debate that Christine Grahame has brought to the chamber, and because I decided that I wanted to participate in the debate, I did not realise that I should register, go to the website and make clear my desire in the event of my own death. I am very grateful for the debate for that reason. I also communicated that to my family—to my wife and to our children—so that they would know exactly what I would desire. If any part of me could be useful to anyone else, that is what I would want. We need to make those decisions clear, but we also need to communicate them clearly.

An aspect of the motion that particularly intrigued me was the mention of the

"reported role of faith leaders in confirming that there are no religious barriers to donation and clearing up myths".

I will talk about that from a personal point of view. Something that I have not done very much of in the past four-and-a-half years is speak about things from my perspective as a Christian and a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I take the opportunity to stress that organ donation is not only compatible with my faith, but I believe that it is one of the most selfless acts of love that a human being can perform. In my faith, the body is sacred, but so too is the command to love one another. For me, the act of donation is a profound way of following the example of Jesus Christ, whose life and sacrifice were the ultimate expressions of self-giving love.

The scriptures teach that Jesus said:

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

Organ donation allows us, in a small but significant way, to reflect that same love by giving the gift of life to others, even after our own journey in mortality has ended. That is why I welcome the motion's emphasis on the role of faith leaders. Across Scotland, religious communities have affirmed that there are no barriers in belief to donation. That clears away damaging myths and allows people of faith to see organ donation for what it is: a gift of compassion that is rooted in love and service.

I welcome the call to engage young people by using modern tools in colleges and universities, such as the QR codes that the motion mentions, to spark awareness. If we as parliamentarians need to be sparked into awareness, I am sure that the same applies to a wide range of people across all demographics. We need to be made aware of how we can make our desires about organ donation known.

The issue is not about compulsion or state control, but about responsibility, family dialogue and choosing to give. Therefore, I strongly support the motion and encourage all eligible Scots to register, share their wishes and help to save lives.

17:22

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I congratulate my colleague Christine Grahame on securing this debate on organ donation week. I thank her not only for lodging the motion, but for her lack of fear in broaching subjects that need to be heard but which are difficult to discuss.

Most of us are aware of the advances that have been made in medical science and technology and the literally life-saving impact that they have had on folk who would otherwise not survive. If my understanding is correct—I will probably get told if it is not—the first transplant took place in the year that I was born: 1967. The technological leaps forward in the decades since have been astounding. However, such advances will count for very little if our medical professionals cannot find donors in the first instance.

The debate takes place in the middle of organ donation week, which is designed to raise awareness of organ donation and the incredible role that it can play in changing folks' lives forever. It is bittersweet when someone receives a transplant from an organ donor, as everyone is very aware of the tragic death that has led to the much-needed donation.

The raw numbers have always been small in comparison to our population—a few hundred transplants a year—but the figures highlighted in Christine Grahame's motion are deeply concerning. The numbers on the register have continued to grow over time, but there is an issue with those who make a positive decision to be on the register communicating their wishes to their loved ones. That is another difficult, but important, discussion. Indeed, these are difficult and sensitive discussions for anyone. For some folk, it feels a bit gruesome to talk to their next of kin, who often do not want to listen, about what will happen to their kidneys or liver after they have passed. However, it is because death is fundamental to the donor process that we need to

have those chats now, before it is too late, and to ensure that our wishes are known.

As Christine Grahame has said, only 1 per cent of donor organs are fit for transplant. In 99 per cent of cases, despite the good will and good wishes of those on the register, that generosity cannot, for a variety of reasons, be taken up. The circumstances of death that present the opportunity for donation and transplant are incredibly specific, and they mean that our health professionals need to make the best possible use of every chance that they get to help another, because those chances are few and far between.

If we can increase the number of chances that our national health service professionals have, we can increase the chances for many more people across our country to lead healthy lives. I say to those watching at home that they should ensure that their families and their next of kin know their wishes.

I have been made aware of an art installation in recognition of organ donors that was unveiled very recently at Aberdeen royal infirmary. Shelagh Swanson, the artist, was commissioned to work with the relatives of donors as well as with young folk across north-east secondary schools to create glass pebbles, which have been placed on the walls of the foyer of the ARI's emergency department, all the way up towards the Sandpiper sanctuary. The installation commemorates the ripples of organ donation, and it is hoped that it will act as a conversation starter.

If people see the ripples of organ donation as they are walking in the ARI, I ask them to remember to have that discussion with their loved ones and to tell them of their wishes. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Dunbar. I give a gentle reminder to those in the public gallery that there should be no participation. Tempting though it is, that also includes applause.

Paul Sweeney is the final speaker in the open debate.

17:27

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I extend my thanks and appreciation to Christine Grahame for presenting to Parliament a motion that I know will be close to the hearts of many people across the chamber and throughout Scotland.

Organ donation week is an important moment in the year for us to remember the lives saved by the incredibly generous donations of others, while also, I hope, stirring us to greater action so that we can live in a Scotland where everyone who needs a donated organ can receive one.

Organ donation, as has been mentioned by other members, including Mr Kerr, is the ultimate act of kindness and represents a selfless commitment to the wellbeing of others. It is a recognition that when our life has reached its end, others can be given the gift of life and vitality. It is an ending that becomes a beginning; the moment of death becomes, in a way, an act of love and a continuation or improvement of life. It is through such acts of giving and receiving that we build a society that is based on trust and recognition—one in which we care for the stranger and in which, at the end of life, we can leave with a generous spirit and a hand open to friendship, even to someone whom we have never met.

Like many in the Parliament, I was a registered organ donor under the old system. I am proud that the Parliament created an opt-out system in 2021, after the passing of the Human Tissue (Authorisation) (Scotland) Act 2019. That monumental act of Parliament still retains choice for those who wish, for whatever reason, to opt out of the system, but the more generous and giving option is now the default. The 2019 act was a profound moment of progress that we should all be proud of—it built a sense of solidarity and community.

That said, although Scotland should be proud of the opt-out system, the figures from Kidney Research Scotland paint a worrying picture of the state of organ donation in Scotland. Five hundred people are currently waiting for transplants in Scotland, but the numbers registering on the organ donor register have reduced dramatically each year, from 155,479 in 2021 to just 7,859. That is a worrying development.

Not registering on the organ donor register can create a lack of clarity for families regarding their loved ones' final wishes. It can cause delays in organ retrieval, which means that organs that could have been saved to enhance or preserve life are no longer able to be used, often very urgently, in surgery.

I urge everyone listening to ensure that they are on the organ donor register so that their family, and medical professionals, can be in no doubt about their wishes, should they wish to donate organs. I admit that I did not fully appreciate that requirement to clarify my intentions and that I have just done so in the past five minutes. It does not take long at all—I just did it on the website.

Christine Grahame: I am ashamed to say that I, too, did not realise that. I have been carrying the old card and did not know that I had to register. I just thought that all would be well, because we now have presumed consent.

Paul Sweeney: The figures that I mentioned might reflect some complacency since the law

changed. People might think that it is a done deal unless they feel specifically motivated to rule themselves out, but clarifying which organs or tissue we wish to donate would avoid any ambiguity in the traumatic situation of dealing with the death of a loved one. It is good to address that matter, and I encourage members of the public and colleagues to do so.

I recently visited the anatomy school at the University of Glasgow, where staff raised similar concerns about the drop in the number of people donating their bodies to medical research. The five Scottish universities that teach medicine desperately need people who are willing to donate their bodies for research. It is still an opt-in system, and a generous one, and it is something else that people might want to consider this week.

We should use organ donation week to recognise that much more work is needed if we want organ donation to serve the people of Scotland as well as it can. We can no longer rest on our laurels; we must get people proactively registering, and we must reduce the stigma and silence by actually talking more about the end of life. We do that more in Scotland than we used to. We do talk about hospice and end-of-life palliative care, and people should be happy to discuss with their friends and family what they want to do at the end of their lives and whether they wish to donate their organs.

I reiterate my thanks to the member for lodging the motion, and I am happy to support it in the hope that today will be the start of a new Scotland-wide conversation about a vital topic.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I invite the minister, Jenni Minto, to respond to the debate.

17:32

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): I welcome the opportunity to participate in this debate. I thank members for their contributions, and I particularly thank Christine Grahame for lodging the motion. This week is crucial in raising awareness of the life-saving and life-changing opportunities that organ and tissue donation provides and today's debate has made an important contribution towards that end.

I pass on my love and thanks to Audrey Cameron for the decision that she and her family made about James Borland, someone who Christine Grahame described as a kind and gentle man. He was inspiring, and I thank them so much for their decision. *[Applause.]*

Stephen Kerr spoke about comfort and selfless acts, and I thank him for being so personal in sharing his views, which can only help to ensure

that we increase donor numbers. As Paul Sweeney said, we need a generous spirit, which Stephen Kerr showed, if we are to increase numbers and ensure that as many people as possible get the opportunity of a better life, or of life itself.

Paul Sweeney, and other members, also spoke about the importance of discussing end-of-life care. I was pleased to launch “Palliative Care Matters for All” 10 days ago. That framework recognises the importance of having those conversations.

During my time as minister, I have met people who have donated organs, the families of those who have, sadly, died and who took the decision to donate their organs, and people whose lives have been transformed by receiving transplants. I also observed a live kidney transplant operation at the Royal infirmary of Edinburgh. I pay huge tribute to everyone who has donated organs and to the clinicians and other NHS staff across Scotland who are involved in donation and transplantation.

The Scottish Government marketing campaign for this year’s organ and tissue donation week focuses on the key message, “Don’t leave your loved ones in doubt.” The national campaign is designed to encourage people who are aged 16 and over to record their donation decision on the NHS organ donor register and to tell their loved ones about their decision. I also think that the artwork that Jackie Dunbar described is hugely important, because it is sometimes easier to bring about a difficult conversation through art. I commend the work of Shelagh Swanson and Aberdeen royal infirmary.

Scotland has a good record on the number of people who register their decision on the organ donor register, which I am pleased about. However, we have to do more. Working with stakeholders and using a variety of social media platforms, video on demand and digital and radio platforms, we will be emphasising the message that, if family and friends know about someone’s donation decision in advance, it will make it easier for them to ensure that that is honoured. I thank Erin and Bushra for the conversation that I had with them on that specific issue at their stand in Parliament earlier today. I also thank them for our conversation about death and the importance of sharing our wishes with our loved ones.

Christine Grahame: I am grateful for the publicity on organ and tissue donation, but members who are sitting here in the Parliament did not know that it is preferable to register one way or the other. I know that we are sometimes not the brightest of the bright, but even though there is a campaign, the message is not even getting through to us. How do we step up the

campaign so that it becomes common knowledge that people should help by registering one way or the other?

Jenni Minto: I thank Christine Grahame for that very important intervention. My conversation at lunch time was about that issue and how we can make that more clear. We need to disseminate the message widely, including when people apply for certain things such as driving licences, so that as many people know as possible. I have taken that on board, I have listened to that conversation and I will be discussing it with officials after this debate.

I will draw attention to three key areas of Scottish Government work that supports organ and tissue donation. First, we are working with NHS Blood and Transplant to address concerns about a decline in the pool of eligible donors, as Christine Grahame just mentioned. That is not just across Scotland but in the United Kingdom and internationally. There has also been a decline in family authorisation rates and changes in the perception of the NHS post pandemic.

With the aim of seeking to explore how opportunities can be maximised to increase the number of organ donations, we created the organ donation joint working group. That has taken advice from international experts and I look forward to receiving the group’s report in due course. Inputs from tonight’s debate will clearly also be part of my thought process and evidence gathering.

We are aware that some families find the donation process difficult. I welcome that the NHSBT, as part of its work, will review the donor family authorisation form to seek to improve the experience of donor families and specialist nurses and help to reduce the length of the donation process. I also look forward to receiving next year’s five-year evaluation of the opt-out system, which was introduced in 2021. I am sure that there will be more learning from that.

The second area that I draw attention to is that, earlier this year, we worked to promote living kidney donation as an excellent option for those who face the need for transplantation. That work is supported by the renal education and choices @ home programme, which is being funded by the Scottish Government. REACH, which was established in late 2022, is focused on timely education—a key component of the treatment pathway choice for all patients.

The network of REACH nurse specialists in Scotland provides home visits to people with end-stage kidney disease and their key family members to give them more information on living kidney donation. That approach drives improvement in education and increases the uptake of patients who access pre-emptive living

donor kidney transplantation. Meeting a family that benefited from that is one memory that will never leave me.

Thirdly, I thank Kidney Research UK, which the Scottish Government grant funds to increase awareness of living kidney donation among minority groups in Scotland, which might otherwise face challenges in equitable access to transplantation. The work of our peer educators, whom I met here in the Parliament, provides a vital service informing, educating and helping people to make choices about organ donation.

Again, I thank members for their support and for their speeches, and I once more urge people across Scotland to record their donation decision on the organ donor register and to discuss their decision with their family and friends.

Meeting closed at 17:40.

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