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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 1 October 2025

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

Portfolio Question Time

Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Good afternoon. The first item of business this afternoon is portfolio questions, and the first portfolio is rural affairs, land reform and islands.

Cockle Fishery (Solway Firth)

1. Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what engagement its marine directorate has undertaken to progress any plans to reopen a boat-based cockle fishery on the Solway Firth. (S6O-04994)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): The marine directorate of the Scottish Government has been considering a proposal that it received for a Solway cockle scientific trial using fishing vessels. During portfolio question time on 10 September 2025, the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands assured Mr Carson that a discussion would be arranged with him once further information had been received from the marine directorate, and steps are currently being taken to arrange such a meeting.

Finlay Carson: I thank the minister for his response. He will no doubt know that the Solway Firth has long been recognised as one of Scotland's most productive shellfish areas, with a rich history of cockle fishing that has supported generations of coastal communities. The potential reopening of a vessel-based cockle fishery in my region represents not only an opportunity to revive a once-thriving industry but a chance to deliver sustainable economic growth in a region that faces persistent challenges around rural employment and depopulation.

I have worked with local scientists and stakeholders over the past few years, and it is clear that a well-managed boat-based fishery could deliver environmental safeguards, traceability and economic resilience, all while respecting the unique ecology of the Solway. With that in mind, will the minister and the cabinet secretary agree to meet me and stakeholders to accelerate the process so that the economic benefit is realised sooner rather than later?

Jim Fairlie: Mr Carson has been pursuing the issue for years now—a long time, as far as I am aware—and I spoke to the cabinet secretary before she went away on her trip. I have been told that, as well as the arrangements that have been made for the cabinet secretary to meet Mr Carson, officials from the marine directorate intend to reconvene a meeting with the party that put forward the cockle proposal and the relevant fishers.

Opening a fishery is not a straightforward or quick process, and there are aspects of the proposal that has been made that require some clarification, but arrangements are currently being made for such a meeting as Mr Carson has asked for. I know that officials and the cabinet secretary will keep Mr Carson updated as that develops.

Farming Payments

2. Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government when information on farming payments will be publicly available, in accordance with section 19 of the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024. (S6O-04995)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): Scottish ministers are co-developing the approach to future agricultural support, and our agricultural reform route map will continue to update farmers and crofters on the changes. The rural support plan will set out the intended agricultural reform and the use of the 2024 act.

Our future approach to reporting on the publication of support information will be part of the aforementioned co-development process. In the meantime, the Rural Support (Simplification and Improvement) (Data Publication) Scotland Regulations 2025 will allow us to continue publishing information relating to payment recipients.

Richard Leonard: I thank the minister for that reply.

I wrote to the cabinet secretary as far back as 21 June last year, seeking clarity and a timetable on this. I raised it in Parliament with the minister on 7 May of this year, who told me, in his words, that it is “a complex issue”, but it is not a complex issue—it is a straightforward issue. It is simple. Is the Government on the side of secrecy or on the side of transparency, on the side of concealment or openness? When will it implement legislation passed by Parliament over a year ago so that it is a matter of public record just exactly who is in receipt of the £660 million of public money that is paid out through the farm payment system?

Jim Fairlie: I dispute Richard Leonard's position that we are doing anything other than being open and transparent. I suggest that data will be

published annually by 30 June, following the financial year end. It will remain publicly accessible for two years from the date of publication. In addition, the Scottish Government's publications must be approved by the Information Commissioner's Office. What we are doing is anything other than trying to hold information back.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have requests for two supplementaries—I will take both. Christine Grahame can go first. I remind members that all supplementaries have to be supplemental to the question in the *Business Bulletin*.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I know that the minister recently had a meeting on farrowing crates. Would he consider using rural payments to support animal welfare improvements such as transitioning from farrowing crates to free farrowing?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The question in the *Business Bulletin* relates to the publicly available nature of the information on whatever the farming payments are made to promote. With that in mind, minister, please respond to Ms Grahame.

Jim Fairlie: Certainly, Deputy Presiding Officer.

As the member has just talked about, I recently stated, at the alternative farrowing systems round-table discussion that I chaired in Parliament, that, once a definitive direction as to what will replace farrowing crates is determined, we will consider what options are available. We will continue to listen to and work with the industry and key stakeholders on how best to achieve improvements in animal welfare, as well as monitoring industry information to allow us to determine how to ensure that best practice is delivered.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister—I am not entirely sure that that related to the question in the *Business Bulletin*. We move to a supplementary from Mr Halcro Johnston; I hope that this might be closer to the mark.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests as a partner in a farming business in receipt of farming payments and a member of NFU Scotland.

It was reported in *The Scottish Farmer* that the Government's farming future investment scheme has been heavily oversubscribed, with more than 3,000 farms—including our own—applying to the £14 million scheme. What consideration is the Scottish Government giving to NFUS calls to increase funding for the scheme in 2025-26, and when will the offer of grants and payments to those farms that accept the offers start being made?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Again, if we could relate all the supplementaries to the actual question in the *Business Bulletin*—that includes the minister's responses—that would be really helpful.

Jim Fairlie: Okay—I will try to get my answer somewhere in relation to the question that was originally asked. We will make publicly available the amount of money that is going to be delivered via the farming investment scheme. We will, I hope, publish that information as farmers get it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 3 has not been lodged.

Domestic Food and Drink Markets

4. **Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government when it last engaged with the United Kingdom Government on domestic food and drink markets. (S6O-04997)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): The Scottish Government has consistently urged successive United Kingdom Governments to safeguard our domestic market and ensure fair competition for producers. However, recent trade deals, especially those affecting beef, sheep and dairy, have exposed Scottish farmers to increased risk, amid rising costs and an uncertain trade environment.

Meanwhile, meaningful collaboration between the Government and industry is vital to assess those trade impacts and protect domestic producers. It is, therefore, deeply concerning that the current UK Government shows only limited ministerial engagement on trade issues, despite the devolved nature of, and shared economic interests in, many aspects.

Emma Harper: Farmers have warned that our food security is under serious threat as a result of the UK Government's decision to scrap skilled worker code 5111, which effectively blocks farms from hiring skilled overseas workers. That leaves pig, poultry, dairy and horticultural producers struggling to fill vital jobs. In Dumfries and Galloway, more than 25 dairy farms depend on staff from the Philippines and other nations to keep operations running.

Does the minister agree that that is yet another example of a UK Government that is ignorant of, and does not care about, the needs of Scotland's farmers?

Jim Fairlie: It is clear that the UK immigration system no longer meets the needs of our economy, our public services or our communities. Scotland urgently requires tailored migration routes, such as the rural visa pilot, to reflect our distinct needs.

Labour shortages in the food and drink sector stem largely from Brexit, which led to the departure of many European Union citizens and the loss of vital skills. The UK Government's removal of skilled worker code 5111 has worsened that situation, severely hindering the recruitment of overseas talent in sensitive sectors such as pig, poultry and dairy and making it unnecessarily difficult to fill essential roles and support industry sustainability.

Indeed, as the member is aware, an article in *Farmers Guide* by Aleksandra Cupriak, on 29 September, warns that the UK's food security is at risk following the decision to remove skilled worker code 5111, taking skilled roles off the temporary shortage list, despite maintaining the code for builders. I would argue that folk who are working in the pig, poultry, dairy or processing sectors are skilled enough to keep food on our plates, so we should have a scheme that would allow us to issue visas to bring them to Scotland.

Rural Crime (Support for Farmers)

5. Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the agriculture minister has had with the justice secretary regarding support for farmers in relation to rural crime. (S6O-04998)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): I have not spoken directly to justice ministers about rural crime, but clearly issues such as machinery and livestock theft have a hugely detrimental effect on Scotland's rural communities, including our hard-working farmers and crofters. A wide range of rural organisations, including NFU Scotland, are represented in the Scottish Partnership Against Rural Crime—SPARC—alongside Police Scotland. SPARC aims to prevent, reduce and tackle rural criminal activity and, in association with local partnerships, is seen as a success story in combating rural crime. The Scottish Government is a member of SPARC and is fully supportive of its work.

Liam Kerr: Farmers will be surprised and disappointed by the minister's lack of action on rural crime. According to NFU Mutual, the cost of rural crime in Scotland increased by 34.9 per cent in 2022-23 and cost the Scottish economy £1.2 million last year. Around 2.7 million quad bikes and all-terrain vehicles were stolen in the past year and, last month, five were stolen in Aberdeenshire, possibly from the same outfit. What specific actions will the minister and/or his justice colleagues take in order to prevent north-east farmers from suffering from rural crime? When will those farmers see results?

Jim Fairlie: I take Liam Kerr's points on board. I accept that farm theft is a heinous crime that takes away the tools of a working farm. Farmers can do

a number of things for themselves in order to protect their vehicles, such as placing blocks on the ground or using spray paint. As I have already stated, the Scottish Government is a member of SPARC and we continue to work with the industry to ensure that stakeholders have the information that they need to protect their businesses.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Previously, the Minister for Victims and Community Safety admitted that the Scottish National Party Government missed a legislative consent memorandum on a rural theft bill that was passed by a previous Conservative Government. In the light of the recent news of the rising cost of quad bike theft in Scotland, which Liam Kerr has referred to, does Jim Fairlie accept that the SNP's significant oversight on the issue has left farmers and rural businesses such as those in my constituency in the Scottish Borders much worse off?

Jim Fairlie: No, I defy that point. The Scottish Government has done everything in its power to ensure that Scotland's rural communities are protected and supported at every turn.

Malting Barley Farmers

6. Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what long-term action it will take to support farmers growing malting barley. (S6O-04999)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): I am aware that Scottish arable producers face significant challenges, including volatile markets and extreme weather. That is why the Scottish Government continues to provide certainty through direct support via the basic payment scheme, as set out in our vision for agriculture, in stark contrast to current and past United Kingdom Governments. This year, the Scottish Government launched its future farming investment scheme, offering at least £14 million to accelerate change in Scottish agriculture and support the Government's vision. With 7,500 applications received, Scotland's farmers and crofters have shown a strong commitment to key outcomes such as emissions reduction and nature restoration.

Meghan Gallacher: The minister will be aware that farmers growing malting barley have faced challenges this year, including a difficult harvest, falling prices, increased production costs and reduced demand from the Scotch whisky industry. Worryingly, it is anticipated that the challenges facing the industry will be long term and will affect farmers for years to come. Will the Scottish Government commit to increasing farm payments to compensate farmers for the losses that they are incurring? Will the Scottish Government liaise

directly with the Scotch whisky industry to ensure that arable farmers are supported?

Jim Fairlie: I take Meghan Gallacher's points on board. We continuously engage with the Scotch Whisky Association as well as the Scottish agricultural community. In fact, the First Minister went to the White House to ensure that he was representing the Scotch Whisky Association to get the best possible deal, which should feed back into the industry. As far as funding is concerned, I reiterate that the Government has made sure that we keep direct payments in place, which is giving farmers in Scotland the security that they need.

Inshore Fishing (Offshore Wind Installations)

7. Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on whether the existing conditions and regime that seek to protect inshore fishing from the impact of any loss of fishing grounds due to the seabed installation of cables for, and construction of, offshore wind installations, require to be reformed in order to provide full compensation for any loss of fishing revenue as a result of having to avoid an area of 0.25 nautical miles from any such cables. (S6O-05000)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): The Scottish Government very much values the fisheries sector and recognises the need to address fishers' concerns in relation to offshore wind development. We want a prosperous future for both sectors.

In relation to fishing over cables, fishers should continue to use their expert judgment and knowledge to guide where they fish. However, I agree that it is right to explore the matter. The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands has asked officials to work with the Scottish Offshore Wind Energy Council's barriers to deployment group, which brings both sectors together to consider solutions, and to report back to her.

Fergus Ewing: East-coast inshore fishermen are seeing valuable fishing grounds lost because they cannot fish within a quarter of a nautical mile over any seabed cabling that leads to offshore wind installations.

In the headlong dash for offshore wind projects—some apparently with little discernible direct benefit to Scotland—fishermen are simply not getting the compensation that they deserve. The Scottish National Party stood up for our fishermen for half a century. Will the Scottish Government now stand up for them by instigating an independent review to consider how our fishermen can get a fair deal from their own Government?

Jim Fairlie: I dispute the suggestion that fishermen cannot fish over cables. My understanding is that there is no specific exclusion of fishing activities over or near a submarine cable, but it is an offence for fishers to wilfully or negligently damage cables or pipelines.

On whether there will be an independent review, there is already a cross-Government and cross-industry review looking at all the issues that Fergus Ewing has raised, which will be taken forward when the cabinet secretary returns.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): In committee this morning, we heard from fishing stakeholders who said that everyone knows the value of oil and gas and the renewables industries, but that decision makers often forget about the economic value of fishing.

We need to plot the areas where fishing occurs and factor that in when we are planning for new developments. We desperately need a spatial plan for our seas. When will the Scottish Government bring that forward?

Jim Fairlie: I am not privy to conversations that took place this morning.

I am sorry, but I have completely forgotten the question that Rhoda Grant asked—I was reading something. Could she ask it again?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No, we do not go backwards, I am afraid.

Ms Grant, given that the minister cannot now recall your question, he will probably wish to agree to write to you—and, indeed, all members—to say what his answer would have been if he had remembered the question. Minister, do you undertake to do that?

Jim Fairlie: I am happy to answer the question if the member—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No, we do not go back and repeat questions, minister. Will you respond to the chamber with your answer in writing?

Jim Fairlie: Yes.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The truth is that fishermen are increasingly being squeezed out of prime fishing grounds. NnG Offshore Wind agreed compensation for people using static and mobile gear. However, since then, wind farms have given compensation only to people using static gear—the creel fishermen. Will the minister intervene and make sure that all wind farms give compensation to all parts of the sector?

Jim Fairlie: As Willie Rennie knows, fisheries compensation is a private matter between the wind developers and the fishers. The Scottish ministers have no regulatory or statutory

mechanism for involvement in leveraging such financial payments. However, I am quite sure that, if the member writes to the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands, she will pick up that point for him.

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The common theme in most of the answers today is, "We're talking, we're talking, we're talking", but we do not see any action. Fishermen are facing the problem of spatial squeeze right now, every single day, and they need some action. When is the Government going to act and put something in place, rather than just talking?

Jim Fairlie: As usual, I will respond to Mr Eagle by saying that the talking will continue, because that is how we get resolutions, and that is what will happen.

Land Reform (Scotland) Bill

8. Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): To ask the Scottish Government what benefits it anticipates the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill will deliver for rural and island communities, including in relation to breaking up concentrated land ownership and ensuring that land is used in the public interest and communities are not locked out of decision making. (S6O-05001)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): Scotland has one of the most concentrated patterns of land ownership in the world, so the bill sets out ambitious proposals that will change how land is managed in our rural and island communities for the better.

The bill will prohibit certain land sales of more than 1,000 hectares until ministers can consider the sustainability of local communities, and it will require the owners of large landholdings to engage with local communities about how they use their land. It also includes measures to give greater protection and fairness to tenant farming, making it fit for the future.

Ash Regan: Former MSP Andy Wightman has called the current Land Reform (Scotland) Bill

"the least ambitious ... ever introduced",

saying that it creates

"new complexities, friction and conflict in the land market for no evident gain."

Scotland cannot afford a land reform bill that just tinkers around the edges while ignoring the harsh reality of concentrated land ownership. Rural communities are being locked out of housing and local economies, as land and property are treated as investments.

Will the Government commit to ensuring that the bill will release land for genuinely affordable community-led housing and, possibly, self-

builders, rather than add bureaucracy and leave local people behind?

Jim Fairlie: I dispute Ash Regan's point. The bill will, for the first time in Scotland, give ministers powers to ensure that the public interest is considered when more than 1,000 hectares of land is being sold. The Scottish ministers will require land to be sold in lots, and those lots will be offered to different buyers, where ministers determine that that could make local communities more sustainable.

The bill also seeks to empower communities with more opportunities to own land through the introduction of advance notice of certain sales from large landholdings of more than 1,000 hectares.

There are a number of different measures in the bill, which I am quite sure will take us forward in the journey towards proper land reform.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Thanks to the radical action that has already been taken on land reform by the Scottish Government, many community groups have been able to successfully purchase estates. Today, there are two potential buyouts at different stages in my constituency—the Bays of Harris and Bernera. How will the next phase of land reform legislation further support such community buyouts, particularly those on crofting land?

Jim Fairlie: Scotland has had a proud history of land reform since devolution, and I wish the communities in Mr Allan's constituency well in their potential buyouts.

Alongside what I said in my original answer, the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill will require greater transparency of land sales from large landholdings so that local communities are informed about when land is to be sold and have greater opportunity to make a community right-to-buy application.

The Government continues to make further improvements to community rights to buy. We also introduced the Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill in June, which will give crofters and their communities a greater say in how the land that they work with is used.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): Thanks to the campaigning efforts of the local community, the sale of Kinloch castle on the Isle of Rum by NatureScot will be subject to a public interest test that will be applied to potential buyers. The Scottish Government's Kinloch castle study found that the most important aspects of a sale were long-term contribution to the community, as well as to nature, sustainability, culture and the local economy.

Given that study and the tenacity of the people of Rum, does it not make sense to include in the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill a public interest test for the buyers in land transactions?

Jim Fairlie: As I said, the bill is currently going through Parliament, and I am quite sure that Mercedes Villalba will make that point to the cabinet secretary.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on rural affairs, land reform and islands. There will be a very short pause before we move on to the next portfolio to allow front-bench teams to quickly change positions.

Health and Social Care

NHS Grampian (Meetings)

1. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands)

(Con): To ask the Scottish Government when it last met with the chair of NHS Grampian and what issues were discussed. (S6O-05002)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): The chair of NHS Grampian participated in the most recent meeting of the NHS Grampian assurance board on 23 September. The board, which provides oversight of NHS Grampian's improvement plan, comprises Scottish Government officials and NHS Grampian leaders. The agenda for that meeting included the financial position of the local system, engagement between NHS Grampian leaders and the local workforce, and improvement plans for unscheduled care.

Douglas Ross: As an MSP, I regularly write to NHS Grampian to raise serious concerns on behalf of constituents. The board has now taken to responding to MSPs by saying that it will not meet the 20-day target for a response. However, it is not that the board is not meeting the target—it is missing it completely. Months are going by without my getting any reply.

I raised an issue with the health board on 22 May. It was raised here, in Parliament, with the First Minister on 5 June, and we have still had no response. In another case, I contacted NHS Grampian on 29 April. I have had a number of automatic responses to say that it is still looking into the matter, but there has been no reply. The constituent whom I was advocating on behalf of has now passed away. They had no closure on the issue that they raised with their elected member in Parliament.

Does the minister agree that that is simply unacceptable? What will he do to encourage NHS Grampian to fully respond to those serious concerns?

Neil Gray: To give a direct response to the question, yes, I agree that that is unacceptable. I

expect complaints or concerns that are raised with national health service boards to be responded to timeously, regardless of whether they have been raised by elected members or by individual patients, and I expect progress to be made in resolving the issues that have been raised.

A new chief executive, Laura Skaife-Knight, has just taken up post at NHS Grampian—she has been in post for just over a week. I will ensure that Mr Ross's concerns about ensuring that there is better communication with elected members are raised with her. What Mr Ross has raised with me just now is not the standard that I would expect, and I pass on my sincere condolences to the family of his constituent.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I appreciate the cabinet secretary's continued focus on NHS Grampian and the issues that it has been facing. It is vital that patients in my constituency receive the care that they need when they need it. Will the cabinet secretary outline what work the Scottish Government has done and is doing to stabilise and support NHS Grampian to ensure that patients are able to move quickly through the system?

Neil Gray: I agree fully with Karen Adam. The whole purpose of the escalation work with NHS Grampian is to ensure that local patients have access to responsive, high-quality, safe and sustainable services. To that end, we are providing enhanced scrutiny and support to ensure that the health board has robust improvement plans in place and implements them effectively. The Government's assurance board, which oversees that activity, will actively monitor the development and implementation of several NHS Grampian work strands, from improvements in the overall financial position to specific work regarding better patient flow in line with the recommendations that were made in the independent diagnostic report over the summer.

I am confident that, through those actions, we will soon have a clear plan to stabilise the system in NHS Grampian and set the right conditions for the necessary longer-term transformational work that will be done under the new chief executive.

NHS Operations (Recourse for Patients)

2. Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what recourse is open to patients who have experienced complications following a national health service operation. (S6O-05003)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): Any patient who experiences complications following surgery should discuss their concerns with the healthcare professionals who are responsible for their care. In addition,

everyone has the right to make a complaint about the NHS treatment that they have received, and their concerns should be addressed at a local level through the NHS complaints-handling procedure. When that is not possible, the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman is the second and final stage of the process.

Fulton MacGregor: Last week, I met a constituent, Patrick Higgins, who underwent a routine operation. He now has severe mobility issues due to a nerve in his leg accidentally being severed. Patrick feels that he is being ignored by the health services that are involved in his care, which cannot give him clarity on why the complication occurred or on what can be done to address it. The cabinet secretary will know that I have written to him this week regarding this case, but what can be done to ensure that the NHS has policies in place to ensure the least stressful and best outcomes for patients in what I understand is the very rare event of complications?

Neil Gray: I thank Fulton MacGregor for raising that case with me here, in the chamber, and in writing. I am very sorry to hear of Mr Higgins's situation, and I will provide a full response to Fulton MacGregor's correspondence as soon as possible.

Following an adverse event, no patient should be left in the position that they do not know what has happened. When an NHS board undertakes a significant adverse event review, the patient or their family should be kept fully informed throughout that process.

Furthermore, the Patient Rights (Scotland) Act 2011 and supporting legislation provide a specific right for people to make complaints and place a duty on NHS boards to thoroughly investigate and respond to any concerns that have been raised. If a person remains dissatisfied following the board's decision on their complaint, they can ask the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman to consider the complaint.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): My constituents Roseanna Clarkin and Lauren McDougall have a petition before the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee relating to complications that have arisen from the use of surgical mesh by the NHS. The Scottish Government has previously indicated that it will monitor the progress of the new British Hernia Society registry, to gather more information about the scale of the complications that have arisen from the use of mesh in hernia repairs. I previously submitted freedom of information requests to health boards across Scotland, and I got information from some health boards but not from others. We have the British Hernia Society registry, but will the cabinet secretary ensure that all health boards retain records on complications

arising from the use of hernia mesh and that that information is made available to inform decision making?

Neil Gray: I thank Katy Clark for her advocacy on behalf of her constituents and for the work that her constituents have done through the petitions process. I appeared before the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee last week, and I have found the petitions system to be an excellent means by which members of the public can raise their concerns directly in Parliament. It is a very effective process.

I know that the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health has met Katy Clark on the matter, and I will consider the position that she has asked for and make sure that either the minister or I reply in writing.

Hypermobility

3. Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its approach to considering a hypermobility pathway for healthcare, in line with that being brought forward in Wales. (S6O-05004)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): I reassure members that the Scottish Government, through the Scottish rare disease implementation board and through wider engagement, is continuing our commitment to improving the lives of people living with rare conditions and enabling resources to support clinicians.

Guidance on assessment and referral for hypermobility is available on Healthcare Improvement Scotland's right decision service. I am aware that Ehlers-Danlos Support UK has been working with NHS Wales to co-produce a national pathway for those with hypermobility disorders in Wales.

I am waiting to see the outcome of that work and any learning that can be applied to Scotland. We will continue to implement our action plan to support people with rare conditions in Scotland.

Emma Roddick: As the minister knows, I, too, have been engaging with Ehlers-Danlos Support UK about the many cases that it has come across in which folk have struggled to get access to diagnosis and treatment, often being bounced from one specialist to another without any conclusions. I have appreciated the minister giving her time to speak to me about that previously. Will she speak more to what resources have been allocated or are planned to be allocated for developing and implementing a pathway, whether or not it echoes the pathway in Wales?

Jenni Minto: I thank Ms Roddick for the work that she has been doing to raise my awareness, and awareness more widely in the Parliament, of hypermobility conditions. As she knows, we have consulted on a long-term conditions framework. I am aware that representations have been made by the rare diseases community, and those are being fed in. Those views will be captured in the review work, and the allocation of resources will be determined as that work progresses, in line with the Scottish Parliament's budget work.

"Women's Health Plan"

4. Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the progress being made in developing the next phase of the "Women's Health Plan". (S6O-05005)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): We have been speaking with women and girls, gathering evidence and consulting with interested organisations to develop the next phase of the plan. The first stage was completed in 2024, and we want to make sure that the next phase builds on that progress. I am pleased to say that work has been progressing well, and I hope that the next phase will be published in January 2026.

Carol Mochan: I thank the minister for that update and for the way in which she keeps us all apprised of progress on the plan. I know that the minister will be aware of the situation regarding maternity services in Wigtownshire and the concerns around last week's decision to keep services at Galloway community hospital closed. That comes despite strong opposition from the Galloway community hospital action group, which fears that the closure puts mothers and babies at risk. The group has described current maternity care in Wigtownshire as being

"like something out of the Middle Ages".

Even the new Patient Safety Commissioner for Scotland, who met the group only two weeks ago, feels that there is a "gap in care".

Women are fearful, so will the minister join me and other interested parties in meeting the group to listen to its concerns directly and hear the testimonies of some of the mothers affected?

Jenni Minto: I very much appreciate the dialogue that we have been able to have across the chamber on the "Women's Health Plan". I am well aware of the situation with maternity services in Wigtownshire, having met Finlay Carson and Emma Harper.

Safety is the key concern, but I have to remember that the integration joint boards make those decisions. The cabinet secretary is due to

meet the Patient Safety Commissioner shortly, and ministers would be happy to engage more with the community.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): It is deeply concerning that the United Kingdom Labour Government has been criticised by a coalition of charities that have said that women are

"not a special interest group"

and that they are being deprioritised, with targets cut in half and funding slashed south of the border. A range of women's health issues appear in my constituency casework regularly. Will the minister further outline how the Scottish Government is prioritising women's health and ensuring that women are supported through the Scottish National Party Government's investment?

Jenni Minto: I recognise what the member says, as my own constituency inbox receives inquiries on women's health issues.

As we move to the next phase of the plan, we will continue to invest in women's health. We have provided £8.8 million to target long waits for gynaecology, £4 million to enhance general practitioner services and support access to long-acting reversible contraception, £1.5 million for miscarriage care and £1 million each year to broaden access to cancer screening. We have also invested more than £21 million this financial year by delivering the equally safe fund to prevent and eradicate violence against women and girls.

We will continue to do all in our power to seek the best outcomes for the health of women and girls throughout their lives.

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): Earlier this year, 1,200 women were asked about the impact of the "Women's Health Plan" and 90 per cent still had concerns about accessing comprehensive health screening for conditions such as diabetes, heart disease and female-specific issues. Many expressed the fear that there is just not enough help for people suffering from menopause. What will be different about the next phase of the plan that will mean that it will ensure that the concerns of women, including those of my constituents in Glasgow, are addressed?

Jenni Minto: I welcome Annie Wells to her shadow portfolio on women's health and to the group where we have been sharing progress in that area.

It is important to recognise that Scotland was the first of the four nations to produce a women's health plan. We recognise that we have a distance to go, but with the leadership that we have in the Scottish Government, the cross-party support, and we should not forget the amazing support of the women's health champion Professor Anna Glasier,

we are making a difference. We have been very clear about ensuring that we are bringing women of all ages into the work on the next phase of the plan, and I hope that Annie Wells can welcome it when it is launched in January next year, as I do.

Spinal Injuries (Support)

5. Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what provisions are in place to support people in hospitals and care settings who have serious spinal injuries resulting in paralysis from the neck down. (S6O-05006)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): The Queen Elizabeth national spinal injuries unit in Glasgow is responsible for the acute and lifelong care of all adult patients with traumatic and non-progressive spinal cord injury. We are committed to ensuring that all adults who require rehabilitation in all settings have timely access to the right services at the right time.

The once for Scotland rehabilitation approach sets out commitments that will shape a national programme of improvement work, under which national health service boards will be expected to demonstrate rehabilitation provision in a variety of settings, including in-patient and community settings, and at a range of intensities.

Christine Grahame: My constituent, Graham Wright, suffered a freak accident last year. His spine was paralysed from the neck down. Sadly, he died recently. Although his wife had praise for the three months that he spent in the spinal unit at Queen Elizabeth university hospital in Glasgow, the planned transfer to Borders general hospital exposed dreadful deficiencies in its ability to look after him, including not even knowing initially how to use a hoist.

Will the cabinet secretary meet my constituent to hear her experience, as it is disturbing that in an area known for rugby, horse-riding and agriculture, where a spinal injury might not be so uncommon, the appropriate training for spinal injuries appears to be lacking in the local hospital?

Neil Gray: I am grateful to Christine Grahame for raising the case. I am sorry to hear of Mr Wright's passing, and I offer my sincere condolences to his family for their loss. I know personally about the truly remarkable specialist care that is provided at the spinal injuries unit at Queen Elizabeth university hospital, because my father was a patient there.

I am concerned by the point about Borders general hospital that Ms Grahame has raised. I expect national health service boards to provide high-quality, person-centred care and support for all people. It is always disappointing to hear of

instances where that care has fallen short of the standard that is expected.

I hope that Christine Grahame will understand and appreciate that it is not appropriate for me to comment on individual cases. However, I welcome a discussion to better understand the circumstances, and I invite her to write to me with further details so that we can arrange a meeting to explore them fully.

NHS Dumfries and Galloway (Financial Support)

6. Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to support NHS Dumfries and Galloway in addressing financial pressures. (S6O-05007)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): Following NHS Dumfries and Galloway's escalation for finance, the Scottish Government has provided increased oversight and engagement to ensure that the board is provided with support that is commensurate with its financial circumstances.

So far, that has included an on-going whole clinical services review, which involves NHS Dumfries and Galloway closely collaborating with the Scottish Government in order to identify changes to its models of care and improve sustainability while protecting patient outcomes. In addition, NHS Dumfries and Galloway has received £7.4 million of additional funding to support its financial position.

Oliver Mundell: Any additional money is welcome, but with a record deficit of £58 million, as predicted by the health and social care partnership for 2025-26, the board's financial position continues to deteriorate.

Local communities have real concerns about the impact of drastic reductions in spending. Fundamentally, it will not be possible to save such a sum without reducing services, which will leave rural communities even more isolated. Cost pressures are starting to dictate services, rather than, as the cabinet secretary talked about, services becoming more patient led.

Neil Gray: When such situations arise, I expect us to move to a position in which we have services that are sustainable but that ensure the needs of the population that they serve are being met. Yes, difficult decisions will be required across not only our health services but our public services in general, because of the corrosive impact that years of high inflation have had on our spendability, as well as the demand that is coming through.

That is why it is so important that we use tools, such as the population health framework that we

have set out, to shift the balance of care, reform our health and social care services, reduce demand and address demand more directly. I will continue to work with NHS Dumfries and Galloway, and its chief executive Julie White, to ensure that that will be the case in Dumfries and Galloway as it is elsewhere.

Dentistry (Skilled Worker Visa)

7. Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the potential impact on Scotland's dentistry sector of the United Kingdom Labour Administration's recent changes to the skilled worker visa. (S6O-05008)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): Home Office changes to skilled worker visas mean that dental care professionals such as therapists, hygienists, technicians and nurses are no longer supported. According to the General Dental Council, more than one fifth of new applicants in 2024, which is more than 2,000 workers, were from non-UK backgrounds.

It is clearer than ever that the UK Government is not interested in Scotland's healthcare sector's migration needs. I am sure that Jackie Dunbar will agree that the only way that Scotland can create the immigration system that it needs is with full powers as an independent country.

Jackie Dunbar: I totally agree with the minister. It is clear that the UK Labour Government is determined to lurch even more to the right on immigration than even the Tories did while in power. That is having a hugely damaging impact on constituencies such as mine that rely on skilled workers in health and social care.

What assessment has been made of the harms that those Labour policies are having on the wider health and social care sector, including dentistry? Will the minister join me in calling for the repeal of the damaging policies by this reckless UK Labour Government?

Jenni Minto: I want to let members know that, in August, I wrote to Stephen Kinnock, the Minister of State for Care, to highlight our concerns at a time of continued pressure on the dental workforce. The UK Labour Government's decision will have consequences for hard-working people who make such a valuable contribution to our communities and our healthcare system. The Scottish Government will continue to call on the UK Government to reverse the proposals.

The UK Government has not worked with us on developing a Scottish visa or a Scottish graduate visa route, despite repeated asks. We are clear that Scotland should have an immigration system that meets Scotland's economic and demographic

needs. The best way for Scotland to do that is to be an independent country.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): The minister will be aware that more than 300 dentists have taken early retirement since 2020, at the same time as 36,000 patients have been forced to go private. It is clear that the funding model is still not working. The Scottish Dental Association reports that nine out of 10 dentists say that the national health service is not an attractive place to build and maintain a career and that further reform is needed. Will the Government listen to them, stop more dentists leaving the NHS and ensure that our rural areas are not left as dental deserts?

Jenni Minto: I made it clear in November 2023, when we introduced the new payment system for dentists—which has been welcomed by dentists—that that was the start of a journey. We are talking about governance and training, and we provided more investment in dentistry in the most recent budget, which the Conservatives did not support. We are moving along with dentists, whom I thank for their work in ensuring that Scotland's teeth health is as good as it can be.

Can we do more? Yes. Are we doing more? Yes.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The minister is not living in reality. The reality is that we are losing NHS dentists. The Cupar Dentist is providing an emergency service only, and it has been like that for months. We have lost dentists in Newburgh, Leven and Glenrothes. In many parts of Fife, people simply cannot get treatment. The minister surely has to accept that the payment review that she introduced in November 2023 is just not working. When will she get back to reality?

Jenni Minto: I am living in reality. The conversations that I have had with a number of dentists show that they are pleased with the funding change that we introduced two years ago. However, as I said to Mr Whittle, do we have to do more? Yes, we do.

Unfortunately, we have one hand tied behind our back, given that the UK Government has changed visa allowances, which affects our ability to ensure that people can come into the country so that we have the right dental teams. We are investing in education to open up more places for dentists in Scotland. I point out that NHS Fife has benefited from the Scottish dental access initiative, which enables more dentists to open up practices in Fife. I regularly have such conversations with NHS Fife.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Paul Sweeney, who joins us online, to ask a brief supplementary question.

I give one last call for Paul Sweeney. Are you there?

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I ask for a brief supplementary question. We have now lost a bit of time.

Paul Sweeney: We know that the problems with NHS dentistry are caused primarily by dentists leaving the NHS to go private. The Scottish Government's response has been to promise to train roughly 10 extra dentists a year, while hundreds of migrant dentists are unable to work as NHS dentists because of huge waiting lists to access conversion training. Will the minister stop blaming the UK Government over a marginal dispute about skilled worker visas and take responsibility for creating an effective training and retention plan to serve the ambitions of Scotland?

Jenni Minto: I politely point out to Mr Sweeney that the waiting list for dentists from international countries to sit the examinations is down to the use of reserved powers. Your minister—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Jenni Minto: My apologies. The Minister of State for Care made a decision not to follow up on the request that we and the other devolved nations made. I call on Mr Sweeney to write to Mr Kinnock to try to persuade him of the need to get more dentists into this country.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can squeeze in question 8, but I need brief questions and brief responses.

Alcohol-specific Deaths

8. Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports that alcohol-specific deaths in Scotland remain above 1,000 for the 12th year in a row. (S6O-05009)

The Minister for Drug and Alcohol Policy and Sport (Maree Todd): The first thing to say is that behind those figures are individuals who have lost their lives, families who are in mourning and communities that are feeling the loss of those people.

The number of alcohol-specific deaths fell by 7 per cent to 1,185 in 2024, which is the lowest that it has been since 2019. The decrease is welcome, but we know that the number of deaths remains far too high and that all of them are preventable. The Scottish Government is committed to tackling alcohol harm and has allocated more than £160 million to alcohol and drug initiatives and services in 2025-26. Last year, we increased the minimum

unit price as part of our world-leading strategy to 65p, and we expanded access to treatment, including residential rehabilitation. As a refreshed alcohol and drug strategic plan develops, I will continue to act, guided by evidence, to reduce harm and to support those who are affected.

Roz McCall: Any fall in the number of deaths is welcome, but Alcohol Focus Scotland says that the level of deaths is “appallingly high” and that it is more than double what it was 30 years ago. In response to that, the minister said in an interview last week that she was considering increasing alcohol prices annually, in line with inflation. Will the minister confirm whether that is Government policy? Rather than doubling down on hard-working Scots with even more tax, why will the Government not take a positive approach, back our Right to Addiction Recovery (Scotland) Bill at stage 1 next week and enshrine in law the right for treatment for those who are struggling with alcohol addiction?

Maree Todd: The minimum unit pricing policy is significant and world leading. It is vitally important that the minimum unit price is uprated on a regular basis to ensure that it is impactful. What I said in the interview last week was that automatic uprating was a reasonable idea to consider. Although the formula would be hotly contested and debated, it would be a useful thing to do. It is not yet Government policy; we are considering how to proceed with it. Undoubtedly, as the prices of everything increase, the minimum unit price will need to increase.

We will have the stage 1 debate on the Right to Addiction Recovery (Scotland) Bill next week. I recognise that the Parliament has had its say through the lead committee's report on the bill. The committee cannot commend the bill to the Parliament because there are so many flaws in it. However, we will certainly listen to the debate and make our position clear next week.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on health and social care. There will be a short pause before we move to the next item of business to allow front-bench teams to change positions.

Mobile Phones in Schools

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-19123, in the name of Pam Duncan-Glancy, on mobile phones in schools.

14:52

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Presiding Officer,

"It helped me focus."

"Fights and bullying at breaks have got better—because no one has their phones in class to organise them."

"I spend more time talking to my friends now."

"I'm glad the temptation to go on my phone has gone."

That is what young people told me about a ban on mobile phones in school classrooms when I met them last week, and that is why Scottish Labour has lodged a straightforward motion with a straightforward purpose: to ban mobile phones for learners in classrooms across Scotland in order to help to make classrooms calm and safe places to learn. We propose that because education is crucial. It is the ladder to opportunity for all, and it is our job to move anything that stands in the way of that vital goal.

All colleagues across the chamber know that there are many obstacles to that goal and that the atmosphere in too many classrooms is challenging for learning and teaching. Teachers are overworked and are firefighting disruption. The scaffolding that should be there to hold our young people up—timely mental health support, speech and language services and educational psychologists—has all been stretched thin, and in some cases it is non-existent. Bullying is up by nearly 200 per cent in just five years. A School Leaders Scotland survey found that pupil behaviour is increasingly difficult to manage, and the Government's behaviour in Scottish schools research cites phones and social media as a factor, recognising that they are seriously disruptive.

Amid all of that, we are still allowing that disruption in classes and letting the online world pour into the school day through the rectangle in a young person's pocket, with the constant of notifications, group chats, viral clickbait and rising amounts of harmful content. The cabinet secretary says that headteachers are empowered to end that if they see fit, but that is not leadership; that is passing the buck. Local delivery is indeed crucial, but it is the Government's job to set clear expectations, and that is why I cannot accept the Government's amendment to the motion. It leaves us where we are now, and I am not prepared to stand still on the future for our young people.

The pupils I met last week told me that, when the temptation is removed, they talk to their friends more, they concentrate more, they feel calmer and they can hear themselves think. A national ban on phones in class would free young people and empower staff and parents. It would change the temperature in the room and draw a sensible boundary during lessons so that pupils can concentrate and teachers can teach. Importantly, it can be implemented in a way that involves young people, engages parents and empowers schools. Leaving it up to headteachers lacks leadership and passes the buck.

Where the Government has failed to lead, schools have stepped in. In Portobello, the model is simple and it is delivered in a rights-protecting way. Pupils keep their property, but it is locked in a pouch for class and unlocked at lunch—not at break. Pupils can unlock it to call home if they need to, and pupils who need more regular access to their phones—for example, pupils with additional support needs or caring responsibilities and some pupils in the senior phase who might need messages about work—can access them. In Notre Dame high school in Glasgow, staff and pupils manage a clear off and away rule, together with classroom routines that everyone understands. Those are two different models with the same outcomes: more attention, fewer flashpoints and more time on task.

However, leadership cannot stop at the school gate. The Government issued guidance and then shrugged. We therefore have a postcode lottery, with teachers left to bear the weight of that crucial decision and parents left to navigate mixed messages. Empowerment without direction is abdication, and our motion corrects that.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): I am interested in the member's point about a postcode lottery. In Scotland, the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 makes it clear that statutory responsibility for the delivery of education rests with local authorities. Our 32 local authorities very often interpret the curriculum in different ways. Is the Labour Party now suggesting that we repeal the 1980 act and centralise education? I am keen to hear the message on that.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I draw the cabinet secretary's attention to section 2 of the 1980 act, which has regulating-making powers for the Government in a wide range of areas. One has to wonder how on earth anything that the Government wants to do in schools can get done if the education secretary does not think that she has any power over schools. That leaves us in a situation where we can see an abdication of responsibility for Scotland's children and young people.

In our motion, we ask for national clarity, with no phones in class for learners, clear expectations, clear consequences and clear exceptions, including for pupils with ASN and those who need devices for medical reasons, for example, as I set out. National guidance should codify decisions on all of that, so that families are confident, staff are empowered and young people are freed to learn.

We must acknowledge that technology is with us and that, of course, it has potential for our nation. Despite the Scottish National Party's promises, however, not all pupils yet have the free iPads to learn on that they were promised, so some are relying on personal devices when teachers are using them in lessons. Therein lies inequity, however, in that not all pupils have devices. I am clear that we should not bake inequality into pedagogy by relying on personal smartphones where schools need devices for learning.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: In the absence of the iPads that the SNP promised, where teachers want to use devices in lessons in schools where bans exist, teachers have the option to say, "Take out your device for this task" for a specific purpose and in a specific period.

I am happy to take the intervention.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You do not really have time, Ms Duncan-Glancy.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I apologise to Karen Adam, but I cannot take her intervention.

With a national ban, the default changes from phones first to learning first. That is what we are asking for. We are asking the Government to take a practical, proportionate step, with a classroom rule being implemented with professional judgment and involving young people.

The Government has dithered and delayed. Schools have improvised, parents have worried and pupils have paid the price. Today, the Parliament has a choice: we can let schools keep muddling through or we can set a clear expectation that every child in Scotland deserves a calm, phone-free lesson as standard, not as a postcode perk. Our ask today is simple: to make the rules clearer, make the day calmer, give teachers back the time to teach and give pupils the space to learn and flourish. The motion proposes a national phone ban for learners during lessons. Our young people deserve that, and I urge members to support the motion.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that mobile phones should be banned for learners in school classrooms.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise members that, as ever when there are two debates during the afternoon, we are pretty tight for time. There is not a lot of additional time.

15:00

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): The Government agrees with the premise behind the Scottish Labour Party's motion that mobile phones should be banned in our schools. The motion from Labour is very simple. People like that from politics: simple solutions to the challenges of the modern age. However, I think that it is missing something—that is, the professional judgment of Scotland's teachers, whom we trust to educate our children every day. I am sure that Scottish Labour is not suggesting that we ignore the views of Scotland's teachers on this important issue. With that in mind, I am surprised to hear that Labour members will not be able to vote for the Scottish Government's amendment, which makes the need for that judgment clear.

We should listen to our teachers. It is what I spend much of my time as Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills doing. Understanding how mobile phone bans work is rather important. The national guidance that was published last August states:

"That means empowering headteachers to take the steps they see fit to limit the use of mobile phones in our schools, up to and including a full ban on the school estate during the school day, if that is their judgement. I am clear in publishing this guidance that, as Cabinet Secretary, I will support any headteacher who decides to institute a ban on mobile phones in their school."

Pam Duncan-Glancy: The point that I made when I set out why we are proposing the motion is that you are leaving it up to headteachers to take a big decision on what goes on in schools. Does the cabinet secretary think that there should be a mobile phone ban for learners in classrooms, or not?

Jenny Gilruth: I say to the member, very gently, that it is quite clear in the national guidance that our headteachers are already empowered to carry out mobile phone bans. I must ask why Scottish Labour does not trust our headteachers to do that. It is not for me, sitting in an office in Edinburgh, to dictate to Scotland's teachers. Why does the Labour Party think that it knows better than Scotland's teachers?

What interests me in Scottish Labour's approach—and I will be interested by how this argument develops—is how exactly it intends to implement a national ban. I presume that the proposal is for primary legislation; I think that I heard the member suggest something around

regulations. Whether it is primary legislation or regulations—

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Jenny Gilruth: I am happy to do so.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: We are not proposing primary legislation. What I said was that the cabinet secretary is the person who said that legislation was required. If you chose to do so, you could use the regulation-making powers in section 2 of the 1980 act. That is already in the gift of the Government.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Jenny Gilruth: As I have just intimated, whether or not it is primary legislation that is being proposed—I hear the member's point in relation to regulations—I have to ask why. Regardless of whole-school approaches, it is not my experience that pupils are routinely sitting with their phones out in class—quite unlike members of the Scottish Parliament in this chamber.

There is an irony that I want to return to on that point: mobile phone use is corroding the way in which we all communicate. If Scottish Labour wants a ban on phones in our schools, what are its views on mobile phone use in this Parliament? For absolute clarity, I would support a day in this place being set aside in which we commit to not using our electronic devices. As politicians, we should be leading by example. It cannot be “Do as I say, not as I do.”

That is why, if Labour MSPs are interested, how our headteachers go about implementing full-scale bans is very important. I heard about that this morning, when I was in Portobello high school—the school that Ms Duncan-Glancy referred to, which took nine months in total to implement its ban because it had to listen to, and work with, its whole school community.

It involves communication. The national guidance on mobile phones that was published last year gives guidance on how schools can do it. Last year, I visited Stonelaw high school to launch that guidance. The headteacher at Stonelaw had all the young people buy into the ban. She achieved that, working with her staff, by doing several things; parental engagement and buy-in was key. That action helped to secure parental buy-in and support. Pupils' buy-in involved pupils minding their own data use and checking how much time they were spending online. Teachers joined in. Staff and pupils alike were horrified by the amount of time that they were wasting online. Young people were receiving, on average, 80 notifications in a one-hour personal and social education lesson.

Pupils spoke to me with passion about how the ban was implemented in their school. The approach that was taken in Stonelaw allowed pupils to use their devices in social areas and during break times. The pupils felt that that was a fair approach, as it involved trusting them as young people. Being able to use their phones during breaks and in social areas was a privilege that they would not abuse. If they broke the rules, their phone would be confiscated until the end of the lesson.

How we get such buy-in is really important. If we simply ban something, behaviour change is not assured. We must educate people, which is the part that our schools—as opposed to MSPs in Holyrood—are experts in.

I agree that mobile phone use can be a distraction to learning and teaching. Indeed, the significant disruption that is caused by mobile phone use in classrooms was a key theme of the behaviour in Scotland's schools research that was published in 2023. More broadly, there are a number of questions at the heart of the Government's approach to the issue of mobile phone use in schools. In Scotland, as we have heard, it is our local authorities that have the statutory responsibility for running our schools, not the Scottish Government—I do not think that Scottish Labour is proposing to change that. Snappy one-liner debates might help when it comes to drafting a press release, but they rarely stack up when it comes to the detail.

The position that is taken in our guidance is that we trust Scotland's headteachers to take the action that they consider necessary, which includes imposing a mobile phone ban across the school day. However, the question that I want to hear the answer to today is why Scottish Labour does not trust Scotland's teachers to lead the change that we all want to see.

I move amendment S6M-19123.2, to insert at end:

“, and acknowledges that the Scottish Government's Guidance on Mobile Phones in Scotland's Schools makes clear that headteachers are empowered to implement full bans, should their professional judgment see fit to do so.”

15:06

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I thank the Labour Party for holding a debate on mobile phone use in schools. The Scottish Conservatives held a similar debate in January this year, and I am pleased that, since then, other parties—and, indeed, the cabinet secretary herself—have moved towards supporting our call for a national ban on the use of mobile phones in classrooms. We are clear that there is growing concern about

behaviours in our classrooms, and mobile phones are often at the heart of those behaviours.

As Pam Duncan-Glancy said, our classrooms must be safe spaces for pupils to learn in and teachers and classroom assistants to teach in, but, for so many of our young people, they are not. Concentration is a key thing that we must ensure is restored. Many schools can be and are great learning environments for our young people and great environments for teachers to deliver the lessons that we all want to be delivered. However, we also need to make sure that standards are set.

Last week, I was delighted to visit Leith academy, which I know that the cabinet secretary also visited last week. I welcome what the school is doing to support its pupils, some of whom I welcomed to Parliament yesterday. I have been really impressed by the work that the school is doing on pupils' expectations with regard to mobile phone use in classrooms. Most schools can manage expectations in that way.

However, in too many cases, our school environments have become toxic, with students and teachers experiencing stress, bullying and other negative behaviours, and mobile phone use is often at the heart of that. Action must be taken to ensure that poor behaviour in the classroom has consequences, and we must look towards not allowing pupils to have phones out in classrooms. I therefore welcome the fact that there now seems to be a clear consensus across Parliament on our desire to send out the clear message that we want mobile phone use in classrooms to be banned and that we want all 32 councils to move towards implementing such a ban.

As has been stated, here in the capital, City of Edinburgh Council is leading by example. I welcome the fact that Conservative councillors have secured a ban on mobile phones in Edinburgh's primary schools, which will be introduced in November. In addition, two secondary schools—Portobello high and Queensferry high—have piloted the issuing of special sealed wallets, which, once sealed, require a magnetic pad to unlock them. That allows pupils to keep their phones in the classroom. That is an expensive solution to the problem, and I know from speaking to staff that the additional staff support that is needed to seal and unseal the wallets is problematic. I am open to different approaches being taken, and I think that headteachers should be at the heart of that work. All schools already try to manage the situation, and their headteachers have policies on the issue.

The Scottish Conservatives have led the debate on our toxic school environments. We have called for a reset on that, and I hope that ministers have started to listen. I hope, too, that Parliament will continue to listen to some of the commonsense

views of teachers, parents and our young people that we have brought to Parliament. I welcome the progress that has been made in delivering some of the changes that we want to see, such as the review of additional support for learning, which we secured in May. Ultimately, we want Parliament to send out the message that we want there to be a national ban on mobile phone use in classrooms, and that we want all councils to work to progress that. That is what my amendment seeks to achieve.

I move amendment S6M-19123.1, to leave out from “banned” to end and insert:

“subject to a clear national ban in classrooms, recognising the strong evidence of how distracting they are and how disruptive they can be to pupils' ability to learn and teachers' ability to teach; acknowledges that while headteachers and local authorities have some powers to restrict the use of mobile phones, existing Scottish guidance is weak, and calls, therefore, on the Scottish Government to update its guidance with clear national direction on what is expected.”

15:09

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Pam Duncan-Glancy quoted young people welcoming the change of policy on phones in classrooms, and she talked about having a sensible boundary during lessons. I welcome that, and I will support the motion, but it is disappointing that Labour does not support the Government amendment, which also seems sensible and balanced to me. It seems that Labour wants to present the idea of a simple blanket and uniform rule while still acknowledging the need for exceptions and individual reasons and acknowledging different circumstances. I agree that we need to recognise the autonomy of schools.

That being said, I support the motion and the Government's amendment. The cabinet secretary said that Labour's motion is missing something, but I think that both the motion and the amendment are missing something, because the debate is not just about distraction in class but about young people's ability to learn to navigate an increasingly fraught, hostile and disturbing information landscape. Many aspects of today's permanently online life do not stop when the school day ends—far from it. Young people face multiple issues, including bullying, targeted abuse against minorities, marketing, conspiracy theories and racist and far-right content—all beaming at them 24 hours a day through these devices. It is not accidental. It is built into the business models of social media platforms and others.

I cite the death of 23-year-old Paloma Shemirani. Paloma's mother had been radicalised against science-based healthcare by that type of content, and that influence led Paloma to refuse chemotherapy that could have saved her life. Her

story has become a tragic example of the way that social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and X have become sources of health information and disinformation, with millions of people—increasingly, young people—relying on them for advice and being misled.

Health conspiracies on other issues, such as anti-vaccine conspiracies and the promotion of fake treatments, also circulate. Recently, days after Donald Trump promoted dangerous rubbish about paracetamol and autism, a member of this Parliament echoed that baseless idea. Scotland is by no means immune.

Prejudice, racism, anti-migrant propaganda, homophobia and transphobia have been growing in intensity to the point that, even at the highest level of politics in the United Kingdom, there are politicians who openly debate whether black or brown people can ever be British, English or Scottish—ideas that, not so long ago, would have been the preserve of the British National Party. Much of that activity is promoted and even directly paid for by social media platforms—X, YouTube and others are paying people huge sums of money to produce it and then aggressively pushing it out to audiences, especially young people. That torrent of far-right and conspiracist propaganda is the information landscape that young people are growing up in. If phones are switched back on as soon as young people leave the classroom, they are still vulnerable.

I will back the motion and the Government amendment at decision time. The policy stance on phones in classrooms is fine as far as it goes, but I am not sure that the debate about whether it should be a blanket decision by a cabinet secretary or up to the autonomy of individual schools and headteachers is really where the issue is at. We must not allow that action to result in complacency about the wider issue—the world of abusive, bigoted, conspiracist and untrue content that we have all created and the impact that it is having on everyone, including the young people who are growing up on it.

A policy of no phones in classrooms is fine, but it will not end the need to take a far more robust approach to regulating social media and tackling the far-right and toxic culture warriors.

15:14

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I think that there is agreement that the use of mobile phones in the class can be incredibly distracting. There is growing evidence from across the education world that it damages academic performance and can be a major source of distraction.

The constant notifications that we all experience on our phones can create a state of hypervigilance and a lack of concentration. That has an effect on the school more widely—for example, on the number of conflicts and fights between pupils, and pupils' conflicts with teachers. I think that members on all sides of the chamber accept that that is the case and that phone use in class contributes towards the trio of issues that the cabinet secretary often talks about: absence, additional support needs and behaviour. It adds to the mix and exacerbates the problems within that.

Patrick Harvie made the point that the wider world of the internet presents an extreme challenge to our way of life. School can often offer a haven of education and peace, and a bit of normality, away from everything in the wider world. If there is trouble at home, school can be a place of safety. What we are talking about today is exactly how we execute that.

I would like to see the evidence as to the impact of the cabinet secretary's current policy so far. I hear of some good examples where phones are handed in at the front of the class at the beginning of the lesson and handed back at the end, which has an impact on the performance of the class.

Equally, however, I hear too often that there is still a debate about whether phone use in class is a good thing or not. We should recognise that the evidence and the science are clear: it is not a good thing for phone use to be happening in class. We should not leave any doubt about that, and the cabinet secretary needs to play a role in that regard.

There has been a bit of a difference in the way that the cabinet secretary has talked about the issue today. On the one hand, she has said that she thinks that phones are a distraction but, on the other hand, she has said that she wants to leave the power with the headteacher. I want to empower headteachers, but that indicates that there may be circumstances in which it is appropriate to have phones in class.

We need to be clear that the evidence is growing—the science and the studies are clear—that that state of hypervigilance is not a good thing. I would like the cabinet secretary to reflect on that in her closing remarks, because we need to send a very clear signal to headteachers about what we think that the balance is. The cabinet secretary has a leadership role in that regard.

In addition, headteachers need a bit of support, because they face a number of different challenges. Those include sometimes quite challenging parents who come into the class and demand things from teachers and from the headteacher. If direction comes from the education secretary, it means that the

headteacher has her support. The headteacher knows that the cabinet secretary has their back, which perhaps makes it slightly easier to implement a ban.

A final point is peer pressure. I know many young people who would just love a day without having to go on their phone, because of the way that it changes their demeanour and their ability to talk in the playground, the canteen or the corridors. They would be able to get those human connections back again, rather than everybody being stuck on their phone all the time.

We can seek the positive of that change in behaviour with schools as a haven, and we should be aiming for that. I will support the motion and the Conservative amendment this afternoon, because we need to go further.

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

15:18

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): I believe that it is time to ban mobile phones in all Scottish classrooms. We need to shield children from harmful content, misinformation, bullying and other social pressures and—as Pam Duncan-Glancy said—make the classroom a safe place in which to learn.

I was shocked to read that research by Ofcom indicates that a quarter of three and four-year-olds in the UK now have a smartphone and that, by the time they are 12, the percentage rises to 89 per cent. That is the current trend in society, and by the time children come to education, it is much harder for educators to control something that is going on outside.

With the rise in cyberbullying, our children are exposed to an unacceptable amount of danger. There is pressure on parents to provide smartphones—Willie Rennie was quite right to talk about peer pressure—and I think that that would dissolve to some extent if there was a ban on mobile phones in schools.

It would also take the pressure off headteachers themselves, although they would still have to deal with a minority of parents who may still want to keep phones in class. The Government appears to clearly support a ban as long as headteachers make the decision. That is what we are arguing over, and I think that it is a responsibility for Government. Given the trend that I talked about and the harm that is being done to children, it is a decision for Government to make.

I do not believe that such a decision would undermine the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 and the delivery of education by local government in any way whatsoever. The tech companies are

incredibly powerful, and we know that there is a constant battle with them about social media content and a tension with the policies that we drive to reduce violence against women and girls. The tech companies' algorithms drive people towards certain behaviours. One of my biggest reasons for supporting a ban on mobile phone use in schools is that an increasing body of data shows that being exposed to excessive social media is rewiring young brains during a critical window of their psychological development. That is my primary concern, and it always has been. I agree with Jenny Gilruth that we should listen to our headteachers, but we should also listen to our scientists. Their views are unequivocal and have been for a decade. I think that that is enough of a basis to say that we have a responsibility to impose a ban on mobile phones in schools.

The cabinet secretary is quite right that MSPs are some of the worst offenders, particularly during committee meetings—we know that. However, we are talking about children and the responsibility that we have towards them. That is why I am speaking in the debate. It is asking a lot of a child to ask them to navigate online content and to protect themselves. At some point in the future, I wonder whether those children will ask us why we did not act more strongly when we had the chance, and why we left it to them to make decisions about their use. Members may have noticed a recent survey of gen Z adults aged between 18 and 27, who have grown up with social media. Members can believe this or not, but the survey found that nearly half them wished that TikTok, Snapchat and Twitter—or X—had never been invented. That generation is already alive to the dangers of smart phone use.

In my final minute, or just under a minute, I want to touch on the wider harms that Patrick Harvie spoke about. He was quite right to say that, by banning mobile phones in schools, we will not reduce all the harm. However, we know that smartphones are used, especially by boys, for intimate image abuse, and that 12-year-olds are exposed to pornography on smartphones. It is as much about protecting boys as it is about protecting women and girls. Clearly, that is a wider issue, but much of that behaviour goes on in schools. For some time, I have been calling on the Government to collect data on what is going on in our schools, because England and Wales have done that. I hope that we will legislate further on what needs to be done to tackle the creation of that content and to teach children that that is unacceptable behaviour.

For those reasons, I believe that this generation expects the Government to take big decisions. I think that the time has come for there to be a national ban on mobile phones in our classrooms.

15:22

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I thank Pam Duncan-Glancy for bringing the motion for debate in the chamber. Many of us have had casework on the issue over the past few years. East Lothian Council has had a policy of allowing individual schools to decide on their own policies. I am also aware of differing opinions within schools in East Lothian, as well as among the parents whom I have liaised with. As the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills highlighted, it is about the Scottish Government empowering headteachers in schools to make the decisions on mobile phone use that work for them and best support their children and their local areas.

Of course, classrooms must be a safe environment—I do not think that any of us would disagree with that—and we must recognise the role that mobile phones play in contributing to distraction and challenging behaviour.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Some of the children whom I have spoken to in East Lothian and beyond say that they use their mobile devices in classrooms as a learning aid. Is the member embarrassed that the SNP's commitment to provide every school pupil with an internet-connected tablet or laptop and the support to use them has not been delivered during the parliamentary session?

Paul McLennan: No, I am not embarrassed. The Government has made good progress on that.

We need to equip headteachers with guidance and with the means to act in the best interests of their pupils in addressing concerns around mobile phones. The Government is supporting Scotland's schools to take the necessary steps to tackle the negative effects that are associated with mobile phone use in order to enhance outcomes for all Scotland's young people. Of course, as members have noted, there is growing evidence that suggests that overexposure to mobile phones can negatively impact concentration levels and result in isolation. The decision to implement a ban on mobile phones rests with headteachers. As I said, I have had discussions with headteachers in East Lothian. They know their pupils and staff best and are trusted to make decisions that are in the best interest of their pupils.

Those decisions are not made in isolation. Guidance on mobile phones was published in August 2024 to provide support to teachers' efforts to ensure a consistent learning environment for pupils.

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

Paul McLennan: I am sorry, but I only have four minutes, and I have already taken one intervention.

The Government is now providing schools with comprehensive guidance on a range of approaches to responding to behaviour issues. That builds on the guidance that was published in June 2025 to promote positive relationships and behaviours across the whole school community.

Importantly, the guidance was developed with input from headteachers, teaching unions, local government and educational psychologists. It focuses on improving outcomes by reinforcing positive behaviour and working to reduce the likelihood of negative behaviour occurring in the future.

The Scottish Government guidance is the latest commitment to be delivered through the relationships and behaviours in schools joint national action plan, which covers the period from 2024 to 2027. It was developed in response to evidence from the behaviour in Scottish schools research that the Government published in 2023. Around 4,000 school staff from across Scotland participated in the production of the report. The joint action plan is a collaborative exercise and is informed by the work of the Scottish Government, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and Education Scotland, as well as by the views of parents and carers. It contains 20 key action points that are designed to support schools in their practice and approaches. It will be delivered across three years and is led by partners, including national Government, local government and third sector organisations.

Scotland has a good education system, with great schools and great teachers. We should trust them more. We all want our children and young people to get the most out of the learning opportunities that are available to them, and all children and young people have the right to get the support that they need to reach their full learning potential.

There are real challenges in Scotland's schools at the current time—we are all aware of that—and it would be far more beneficial for Scotland's children and young people if parties were able to work together to respond to those challenges.

In my experience, schools know how best to use their local knowledge to develop their own mobile phone strategy.

15:26

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to speak in support of Pam Duncan-Glancy's motion, which calls for mobile phones to be banned for learners in school

classrooms. We have had to bring the debate to the chamber because of the continued inaction and dithering from the Scottish Government.

I declare an interest, in that I have two primary school-age children. They do not have mobile phones, because I do not think that it is appropriate for them to have them yet, but I very much recognise what Willie Rennie said about peer-group pressure.

I fully appreciate and understand that every parent will make choices about whether and when it is appropriate to give their child a mobile phone, with the best interests of their child in mind. I particularly understand that many parents give their children a phone for safety reasons, so that they can contact their child should there be an emergency. Many children take mobile phones to school for that reason. The proposal would not prevent that, but it would prevent the misuse of those mobile phones in the classroom.

Schools and classrooms should be a space for learning, growing and flourishing, but mobile phone use is a known distraction in the classroom, which is limiting the ability of teachers to teach and learners to learn. Not only that but, as we have already heard, bullying continues to be a problem in Scottish schools, with an increase in cyberbullying, which follows children inside and outside school, and sickening examples of vicious attacks in schools being filmed on mobile phones and spread across social media.

It is for all those reasons that Scottish Labour would implement a nationwide ban on mobile phones in classrooms in order to make schools safe and attentive places for learning again.

It is important to listen to what teachers and parents are saying. I have been listening to teachers and parents in my area, where good progress has been made to limit the misuse of mobile phones in classrooms. I have to say that the overwhelming majority of teachers and parents to whom I speak agree with a nationwide ban.

It is also important to listen to the views of young people, who are also saying that mobile phones are causing distractions in the classroom. Having listened to their concerns, I would also say that, of course, there would need to be exemptions for schoolchildren who have caring responsibilities or who need mobile phones for medical reasons, but the assumption would be that the vast majority of children do not require a mobile phone in the classroom. Messaging between pupils, filming in classrooms and doing pranks using mobile phones are unacceptable and should not be tolerated—I would say that they should not be allowed to happen in the first place. That is why we should have a nationwide ban on mobile phones in the classroom.

Of course, there has been progress in a number of areas, but I say to the Scottish Government and the cabinet secretary that we should have a nationwide ban. I also say to the Scottish Government, which has recently announced its support for a ban on greyhound racing—despite there being next to no greyhound racing in Scotland—that we should have a ban that will make a significant difference to Scotland's children and young people.

It is also not to say that digital learning cannot make a good positive difference to young people's lives, but it should be done using laptops, tablets and technologies that are specifically designed for learning—not by using kids' own mobile phones.

On the issue of laptops and devices, as we have just heard from Mr Hoy, let us not forget the SNP manifesto commitment in 2021 to provide every primary and secondary school-age child in Scotland with a laptop or tablet to get online. That pledge was scrapped last year. Mr McLennan said that the Scottish Government was making real progress. Apparently, in 2024, the Scottish Government had issued only 60,000 devices, despite there being 700,000 school pupils. I do not really count that as progress. If we were marking that progress out of 10, the Scottish Government would not even get 1. That is the story of this Government—big promises made and big promises broken; all talk and no action; all spin and no substance.

We have heard a lot about distraction this afternoon. Perhaps the Scottish Government should stop being distracted by the constitution and grievance politics, and focus on the issues that matter. The Scottish Government should introduce a nationwide ban on mobile phones in classrooms, which will make a difference to our children and young people.

15:30

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): How about that? A Government that is not distracted by manufacturing grievance all day long—that would be quite an improvement on the Government that we have.

I know that there are wider issues—Patrick Harvie went on at length about the wider issues—but we are talking about the learning environment in schools. That is what we are talking about. I had not come across the word “hypervigilance”. I like that. It is a good description of exactly what we are trying to combat.

I make no apology for standing up to argue in favour of order and discipline in our schools, because order and discipline require consequences and sanctions. Without them there is no respect; without respect, there is no learning

environment. Those are not optional extras—they are the very foundations of what makes an education system work.

I know that sometimes we have an aversion in the Parliament to looking at evidence, but we must look at the evidence of what has happened elsewhere. In Spain, they talk about gaining the equivalent of up to a year of extra learning in science, and there have been significant improvements in maths. In Norway, a ban has boosted girls' grades, reduced bullying and lowered stress and anxiety. In North America, for goodness' sake, the evidence shows calmer lessons, higher levels of engagement in the classroom and improved test scores.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization is unequivocal that a smartphone should be used in school

“only when it supports learning”.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has shown that digital distraction costs people months of learning time, with two thirds of teenagers in its surveys admitting that they are distracted in class by phones—sometimes their own, often those of their classmates.

The Scottish Government has highlighted in its own behaviour in Scottish schools research report that the

“abusive use of mobile phones and digital technologies was one of the most ... serious”

disciplinary problems in our classrooms. The same report revealed shocking rises in violence and disruption. Almost 90 per cent of teachers in secondary schools said that pupils were sometimes or frequently off task, and more than half reported serious verbal abuse. Physical violence against teachers has also risen alarmingly.

The conclusion is obvious: mobile phones undermine learning, discipline and the happiness of children and young people, and they undermine the authority of teachers. As a general rule, they should not be seen or used in classrooms, save in the rarest of circumstances, when they directly support learning. However—this is the point, and I am aghast that the cabinet secretary cannot grasp this—teachers and headteachers cannot do this alone. We might say that they have autonomy to do this, which is true, but it is not an easy thing to do. They have to deal with the consequences of their decision to ban mobile phones in their schools. That point has been highlighted by other members. Headteachers are standing up to the everyday disruption, disorder and, often, violence. They are often left feeling—anyone who has spoken to a headteacher must know this—that they are alone in confronting those challenges,

because the national direction and guidance are lacking and they are without the back-up from the Parliament that they badly need.

Jenny Gilruth: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr is just winding up.

Stephen Kerr: Teachers and headteachers deserve the unambiguous backing not just of ministers but of every member of the Parliament. They must know that, when mobile phones are banned in their schools, they are enforcing that rule with the full support of the Government and the Parliament. Government action must reflect a broader society that backs parents and teachers in making the right choices for our children. It will take resolute, collective action—parents, teachers, communities and this Parliament acting together—to make a ban real and effective.

The choice before us is simple: order and discipline in our classrooms or continued distraction, disruption and decline. For the sake of Scotland's children, it is imperative that we choose order.

15:35

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): It is important to recognise something that we do not say nearly enough in the Parliament: Scotland has fantastic schools that are led by great teachers and filled with hard-working young people. Too often we talk about education in the Parliament as if our pupils are a problem to be solved, which I find incredibly insulting and frustrating. Childhood and adolescence are not problems; they are very normal stages in human development that are full of learning and growth. Our job is to support that journey, not reduce it to soundbites that paint young people in the worst possible light.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Will the member take an intervention?

Craig Hoy: *[Made a request to intervene.]*

Karen Adam: I have a lot to get into my speech.

Labour's motion calls for a blanket ban on mobile phones in classrooms. I agree that mobile phones can and do cause distraction. There are times when they contribute to negative behaviour and there is growing evidence that overuse can affect concentration and social interaction. None of us would deny those facts. However, the real question is not whether those are challenges; it is how we can best respond.

Just last month, I spoke with a headteacher in my constituency who told me that they had introduced a phones away policy during lessons

but that they still allow phones at lunch time. That is because, for some pupils—especially those with additional support needs—access to music or online communication is vital. That flexibility worked for their school. That can be compared to another school in which a complete ban during the whole day is also the right approach. Both policies are valid because they come from professionals who know their pupils and staff.

On the point about exemptions, would that not just create the same admin, policing and management but with fewer powers and more restrictions?

The Scottish Government's approach to empower headteachers and schools to make the decisions that are right for their school communities makes far more sense. Labour would be the first to complain if the Scottish Government swooped in with central diktats on other matters and undermined the professional judgment of teachers. Local authorities and school leaders know their pupils, staff and environment far better than we ever could in the Parliament, and they are best placed to decide whether a mobile phone policy means a complete ban, restricted use or managed access—and they already have the power to do that.

Let us also not pretend that the Government has been idle. Last year, detailed guidance on mobile phones was published, which was designed with input from teachers, unions and educational psychologists. Just a few months ago, that was followed by new guidance on building positive relationships in schools. The guidance is not about leaving schools to fend for themselves—far from it—but it is about equipping them with evidence and support to make the best choices.

It is worth remembering the broader context. Almost 4,000 staff contributed to the behaviour in Scottish schools research report. The report showed that most pupils are well behaved and dedicated while also highlighting challenges such as misogyny and worsening behaviour in some places, as my colleague Patrick Harvie spoke about. That is exactly why the national action plan on relationships and behaviour was created, bringing together the Government, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, parents, carers and the third sector. It is about partnership, not grabbing headlines.

If we want young people to learn healthy communication, resilience and balance in a digital age, the answer cannot be to simply legislate phones out of sight. That will do little to prepare young people for the world beyond the classroom, where digital communication is a daily reality.

Let us not fall into the trap of making children the scapegoats for wider frustrations. Let us

respect their development, respect our teachers and respect the principle that those who are closest to the classroom are best placed to decide what happens in it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches.

15:39

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): The debate has been interesting. A number of members have used the word “distraction”, but it is coincidental that this has been a slightly distracted debate. I think that Neil Bibby was the first one to suggest that the Government is being distracted, when he said that it is being “distracted by the constitution”. I think that he is the only member who mentioned the constitution in the debate, proving that it is not only independence supporters who are distracted by the constitution.

There have, however, been aspects of the debate in which we have been distracted from the real issue—it is not only in classrooms where that happens. Should this serious debate really come down to the difference between a cabinet secretary issuing an edict and respecting the autonomy and the judgment of schools and headteachers? That, in itself, is a distraction from the wider issue that all members across the chamber are genuinely concerned about.

Members have spoken about the impact on learning and of conflict. Those are social and cultural phenomena that are part of our behaviour. They come from us and do not inevitably come from the technology itself.

I have been left thinking that, had someone described mobiles to me when I was a young person growing up in the west of Scotland in the 1980s, they would have sounded like something from science fiction—a great, enlightening and liberating technology, giving us all access to the sum total of human knowledge and the ability to communicate with anybody else in the world. They would have sounded so utopian. In reality, they have become something deeply dystopian.

When I consider the social and cultural environment in which I grew up as a queer, out young person in the 1980s, I just imagine how much worse that experience would have been had every homophobic bully on the planet—whether it was the person sitting at the next desk in my classroom or someone in Government or in a position of power in the country—been able to access me directly and to beam that prejudice right into my eyeballs. I also imagine how much worse it is for, for example, young trans people who are coping with the level of prejudice that is being beamed through those devices right into their eyeballs every day, let alone for young

people who are being affected by racism or anti-migrant prejudice, those who are vulnerable to the pressure to present Instagram lifestyles and Instagram bodies, and those who are desperate for information about their health or their wellbeing and finding only lies and conspiracies.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Will the member take an intervention?

Patrick Harvie: I am afraid that I do not have time.

Ending the use of phones as a distraction in class is fine, but we must also enable our schools to give young people the skills to navigate their lives in this age of information and disinformation. If we want schools to teach those skills, sometimes the question to ask is what the right role is for phones in classrooms, in the right context; it is not just about having a blanket ban.

I will finish by saying, once again, that the problem does not stop when the school day ends, when young people leave the class or leave the school—far from it. The harms that all members are concerned about in the debate are not inevitable. They are really the result not of the technology itself, but of the deliberate choices of the wealthy, powerful people whom we have permitted to control the technology and how we all use it.

15:43

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am pleased to close the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives, and I thank Pam Duncan-Glancy and Scottish Labour for again bringing to the chamber an issue of concern that I think we can all see within Scotland's education system.

The use of mobiles in classrooms has been a concern of the Scottish Conservatives for many years. The point was first raised by my colleague Sue Webber back in November 2023. I think that we were discussing violence in schools at the time. We are almost two years on and are still debating the negative influences of mobiles being incorrectly utilised in our schools.

The Scottish Conservatives have been aware of the issue for years and have been lobbying to ensure that Scotland's young people have suitable learning environments in the classroom.

Surely we must all agree that it is essential that our classrooms are conducive to inquiring young minds learning, inquiring and growing. That has to happen in a structured atmosphere and without external influences or mechanisms to distract young people from the task that is in front of them.

In 2024, a Scottish Secondary Teachers Association survey found that 71 per cent of its

members believed that the misuse of mobile phones had a negative impact on behaviour and learning, while more than 90 per cent of their lessons were being interrupted by students having to be asked to put away their mobile phones. Three quarters of teachers said that mobile phones disrupted nearly all their lessons. Those are very stark figures.

Even though some local authorities have availed themselves of the guidance that empowers headteachers to restrict mobile use, there is still uncertainty and there is more room in the guidance. That is why national guidance must be clear about what is expected of our headteachers.

I will mention a couple of points that came up in the debate. I listened to Karen Adam's contribution, but I do not think that it was about what we have been discussing in the debate. Pam Duncan-Glancy and Miles Briggs mentioned the violence in the classroom that is exacerbated by mobile phones, which was also mentioned in the teachers survey. I think that we can all agree that teachers and classroom assistants should have a working environment that is completely free from violence, threats and bullying.

Stephen Kerr's contribution was excellent, highlighting the international results that have come from mobile phone bans.

Patrick Harvie made a valid point, but the influence of social media is a different debate. We know that there are algorithms that can spin us off down a rabbit hole, and whether it be far-right or leftist propaganda, we are aware that many of our young people might be seeing harmful ideology on social media. However, that is definitely a different debate.

Finally, on Willie Rennie's point, there needs to be a clear signal to our headteachers so that they know and can believe that we are behind them and that they will be listened to in what they are calling for.

We have recently heard many positive accounts from schools that have taken steps to limit or even ban mobile phones in classroom time. The results in increased learning and attainment among the pupils in those schools are there for all to see.

I have previously highlighted the fundamental point that children should be children. There is an innocence that we, as a nation, should nurture rather than destroy. The effects of mobile phones on growing and developing minds are only just beginning to be explored. So far, the isolation and anxiety that come from social media are deeply concerning. The issue is more important than we currently know or are aware of, and I urge the Scottish Government to update its guidance with clear national direction on what is expected, just

as the Scottish Conservatives' amendment suggests.

15:47

Jenny Gilruth: I welcome the contributions made by members this afternoon. As I said in my opening remarks, there is a lot of consensus around the chamber on the issue.

We all recognise the significant harm that mobiles can cause when they are used inappropriately or maliciously. Many of us will have had personal experience of that. This morning, I was listening to a group of pupils at Portobello high school, and one of them spoke eloquently about the impact of the mobile phone ban in Portobello. She said:

"When our phones went down, our heads went up."

The comment stayed with me throughout the morning, during our interactions with the international council of education advisers, which is here at the moment.

We also recognise more broadly the impact that mobile phone use can have in our classrooms, such as in a class of 30 pupils, each of whom is receiving 18 notifications an hour, which causes significant disruption to learning and teaching.

There is also a consensus that, when mobile phones are causing problems, it is entirely appropriate for schools to act to restrict young people's access to them. However, where we differ—Willie Rennie rightly spoke about this—is in how potential bans should be implemented. Let us remember that the headteacher of Portobello high school took nine months to implement his full ban, and it was not a top-down ban—he was working with the whole school community.

Neil Bibby rightly pointed out that some pupils have additional support needs and caring responsibilities. Every headteacher I know who has implemented a ban has worked to provide support to those groups. It is important that headteachers can do that, and the national guidance gives headteachers advice and guidance on how they might do it.

We have heard contributions from members across the chamber, so I will comment on some. With his impassioned delivery, Stephen Kerr spoke about the importance of evidence, and I agree with him whole-heartedly on that point. That is why the Scottish Government regularly commissions evidence on behaviour in Scotland's schools, the last round of which was published two years ago. We should also remember that the findings from the BISSR reflected wider societal changes, which is the point that I think that Patrick Harvie was making.

Stephen Kerr: Would the cabinet secretary like to see a ban of mobile phones in Scotland's schools? I am not saying that she will direct it or legislate for it, but would she like to see it?

Jenny Gilruth: I will read to Mr Kerr my own words from the national guidance on mobile phones. It states:

"I am clear in publishing this guidance that, as Cabinet Secretary, I will support any headteacher who decides to institute a ban on mobile phones in their school."

I give my full backing to headteachers to do exactly that. Stephen Kerr and I have discussed at length the impact that a such a ban might have on learning and teaching in schools.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Jenny Gilruth: I will, but I am mindful of the time.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Does the cabinet secretary not understand that teachers, including headteachers, whom we all trust to implement policy and create good education environments in their schools, are desperate for the Government to show leadership and set out its expectations on a ban of mobile phones in schools? That is what the motion is asking the cabinet secretary to do today. Will she do it?

Jenny Gilruth: Ms Duncan-Glancy and I have debated this point at length previously. The points that I made in my introductory remarks relate to the legal framework as it currently operates. However, I am somewhat confused by the Scottish Labour Party's position on the issue. Only in March, Keir Starmer, Ms Duncan-Glancy's boss, said that a complete mobile ban in schools is "completely unnecessary", so there seems to be some dubiety about the Labour Party's position on whole-school bans.

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

Jenny Gilruth: I am aware that I have no time in hand. I want to make some progress, but I am happy to discuss the matter with Pam Duncan-Glancy outwith the chamber.

It is important to be mindful of those wider societal issues. Pauline McNeill rightly spoke about the increase in misogyny and the recent increases in toxic behaviour online, which are not limited to our schools. It is important that we recognise some of those societal shifts, which impact, and hold a mirror up to, some of the behaviour that we now see in our schools.

More broadly, I go back to the implications of implementing such a ban. We have to trust Scotland's teaching profession. In the national guidance, I have made it very clear that

headteachers have my full support to implement a mobile phone ban should they so wish. Many schools have already done so, and many local authorities have already undertaken that work. Mr Rennie rightly spoke about the need for evidence to inform any future thinking on the topic. I agree with him, which is why, in advance of the next election, the Government will review the impact of the bans and seek to understand how they operate across the country. That is the right and proper approach to informing future policy developments.

It is important to trust our teaching profession. The national guidance, which has been criticised throughout the afternoon, was developed by the Scottish advisory group on relationships and behaviour in schools. The group's membership includes the Educational Institute of Scotland, the NASUWT, the Scottish Secondary Teachers Association, School Leaders Scotland, the Association of Headteachers and Deputies in Scotland, and Unison. Members purport to represent the views of teachers across Scotland, but I know that our approach has the backing of Scotland's professional associations. Those professional associations and trade unions are best placed to make such decisions and represent their members. They have my full trust and the Scottish Government's backing to do so, which is exactly what the national guidance on mobile phone use makes clear.

15:53

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to close for Scottish Labour in the debate. I will perhaps contradict some of the contributions, which I have found remarkably interesting. Before I start, I should declare an interest to those viewing and those in the chamber, which is that I was a teacher some while ago, a role that straddled the start of my time in this place.

Mobile phones and digital technology have generally had a huge impact and have huge potential, and they touch every aspect of our lives. Even in the 1980s, when telephones were still attached to the wall, they tended to cause anger among parents when phone calls came in. They are genuinely a hugely valuable tool that allows young people to access information. However, a lot of this afternoon's contributions have shown how seriously we now need to take mobile phones, the internet and the worldwide web of fake and false information, because they have a negative impact on our pupils throughout their whole lives, but particularly in the classroom.

To pick up on what Neil Bibby said, the evidence of bullying that continues on our school estates, which then carries on afterwards through

the use of mobile phones—there are sickening examples of children being filmed fighting each other, which has often been provoked by the use of mobile phones—is incredibly worrying, as is the content that is being beamed down to those phones. We need to be concerned, because smartphones are damaging the environment in our classrooms.

That brings me to the speeches of various members. I will start with that of the cabinet secretary. I remind her of the requirement in the Education (Scotland) Act 1980, which states:

"The Secretary of State may make regulations prescribing the standards and ... requirements to which every education authority shall conform in discharging their functions under section 1 of this Act".

That relates to providing the right educational environment and the right number of facilities in which education can take place. I make that point because we do ban things for children. Roz McCall is right that children are entitled to a childhood. They are entitled to be told not to smoke, and they are entitled to be told not to drink alcohol. In due course, they might be entitled to be told not to attend greyhound races. We place parameters around our children's lives because we are adults and parents, and because—regarding the stages of development that children go through—it is good for them sometimes to push up against walls, to see how far they can go and why those walls are there.

A number of members have said or have implied that Scottish Labour has no trust in teachers, including headteachers, in schools. That is simply nonsense. We trust our teachers to deliver curriculum for excellence, which requires certain signposted activities to be arrived at, and we empower them to teach that curriculum in the way that is appropriate and correct for a small group, for a large group or for the entire school.

Jenny Gilruth: I am interested in the point that Martin Whitfield is making. Of course, any regulatory move of the type that he has suggested would take power away from local authorities and centralise power with the national Government. More broadly, I am struck by the approach of the NASUWT, which has been quite critical of the UK Government's position on the matter. Dr Patrick Roach said:

"If the Government introduces blanket bans that are unenforceable, this will make the behaviour crisis worse, not better."

That takes me to the point that the issue is about how bans are enforced and how we trust Scotland's teaching profession.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Briefly, cabinet secretary.

Jenny Gilruth: Will Mr Whitfield respond to that point?

Martin Whitfield: I offer my deepest regret for interrupting the cabinet secretary's contribution.

Of course, education policy is devolved in Scotland. On the issue that the cabinet secretary was talking about, it would be easy to go to article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and ask, "Why are children not involved in this decision?" Children are, of course, involved in the decision. We have heard brilliant examples of headteachers working with their communities on how to implement a ban.

On the genuine question in today's debate, we have to turn to Willie Rennie's opening speech. Our schools, our headteachers, our parents and our children are looking for authority in that message. Our headteachers need support, and there needs to be a clear message. To slightly corrupt Willie Rennie's contribution, the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government should give our schools the agency to be able to say that there should be no mobile phones in classrooms unless there is a need for one. The detail of "unless there is a need for one" can be devised through discussions with young people, the school community and parents.

We have heard that there is overwhelming evidence that smartphones are potentially rewiring the brains of our young people, but we cannot go down the route of a ban without providing full and proper support. We cannot have leadership if there is no listening, but we need leadership when there has been listening. The cabinet secretary has the power to make the change, not in a directorial and top-down way but by saying, "This is the message—implement it in the way that you need to." To be fair to Stephen Kerr, in relation to his intervention, I am not sure that the cabinet secretary has gone that far by referencing support for headteachers who introduce a ban.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on mobile phones in schools.

Protecting Scotland's Fire Service

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-19124, in the name of Katy Clark, on protecting Scotland's fire service. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

16:00

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): Scottish Labour has lodged the motion because the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is in a state of crisis. The Fire Brigades Union Scotland has been warning for years about the devastating impact of underinvestment in our Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and about the threats that we are now facing after years of cuts and failure by the Scottish Government to deliver investment.

Over the past 13 years, 1,250 firefighters' jobs have been lost, which represents more than a sixth of the total workforce. That figure includes 729 whole-time operational firefighters and 368 retained operational firefighters. Those are direct cuts to vital, life-saving front-line services. The number of volunteer firefighters has also reduced by 35 per cent, which negatively impacts on emergency cover in many of our remote and rural communities. In control rooms, there has been a 26 per cent reduction in staff—staff who are vital in handling calls and supporting individuals in emergencies, including those that pose a risk to life.

When I met FBU Scotland yesterday, its representatives laid out the impact of those job losses on response times. Average response times have increased from six minutes and 51 seconds to eight minutes and 20 seconds. Every second counts when waiting for a response from the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. The FBU fears that, without the investment that is needed in the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, response times could eventually reach more than 10 minutes.

Response times to incidents that pose a risk to life have also increased. In 2016, the average response time to such incidents stood at around seven minutes and 30 seconds. Last year, it stood at eight minutes and 50 seconds. In such situations, when there is a risk to life, every minute counts.

In control rooms, job losses have contributed to an increase in call-handling times. Call-handling times for incidents that pose a risk to life have increased from one minute and 10 seconds in 2016 to one minute and 32 seconds. Staffing

levels in control rooms are generally considered to be inadequate and regularly fall below agreed safe levels.

FBU Scotland is calling on the Scottish Government to commit to no further cuts to firefighter numbers. I urge the minister to give such a commitment today. Since its creation in 2013, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has faced cuts of tens of millions in funding from the Scottish Government. The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service resource budget for this financial year stands at £332.1 million, which represents a real-terms cut of more than £56 million in the past 12 years.

Sustained underinvestment in our fire capital budget has also led to a capital backlog of more than £800 million, and many fire stations are no longer fit for purpose. The fire service has estimated that £80 million per year would be needed to improve the condition of fire stations and control rooms. FBU Scotland is calling for increased and sustainable real-terms investment in the service from the Scottish Government. Ahead of this year's budget process, I urge the minister to engage with the firefighters' union, with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and with firefighters across Scotland.

The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's service delivery consultation recently closed, with more than 3,500 responses. The consultation outlined several options, including changes to fire cover, the permanent withdrawal of 10 appliances and the closure of 13 fire stations.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Does the Labour Party believe that rural areas could be disproportionately affected by the proposals from the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, because they cover such a large geographical area, and that losing a whole-time service would be so detrimental to anyone who was involved in a road traffic accident or a fire, particularly in rural areas?

Katy Clark: Rachael Hamilton makes her point well, and I agree.

The plans that have been outlined would further damage the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and add to the negative impact that underinvestment and cuts have already had. Fire cover would change across Scotland, including in rural areas, but also in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee and Dunfermline. In my region—West Scotland—fire cover would be affected at the Milngavie, Inverclyde and Helensburgh stations, and in many other parts. Let us be clear that those changes to fire cover would lead to increased response times.

The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service board is set to decide on the consultation proposals by late December. Although it is the board that will

ultimately decide, we should remember that the board members are appointed by the Scottish Government, and the Minister for Victims and Community Safety is ultimately accountable to the Parliament for the delivery and provision of fire and rescue services. After the board makes its decision in December, MSPs must have adequate time and opportunity to scrutinise and debate any proposed changes, especially as those changes are set to have a negative impact on service delivery if some of the proposals proceed—particularly due to the likely increases in response times. I therefore call on the minister to commit today to a debate in Government time, to ensure that Parliament gets its opportunity to have a say on any proposals.

I am sure that other colleagues will pick up the many other issues that I could have raised in this debate on fire and rescue services, but I will conclude by thanking Scottish firefighters for their vital work in keeping our communities safe. I pay tribute to all our firefighters, and particularly to Barry Martin and Ewan Williamson—two brave firefighters who lost their lives while on duty. We owe it to them and to all of Scotland's firefighters to ensure that Scotland's Fire and Rescue Service gets the investment that it needs. I therefore hope that the Parliament will support Scottish Labour's motion.

I move,

That the Parliament expresses concern at the cuts proposed by the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS); recognises the Cuts Leave Scars campaign, which was set up in 2023 in response to a decade of underfunding by the Scottish Government; notes the loss of over 1,250 firefighter jobs across Scotland since the establishment of the SFRS in 2013, leading to pumps being unavailable as a result of too few firefighters to crew them; regrets that, as a result of cuts, call handling times have increased in control rooms and response times have increased from 6 minutes and 51 seconds to 8 minutes and 20 seconds, which risks lives in Scotland; notes with concern the plans to close 13 stations and permanently withdraw 10 appliances, and encourages the Scottish Government to work alongside the SFRS and the Fire Brigades Union Scotland to ensure that there are no further cuts to firefighter numbers or fire cover and that safe crewing levels are guaranteed.

16:08

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, which has been a single national service since 2013, is one of Scotland's success stories. We have a successful emergency service of dedicated firefighters that we should all be proud of, and I thank each and every one of the staff at the SFRS for their commitment to and their work on keeping our communities safe every day.

The vast majority of the reduction in firefighter numbers that the motion cites can be attributed to the reduction in duplication and layers of

management that resulted from this significant public service reform.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I join the minister in paying tribute to our firefighters, who do a wonderful job. However, in regions such as mine—the Highlands and Islands—less than 10 per cent of fire stations are fully staffed. Those people have not disappeared—it was not that there was duplication of jobs. Many fire stations cannot put out a crew to deal with a fire.

Siobhian Brown: The bill that became the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012 was supported by Labour at the time. The reduction in the number of firefighters is primarily a result of the establishment of the single national service, which reduced the duplication in the eight regional services. I know what the member is saying about rural areas, which she mentioned to me yesterday, but, under the service delivery review, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service needs to keep evaluating its services as time progresses.

The single service has allowed for the delivery of additional specialist resources that serve the whole of Scotland, such as the water rescue capability, which is being rolled out to 20 fire stations.

In 2013, there were 357 fire stations in Scotland; today, there are 356—only one fewer. In that time, the risks that our country faces have changed, and it is right that we make sure that we are ready to respond to any new challenges. Over the past 10 years, there has been a 20 per cent reduction in the number of house fires. The overall number of incidents that are attended by the SFRS continues to fall.

Although the number of house fires has reduced, there have been other incidents, and new risks have emerged.

Katy Clark: Will the minister be addressing the concerning increases in response and call-handling times?

Siobhian Brown: I will get to that.

Climate change is contributing to warmer, drier conditions, which increase the likelihood and intensity of wildfires. As I said yesterday,

“Shifts in weather patterns, such as those that led to last week’s wildfire danger warning and this week’s yellow warning for rain, reinforce the climate challenges that we currently face.”—[*Official Report*, 30 September 2025; c 8.]

With that has come a change in the risks to our communities, as incidents such as those of flooding and wildfires increase. Our firefighters are trained to respond to both those types of incident, but the change illustrates the need for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to be adaptable to such risks. That is why it is right that the fire service carefully considers how its services are delivered,

to ensure that they are configured in the right way, and that it adapts to changing risks to remain effective and efficient, with firefighters in the right place at the right time.

Not adapting and changing over time—

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): Will the minister take an intervention?

Siobhian Brown: I would like to make some progress.

Continuing to keep everything the same for decades would not be efficient or effective and would not ensure that taxpayers’ money was invested in the right way.

There is a wide disparity between the numbers of incidents that fire stations respond to, which is why the SFRS is looking to adjust the resources that are present in some locations. I emphasise that the driver for the changes that the SFRS proposes is to better align resources to current risks; it is not about saving money.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Will the minister give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister will be concluding shortly.

Siobhian Brown: I must make some progress.

The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service plans to redeploy resources that are freed up by making changes to front-line delivery to provide greater resource to its prevention and protection function, and to boost training provision to ensure that firefighters remain fully ready and competent to keep us all safe from the changing risks that we face. The SFRS also aims to ensure that investment is going to the fire stations that need it most—for example, to tackle reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete roofs and to enhance the facilities for firefighters, including modern decontamination facilities.

Therefore, I do not accept the accusation that the service delivery review is a cuts exercise. Despite financial pressures in recent years—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, you need to bring your remarks to a close.

Siobhian Brown: I conclude by saying something about response times—that is really important because, if anything about that is misconstrued, it can cause public fear. The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has been clear that it advises against using response times as a meaningful metric for performance and that the focus should be on outcomes. There are complex and dynamic factors that impact on those times.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, you need to conclude and move your amendment.

Siobhian Brown: Thank you, Presiding Officer. I will try to update Parliament more in my closing speech.

I move amendment S6M-19124.2, to leave out from “expresses” to end and insert:

“recognises that, whilst house fires have reduced by over 20% since 2013, due to the climate emergency, incidents and risk of flooding and wildfires have significantly increased; further recognises that the recent Scottish Fire and Rescue Service’s (SFRS) Service Delivery Review aims to ensure that the service can respond to these changing risks and that the right firefighters and appliances are in the right place at the right time; notes that no decisions will be taken until an independent analysis of the public consultation has been carried out and that any changes would be implemented over a five-year period; agrees that all public services need to provide efficient and effective services that deliver value for the public purse, and encourages the Scottish Government to continue to work alongside the SFRS and the Fire Brigades Union to ensure that Scotland has safer communities.”

16:13

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): I thank Katy Clark for securing this important debate for the chamber.

The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is a life-saving organisation, which protects people, homes, businesses and the environment every day. Its importance can be seen in towns and cities, where firefighters race to put out potentially devastating fires in minutes, and it can increasingly be seen in the countryside, as they tackle raging wildfires that threaten to run out of control, ruin wildlife and pose risks for those who live in remote and rural communities.

The importance of firefighters is seldom more recognised than when they put themselves in danger, without hesitation, to ensure that we can live safely. In the process, many have been injured and some have tragically lost their lives. We should take the opportunity to again remember the ultimate sacrifices that were made by Ewan Williamson in 2009 and, more recently, by Barry Martin in 2023. In fact, it seems that the Scottish Government is alone in not fully comprehending the fire brigade’s importance. It is quick to praise firefighters and to talk up its support for them, but the money and the numbers tell a vastly different story.

Since the creation of the single fire service in 2013—a move that was supposed to create a nimbler and more effective organisation—things have got decidedly worse. There has been a reduction of 1,215 uniformed firefighters in that time, which represents a drop of almost 16 per cent, and, although ministers talk about uplifts in funding, the real-terms picture shows that there have been devastating cuts to the budget over a number of years. Scottish Conservative research

shows the effects that those cuts have had on performance statistics. Average response times have increased by one and a half minutes.

That all begs the question, why? Why did the Scottish National Party Government centralise the fire service only to subsequently oversee brutal cuts and woeful mismanagement? The minister in charge likes to make the point that Scotland has more firefighters per head than England, but anyone who understands the geography of Scotland and appreciates how spread out and remote our communities are in comparison with those in England knows that that is a completely ridiculous argument.

The efficiencies that are proposed by the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service are truly terrifying and difficult to believe. The chief officer, Stuart Stevens, is on record as saying that the efficiencies will go ahead only if they ensure

“the safety of the community of Scotland.”

If that is the case and the service’s damaging proposals can be vetoed on the ground of people’s safety, those changes must be stopped and an improved funding settlement from the Scottish Government delivered.

I fully support the FBU and its cuts leave scars campaign. Unlike the Scottish Government, it understands the genuine risks that the proposed efficiencies will pose. The fire brigade is facing a range of new challenges, yet it is expected to meet them with fewer tools.

Siobhian Brown: Will Sharon Dowey take an intervention?

Sharon Dowey: Would I get the time back, Presiding Officer?

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

Sharon Dowey: I am sorry.

Wildfires are on the rise. Newer developments such as recycling centres and battery energy storage systems also present a fresh challenge. Scotland’s population is increasing and ageing and is therefore becoming more vulnerable. Instead of constantly asking firefighters to do more with less, the Scottish Government needs to completely change direction. John McKenzie, the Scottish secretary of the FBU, said:

“The Minister’s call for improved fire safety at a time when she is overseeing a service being systematically stripped of jobs and fire fighting capacity shows she is in complete denial about what is going on in the service she is responsible for.”

Brave firefighters save lives, keep communities safe and place themselves in grave danger while doing so. They need to know that the Scottish Parliament has their backs. I ask all members to

support my amendment, which will show firefighters that that is the case and will, I hope, trigger an urgent rethink on funding and resources.

I move amendment S6M-19124.1, to insert at end:

“; recognises that the Scottish Government’s mismanagement of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) has resulted in an £800 million operational backlog that has mostly resulted from the failure to bring stations up to modern standards, with 18 fire stations lacking running water; notes that the SFRS is coming under increasing strain thanks to the pressures presented by wildfires, and that the public are becoming more concerned about the fire hazards presented by battery storage sites, and calls on the Scottish Government to ensure that firefighters have the basic resources to do their job, to ensure that lives are not needlessly lost.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I invite Maggie Chapman to open on behalf of the Scottish Greens.

16:18

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I begin by paying tribute to all of Scotland’s firefighters—our fireys—who put themselves in harm’s way every day to protect us; to their families who live with the knowledge that, when their loved ones leave for work, they might not return; to the control room staff who stay on the phone for as long as it takes, even if that means to the end of someone’s life; and to the Fire Brigades Union, for its tireless work in defending not only its members but the communities that they serve.

The FBU is right when it says that cuts leave scars. That is not a slogan—it is the lived reality of communities up and down Scotland. That is why I will support Katy Clark’s motion.

Since the creation of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service in 2013, we have lost more than 1,250 firefighter jobs. Pumps are off the run because there are too few firefighters to crew them safely. Response times have gone up from 6 minutes 51 seconds to more than 8 minutes, and, as every firefighter will tell you, those 90 seconds can mean the difference between life and death.

The changes that are proposed by the SFRS might not be framed as cuts, but that is how they are understood. We are not trimming fat—we are cutting into the muscle of our fire service, which will leave scars that will last for generations.

Let us be clear about the reality of the modern fire service. Firefighters are no longer dealing only with house fires and car accidents. They are tackling climate change on the front line, with more frequent and severe wildfires and devastating floods. They are stepping into medical emergencies. They are doing more, and they are willing to do even more, but we cannot and must

not ask them to do more with less. Role expansion must be matched with proper resourcing, staffing and training; otherwise, it is nothing more than exploitation of their dedication.

The FBU’s “Firestorm” report, which was published in 2023, makes that case powerfully. It shows the risks that our communities face if we continue down the road of cuts and underfunding; it shows the scale of the challenge in an era of climate crisis; and it demands that we all listen to the evidence and act accordingly.

We must not forget the silent dangers that firefighters face. I have championed the FBU’s decon campaign, which highlights the risks of cancers and other diseases that are linked to contaminants on the job. Firefighters risk their lives in the moment of a blaze, but they also risk their long-term health every time that they put on contaminated kit. The least that we owe them is a workplace that does not poison them. That means investment in equipment, decontamination facilities and safety standards.

In my closing speech, I will speak about the potential impacts of the SFRS’s proposed changes to fire services in the North East Scotland region—in particular, the impact on the Balmossie community fire and ambulance station. For now, I will just say that closing Balmossie will increase response times to some communities.

Our firefighters are not asking for luxuries. They are asking for the tools, staffing and safety to do their jobs and to save our lives. They are asking us to value their lives as much as they value ours. Cuts do indeed leave scars on our firefighters, our communities and our collective safety. We must all work with the FBU and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to stop the cuts, guarantee safe crewing levels and invest in the fire service that Scotland deserves. We owe our firefighters not just gratitude but respect—and respect demands resources.

16:22

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I thank Katy Clark for lodging the motion for debate, which provides an opportunity to highlight the central role that the fire service plays in protecting communities across Scotland and making them safer and more resilient. I join other members in paying tribute to all firefighters and staff across the country.

The debate comes on the back of stark warnings from the SFRS about the threat of wildfires, and as communities across the Highlands and Islands come to terms with the devastating impact of the wildfires that we have seen over the summer, so it feels particularly timely. As other members have suggested,

proposals for the potential closure of 13 fire stations and the permanent withdrawal of 10 appliances are deeply concerning, not least for the workforce. We have been absolutely clear about the potential impact that those staff reductions will have.

The statistics for the period since 2013 are stark, too. There has been a 16 per cent reduction in uniformed staff, with 1,250 fewer firefighters working across Scotland. As a direct result, crews often do not meet safe staffing requirements, meaning that they cannot respond to calls, which, ultimately, and inevitably, leads to call times increasing, as we have seen.

Katy Clark is right that every second counts in an emergency, and that increases in average response times risk lives. In that context, the further cuts that are proposed to firefighter numbers and resource capacity seem untenable. Those cuts are also having an effect on the provision of training. As one firefighter put it in the “Firestorm” report, the public

“envisage a fully equipped, fully trained Service sending the requisite number of firefighters to any emergency situation ... The reality is poorly trained, poorly equipped firefighters who are sick of trying their utmost to carry out their duties against a background of cuts and a lack of training and support.”

Of course, maintaining community safety looks different in different parts of the country—a point that Rachael Hamilton made. In rural and island communities, the vast majority of stations are staffed on an on-call basis by retained crew. However, many of the retained stations across the Highlands and Islands face severe challenges in recruitment and retention. As Rhoda Grant highlighted, only 10 out of 125 fire stations across the region are fully staffed. In Orkney only 10 are fully staffed, and in Shetland none at all. In recent years, stations in Hoy, Eday and North Ronaldsay have had less than half a full complement of staff. That sees crews being taken off the run, which impacts on communities’ resilience.

Meanwhile, statistics published by SFRS suggest that fire casualties are higher in rural and island areas. That cannot be any coincidence. If we are serious about ensuring the safety of communities across Scotland, we must get serious about training, staffing and resourcing our fire service, not least in those rural and island communities.

As an aside, from my perspective, community safety extends to enabling others who require fire training to be able to undertake it. The upgrade in facilities at Kirkwall airport, for which I campaigned over many years, has undoubtedly delivered huge benefits, not least in reducing the need for fire crew members to leave Orkney for training. I understand from a recent meeting at Orkney

College, however, that there are currently problems with local merchant seafarers getting the fire training that they need in the islands.

With greater use of indoor simulators, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency has raised concerns about the reduced access to real fire conditions as part of the course. MCA representatives are due in Orkney soon, and I hope that an agreement can be reached between the MCA, Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd and Orkney College so that merchant seafarers can, again, get the access to fire safety training that they need without the additional cost, time and inconvenience of having to travel to the Scottish mainland.

In the meantime, I again thank Katy Clark and confirm that the Scottish Liberal Democrats will support both her motion and the amendment in Sharon Dowey’s name.

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

16:26

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): What is taking place in our communities is not a Scottish Fire and Rescue Service delivery review—it is an experiment, and it is one which, as a matter of public record, is causing serious concern to members of this Parliament from all sides, including members from the minister’s own back benches. The Government cannot contract out these decisions to the board of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. It is this Government that is putting at risk public health, community safety and even the lives of its own citizens. It is this Government which must be accountable to Parliament.

We know that this risk—this experiment—will not be borne evenly, and that these cuts do not have an equal impact. Look at the awful, distressing facts. Look at what happened at Grenfell: 40 per cent of disabled people who lived in Grenfell tower died that night in June 2017. A quarter of all children who lived in Grenfell tower died as a result of the fire that night.

This is a public service that should be about people, and not about money. That includes the firefighters and their trade union, the FBU, who passionately tell us,

“We don’t just fight fire, we fight injustice too”

and who make it plain that, since the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service was created, there has, in their words, been

“A decade of underinvestment—a decade of real terms cuts”.

There has been a net reduction of 368 retained operational front-line firefighters; a net reduction of 729 whole-time operational front-line firefighters; and cuts to control staff, cuts to volunteer firefighters and cuts to the number of appliances as well.

I vividly remember speaking to firefighters at the Hamilton station back in June 2023, where an appliance was being removed as “a temporary measure”. Over two years later, it has never returned. It was not a temporary measure—a temporary removal—at all. It was, as we warned at the time, a permanent measure—a permanent removal.

At Cumbernauld, we are now witnessing a plan to remove whole-time firefighters and to replace them with on-call crews. The reductions that are planned for stations in Glasgow will have a knock-on impact in Lanarkshire as well. The FBU, in its insightful “Firestorm” report, reminds us that, when the single fire service was set up by this Scottish Government, we were promised that it was about

“stopping duplication of support services ... and not cutting front line services”,

but that is precisely what we are witnessing today: downgrades, front-line jobs and service cuts, redundancies and a significant increase in response times as a result.

In every area, the pros and cons of the proposals have been set out. In every area, the pros include financial savings that are to be made. In every area, the cons include increased response times. In every area, there is a reduction of fire cover. Describing those proposals as anything other than an exercise in financial cuts is the real con. Don't anybody try to tell us that those are operational choices: they are policy choices, and they are political choices. I hope that, at decision time tonight, they will prove to be political choices that the Parliament resoundingly rejects.

16:30

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): This is an important debate. I took part in the public consultation and have informed my constituents that I do not support the proposals for Inverclyde. To inform my submission to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's service delivery review consultation, I engaged with constituents, visited Inverclyde's three fire stations and spoke to each of the crew members who were working when I visited. I attended the two Fire and Rescue Service public meetings in Greenock and Port Glasgow and met the local FBU Scotland representative. I also spoke to senior management during my visit to the Port Glasgow station. I thank them all for their contributions and for their

information and assistance. I also thank all the fire and rescue staff across Scotland.

I approached the consultation with an open mind as I am acutely aware that time does not stand still and the delivery of public services also changes. If we delivered public services today in the way that we did 20, 30 or 40 years ago, there would quite rightly be a public outcry, and I am quite sure that we would be debating that in the chamber.

I was reassured that the changes have not been made as a result of a reduction in budget, as was suggested at the Port Glasgow public meeting. The local MP tried to make the accusation that the consultation was happening as a result of cuts, which was quickly rebutted. For the record, I note that, since 2017-18, there have been substantial year-on-year increases in funding to support the Fire and Rescue Service.

Liam Kerr: Will the member take an intervention?

Stuart McMillan: I will in two seconds. Actually, I have only four minutes, but I will come back to address the Tories—don't you worry.

The current annual budget is more than £97 million higher than it was in 2017-18. Notwithstanding the additional resource over that period, however, the increase still does not guarantee the security and safety of my constituents in Greenock and Inverclyde, because both of the consultation's proposed options will have a negative impact on the number of whole-time firefighters locally. I do not believe that the proposals will strengthen the on-call service, notwithstanding the various recruitment initiatives that the Fire and Rescue Service has planned.

Gourock's on-call station regularly attends calls in Largs in North Ayrshire, because the on-call station at Skelmorlie cannot always send a crew. Half of Port Glasgow station covers the area up to Dargavel in Bishopton, in addition to elsewhere in the Inverclyde local authority area. Response times, which have already been mentioned, are clearly a hugely important part of the discussion. If Gourock station staff are having to go to Largs regularly, the addition of 650 homes on the Inverkip power station site will not help with the response times—it is complete folly and utter madness. That is why the decision by the Inverclyde Council planning committee to give the go-ahead for those homes is going to make the situation worse.

Approval has also been given for additional housing at Spango Valley in Greenock, which is not going to help at all. The fact that Inverclyde stations are serving other areas suggests that reducing the number of appliances for the whole-time firefighters in my area will only increase the

strain on the existing staff. Safety is paramount, and I do not trust that the current proposals will make Inverclyde and the Greenock and Inverclyde constituency safer.

I will finish with a brief comment on funding. We have had 14 years of austerity. Anas Sarwar claimed at his party's conference this week that Labour has ended 14 years of austerity. If that is the case, what was announced in June in the UK spending review? I urge the UK Labour Government not to continue with that austerity. It should stop the austerity and ensure that more money goes into public services such as the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and other public services across the UK. If that does not happen, sadly, the situation that we are facing in Scotland and elsewhere across the UK will continue.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr McMillan, you will need to conclude.

Stuart McMillan: Okay, Presiding Officer.

I support my constituency and I genuinely support the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service but, my goodness, the proposals that I have mentioned need to be scrapped. The SFRS must think again and come forward with something that will secure the safety of my constituents.

16:35

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I was interested to hear what Stuart McMillan said and I commend him for standing up for his constituents. However, we are hearing from the Government front bench that it is not about the money, while we are hearing from the back benches that it is about the money. The Scottish Government needs to regroup and make up its mind, because what is happening feels like gaslighting of our firefighters and all the support staff in the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service.

I am proud to speak in this debate, which has been secured by Scottish Labour. I am disgusted that the Scottish Government is not supporting our motion. Instead, it has brought to the chamber an amendment that deletes our motion in its entirety and airbrushes out more than a decade of underfunding.

To recap, I note that, in 2023, after that decade of underfunding, FBU Scotland launched the cuts leave scars campaign. We have all been listening to our communities, but we are not just defending our own patches—we want to get this right for the whole of Scotland. It is not about pitting one community against another. However, I feel that the minister has come to the chamber and gaslit not just the members who are here, but also the firefighters in the gallery and people across the country by saying that any reduction in fire crews

has been about reducing duplication of services. I hope that that suggestion will be corrected in her closing speech and that we will find out whether the minister agrees with Stuart McMillan.

Like Richard Leonard, I have been spending time in Cumbernauld, Hamilton and right across Lanarkshire and Central Scotland and listening to our communities and our firefighters. Richard Leonard made a point about the second appliance in Hamilton. We were told to trust in the process and that the arrangement was temporary, which is why there was no need for statutory consultation. We were told not to talk down the Scottish Government with regard to the issue. However, I have to say that people no longer trust the Scottish Government when it comes to the future of Scotland's fire and rescue service. People in Hamilton do not trust what they hear. Why should people in Cumbernauld or anywhere else trust the Scottish Government?

At the public meeting in Cumbernauld—which was also attended by Jamie Hepburn, who heard the same testimony that I did—a woman who had been sitting quietly at the back of the room got to her feet and said to the top table, the politicians and everyone who was gathered there that her sister and her sister's children had died in a tragic house fire. She made the same plea to decision makers that we are making.

This issue is about people and our communities, and it is about building resilience for the future. If we believe the science, if we watch the news and if we see the wildfires and the impact of floods and storms, we know that we need to act. Our firefighters do more than deal with house fires and other emergencies, and we have to give them the right equipment. I recently visited the national training centre in Cambuslang, and firefighters there told me that they have examples of out-of-date kit that cannot be used in emergency situations. There are many concerns about health and safety, and I pay tribute to Mercedes Villalba and Maggie Chapman for the work that they have done on that issue.

I ask the minister to please think again. She must not dismiss the Labour motion out of hand because of politics. We cannot go on cutting the service to the bone. It will risk lives. The cuts leave scars campaign tells us that, but tonight I am thinking about that sister—that aunt—who said that her family had been wiped out in a fire.

If the minister does not show some political leadership and deal with the reality, I fear for the future. I urge all colleagues to back the motion tonight.

16:39

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

I am delighted to speak in the debate and I welcome the fact that Labour has chosen this topic for debate. We have rightly had unanimity in our praise of firefighters, who do an extremely challenging job in some of the toughest of circumstances. However, those warm words are not enough if they are not backed up by action. Tonight, the Parliament has an opportunity to unite behind the Labour motion, to dismiss the Scottish National Party amendment and to back up our warm words with action to protect our services on the front line in our communities the length and breadth of Scotland.

The SNP wants to delete all the negative references in the motion. It can delete the text, but it cannot just forget or ignore what is going on outside this building, because there is no doubt that we have seen a reduction in the number of firefighters across Scotland. Many of the stations in the area that I represent are now not manned at all, as Rhoda Grant said.

As we say in our amendment to the motion, some of the buildings that firefighters are using are completely unfit for purpose. There is a huge £800 million backlog in the investment that we need to see going into the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service—that investment is not happening.

I say to the minister and members on the SNP benches that I am sorry, but we need more than warm words about the Government supporting our firefighters when it is clear from its actions that it does not. That is why the debate is important and why the votes this evening will be so important. I say to SNP back benchers that this is an opportunity to stand up to the Government and say, “No—this is wrong. We don’t want to support this and we can’t put our names to it”.

I have to say to Stuart McMillan that his very dismal speech was also extremely confusing. He spoke at length about how all the problems were caused by the other parties, ignoring what his party is doing, but he then said that he opposes the cuts. Which is it? How will he oppose the cuts in his local area? Will he vote against his Government? Will he and other SNP members show their constituents, who will go to the ballot box in a few months’ time to say who they want to represent them, that, on an issue as important as this—a life or death issue—they will stand up to the SNP Government? Will they say, “No more—we cannot take the cuts to our fire and rescue service.” Will they say that we cannot accept a greater reduction in the number of firefighters or the standard of service that will be delivered if more and more is taken out of the service when it needs investment? At decision time this evening, we will all be scrutinising which side members are

on. Their warm words will count for nothing if they just line up as Government fodder and vote the way that the SNP whips tell them to vote.

This is a crucial issue because, since the single force was brought in, we have seen a cut to and diminution in the service that is provided locally. It is defended by Government ministers and bosses at the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, who seem immune to the criticism that is clearly coming from the local community. They are deaf to it and unwilling to listen. What will it take for them to take on board the legitimate concerns of local communities, which are worried about the provision that is being stripped away day after day, week after week and month after month? At some point, it has to stop.

I was reminded that Colin Brown, FBU executive council member, said that the 2025-26 budget “won’t touch the sides”. This is not just about the future, but also about the past. The SNP Government has underfunded our fire and rescue service for far too long. It is to the credit of our firefighters and those working in the service that we have not reached breaking point before now. However, we are getting very close to that. The way to stop it is to back the Labour motion and unite as a Parliament to send the clearest message to our firefighters that we support them.

16:43

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth)

(SNP): I join others in welcoming the debate. I am grateful to Katy Clark for lodging the motion, which touches on an important issue that is local to my constituency. Indeed, I have heard Mr Leonard and Ms Lennon mention Cumbernauld, which they do not often do. I commend to them mentioning Cumbernauld a little more often in this place.

First, I will try to place my remarks in some context. The motion refers to the 12 years that we have had a national fire service through the formation of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. I concur with what the minister said at the outset—I think that, overall, it has been a success story. It has enabled a more responsive fire service in many instances.

I will cite a specific example in my area. This April, in common with many other parts of the country, we experienced a wildfire—that was in the Palacerigg locality of Cumbernauld on 10 April. That required a significant response from the Fire and Rescue Service, with the deployment of firefighters from Cumbernauld and other stations. Many of those stations are in what was the Strathclyde fire service area, while some—Slamannan, Denny and Larbert—are based in the former Central Scotland fire service region.

I am not suggesting for a moment that that type of cross-border deployment did not previously happen. However, in my engagement with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, I am told that that process of deployment is far easier to achieve now. That is one practical example of an improved service, which is in the shape of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. It would be remiss of me to not put on the record my thanks to the fire service personnel who responded to that incident.

I will touch on the service delivery review in relation to how it impacts my constituency. I understand—we hear this often enough—that we expect public services to be led in a way that is independent of ministerial direction. That is what we generally hear in relation to the Fire and Rescue Service, Police Scotland, the national health service and other public services. I understand that the process is being undertaken in that context.

I have written to the minister about the review and I am grateful for the reply that I have had. In particular, there was an emphasis that the changes that are being considered—we should say that they are only being considered at this stage—are about reshaping delivery in the context of a changed environment. That is instead of being in the context of seeking to—

Monica Lennon: Will Jamie Hepburn take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member will be concluding shortly.

Jamie Hepburn: I am afraid that I do not have time to take an intervention, but I will be happy to engage with Ms Lennon on this issue in any other fashion. Maybe we can work together on the issue.

The specific proposal for Cumbernauld is for there to be a reduction from two full-time crews on a 24-7 basis to one full-time crew on a 24-7 basis with another part-time on-call crew operating on evenings and weekends.

I want to raise a concern about the process. I have talked about it being a national fire service, but I have concerns that that is not being taken advantage of. This is a series of proposals that is often being presented in isolation. In this case, we know that changes in Glasgow might impact on the proposals for Lanarkshire. I have also been informed that Cumbernauld has one of the lowest call-out rates of any station in the country with two full-time fire appliances. That is welcome, but the community knows that the station is there when it is needed. Therefore, some of the proposals understandably cause concerns.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Hepburn, you need to conclude.

Jamie Hepburn: I will continue to engage with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to try to make sure that it makes the right decision for my constituency.

16:48

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): I commend my comrade Katy Clark for introducing Labour's motion on protecting Scotland's fire service. Our motion recognises the Fire Brigades Union's cuts leave scars campaign, which was set up in 2023 in response to a decade of underfunding by this Scottish Government. As a result of those cuts, call handling times have increased, response times have increased and the risk to lives has increased. Unbelievably, the Scottish Government's response to that has been to support the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's latest plans to close 13 stations, permanently withdraw 10 firefighting appliances and no doubt further cut firefighter numbers.

I am proud that Scottish Labour has used our debate time today to highlight this issue. However, is it not pitiful that the Scottish Government has not brought forward the issue in Government time? Instead, the SNP has tabled a wrecking amendment that rewrites our motion and removes any recognition of the damage that its cuts have caused, the danger that further station closures could cause and the responsibility that it has as the governing party to protect our public services. I will not vote for the SNP's amendment, just as I do not support the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's disastrous proposals to downgrade or even close Balmossie fire station in Dundee. I am not the only one who is opposed to it. The council is opposed to it, the firefighters are opposed to it and, most important, the people of the area are opposed to it, because it is dangerous and because it creates an unacceptable risk to people and communities. As one constituent wrote to me,

"We do not elect ministers to be silent functionaries; we elect them to be strong voices, especially when critical public safety issues are on the line."

I am proud to stand with local firefighters, and I urge all members to join us and vote down the SNP amendment tonight and support Labour's motion in full.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches. I advise members that there is no time in hand.

16:50

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I do not think that anyone in this chamber believes that our Fire and Rescue Service does not need to change. The minister spoke of better aligning resources to match changing risks that we

and our communities face. Several members have mentioned the increasing challenges that our fire service is having to deal with. The increasing frequency and severity of wildfires, coupled with the similarly increasing risk of flooding, means that the jobs that our firefighters have to do are changing. Taken alongside the urgent need to address the demands of the FBU's decon campaign, we all have our work cut out for us.

We have all said—in different ways—that things need to change, so maybe that is an important point that we can agree on this afternoon. However, it is how that change happens that matters.

I will turn to the SFRS's proposed changes to the provision of stations and appliances across the country. We know that once a station is shut, it almost never reopens, and that once an appliance is removed, it is almost never replaced.

Balmossie fire station, which serves the communities of Dundee and Angus, faces closure. If that decision were to go ahead, that would be a grave mistake. Balmossie is not an abstract line on a balance sheet; it is a lifeline for the people of Broughty Ferry, Monifieth, Dundee and beyond. It is staffed by skilled and dedicated firefighters who know their community and who can get to emergencies quickly when every second matters.

To remove that cover is to leave thousands of people at greater risk. The local community knows that all too well, which is why their opposition to closure is so strong. Residents have made their voices clear in the consultation process. They do not accept that losing Balmossie will somehow leave them safer. They understand what the service means in practice: quicker responses, better cover and greater peace of mind.

I attended public meetings about the proposed closure in recent weeks, one of which was organised by the FBU and one of which was a formal consultation meeting arranged by the fire service. Local residents who attended those meetings were clear that they are worried about the safety of their communities, their neighbours and their families should the closure go ahead. They are also worried about the impact of the closure on the firefighters in their communities. They see the strain that SFRS staff are under. They care about the wellbeing of their local fireys.

Let us not forget the reality of recent events. We have seen too many substantial fires in the Dundee area—incidents in which rapid attendance by local crews who know their areas made all the difference in preventing wider damage and danger. To suggest that Balmossie is surplus to requirement simply does not match the lived reality of those communities.

The consultation documents that the fire service presents also fail to tell the whole story. They present figures that focus on averages and projections, but they do not capture the risk of delayed response in high-impact incidents. They do not fully reflect how population growth in Monifieth and the eastern edge of Dundee will increase demand in years to come, and they do not acknowledge the role that Balmossie plays in providing resilience and back-up for neighbouring stations that are already under pressure.

The consultation also fails to address—at all—the impact of removing the fire station on the ambulance station. It is a shared joint facility. Closing one will affect the other, and yet we have no information about what those impacts will be.

Closing Balmossie would be a short-sighted and dangerous decision. As I said, once stations are shut, they almost never reopen. I, like Mercedes Villalba and others, will continue to stand with the local community and the FBU in saying loudly and clearly that Balmossie must remain open.

16:54

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Given the wording of the Labour motion, which we will support and which sets out many of the serious problems that beset Scotland's fire and rescue service after 18 years of SNP Government, this was always going to be a pretty depressing debate. So it has proven, with speaker after speaker highlighting the serious challenges that the service faces.

Douglas Ross highlighted the £800 million backlog facing the service, of which £500 million is required to bring stations up to modern standards. I say "modern standards", but I note Sharon Dowey's amendment, which says that we are asking those heroes—for that is what they are—to work in conditions that include 18 stations that lack running water.

Sharon Dowey also talked about the long-term underfunding by the Scottish Government, with the loss of around 1,250 firefighter jobs across Scotland since 2013. Maggie Chapman rightly highlighted the impact of that, with pumps being unavailable as a result of there being too few firefighters to crew them. We heard powerful comments from Katy Clark about call handling, with response times increasing—and potentially increasing even further. We also heard from Liam McArthur about the plans to close 13 stations. Those stations include Balmossie, as we have just heard from Mercedes Villalba. That proposed closure totally ignores the large number of incidents that Balmossie's crew attended in Dundee and Angus. Despite Balmossie being in the finance secretary's backyard, I note with

interest that Shona Robison has not bothered to show up to the debate today.

Things only became more depressing when I saw the Government amendment, which, as Monica Lennon rightly highlighted, deletes all references to those harsh facts from the original motion. Instead, Scotland's Government denies any responsibility and fails to set out any concrete actions or measures that it might be taking to sort the situation. In fact, we heard the minister blithely say that the reduction in numbers is about duplication, while she completely ignored the response times issue and, indeed, failed to respond appropriately to Rhoda Grant's timely intervention. Stuart McMillan blamed house builders for building houses and, of course, the Tories for delivering record block grants for years. Incredibly, Jamie Hepburn spoke for four minutes but said absolutely nothing of any value.

Rachael Hamilton: He is out of practice.

Liam Kerr: Indeed, he is out of practice.

What is most concerning is that neither the SNP amendment nor any SNP speaker has proposed any realistic solutions to the issues that are flagged in the Labour motion and the Conservative amendment.

The Labour motion sets out the myriad challenges that beset the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service after 18 years of SNP Government. The Conservative amendment highlights further challenges and proposes solutions. However, as Douglas Ross told us, the SNP amendment deletes all that. It completely defangs the proposition and substitutes warm words while kicking things into the long grass and slopy-shouldering responsibility—it contracts it out, as Richard Leonard rightly put it.

I have one more thing to say, Presiding Officer. For most of the debate, there were a mere seven MSPs from the SNP back benches in the chamber. Over the next 10 minutes or so, SNP MSPs, most of whom have not been in the chamber this afternoon to listen to the contributions and come to their own view, will start to file into the chamber so that they can vote for the Government amendment, as they have been told to do. They will try to ensure that the Parliament passes a sanitised, safe and sterile amended motion that absolves the Government of any responsibility and ensures that, in the face of all the challenges faced by our extraordinary and brave fire service, nothing will change. That betrayal of our brave firefighters is the most depressing thing of all.

16:58

Siobhian Brown: There is no doubt that people are rightly very passionate about our Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. When we think about a fire service, we tend to think about it dealing with fires and other emergencies, but it also carries out vital fire safety and preventative work, which prevents fires from happening in the first place. The statistics show that the SFRS has been successful in that regard, with a 20 per cent reduction in house fires over the past 10 years, along with a 33 per cent reduction in non-fatal fire casualties between 2009-10 and 2023-24, and a 32 per cent reduction in fatal fire casualties in the same period.

I have listened carefully to everybody today, and I have heard the concerns that members have expressed on behalf of their constituencies and communities. I know that this is a really emotive issue. However, I have to point out that I have engaged extensively with the SFRS, which has assured me that any changes that were proposed as part of the service delivery review have been assessed through detailed simulation modelling. The SFRS would not propose any option for change—

Liam Kerr: Will the minister take an intervention?

Sarah Boyack: Will the minister take an intervention?

Siobhian Brown: I am not taking any interventions at the moment, because I have a lot to get through.

The SFRS would not propose any option for change that could place communities at risk. That is important. The SFRS chief officer and his strategic leadership team have the expertise that is needed to deliver fire and rescue services that keep our communities safe. Therefore, decisions on how to keep communities safe should primarily be a matter for the service, rather than politicians deciding how the service should be delivered.

It is appropriate that we await the independent analysis of the public consultation and learn how the SFRS proposes to progress with the options for change. Any changes that are agreed will be decided by the SFRS board in December and then carefully rolled out over a five-year period, with any impacts fully evaluated on an on-going basis.

I have set out that the risks to people have changed over time, so there are good reasons why the SFRS should look at the footprint of fire stations, types of appliances and crewing patterns. Keeping everything the same for years is not an efficient or effective way to manage the service.

I apologise for not being able to get to response times in my opening speech, because I ran out of

time. However, it is important to recognise that response times alone do not provide a meaningful measure in determining an effective emergency response. We are aware that increasing response times are a trend that is being witnessed at fire and rescue services across the UK. The issue is complex, because dynamic factors impact and influence response times. They vary across wide-ranging and diverse geographical areas. Factors include rising traffic levels, varying degrees of congestion, unexpected roadworks, road closures and diversions and an increase in the use of traffic-calming measures over the years, but foremost is firefighters' safety and wellbeing.

The SFRS has strict health and safety policies to protect its staff. For example, firefighters must ensure that they follow correct safety procedures when mobilising for an incident, which can impact response time.

Katy Clark: As the minister knows, response times are not the only issue. I understand from speaking to the fire service that one major concern is that the first appliance might arrive but it might not be possible for the crew to act because of the lack of a second or third appliance. Does the minister agree with me that, as well as response times, the reduction in the number of appliances is a major concern?

Siobhian Brown: That is why the SFRS is having the service delivery review that looks at all such issues. Response times are a really important factor. Many years ago, firefighters would get in their fire engine without putting on personal protective equipment. There is a time delay due to those health and safety issues, which are very important.

I work closely with the SFRS. I regularly meet the board, the chair and the chief officer. I meet the Fire Brigades Union's Scottish officials to hear directly about current issues. The SFRS chief officer and his strategic leadership team have the expertise that is needed to deliver fire and rescue services that keep our communities safe. Therefore, we should listen carefully to the evidence that the SFRS provides for change.

17:03

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): If the minister is tone deaf and cannot grasp the level of concern across the chamber from members about what is being proposed, I certainly hope that other ministers, cabinet secretaries and Government advisers are listening, because the situation is not acceptable.

Siobhian Brown's amendment states that

"no decisions will be taken until an independent analysis of the public consultation has been carried out".

We need absolute assurance that no decisions will be taken until that independent analysis comes back to the Parliament and there is a full debate, in Government time, on the issue. If the Government will not sign up to that, I ask my business manager and all the other business managers to ensure that the proposals do not proceed before there is a proper debate in the Parliament.

This morning, the east area chair of the FBU, Lewis Clark, said:

"The amendment to the motion submitted by Siobhian Brown looks to detract from the responsibility that the Scottish Government, and the Minister for Community Safety, has to properly resource Scotland's fire service. House fires have reduced, due in great part to the work of our fire fighters in delivering community safety. It doesn't mean house fires don't happen. To simply reduce fire cover, increasing the time before a rescue attempt can happen, for those that will still be affected by house fires, doesn't make sense. This metric is also unrepresentative of the broad range of emergencies, prevention, training and fire safety work we undertake."

I urge every member of the Parliament not to support the Government's amendment, because, as the FBU has said, it brushes over issues.

Where are we? What is the position? The senior management of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has put forward proposals that will have a detrimental impact on communities. The FBU Scotland and front-line firefighters are telling us that lives will be put at risk as a result of the proposed changes. Local communities across Scotland have considered the issue at packed-out public meetings. In my area, after Lochgelly community council organised a public meeting, other community councils joined in and said that they are also opposed to the proposals. Communities up and down Scotland are saying that they are opposed to the proposals.

Earlier, Douglas Ross said that senior management is "immune" to those arguments. I sometimes think that the minister is completely immune to them, too. Basically, she is saying that, if the management of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has said that the proposals are right, they must be right. Today, she told us that a detailed simulation has taken place. Despite the concerns about safety, she is saying that a simulation has been done on a computer and that it is a case of "computer says no."

I have questions for every politician here today. Are they seriously going to ignore the major concerns of front-line firefighters? Are they seriously going to ignore the Fire Brigades Union, which says that lives are being and will be put at risk? Are they going to ignore local communities up and down Scotland?

Where I come from, the Cowdenbeath area committee, which is made up of SNP, Conservative and Labour councillors, is unanimously calling for the proposals to be stopped and for the issue to be looked at again. The Government must do that, because consistent cuts to fire services over the years have left the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service stretched to its absolute limit. As has been said, the latest round of cuts that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has proposed would result in 13 stations being closed and 10 appliances being withdrawn.

Let us take Fife as an example. In 2023, a fire engine was withdrawn from Methil and another one was withdrawn from Glenrothes. Fire facilities have also been withdrawn from Dunfermline and Kirkcaldy. Now, suddenly, the Government wants to put an engine from Lochgelly back into one of those areas. The whole thing is a total farce. It is a total mess.

The people of Scotland are speaking out loud and clear. As we have a minister who sits behind fire service management without seeming to provide any leadership, I say to every other minister in the Cabinet and to every other MSP that they must not allow the situation to continue, and that they must get the FBU Scotland and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service back around the table and have a discussion about how we can proceed. We must take people with us, not put lives at risk, which is what is being proposed today. Members must reject the amendment in the name of the minister and put out a clear statement saying that we will fight to protect fire services up and down Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Rowley, you need to conclude.

Alex Rowley: When we are in a situation in which we need the fire service, we expect it to be there and to help us. The proposals before us put that at risk and we must put an end to them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on protecting Scotland's fire service.

Urban Gulls Summit

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a statement by Jim Fairlie on the urban gulls summit. The minister will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

17:11

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): The issue of urban gulls resonates with many of us across the chamber. The concern has been raised repeatedly by constituents, councils and communities across Scotland. That is why, last Tuesday in Inverness, I convened the Scottish Government's gulls summit, bringing together key stakeholders from across the country to address that growing challenge.

The summit was a direct response to the increasing public concern about the impact of gull populations in our towns and cities and to the commitment that I made in the chamber, in which I said that I take those concerns seriously and am determined to act to find solutions. For that reason, I worked with NatureScot to address the immediate dangers and issues that are being faced in the Elgin and Inverness areas, where it was clear that an area licence was required to deal with the immediate past nesting season. Outwith those areas, concerns have been expressed more broadly. Therefore, it was clear to me that there was a need for us to look nationally at the next steps. The first of those was the summit that I convened last week.

The primary purpose of the meeting was to listen, learn and begin shaping a co-ordinated national approach at pace. One of the functions of being a Government minister is to use that convening power to bring people into the room, which is particularly important when we have thorny issues—

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): You do not want them in the room.

Jim Fairlie: Are you going to listen?

Members: Oh!

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, please resume your seat. I want to ensure that we have some order in this chamber. Mr Ross, the minister has the floor, and I have already said that there should be no interventions or interruptions. My having to remind members of that has probably used up about 30 seconds. Minister, please resume.

Jim Fairlie: I will repeat what I said. One of the functions of being a Government minister is to use

that convening power to bring people into the room. That is particularly important when we have thorny issues to find solutions to and when we have disparate voices and opposing views on how to find those solutions. Understanding those opposing views, hearing what the genuine problems are and taking a considered, balanced approach allows us to find the proportionate solutions. Everyone then has all the information to be able to contribute constructively to finding that common ground. We have done that before on other issues, such as deer management and wildlife management, and it is an approach that I will continue to adopt.

The issues are not easy. Views can be extremely polarised, but only by having those difficult conversations will we find balanced solutions. The Scottish Government chairs those meetings, but it is the other knowledgeable voices who give the help, advice and guidance that are vital to making progress. Let me be clear: I was determined that the summit was to be about finding solutions to the very real and recognised problems. Let me be equally clear that I absolutely acknowledge the strength of feeling on the issue. We have heard from residents, businesses and local authorities from Eyemouth to Inverness and from Dumfries to Aberdeen about the disruption that is caused by gulls, particularly during the nesting season. The complaints are familiar: persistent noise, aggressive defending behaviour, damage to property and risks to public health. Those concerns are real, and I wish to assure the Parliament that they are being taken seriously and that the Government will take targeted action where necessary.

We must recognise that gulls are a protected species for a very valid reason. Many gulls, including the herring gull and the great black-backed gull, are in significant decline. In particular, the herring gull population has halved since the 1980s. These birds face threats from climate change, overfishing, habitat loss and the devastation of avian flu.

The summit brought together those who needed to be in the room: local authorities, housing associations, representatives of business, waste experts, community groups, scientists and NatureScot. It was a constructive forum for sharing practical solutions, identifying knowledge gaps and laying the groundwork for a co-ordinated response. The summit was the first step in our work on gull issues, but I was very pleased with the progress that was made there, and I will outline momentarily the work that we will be taking forward over the coming months.

We must now shift our focus from reactive control to preventive management—and we must do so urgently, ahead of next year's breeding

season. That means tackling the root causes: the availability of food and nesting sites in urban areas. Although that may sound straightforward, it will require a co-ordinated effort across Government, local authorities, health boards, housing associations and individual households.

It is clear that, although many are working hard to mitigate gull impacts, efforts are fragmented and often ineffective, so we need to align our approach. Over the coming months, we will focus on five key areas.

On local engagement, NatureScot will lead a series of regional round-table events in areas most affected by gull-related issues. They will bring together local stakeholders to agree on collaborative action ahead of the next breeding season. NatureScot will be listening to and working with local people.

On best practice, last week I announced an initial £100,000 from NatureScot to support local authorities to develop proactive and collaborative management of gulls. NatureScot will work with local authorities to develop a co-ordinated gull management plan. That will sit alongside work on the Highland Council project. Highland Council and NatureScot have jointly committed to the development and delivery of pilot gull management for the city of Inverness. We will then draw on successful examples, such as the work in Inverness, to inform national best practice.

The summit also highlighted a significant gap in our understanding of gull behaviour and ecology. We will work to fill such gaps through research and data collection, ensuring that our interventions are informed and effective. Alongside short-term deterrents, we must also consider long-term design solutions. Making our buildings less attractive to gulls through thoughtful planning, restoration and retrofitting will be key. There are good pieces of work that we can look to, from roof structures on new builds and refurbishments to minimise the attraction to nesting gulls, to planning conditions for commercial businesses and food outlets that require effective waste management.

There must also be public awareness. Access to food is one of the biggest drivers of gull presence in urban areas. We heard at the summit about successful efforts in Inverness to remove commercial bins from streets, which was effective both in reducing food sources and in improving the city centre experience. We will work with local authorities to develop public awareness campaigns that encourage responsible waste disposal and discourage the feeding of gulls.

We also heard at the summit about the ways in which we can deter gulls from swooping, using creative but effective methods of putting them off takeaway boxes and building confidence among

the public when people are out and about. We will be working with local communities to raise awareness of that.

Licensing is an essential part of managing the problem. During the summit, we discussed the licensing regime that is administered by NatureScot. I recognise the frustrations that have been voiced by communities and elected members about its complexity and inconsistency. I have raised those concerns directly with NatureScot, and I expect to see improvements in clarity, responsiveness and practical guidance. Licences for gull control will be issued where there is a demonstrable risk to public health and safety, where they can be issued within the legislation and with the practicality that we expect from a public body working on behalf of the Government and, ultimately, our constituents. NatureScot will be working to support licence applications earlier in the year, with a focus on licensing in the areas where health and safety needs are highest.

The key thing now is that we move forward constructively and at pace, with a shared commitment to finding solutions. I thank everyone who participated in the summit, and I invite members across the Parliament to engage with the work ahead in a similar collaborative way. A summary of the summit's findings and next steps will be published shortly, and I will welcome input from all parties that is constructive and forward looking.

Gulls are part of Scotland's natural heritage, but I know how serious the issues are that people are facing. Although gulls are, increasingly, part of our urban landscape, we must manage their presence responsibly and effectively. We must work together to find solutions that recognise the complexities around gull populations, and those solutions must work for the people who are living with the negative effects of gulls every day. With collaboration, evidence and community support, I believe that we can do just that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on the issues raised in his statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move to the next item of business. It would be helpful if those members who seek to ask a question were to press their request-to-speak button.

Douglas Ross: First, we had the stushie around the Government not wanting to provide that statement at all. Then, we had the sham of the summit itself. I have been contacted by so many individuals—councillors, community councillors, residents associations and others—who were bitterly disappointed and, frankly, angry that the minister excluded them from the meeting and refused to listen to their concerns.

I have to say that the feedback that I have had from those who did attend was that it was a frustrating waste of time. In his statement, the minister mentioned practical solutions that were discussed. He did not give all the detail about it. Let me account to the chamber for some of those practical solutions that were genuinely made at that summit.

To deter the gulls, when people are walking down a high street, they should walk around waving their arms, because that will stop the gulls swooping on them. That is, literally, what they were told.

The minister mentioned takeaway boxes and what can be done to stop the gulls going for them. He did not say that the solution was to draw on eyes—because gulls are scared of being stared at and, therefore, they will not swoop down for a takeaway box if someone has drawn eyes on it. It would be funny if it was not so serious. It is utter nonsense. It is this chaotic and comical approach from the Government and its quango, NatureScot, that is—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Ross, you need to ask your question. You are over your time.

Douglas Ross: My question to the minister is this. After the summit, he was speaking about how poorly NatureScot had determined licences. He said that it was asking for “ridiculous evidence or proof”. He said that he himself had received

“inadequate answers from NatureScot as to why several things were being done in a certain way.”

Finally, he said that

“It was ludicrous”

that NatureScot was

“asking people to take a photograph of a newspaper beside a nest so that they could actually determine what day it was on”—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can I have your question, please, Mr Ross?

Douglas Ross: Those are the minister's words—it is

“completely and utterly ludicrous and I absolutely accept that.”

Minister, can you tell us why you still defend NatureScot having the dual role of conserving bird numbers and determining licence applications when, in your own words, it is “utterly ludicrous” in its determination?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Jim Fairlie: Let us be clear: the jokers on the other side of the chamber are not taking this seriously. There was never a request for a statement until it came in, and I accepted that

request, which is why I am standing here right now.

Douglas Ross: Jamie Hepburn might disagree.

Jim Fairlie: There was never a request for a statement, as Mr Ross absolutely knows. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members, let us hear the minister.

Jim Fairlie: Mr Ross talks about people who were not represented at the summit. Requests for representation were sent out to people who needed to be in the room. What we did not need at that summit was grandstanding, which is what Mr Ross has done from the start of this entire issue coming to the chamber. I refuse to be drawn in to his grandstanding. Absolutely, those people were represented.

On my response to NatureScot, he is correct: some of the responses that came back from NatureScot were ludicrous. I have now spoken to NatureScot and said that we need to find practical solutions. Yes, when some of the scientific evidence was brought forward at the summit, it talked about googly eyes on takeaway boxes.

Douglas Ross: Don't repeat it!

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members, please.

Jim Fairlie: Yes, it talked about people waving their arms in order to distract birds, and, yes, it talked about staring at seagulls because seagulls do not like eye contact. *[Interruption.]* The Conservative members can sit and laugh. They can joke about this, but they are the ones who brought the matter to the chamber. If they want to have a serious discussion—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members!

Jim Fairlie: If they want to have a serious discussion, let us have a serious discussion. Clearly, not one of them understands the complexity of a bird's brain, which is what we are talking about.

We are living beside seagulls. We have seagulls in our midst. There will be licensable purposes, as we have already discussed. However, we will not go down the route that Douglas Ross clearly wants us to go down, which is to have a mass slaughter of a bird that is already in decline. We will not go down that route, and we will continue to take a balanced approach and to ensure that we conserve bird numbers.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I, too, wish that the summit had been more inclusive—

Jim Fairlie: I cannot hear, Presiding Officer. Will you ask Conservative members to please be quiet?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, I am in the chair, and I will deal with things. *[Interruption.]* I heard you, minister.

Please sit down for a second, Ms Grant. I have already said to members that, if they want to have the opportunity to ask the questions that they really want to ask, we need to have some order. Under the standing orders of this Parliament, we need to show courtesy and respect.

Rhoda Grant: I, too, wish that the summit had been more inclusive. For example, Councillor John Divers, who has been trying to find a solution to the problem in Elgin for years and who has a wealth of knowledge and experience, should have been involved.

Is the minister aware that the Joint Nature Conservation Committee has said that the national population estimates of herring gulls and lesser black-backed gulls from the seabird 2000 census are considered unreliable because of the likely underestimation of roof-nesting gull numbers? Is he also aware that it takes NatureScot six weeks to approve a licence to remove eggs and nests but that the gestation period for the eggs is only four weeks? Those birds will have flown long before a licence is approved.

We want to protect gulls in their natural environment, but there are genuine public safety concerns in urban areas, so will the minister work with communities, be more open minded and inclusive, hear the concerns that they have and take action that will keep people safe?

Jim Fairlie: Rhoda Grant has raised a number of points. I have the seabirds count data, which shows the percentage change between 2000 and 2020-21. Black-headed gull numbers have gone down by 75 per cent, common gull numbers have gone down by 53 per cent, lesser black-backed gull numbers have gone down by 48 per cent, herring gull numbers have gone down by 44 per cent and great black-backed gull numbers have gone down by 63 per cent.

Those are the figures for gulls in their natural environment. I absolutely accept that numbers have gone up in urban areas, for the reasons that I outlined in my statement. We have created areas that are safe for nesting and where there is a food source, which is exactly what the birds are looking for. The numbers of gulls in their natural habitat have declined as a result of overfishing, climate change and avian influenza.

With regard to Rhoda Grant's point about community engagement, I have already said that NatureScot will be holding a series of summits

across the country to identify specific areas where there are specific problems and to find solutions long before we get to the nesting season, so that we do not face the issue in relation to gestation. It is a case of preventing birds from nesting in such areas in the first place, rather than trying to take nests out after the nesting season has started.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise the chamber that 11 members seek to pose a question. I would like to take all 11, but we need succinct questions and succinct responses.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Gulls are indeed a nuisance, but there will be gulls only where there is easy food, which is often supplied by our own throwaway waste. No food, no urban gulls—that is it.

Will the minister confirm that, even after gull questions and a gull summit, it was the Tories—who opposed us talking about Gaza—who insisted on taking up more precious parliamentary time talking about gulls? Given that there are folk who will not be able to afford food or heating this winter, will this be the last time that we use our valuable parliamentary time talking about gulls? It is making a mockery of this place.

Jim Fairlie: It is not me who decides what the business is in this place—it is the business bureau that does that. However, I take on board Christine Grahame's point. I have had representations made to me that I am wasting my time standing here, but I do not believe that I am. We have had representations from people across the country, including from numerous MSPs, who have said that they have a problem with gulls, which is why I have addressed the issue. I hope that we will find solutions.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Jim Fairlie called the gull summit a summit for everyone in Scotland affected by the issue, but his statement said that it was restricted to

“those who needed to be in the room.”

Minister, it was a talking shop in the north for quangos.

The minister pretends that he wants to reach common ground, but he will use ministerial powers to bring people into the room. He says that the Government has a record of reaching common ground. How can my constituents trust his Government on its record? It is doing things on its terms. The Government is overreaching. It is not listening to injured people, scarred visitors and affected businesses in Eyemouth and other towns in the Borders. A national approach is thoroughly wrong. Last July, I raised the issue—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We need a question, Ms Hamilton.

Rachael Hamilton: —and suggested a pilot scheme. I am coming to the question, thank you.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Yes, but please come to the question now, Ms Hamilton.

Rachael Hamilton: Residents and businesses in Eyemouth asked to be part of the summit—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Hamilton, please.

Rachael Hamilton: I would like to invite the minister to my own round table to discuss a specific pilot in Eyemouth. Will he come?

Jim Fairlie: As I have laid out, I have instructed NatureScot to hold a series of regional round-table events. If Ms Hamilton wants to attend one of those, she is absolutely entitled to do so. The events will be inclusive and collaborative and will work with people across the sector who are looking for solutions.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): As members can imagine, urban gulls are a hot topic in my constituency of Banffshire and Buchan Coast. Not long after I was elected, I set up a gull working group with local authorities and experts to share best practice, with the recognition that each community faces different challenges. We recognise that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach. What support can the Scottish Government give to local authorities for the bespoke solutions that are needed?

Jim Fairlie: One of the bespoke things that we are looking at is that £100,000 is being immediately made available to assist local authorities to develop area-wide gull-management approaches. The area-wide approach will give a better understanding of gull populations and their movements at a local level. It will identify the range of measures that could be practically applied in a local area. It will identify high-impact areas and develop a strategic view as to where and how gulls can be moved on from areas of high impact, and it will provide locally co-ordinated, area-based licensing approaches.

That is the beginning of a process, and the funding will help to support that work and get it under way. I have outlined other actions that we will take following the gull summit, and I will continue to consider any other support that is required thereafter.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Emily Burton, who is a senior conservation officer at the Scottish Seabird Centre in North Berwick and who was at the summit, said:

“Local authorities, businesses, and individuals need consistent and clear advice on tried and tested, effective

solutions for living alongside gulls, together with information about where funding can be found to support them.”

Will the minister confirm that the Scottish Government will step up to the role of facilitating consistent and clear advice and ensure that, beyond the £100,000 that he mentioned, funding is there to support solutions?

Jim Fairlie: The first part of the process was holding the summit, and the second part is taking the five steps that I outlined. As I just said, the £100,000 will get that process up and running. I have already stated that I am more than happy to look at what other mitigation measures we need once we go through the process.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Will the minister outline what work the Scottish Government has done with local education authorities and external organisations to educate children and young people about acting appropriately around gulls, such as not feeding urban gulls, which encourages their flocking, and dealing with gull chicks?

Jim Fairlie: Keep Scotland Beautiful has run campaigns and education events that have covered public awareness on not feeding gulls. That includes the my beach, your beach campaign, which ran from 2018 to 2023. Through NatureScot, we have supported projects in Inverness and St Andrews to increase public awareness of the importance of not feeding gulls and to engage a range of audiences, including children and young people, through public communications. We recognise that that is a key part of making our urban areas less appealing to gulls, and a national awareness campaign that includes encouraging people not to feed gulls will be central to our approach. NatureScot will continue to work with local authorities and education authorities, alongside others, to explore opportunities to increase awareness among young people specifically.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): Gulls are in overall decline in Scotland. Three out of five of the species face an extinction risk. Gull populations are increasing in urban areas because of the availability of food but, in the natural environment, food sources are declining because of climate change and overfishing, and natural breeding sites are also declining. What action, summits and funding will be available to ensure that gulls have a home and food in the natural environment, where they belong?

Jim Fairlie: As I have said, that is part of the process that we are going through right now. We are looking at the complexity of gull movements and gull populations—that will all be part of our thinking as we go forward, and I hope that we will get the correct answers so that we can ensure that

we have a supported population of gulls, as well as safe towns and cities.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The reaction from local authorities, councils and other agencies to attacks has often been too slow, bureaucratic and complicated, and people just give up as a result. Can the minister guarantee that, after this campaign, there will be a swift and simple process that people can follow to get action taken? That ultimately has to be the aim.

Jim Fairlie: I am disappointed in Willie Rennie's question, because he is asking for simple solutions to a complex question. Mr Rennie is talking about the licence application process. However, it is not simply a case of saying, “Yeah, there's gulls there—knock them out.” That is not what it is about. It is about ensuring that all the appropriate actions have been taken to put in place other mitigations and that people have tried every other method of removing the gulls. If it then comes to removing a gulls' nest, eggs and chicks, NatureScot should be in a position to do that as long as there is a health and safety reason for doing so.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Minister, you have previously said that the summit allowed for the sharing of practical solutions, learning from real-world examples and identifying

“gaps in current policies to develop a co-ordinated approach.”

Can you share some of the learning and solutions that were discussed and identified as a result of the summit? I have a problem with gulls in my constituency at certain times of the year.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always through the chair.

Jim Fairlie: The discussions were around the use of alternatives such as netting, spikes, predator eyes, food waste management and hawking. It was recognised that each location's circumstances are unique, albeit that there are some common themes.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution, and multiple tools and techniques will be required in order to get a resolution. A collaborative approach between NatureScot, local authorities, business improvement districts and wider community groups is needed, while other local forums will take place in order to include organisations that are not represented on the day.

There will be a national awareness campaign to encourage people not to feed gulls, because that is central, too. There was agreement on the development of area-based management and a commitment from NatureScot to provide funding to enable local actions to be progressed.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I have to say that, in my time representing Coatbridge and Chryston, seagulls have never been raised with me as an issue. Perhaps that is not surprising, given the effects of the cost of living and austerity in my constituency in recent years. However, I am interested in the issue. Will the minister set out some of the circumstances in which NatureScot can issue control licences, and will he say what thresholds would have to be reached before that would take place?

Jim Fairlie: As I just laid out to Willie Rennie, all applications have to be assessed on their own merits—there is no simple solution to a complex problem. All licences that are issued need to meet the licence criteria as stated in the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Those include

“for the purposes of preserving public health or ... safety”.

There are other purposes in the legislation, but that is the principal one for gulls in urban areas. It is necessary to identify the hazard, who is being harmed and what the mitigation measures are. There should be “no other satisfactory solution” than licensed control. In other words, other relevant non-licensable solutions should have been tried or discounted, examples of which might include netting, spikes, management of food waste and so on. NatureScot would then have to consider, as a matter of policy, the impact of issuing a licence on the conservation status of the species, in accordance with Scotland’s commitments in relation to other conservation legislation and international agreements.

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): An elderly man came to the Co-op every day for his newspaper. In June, a seagull attacked him. He fell and broke his hip. He does not leave the house now.

When I hear stories like that, I cannot understand why no action is being taken. However, the minister has form on this, because the previous group that he set up to look at protected species—the strategic wildlife and land management forum, which was announced to great fanfare at the Royal Highland Show in 2024—has achieved nothing. Why, then, should I have any confidence that the minister’s seagull summits will actually do anything?

Jim Fairlie: There is a serious point regarding the issue that Tim Eagle has raised. There are, absolutely, circumstances in which gulls are causing harm to people. That has never been denied. I have never denied it, and nor has the Government—we absolutely accept that that is an issue.

The member referred to the strategic wildlife and land management forum. He is not in the

room, because we do not want grandstanding, but in that forum we have intense discussions and hear polarised opinions in order to find solutions to the issues that we face. We have managed to do that with common ground and deer management, and we are now in the position where we can get people in the room to look at practical solutions and find ways to make things work better. Such forums do not need the kind of political grandstanding that we are seeing from Conservative members on my left.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind):

The minister’s argument rests on the proposition that gulls are in decline, but a freedom of information response to my constituent and a report from an expert who was present at the summit both indicate that the population has merely switched from traditional nesting environments to urban areas and that there is no data for urban gull populations. Will the minister place all the available information in the Scottish Parliament information centre so that we can get to the bottom of it? The information is disputed.

On a practical level, the business improvement districts were assured last year by NatureScot that there would be a new and better system in place by December, yet, in December, they were told that the plans had been scrapped. Will business improvement districts get area licences, and will the rules revert to those that were applied in 2023, which struck a reasonable balance?

Jim Fairlie: I do not know the details of Fergus Ewing’s last point, about the plans being scrapped, so I will look into it and will come back to the member with a written answer.

I have the numbers here, in front of me, and it is absolutely crystal clear that, in their natural environment, gulls are declining at an alarming rate. However, they are increasing in urban settings because of all the issues that I laid out in my statement. Although Fergus Ewing is disputing the increase in the number of gulls in urban settings, overall, their numbers are declining. I will take up his point about the methodology and will come back to him in writing.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There will be a short pause before we move on to the next item of business.

Business Motions

17:42

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-19136, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 7 October 2025

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Criminal Justice Modernisation and Abusive Domestic Behaviour Reviews (Scotland) Bill

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

6.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 8 October 2025

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, and Parliamentary Business; Justice and Home Affairs

followed by Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party Business

followed by Ministerial Statement: Secure Accommodation – Capacity and Future of Secure

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.40 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 9 October 2025

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Education and Skills

followed by Ministerial Statement: Youth Mental Health Support

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Right to Addiction Recovery (Scotland) Bill

followed by Motion on Legislative Consent: Planning and Infrastructure Bill - UK Legislation

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 28 October 2025

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Land Reform (Scotland) Bill

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

9.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 29 October 2025

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

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

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Land Reform (Scotland) Bill

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

9.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 30 October 2025

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions: Climate Action and Energy, and Transport

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill

followed by Financial Resolution: Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 6 October 2025, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding

Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[*Graeme Dey*]

17:42

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind): I wish to speak to the business motion and to make two arguments to the Minister for Parliamentary Business, both of which I set out to him in detail in writing at 5:28 yesterday evening. I acknowledge the courtesy of the helpful reply that I received from Mr Dey this afternoon, to which I have replied in turn.

I have two suggested additions to business. First, I argue that a visitor levy reform bill should be brought forward to the Parliament, possibly using the expedited bill process, which, to my knowledge—I could be corrected—has never been employed in the history of devolution. The process is designed to achieve reform when there is consensus among the major parties, which everyone can see is required here.

The proposed reform was the subject of some political jousting last week in the chamber, but it is very simple. The law as passed entitles local authorities to charge a visitor levy only on a percentage basis. It does not allow them the opportunity to charge a flat-rate tax, which is the method that is employed in many places in Europe where a visitor levy has been applied. Many local authorities wish to proceed in that fashion, but they cannot. It is fair to say that the Minister for Public Finance, Ivan McKee, the Deputy First Minister and others have listened to the industry. I have met them and have written to them; I will not go through the whole litany of representations, but I have done all that. It is also fair to say that they have now accepted that it is a flaw and a defect in the law. Short of entering the confessional, I do not think that we will get much more on that front.

However, my first submission is that, where there is a defect in the law—I think that all the major parties accept that there is—the first duty is to correct that before we go on to pass more laws. Our performance, collectively as a Parliament, is surely judged in part by the quality of our legislation and whether it is flawed. I am afraid that, of late, our reputation has become a bit tarnished.

My thesis is that, before we pass new laws, we should correct the defects. Over the coming weeks there will be lots of opportunities to defer things and, perhaps, introduce a visitor levy reform bill.

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Fergus Ewing has eloquently echoed my view that this issue is one of deep concern to businesses across Scotland. Does he acknowledge that the Conservative group wrote to the minister last week on the exact point that Mr Ewing has just made,

which is that we need an emergency or expedited bill to come before the Parliament, so that we can correct the defects that the SNP has created?

Fergus Ewing: Yes, I think that that is fair. There is, broadly speaking, an agreement that this is something that needs to be done. I am pleased that Mr Eagle has made a point that I omitted to make, which is that we are talking about something that is not simply a technical defect but one that could have serious adverse consequences.

I voted against the legislation because I think that the tax burden is already too high, with VAT at 20 per cent—who knows what it is going to be in November—and because the proposed tax is unworkable.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Fergus Ewing: I am very sorry, but I have only one minute left in which to advance my second argument.

I believe that the tax, as it currently stands, is unworkable, because the Improvement Service, which is supposed to supply the information technology platform, has paused that work and now says that it will be ready in spring 2026. However, the tax is due to go live on 24 July. If there is slippage, we will move into utter commercial chaos and run the risk of the situation turning into a running sore and the policy becoming a laughing stock.

A pause is essential, so I would like to hear a ministerial statement within the next few weeks that sets out how a pause can be achieved. Further, if—my goodness—there is to be reform that retrospectively changes the existing schemes, that is a further complication that also justifies a pause.

Finally, in the past couple of days, I spoke to a hotelier in Inverness who asked how on earth the Improvement Service platform will be compatible with the multiplicity of IT schemes that are deployed by the likes of Expedia, Booking.com and many other agencies. How will that work? Good luck with that.

17:47

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I would prefer not to vote against the business motion, but I need to ask for some assurance and a commitment from the minister in relation to an issue that he will be aware that the Greens have repeatedly raised with the Parliamentary Bureau: the long-overdue carbon budgets, which are due to be presented to Parliament and have already

been scrutinised by the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee.

We have been asking for clarity about when the carbon budgets will be put to the vote and an assurance that time will be allocated to debate that hugely important issue. This week, we received a letter from Mr Dey, in his role as the Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans, telling us that he hopes that the vote will take place prior to the October recess. Obviously, if that is to happen, it will have to be by next Thursday at the very latest, yet the business motion that is before us does not allocate any time to debate the carbon budgets. Therefore, I am asking for an assurance from the minister.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee has completed its carbon budgets report and published it yesterday. The committee went through the issues at pace in order to ensure that there would be sufficient time to debate the carbon budgets in Parliament before the recess, so that there would be no delay to the climate change plan, which is due to be laid at the end of October or in early November.

I support what the member is saying, and I want to make it clear to the chamber that the committee has played its part to ensure that the carbon budgets can be debated.

Patrick Harvie: As I acknowledged, the committee has undertaken that scrutiny, and the member is quite right that this relates to the timing of the climate change plan, which itself will have to be scrutinised during what is left of the parliamentary session. The point is that the Scottish statutory instrument on the carbon budgets ought to be given some time for debate in the chamber as well. I ask for an assurance from the minister that an amendment to the business motion will be lodged at the start of next week's business to ensure that time is allocated for us to debate the carbon budgets in the chamber before we are asked to vote on them.

The Presiding Officer: I call the minister to respond on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau.

17:50

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey): The Minister for Public Finance has made it clear that the Government is engaging with industry partners, local authorities and others to understand how we can best provide more flexibility in the implementation of the visitor levy to support local circumstances and requirements. As part of that on-going process of engagement, the minister will shortly write to all parties, offering to meet to discuss options on how to address requests for the introduction of

flexibilities as to how the levy is applied and administered. I acknowledge the constructive correspondence that we have had from the Conservative Party.

The minister has also made it clear that the Government has been considering the most appropriate legislative vehicle to make any required changes to primary legislation. We will share the Government's amendment to the Housing (Scotland) Bill as part of those discussions, in the interests of transparency. To be clear, there is no intention to pause but there is an intention to move ahead. In doing that, we will look to work constructively with members who are of a mind to engage constructively. If a statement of any kind were to be sought or felt necessary thereafter, the Government would give due consideration to that.

On the points that Patrick Harvie raised, as I said in my letter to the Green business manager, Lorna Slater, we are absolutely mindful of the need for Parliament to have the correct scrutiny period. I expect that Parliament will have the opportunity to vote on the SSI prior to the October recess.

On the point about allocating time for contributions in the chamber, I am sure that the business bureau will consider that when it meets next week. I am certainly open to considering that possibility.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. We move to the vote on the motion.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 7 October 2025

2.00 pm	Time for Reflection
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Topical Questions (if selected)
<i>followed by</i>	Stage 3 Proceedings: Criminal Justice Modernisation and Abusive Domestic Behaviour Reviews (Scotland) Bill
<i>followed by</i>	Committee Announcements
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
6.00 pm	Decision Time
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business

Wednesday 8 October 2025

2.00 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.00 pm	Portfolio Questions: Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, and Parliamentary Business; Justice and Home Affairs

followed by Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party Business

followed by Ministerial Statement: Secure Accommodation – Capacity and Future of Secure

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.40 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 9 October 2025

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Education and Skills

followed by Ministerial Statement: Youth Mental Health Support

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Right to Addiction Recovery (Scotland) Bill

followed by Motion on Legislative Consent: Planning and Infrastructure Bill - UK Legislation

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 28 October 2025

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Land Reform (Scotland) Bill

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

9.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 29 October 2025

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

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

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Land Reform (Scotland) Bill

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

9.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 30 October 2025

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions: Climate Action and Energy, and Transport

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill

followed by Financial Resolution: Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 6 October 2025, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.

The Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motions S6M-19137 and S6M-19138, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on the timetabling of a bill at stage 1.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Wellbeing and Sustainable Development (Scotland) Bill at stage 1 be completed by 23 January 2026.

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Restraint and Seclusion in Schools (Scotland) Bill at stage 1 be completed by 30 January 2026.—[*Graeme Dey*]

Motions agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motion

17:52

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S6M-19139, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Climate Change (Local Development Plan) (Repeals) (Scotland) Order 2025 [draft] be approved.—[*Graeme Dey*]

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

Decision Time

17:53

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are seven questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S6M-19123.2, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, which seeks to amend motion S6M-19123, in the name of Pam Duncan-Glancy, on mobile phones in schools, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:53

Meeting suspended.

17:56

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We come to the vote on amendment S6M-19123.2, in the name of Jenny Gilruth. Members should cast their votes now.

For

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)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 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)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)

Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 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)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 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)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Fulton MacGregor]
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Ind)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)

Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD) [Proxy vote cast by Willie Rennie]

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-19123.2, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, is: For 85, Against 26, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-19123.1, in the name of Miles Briggs, which seeks to amend motion S6M-19123, in the name of Pam Duncan-Glancy, on mobile phones in schools, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Ind)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowe, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 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)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 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]

Against

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)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 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)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 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)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)

Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-19123.1, in the name of Miles Briggs, is: For 49, Against 62, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-19123, in the name of Pam Duncan-Glancy, on mobile phones in schools, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I do not think that my vote went through. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: I can confirm that your vote was recorded, Ms Gosal.

For

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)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
 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)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)

Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 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)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 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)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Fulton MacGregor]
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (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)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD) [Proxy vote cast by Willie Rennie]

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-19123, in the name of Pam Duncan-Glancy, on mobile phones in schools, as amended, is: For 85, Against 26, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that mobile phones should be banned for learners in school classrooms, and acknowledges that the Scottish Government's Guidance on Mobile Phones in Scotland's Schools makes clear that headteachers are empowered to implement full bans, should their professional judgment see fit to do so.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-19124.2, in the name of Siobhian Brown, which seeks to amend motion S6M-19124, in the name of Katy Clark, on protecting Scotland's fire service, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 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)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 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)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 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)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 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)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)

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

Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-19124.2, in the name of Siobhian Brown, is: For 55, Against 52, Abstentions 3.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-19124.1, in the name of Sharon Dowey, which seeks to amend motion S6M-19124, in the name of Katy Clark, on protecting Scotland's fire service, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app did not connect. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Gilruth. We will ensure that that is recorded.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I could not connect to the app. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr McArthur. We will ensure that that is recorded.

For

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)

Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 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)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 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]

Against

Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 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)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 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)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 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)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Abstentions

Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-19124.1, in the name of Sharon Dowey, is: For 54, Against 56, Abstentions 2.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-19124, in the name of Katy Clark, on protecting Scotland's fire service, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
 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)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)

Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 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)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 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)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 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)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 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

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-19124, in the name of Katy Clark, on protecting Scotland's fire service, as amended, is: For 56, Against 53, Abstentions 3.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises that, whilst house fires have reduced by over 20% since 2013, due to the climate emergency, incidents and risk of flooding and wildfires have significantly increased; further recognises that the recent Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's (SFRS) Service Delivery Review aims to ensure that the service can respond to these changing risks and that the right firefighters and appliances are in the right place at the right time; notes that no decisions will be taken until an independent analysis of the public consultation has been carried out and that any changes would be implemented over a five-year period; agrees that all public services need to provide efficient and effective services that deliver value for the public purse, and encourages the Scottish Government to continue to work alongside the SFRS and the Fire Brigades Union to ensure that Scotland has safer communities.

The Presiding Officer: The next and final question is, that motion S6M-19139, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Climate Change (Local Development Plan) (Repeals) (Scotland) Order 2025 [draft] be approved.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

International Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder Day 2025

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-18639, in the name of Rona Mackay, on international fetal alcohol spectrum disorder day and the need for awareness. 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 notes that 9 September 2025 is International FASD Day; understands that FASD, or Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, is a preventable neurodevelopmental condition with lifelong cognitive, emotional and behavioural challenges, which occurs when prenatal alcohol exposure affects the developing brain and body; acknowledges reports that 4% of the population are affected, and each person with FASD is affected differently, often requiring lifelong support in education and post school settings to optimise their life experience; understands that, while the guideline in Scotland for pregnant women, or women trying to conceive is, "no alcohol, no risk", 46% of pregnancies in the UK are unplanned so without better awareness, people may continue their pre-conception lifestyle until they have a positive pregnancy test; recognises the importance of prevention, early diagnosis and intervention; notes that unrecognised FASD can lead to people ending up in vulnerable situations, particularly given reports that many professionals do not fully understand the symptoms and effects of FASD; understands that populations of concern include people in contact with the criminal justice system, care experienced people, people who are homeless, and people with substance misuse issues; notes the view that training for health and social care professionals in identifying possible FASD is vital; considers that the use of Alcohol Brief Interventions for pregnant women is a useful tool in reducing the risk of FASD; notes the view that alcohol producers should be mandated to provide clear written pregnancy warnings on their products, and understands that there is an estimated economic benefit of £1.4 million for each case of FASD that is avoided.

18:08

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): It is my pleasure to bring this important debate on fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, known as FASD, to the chamber again, and I thank members from across the chamber for supporting my motion. I look forward to hearing everyone's contributions, because we need to talk about the issue and, crucially, raise awareness of the condition, which is a significant public health matter in Scotland and globally.

FASD is a lifelong condition for which there is no cure, but—this is why we must raise awareness—it is entirely preventable. I say at the outset that I have no wish to blame or shame women: this is a plea to clinicians and to those in power—yes, politicians—that we must bring this

underdiagnosed and devastating condition into mainstream public awareness. It is thought that around 4 per cent of the population are affected, and each person with FASD is affected differently, often requiring lifelong support and education in post-school settings to optimise their life experience.

FASD is a family of complex conditions arising from exposure to alcohol at any stage of pregnancy. It affects the child's physical and mental health and capacity to learn, which continues into adulthood and is the most common, but unrecognised, neurodevelopmental condition in Scotland. It has been estimated that between 3 and 5 per cent of Scotland's young people are living with FASD, but a recent study in the west of Scotland found that as many as 40 per cent of babies showed signs of exposure to alcohol in their second trimester, suggesting a higher prevalence than was previously thought to be the case. The Scottish Government estimated that in 2019, at least 172,000 children, young people and adults had FASD.

Of equal weight to prevention are early diagnosis and support for people with FASD, which are crucial to avoid a range of issues that are commonly encountered such as mental health problems, unemployment, disrupted school experiences, imprisonment and in-patient psychiatric care. Care-experienced people and homeless people are disproportionately affected. However, as with all conditions, the severity of symptoms varies. Some people are moderately affected and are able to live relatively normal lives with support and recognition of their condition.

At this point, I will introduce Dr Jonathan Sher to the debate. Dr Sher is a renowned international expert on FASD, a former deputy director of the Queen's Nursing Institute Scotland and a founding partner of Scotland's coalition for healthier pregnancies, better lives. In my opinion—at the great risk of embarrassing him—Dr Sher has done more to educate people and raise awareness of the condition than anyone on the planet. He believes that the primary prevention of FASD, along with efforts to diagnose and assist those who are harmed by FASD, should become equal priorities throughout Scotland.

The savings on the prevention side would easily more than cover the endless costs of failing to prevent FASD. A Canadian study reported that analysis indicated additional costs of \$1.4 million—that is more than £1 million—to public bodies for each person with FASD. We must, therefore, identify solutions and take meaningful actions, and not just perennially identify and analyse problems.

Clinicians must be trained properly on the diagnosis of FASD and ways to assist those who

are affected by it. A public awareness campaign is necessary to highlight the dangers of alcohol to expectant parents and those who are planning to conceive. Of course, alcohol producers must play a part in that initiative, with clear messages on their merchandise about the dangers of drinking during pregnancy. They absolutely have a public responsibility to do that.

Inconsistent messaging on alcohol products is concerning, with around a quarter of women in the United Kingdom reportedly unaware of the current health advice. Dr Sher points out that alcohol affects everyone in different ways and that what might simply have an impact on one person could be devastating to another. It is a bit like Russian roulette: will that one drink be the one that affects your baby?

Back in the day, the message to pregnant women of my generation was, “Limit your alcohol intake—the odd glass of wine won’t do any harm as long as you’re sensible.” Dr Sher’s message is that the only way to avoid giving your baby FASD is to drink no alcohol at all. He also highlighted the fact that a large number of children who go through the children’s hearings system—I am a former panel member—may well have been affected by FASD. Support for families who are affected by FASD, and early diagnosis, can transform the prospects of young people who are affected. The use of alcohol brief interventions for pregnant women is also a useful tool in reducing the risk.

Adoption UK’s FASD hub Scotland provides invaluable telephone and online support for families who are living with FASD, and is funded by the Scottish Government. However, the problems with diagnosis persist. In a previous debate on FASD in Parliament, I noted that Adoption UK had

“reported that 55 per cent of children waited two years or longer for their ... diagnosis and that 78 per cent of parents whose children were diagnosed with FASD did not feel that healthcare professionals are knowledgeable about the condition or its various presentations.”—[*Official Report*, 23 September 2021; c 37.]

Adoption UK recommends improved diagnosis and support for people who are living with FASD, through the introduction of a dedicated multiyear national strategy on treatment and prevention.

The Scottish Government’s “Alcohol Framework 2018: Preventing Harm” includes a commitment to

“support the current system to be much more responsive to the needs of individuals, families and communities affected by FASD”.

I look forward to a response from the Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing on how that commitment is progressing.

The Government also undertook to develop Scotland’s first national pre-conception framework, supporting the health of women of childbearing age and their families. A key element of the framework will be supporting women to access reproductive health services and avoid unplanned pregnancy.

Scotland has an unhealthy relationship with alcohol, which we are trying to address by way of minimum unit pricing and improved public awareness of the dangers of alcohol. One in four people regularly drink above the levels in the chief medical officers’ low-risk drinking guidelines. Alcohol consumption among women of childbearing age is common, and 46 per cent of pregnancies in Scotland are estimated to be unplanned.

To conclude, FASD is a condition that is entirely preventable. It requires women not to drink for the entirety of their pregnancy, including avoiding alcohol while trying to conceive. The chief medical officers’ advice is, “No alcohol, no risk,” and I do not think that that is too much to ask in order to bring a healthy baby into the world.

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

18:15

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): I thank Rona Mackay for once again bringing this important issue to the chamber. It is an issue that does not always get the attention that it deserves, but it affects thousands of people across Scotland.

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, or FASD, is a lifelong condition that is caused by alcohol exposure during pregnancy. It is more common than many realise—in fact, research suggests that it may be one of the most prevalent neurodevelopmental conditions in the country—yet far too often it goes undiagnosed, misunderstood or unsupported.

It is estimated that up to 5 per cent of people in Scotland are living with FASD, which is, as we heard from Rona Mackay, a lifelong but preventable condition. That is higher than the average prevalence of autism in Scotland, and we talk about autism quite a lot. A study by the University of Glasgow suggests that the prevalence of FASD could be higher than previously thought, with 42 per cent of babies having been exposed to alcohol in pregnancy and 15 per cent showing signs of exposure to frequent high consumption.

Those are not just numbers on a page; they represent lives with real challenges. People who are affected by FASD may face difficulties with memory, attention, behaviour, executive

functioning, social judgment and emotional regulation. Many also live with physical health conditions that affect their heart, kidneys, eyes or hearing. Without timely support, people with FASD are at a higher risk of secondary harms, including, as we heard, mental health problems, addiction, involvement with the justice system and even premature mortality.

However, I make it clear that FASD is preventable. It is entirely caused by alcohol exposure in the womb, yet many expectant mothers do not know the full risk. In the UK, more than a quarter of women are unaware of advice to avoid alcohol during pregnancy. As we heard, that is the only way to stop FASD, and we need to encourage and educate younger women in that regard. Like Rona Mackay, when I had my baby, I was told, “Cut down—go and get a wee half of Guinness for your iron,” or something like that. However, we now know that the only way to stop FASD is to say to women that it should be “No” from the start.

I also want to highlight that FASD is often invisible. More than 90 per cent of people with FASD show no facial abnormalities, which means that diagnosis may rely on understanding brain function, behaviour and history. Many people go through life undiagnosed or misunderstood, or misdiagnosed with other conditions.

That is why awareness is so important. Awareness helps to prevent new cases by making sure that expectant mothers have clear and accessible information about the risks of drinking alcohol during pregnancy. Awareness also drives understanding, so that children and adults who are already living with FASD are met with compassion, not judgment, and receive the tailored support that they need to thrive.

To affected individuals, families and carers, I say: you are not alone—your struggles matter, and your voices deserve to be heard. To every health professional, teacher, social worker and MSP, I say that the duty before us is to act with compassion, evidence and urgency.

I know that I am coming to the end of my time, Deputy Presiding Officer. I pay tribute to the campaigners, charities and families who have worked tirelessly to break the silence around FASD. Their voices have been instrumental in driving change and reminding us all that, with the right support, people who are living with FASD can achieve so much.

Today, let us recommit to spreading awareness, supporting families and ensuring that no one who is affected by FASD feels invisible or left behind. Together, we can make sure that Scotland leads the way in tackling the issue with compassion, understanding and action.

18:19

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I thank my colleague and friend Rona Mackay for again bringing this very important topic to the chamber with a debate on international FASD day and the need for awareness.

International fetal alcohol spectrum disorder day falls on the ninth day of the ninth month of each year. That, I am told, is to draw attention to the importance of going alcohol free for the whole nine months of pregnancy.

Folk might feel that that is an easy ask; surely it is as simple as “If you’re going to get pregnant, don’t drink.” However, that is not so. As the motion from Rona Mackay states,

“46% of pregnancies in the UK are unplanned so without better awareness, people may continue their pre-conception lifestyle until they have a positive pregnancy test”.

Many women are into week 4, week 5 or even later before their pregnancies are confirmed.

Prenatal alcohol exposure is a significant public health issue for Scotland, with an estimated one in seven babies born at risk of FASD. It is also estimated that between 3 and 5 per cent of people in Scotland could be living with FASD.

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder is a term used to identify the range of physical, emotional and neurodevelopmental differences that might affect a person exposed to alcohol while still in their mother’s womb. FASD is frequently described as a neurodevelopmental condition. The term describes a collection of disorders that are a consequence of altered development of the brain and nervous system, and evidence suggests that early and accurate identification of brain differences and support needs can facilitate better outcomes for those who are affected.

Sadly, as we have heard, there is no treatment or cure for FASD, and the damage to a child’s brain and body cannot be reversed. However, an early diagnosis and support can, and often does, make a difference. Once a child has been diagnosed with the condition, a team of healthcare professionals can assess their needs and offer appropriate educational and behavioural strategies.

Without early diagnosis and appropriate support starting in childhood, FASD can lead to secondary disabilities, including reduced educational attainment and outcomes; mental health and addiction problems; involvement with the criminal justice system; and premature death from violence, accident or even suicide. Early identification is vital, as support can mean fewer mental health issues, better educational achievements and improved life chances.

We also need to address the drinking culture, including drinking patterns, because this is not only about how much people drink, but about the way in which they drink. As with any alcohol-related issue, the risks to the fetus are typically influenced by three aspects of the pattern of alcohol consumption: the quantity of alcohol consumed; frequency, or how often the mother drinks; and the timing of drinking in relation to pregnancy.

The most damaging pattern of drinking for the fetus is heavy episodic drinking, known in the UK as binge drinking. Folk can get a bit of a shock when they find out how small an amount of alcohol can be considered as binge drinking. The UK guideline for weekly alcohol consumption is 14 units for folk who are not pregnant, and a binge is defined as drinking a certain number of units on a single occasion—six units for women and eight units for men. That sounds simple, but what is a unit? Is it a drink, a glass, a bottle or a can?

In fact, a binge, which is the riskiest type of drinking for the fetus, amounts to just two large glasses of wine. That is not an unusual amount for women of reproductive age to drink on a night out or during dinner at someone's home. It must also be taken into account that alcohol measures poured at home are often two or three times larger than pub measures—that is something that folk should ponder on.

In conclusion, I hope that today's debate has brought the issue to the forefront of folks' minds and that it goes some way towards getting the message across. The message that I would like to get out there is this: "Don't risk it. If you are even thinking that you would like to become pregnant soon, just don't drink."

18:24

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Rona Mackay for bringing the debate to the chamber once again and allowing Parliament to recognise fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. As she will know, I have participated in these debates because the issue is close to my heart, and I really appreciate her bringing it to the chamber.

It is important that we continue to highlight FASD's impact on Scotland's communities and raise awareness of the long-lasting impact that exposure to alcohol during pregnancy can have. As other members have highlighted, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder affects 4 per cent of Scotland's population, which is a startling figure, given that—as others have said—it is preventable. The UK chief medical officer recommends that the safest approach for people who are pregnant or are planning a pregnancy is not to drink alcohol at all. That will keep the risk to the baby to a minimum.

Of course, it is important that people understand the risk of drinking during pregnancy, but a point that I would make, and which Rona Mackay made, too, is that we, as elected politicians, must take our responsibility in this regard seriously. We live in a Scotland that normalises alcohol; in fact, excessive alcohol culture is almost normal, up to the point where it becomes a problem. Therefore, we must, as Ms Mackay has said, understand this issue as a public health situation, and we must have more debates about population-wide measures to reduce alcohol-related harm.

Research indicates that individual women are often not aware of the advice not to drink alcohol during pregnancy, so clearly more can be done with regard to public health messages that can improve awareness, especially given that, as colleagues have said, 46 per cent of pregnancies in the UK are unplanned. I would hope that putting out that messaging early to young women could be useful.

The Government's "Women's Health Plan" commits to providing accessible information and advice on pre-pregnancy care, which is welcome. In the medium term, there is a plan to develop a framework for pre-pregnancy care to raise awareness and understanding of the importance of optimising health before pregnancy. That might be an area on which we could work with the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health to ensure that we get accurate information and that we can talk about the use of alcohol in pregnancy.

Jackie Dunbar: Do you think that it would help get the message across if we started speaking about the issue in schools, and teaching younger folk what would happen if they were to drink during pregnancy?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: It would help, too, if the member could speak through the chair.

Carol Mochan: I thank the member for making that important point. Interestingly, I have been involved in a discussion on young women's health, and I think that young people would appreciate our talking about these things much more openly, so that the information is out there and that they can make up their own minds about what they are going to do.

Healthcare professionals do a fantastic job out there, but we know that they find it quite difficult to discuss alcohol consumption, particularly when a woman attends healthcare services for pregnancy-related issues. For those who work in maternity services, raising awareness of the dangers of drinking is not part of their area of expertise. We know that they find it difficult, so there are perhaps some things that we could do to help them, such as exploring women's drinking habits.

We could also have a look at whether alcohol brief interventions might be a valuable tool, and how widely it is used by maternity services and midwives. Again, that might be something that we could work on across the health portfolio as part of the considerable work that needs to be done to reduce the prevalence of FASD.

I would say more, but other members have already said it. I will just end by saying that, if we work together, we can make a difference. This is a cross-party issue, and I know that other members in the chamber really want to see a change in this area. Let us hope that, if we are all back here again next year discussing the issue, there are some real improvements that we can talk about.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I invite Tom Arthur to respond to the debate.

18:29

The Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing (Tom Arthur): I thank my colleague Rona Mackay for securing this important debate, and my colleagues Jackie Dunbar, Annie Wells and Carol Mochan for their important contributions. I assure everyone that the Scottish Government is committed to preventing the harm caused by alcohol consumption during pregnancy, and to supporting those impacted by fetal alcohol spectrum disorder.

As has been outlined over the course of the debate, FASD is a lifelong neurodivergent condition that can affect every area of a person's life. That is why the Scottish Government is determined to ensure that people with FASD have the opportunity to live life on their own terms, properly supported when they need to be.

We are working to ensure that our policy on FASD is joined up across various areas of Government, including alcohol education and maternal and pre-conception health, to name but a few. We are taking forward a number of important pieces of work that are relevant to future prevention and support for people with FASD in Scotland.

As some members will be aware, we published in 2018 an alcohol framework that set out a commitment to increasing awareness of FASD and supporting improved diagnosis. We are currently developing a refreshed alcohol and drugs strategic plan that responds to the alcohol and drugs crisis, and we aim to publish that new strategic plan in early 2026, ahead of the conclusion of the national mission on drugs.

The clear message from our chief medical officer on alcohol during pregnancy remains "No alcohol, no risk". That message is also featured in the "Ready, Steady, Baby!" guidance and on NHS

Inform, where there is information on why women should avoid alcohol when they are pregnant or are trying to conceive.

The Scottish Government recognises the importance of pre-conception care to aid pregnancy planning and preparation, which can significantly reduce avoidable harm, including from alcohol. I am pleased to say that we are taking action through delivery partners, communities and families to enable all children to develop to their full potential, including before and during pregnancy. That work is part of our commitment to acting on early child development through our transformational change programme.

Additionally, our recently published population health framework sets out plans for tackling the root causes of poor health and reducing the life expectancy gap between the poorest and most affluent areas across Scotland, including initial action to reduce health-harming risks during pre-conception and in pregnancy.

Related to that, Scotland's "Women's Health Plan", which was published in August 2021, sets out actions that aim to address women's health inequalities by raising awareness of women's health, improving access to healthcare for women across their lives, and reducing inequalities in health outcomes for women and girls. We are now working on the next phase of the plan, which is expected to be published in January next year.

We know how important it is to provide education and training that are specific to FASD, as well as support to families and individuals with FASD. Over the past four years, we have provided almost £2 million, including £620,000 this year, to improve understanding of and support for FASD.

We fund the FASD hub through Adoption UK to support people affected by FASD as well as their families. The hub provides peer support, training and advice, including an advice line that is open to all parents and carers in Scotland who are parenting a child or young person with a history of prenatal alcohol exposure and one-to-one support.

We also fund the fetal alcohol advisory support and training—or FFAST—team at the University of Edinburgh. The team provides consultation and training to professionals, including tiered training programmes that give them the tools that they need to recognise, support and diagnose people who are affected by FASD.

We are aware of significant increases in the number of neurodivergent people, including those with FASD, seeking a diagnosis and requiring support. Although that creates challenges for a range of services, we recognise how important a diagnosis and support can be to someone's wellbeing. I assure members that the Scottish Government is working closely with national health

service boards and local authorities to improve services and support for neurodivergent people, and we have set up a new children and young persons neurodevelopmental task force to drive forward those improvements, as well as providing an additional £500,000 this year to enhance the support available to children and families.

The Scottish Government remains committed to preventing FASD, and to supporting those with FASD to live their best lives. We will continue to work across Government and with partners to increase awareness of FASD, enhance prevention measures, and support the delivery of those measures to those who are affected by FASD.

I again thank members for their contributions, and Rona Mackay for securing the debate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate.

Meeting closed at 18:35.

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