



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

DRAFT

Meeting of the Parliament

Wednesday 29 October 2025

Session 6



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 29 October 2025

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

Portfolio Question Time

Deputy First Minister Responsibilities, Economy and Gaelic

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon. The first item of business is portfolio question time, and the first portfolio is Deputy First Minister responsibilities, economy and Gaelic. Given our busy programme this afternoon and into the evening, I make the usual, but more impassioned, plea for brevity in questions and in answers.

Transmission-related Job Opportunities

1. Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland (Con): To ask the Scottish Government, regarding the potential impact on regional economies and employment, what assessment it has made of the extent to which projected transmission-related job opportunities are dependent on the consenting outcome for proposed overhead line projects within the current network upgrade programme. (S6O-05058)

The Minister for Business and Employment (Richard Lochhead): The Scottish Government is committed to a just transition to net zero, which will bring opportunities across Scotland's economy, including from the network upgrade programme. Our "Green Industrial Strategy" sets out how the Scottish Government helps businesses and investors to realise the enormous economic opportunities of the global transition to net zero.

To give one example, a paper by the University of Strathclyde estimates that up to 80,000 jobs would be required by 2035 in electricity networks and related infrastructure. Scottish ministers consider each proposal for consent case by case, including the potential economic benefits.

Douglas Lumsden: Earlier this week, it was revealed that more than 10,000 people have objected to plans for more than 350 monster pylons between Kintore in Aberdeenshire and Tealing in Angus, yet Gillian Martin was quoted in the United Kingdom Government press release thanking Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks for its investment in Scotland. It is absolutely unacceptable that she gets to play judge, jury and executioner on pylon decisions

when she has clearly already made up her mind. It is even more outrageous that she will not listen to the concerns of campaign groups but is happy enough to cosy up to SSEN.

Is it not the case that in order to meet the green jobs target, those mega pylons, which most of my constituents do not want, have to be approved, which thereby makes a total mockery of our planning and consultation process?

Richard Lochhead: I am not quite sure where to begin in answering that question, because there are a lot of comments there that simply do not stack up.

First, I cannot believe that a Conservative member is saying that he does not welcome SSEN investment in Scotland to the tune of billions of pounds. He must be one of the few people in Scotland who takes that approach, because that investment is very important. It is important first and foremost for consumers, especially in the light of the local storms that we have seen in Scotland over the past few weeks. We need a robust transmission infrastructure and electricity networks—[*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Lumsden!

Richard Lochhead: That investment is therefore important to ensure that the network is robust, as well as in helping us to move to net zero and ensure that we can deploy Scotland's massive renewable energy potential—

Douglas Lumsden: You have made up your mind.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Lumsden, we need to listen to the questions and we also need to listen to the responses.

I call Clare Adamson for a supplementary.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): To what extent will the proposed overhead line project support Scotland's net zero journey and the future of our energy security in clean, renewable power?

Richard Lochhead: The upgrade of the network and decarbonisation of the power system across these islands is incredibly important to ensure that we can take advantage of our massive renewable energy potential and secure all the jobs that will come with that, as well as achieve our net zero aims, which is very important for our future generations and the future of the planet. Over and above that, there are massive opportunities that can be secured.

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (Business and Regulatory Impact Assessments)

2. Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government, regarding the potential impact on businesses and the economy, what steps it is taking to ensure that business and regulatory impact assessments properly reflect the real-world impact of new policies on small and medium-sized enterprises. (S6O-05059)

Kate Forbes: We are continuously improving how we work with business through impact assessment and engagement to hear businesses' views directly and to understand the impacts when we make key decisions. It is vital that new policies take account of small and medium-sized businesses' real-world experiences, and we continue to ensure that that is the case. We have made significant progress with our refreshed business and regulatory impact assessment template and guidance, which has been co-developed with business.

Meghan Gallacher: Given that ministers approved an impact assessment that included only two accommodation providers operating below the VAT threshold and therefore failed to reflect the reality that is faced by small businesses, which make up the backbone of Scotland's accommodation sector, does the Deputy First Minister at the very least accept that the current issues around introducing a flat-rate visitor levy could have been avoided if ministers had done their jobs properly and provided a robust, representative BRIA in the first place?

Kate Forbes: I will respond to those points with the seriousness that the issue requires. I am conscious that businesses across the local authority areas that are considering introducing a visitor levy are very conscious of the impact that it might have on them. It is a decision for local authorities. On the primary issue of whether the levy should be a flat rate or a percentage rate, the decision was based on consultation responses. As the responsible minister, Ivan McKee is engaging extensively with the Scottish Tourism Alliance and many others to understand the impact that the visitor levy will have on businesses, which is exactly in line with the comments that I made in my first answer about the importance of taking the views of businesses on board.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Does the Deputy First Minister agree that the policy that is most detrimental to businesses, charities and the public sector is Labour's damaging hike in employer national insurance contributions? That tax on jobs is stifling growth and investment, and it has already cost 90,000 jobs across the United Kingdom hospitality sector

alone. Will she therefore again urge the chancellor to change course in the upcoming UK budget?

Kate Forbes: We know that what Kenny Gibson has just set out is factual because of the direct engagement that we have had with the businesses, third sector organisations and public sector organisations that he has cited. Not only did the national insurance contribution increase hit employers, particularly those with lots of employees, but it was a surprise for many of them, because the increase was not in any of Labour's manifestos. It is the surprising nature of the increase as well as the negative impact of it that has caused so much damage.

Computing Science Teachers (Technology and Digital Sectors)

3. Davy Russell (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on any potential impact of the recently reported decline in the number of computer studies teachers on employment in the technology and digital sectors. (S6O-05060)

The Minister for Business and Employment (Richard Lochhead): We recognise that delivering high-quality computing science education is important to Scotland's technology and digital economy. Although we do not hold data on the direct link between teacher numbers and employment in the sector, we are taking action to attract more students into teaching computing.

We are funding a pilot at Aberdeen university to support students with relevant higher national diploma qualifications to undertake further study to become computing science teachers. We established Scottish Teachers Advancing Computing Science to support teachers and, by the end of this financial year, we will have invested over £1 million in it. That fulfils key recommendations of Mark Logan's 2020 "Scottish Technology Ecosystem Review", which the Government commissioned and which was aimed at improving the talent pipeline for high-growth businesses. We also continue to offer bursaries to career changers to train in hard-to-fill subjects, including computing science.

Davy Russell: The right technology and computer skills will be crucial to the future success of Scotland's economy. That is true for South Lanarkshire, which hosts a great deal of infrastructure that supports the use of artificial intelligence. However, if we mirror the national trend across Scotland, we see that there has been a decline in the number of secondary computing science teachers in South Lanarkshire over the past five years. What is the Scottish Government doing to reverse that worrying and damaging trend?

Richard Lochhead: Mr Russell highlights an important issue for the future of Scotland's technology sector and the future of our society. In my opening remarks, I outlined a number of investments that are taking place to reverse the situation. I will also take this opportunity to commend Skyscanner. Members may have seen the recent news that a number of Skyscanner staff are undertaking teaching qualifications. For part of their week, they work for Skyscanner and for the other part of the week, they are in classrooms, inspiring the next generation of software engineers. That is a first-class, inspirational initiative that has been taken by Skyscanner, and it shows that employers have a role to play as well.

Scotland's technology sector has more than doubled in size over a 10-year period, so it is going in the right direction. Many of the businesses in the technology sector tell me that they are in Scotland because of the talent pipeline, so they are able to find the talent. However, the member is quite right that the measures that I outlined in my initial answer are extremely important for ensuring that we have more computing science teachers in Scotland's schools.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): The minister will be aware that, in 2022, the Scottish Government invested £1.3 million in refreshing computing science for pupils. Can the minister provide the Parliament with an update on the funding and on what progress it has supported so far?

Richard Lochhead: The member is correct: in 2022, we made available £1.3 million for schools to bid for additional equipment to transform their teaching of computing science with updated physical computing devices and all the resources that have to go with that, giving them the flexibility to choose equipment that would best suit their needs. I am proud to say that that funding has supported 304 secondary schools across Scotland. Much more needs to be done, but I hope that that gives the member some examples of the progress that has been made.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Davy Russell is right to raise a serious issue about the decline in computing science teachers. It is an issue that we have known about for years. I welcome the measures that the minister has set out; whether they will arrest the decline, we will have to wait and see. Is the minister open to more innovative ideas—for example, looking at potentially paying higher salaries to attract teachers into computer science and other hard-to-fill areas of teaching—given its importance to the needs of our future economy?

Richard Lochhead: It is important that ministers always remain open to new, innovative

ideas. The member highlights some potential ways forward. I have referred to the fact that we have already given some extra bursaries to those who want to change their careers, to encourage people to come into teaching computing science and some other subjects.

In the past, we have looked at innovations; going forward, it is important that we stick to the principle that we are always looking for innovative ideas to address what, as the member says, is an important issue for the future of Scotland's economy and our society.

British Sign Language (Parity of Treatment)

4. Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con):

To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on whether British Sign Language receives parity of treatment with Gaelic within its languages portfolio, in light of evidence given by stakeholders to the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, as part of its inquiry into the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015, that, although BSL plans are delivered locally by listed authorities, strong national co-ordination, oversight and dedicated funding are still essential if the aims of the act are to be met. (S6O-05061)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes):

The Scottish Government recognises BSL as one of Scotland's languages. Since the BSL (Scotland) Act 2015 came into force 10 years ago, Scotland has been the first country to implement a free national video relay service for BSL users and, with the new service, we will pilot the use of video remote interpreting for the first time.

The Education (Scotland) Act 2025 places a statutory duty on Qualifications Scotland to

“have regard for the needs and interests of ... those who are receiving, or wish to receive”

education through both BSL and Gaelic, across its functions. We will continue to work with the BSL community and its representative organisations to focus on improving outcomes for BSL users in Scotland, including through the “British Sign Language National Plan 2023-29”.

Tess White: Deaf women are more than twice as likely as hearing women to experience domestic abuse. In the north-east, local stakeholders report that BSL services remain seriously underresourced, with limited interpreting capacity and little dedicated funding for specialist support. Given that Gaelic and BSL are both the Deputy First Minister's responsibility, does she accept that that failure of national co-ordination and investment has left deaf women in particular at greater risk, and that equality means nothing without the resources to make it real?

Kate Forbes: I thank Tess White for that question. At the top of my answer, I say that I would be happy to engage with any of Tess White's constituents and any deaf women in her constituency who have raised those matters, because the statistic that she references is one that requires us to sit up and take notice.

There are several routes to improving BSL provision. Tess White will be aware of the new service that we have been piloting for video remote interpreting. She will also be aware of SignPort, the new app that has been launched with Scottish Government funding, which will develop interpreter booking facilities to make them easier to use.

The third thing that I want to highlight is the importance of local BSL plans. Tess White talked specifically about the north-east, although I imagine that the statistic that she gave applies right across the country. It is important to make sure that local plans are robust. We have recently awarded one-year funding and an in-principle commitment to year 2 funding for a BSL network to share best practice and advice with listed authorities on the delivery of their local plans. That will ensure that, in her own constituency area, there is a plan that is robust and can deliver the services that are required.

Tourism Sector (Impact of New Taxes)

5. Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the economy secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding the impact on the tourism sector of any new taxes or regulation. (S6O-05062)

The Minister for Business and Employment (Richard Lochhead): Tourism is one of Scotland's key growth sectors, and the Scottish Government is committed to working with the tourism sector to create a resilient, sustainable, accessible and inclusive tourism economy for the future. It is a measure of the sector's importance that I am in regular contact with the sector, as are many of my ministerial and Cabinet colleagues. There is a Cabinet sub-committee on investment and economic growth, and as part of our on-going bilateral engagement on policy development work, including on taxation and regulation, we look at all those issues and their impact on tourism and hospitality.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Yesterday, *The Herald* reported that the new visitor levy has already forced accommodation providers in Edinburgh into a position in which they are breaking the law, with Booking.com and Airbnb being unable to apply the Government's five-night cap correctly. The Scottish Bed and Breakfast

Association described the situation as "ridiculous and unacceptable".

Does the minister accept that whatever discussions took place within Government clearly failed? Would he also agree that, if that is how the poorly thought-out and poorly implemented new tax affects Edinburgh, owners of small B and Bs and guesthouses across my Highlands and Islands region have every reason to fear how the Scottish National Party's visitor levy will damage their already fragile and under-pressure tourism economy?

Richard Lochhead: Of course, many local authorities are considering raising the levy to inject investment back into the local visitor economy and thereby bring benefits. That is why 21 out of 27 European countries have some kind of occupancy tax in their jurisdictions.

The concerns in Edinburgh should be communicated directly to the local council by those who are affected. However, we continue to engage constructively with the sector at all times. My colleague Ivan McKee is involved in leading those discussions with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and industry representatives. In the same way that we have done in the past, we will continue to listen to them in the future.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): We know that taxes on overnight tourist stays are common across Europe and the rest of the world. Given that Scotland is an exceptionally popular tourist destination, can the minister say more about the opportunities that are presented by the visitor levy to support our economy and to ensure that Scotland retains its place as a global leader in tourism?

Richard Lochhead: That gets to the heart of the debate about a tourism levy. Given that we all want to have a sustainable tourism sector, we must ensure that the infrastructure and other issues that are affected by tourism are addressed. Many Governments throughout Europe have put in place some kind of tax or levy to address such issues.

As the minister who is responsible for tourism, I regularly speak to people in the sector, many of whom support the levy. Of course, they have questions about its implementation, and they want any new flexibilities to address that. I have no doubt that those debates will continue, but many people are supportive of the visitor levy, because they recognise that the fact that Scotland is a very popular tourism economy brings pressures and that we need investment to address some of those pressures.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I say to the minister, with all due respect, that the answers that he has given have been about the

principle, but the issue concerns a point of detail in the legislation. Providers in Edinburgh are concerned that they are breaching the law because the amount that they will have to charge will be different from the amount that they are advertising.

Ivan McKee has written to spokespeople across the Parliament and to members of the Economy and Fair Work Committee and the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee about a proposed expedited bill. Is that bill ready to go? Will it address the issue that has been highlighted? Can we have a statement on the issue? It is fast becoming the case that there is no clarity on what the Government's position is.

Richard Lochhead: The short answer to that is, of course, yes. The member referred to the fact that the Minister for Public Finance has already written to the other parties on the subject. We will keep that communication going.

In the meantime, as I said in my previous answer, anyone who is affected by the issue that the member raises should speak directly to the City of Edinburgh Council. However, the backdrop is that many discussions continue to take place between the Scottish Government, COSLA and the relevant sectors.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Given that the minister and his colleagues are desperately trying to find a legislative solution to the problem that I think that many would accept that they have created in respect of a flat fee, will he join me, in the interim, in encouraging those councils that are presently consulting on a tourism levy to pause those exercises so that they do not find themselves facing the same problem that the City of Edinburgh Council is facing?

Richard Lochhead: The member must not get away with rewriting history here.

What happened at the time was that there was a consultation on the levy. The people who responded to the consultation were listened to and the legislation was brought forward. However, now, in 2025, further flexibilities are being asked for and, once again, the Government is listening to those affected. That sounds to me like a good way forward, and it counters the member's suggestion that we completely ignored the sectors on the issue in the past, which is not the case. It was consulted on at the time. However, it is now 2025 and we are looking for further flexibilities, as requested by the sectors.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 6 has been withdrawn, and question 7 was not lodged.

Clyde Mission

8. James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on progress towards delivering the Clyde mission, including what its impact has been on the local economy and job creation. (S6O-05065)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): We are providing support to the Clyde mission in three main ways. First, the Clyde mission fund provided £13 million towards a range of projects that have created and sustained more than 600 jobs, supported more than 250 businesses and levered more than £8 million in further funding. Those projects include Renfrewshire active travel.

We have also committed £1.5 million to identify priority actions and locations for investment, with work already under way by the Glasgow city region team. The team is also developing plans for the heat decarbonisation fund, which is expected to launch later this year and to which we have committed £25 million.

James Dornan: I welcome the progress outlined by the Deputy First Minister, but can she say more about how the Clyde mission is helping to ensure that new economic opportunities along the Clyde are inclusive and benefit local communities, particularly in areas that have historically faced economic disadvantage?

Kate Forbes: The master plan work that is under way will further identify inclusive economic opportunities along the Clyde. That will be supported through the £25 million heat decarbonisation fund contributing up to 50 per cent of total project costs to ensure tangible investment in local communities. The fund application process that is being developed by Glasgow city region will also take into account community benefits such as the number of jobs that are created for local residents and linkages to local employability programmes and community-led projects, in order to maximise the economic impact of the Clyde mission.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on Deputy First Minister responsibilities, economy and Gaelic.

There will be a brief pause before we move to the next portfolio to allow members on the front benches to change over.

Finance and Local Government

Scottish Income Tax (HMRC Analysis)

1. **Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on the validity of His Majesty's Revenue and Customs's analysis of Scottish income tax statistics, including the July 2025 outturn publication. (S6O-05066)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): The Scottish Government continues to have confidence in the validity of HMRC's outturn statistics. The 2023-24 outturn confirmed a positive net position of £730 million, which was the largest contribution to the Scottish budget since the devolution of income tax. Scottish income tax grew strongly, by 12.7 per cent, between 2022-23 and 2023-24, and 2.6 percentage points faster than the rest of the United Kingdom. We will continue to work closely with HMRC to ensure the effective administration and collection of Scottish income tax.

Liz Smith: I thank the cabinet secretary for indicating that she has full confidence in HMRC. Will she now acknowledge that the most up-to-date statistical evidence that is available from HMRC demonstrates that the majority of taxpayers in Scotland pay more income tax than people elsewhere in the UK, which is contrary to the persistent claims made by Scottish Government ministers in the chamber?

Shona Robison: First, it is disappointing that Liz Smith did not welcome the very positive net position that I outlined and the growth in Scottish income tax revenues. [*Interruption.*] It seems a shame that no good news can ever be welcomed by members on the Tory benches.

In relation to her question, let me explain to Liz Smith that, at each budget, we set the starter and basic rate bands at such a level that more than half of taxpayers are expected to pay less in the year ahead than they would pay elsewhere in the UK. It is inevitable that earnings growth will be different to that forecast. [*Interruption.*] However, setting policy based on official, independent forecasts from the Scottish Fiscal Commission is the correct approach to take. The same approach is taken by the Office for Budget Responsibility. As is set out in the tax strategy, we will update the starter and basic rate bands by at least the rate of inflation for the lifetime of this Parliament.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I encourage members to request a supplementary question instead of shouting from a sedentary position.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): The SFC has estimated that the Scottish National Party Government's income tax policy choices

since devolution will raise up to an additional £1.7 billion in 2025-26 compared with what would have been the case if we had matched the UK Government's tax policy. Can the cabinet secretary provide assurances that the Scottish Government will continue to deliver a progressive approach to taxation, enabling Scotland to spend more on the things that matter most, such as protecting and improving our national health service and lifting children out of poverty?

Shona Robison: Our income tax policy choices carefully balance the need to support households while raising revenue to invest in public services. That investment enables us to provide a range of supports that are not provided in England by the UK Government, such as the Scottish child payment, free prescriptions and free access to higher education. It is for Opposition parties that propose tax cuts to explain which public services they would slash and run down to pay for the tax cuts that they frequently call for.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Questions 2 and 3 were not lodged.

Public Service Reform Strategy

4. **Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the progress being made against its public service reform strategy. (S6O-05069)

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): The Scottish Government published its public service reform strategy in June 2025, setting out our approach to delivering more efficient, preventative and joined-up public services. I provided an update on the public service reform programme to the Finance and Public Administration Committee on 9 July 2025. Early activity includes the establishment of the PSR board, the delivery of an invest-to-save fund worth up to £29.9 million and the holding of a summit with more than 140 public service leaders to focus on progressing live efficiency programmes.

The Scottish Government remains committed to providing further updates to the Parliament every six months in order to ensure continued transparency and accountability in the delivery of the programme.

Audrey Nicoll: I thank the minister for that update. A key pillar of the strategy is prevention—intervening in such a way as to mitigate negative outcomes for people while dramatically reducing demand for expensive acute or crisis services. After 40 years of working in the public sector, I whole-heartedly agree with that objective. However, there are many barriers to creating a truly preventative system. Will the minister outline

what progress has been made in removing those barriers? What action is being taken to review current budgeting processes that can, in themselves, be a barrier to shifting resources to preventative spend?

Ivan McKee: Audrey Nicoll is absolutely right. First, it is important to recognise that Scotland has a good track record in delivering successful preventative interventions. Alongside the PSR strategy, we published a document that set out our learning from 25 years of preventative interventions. Nonetheless, the strategy absolutely recognises the long-standing barriers to delivering a truly preventative system, including the moving of resources around that system. In response, we have within the strategy dedicated workstreams on understanding demand drivers and on preventative budgeting. That includes redesigning how we track, identify and report preventative spend and how we adapt budget processes to enable resources to move around portfolios and services.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Giving evidence to the Finance and Public Administration Committee last month, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government said that the Government was committed to reducing civil service numbers, stating that a 20 per cent reduction in the number of people working directly for the Scottish Government over the next five years was reasonable and “more than achievable”. Will the minister recommit to that 20 per cent reduction in head count and say how the Government intends to lose one in five members of its workforce?

In addition, is it not time for ministers to scrap their presumption against compulsory redundancies, which, according to civil service insiders, means that those with talent take voluntary redundancy packages while, often, those who know that they could not find a job elsewhere sit pretty and are shoehorned into roles that they lack the ability or skills to do?

Ivan McKee: I recognise the huge talent and skills that exist in Scotland’s civil service. It supports all of the policy agenda that we take forward across a wide range of ministerial portfolios. However, I reconfirm that the Government is committed to delivering on that 20 per cent reduction—4 per cent year on year—over the next five years. That sits comfortably below the attrition rate, so we can do it through tighter controls on recruitment. The permanent secretary and the executive team of the civil service are signed up to that.

On compulsory redundancies, the member should go and read what the relevant policy says.

Older People (Independent Living)

5. Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government how much it will allocate in its forthcoming budget to support older people to live independently in their local communities. (S6O-05070)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): The Scottish budget for the next financial year is still to be set in the context of significant financial challenge across the public sector, with multiyear spending plans due to be published on 13 January 2026. The Scottish Government remains committed to supporting the adult social care sector, with additional funding of almost £1.2 billion provided to social care since 2021-22.

Maggie Chapman: Communities across Aberdeenshire are already struggling, with elderly and disabled people bearing a disproportionate burden of council cuts, and they are now worried about what is to come. They have already seen the closure of sheltered housing despite well-documented evidence of need and the desire to keep such housing open. Indeed, when spaces were available in Cuminestown, applicants were told that it was full. Social care staff are stressed and overworked, with many leaving the sector, leaving home care support needs unmet.

What assurances can the cabinet secretary give the individuals, families and communities who are affected by those cuts? How will the Government ensure that other public services, such as the already stretched national health service, will not have to pick up the pieces when things fall apart?

Shona Robison: First, I say to Maggie Chapman that we have record levels of funding for the NHS and local government. Local government has prioritised social care in relation to the funding that it provides and that each local authority allocates. However, that is not to say that we do not recognise the pressures. Demographic changes continue to be a challenge, as do all the other pressures related to inflationary costs, and that means that we need to do things differently.

I believe that the funding of third sector organisations is often a cost-effective way of providing good-quality services, particularly for our most vulnerable. In the spending review, I am committed to looking at whether we can give multiyear envelopes, particularly to third sector organisations, to ensure that they have the continuity of funding and certainty that will help them to provide those much-needed services.

Primary Care (National Health Service Budget)

6. Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether, as part of setting its forthcoming budget, it will commit to

allocating 10 per cent of the total NHS budget to primary care, in light of reported concerns regarding a 6 per cent real-terms reduction in spending on primary care since 2021-22 and underinvestment being a key driver of general practitioner practice closures, recruitment challenges and increased pressure on hospitals. (S6O-05071)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): As is set out in the service renewal framework in June, during the next 10 years, we want to expand capacity in primary healthcare so that more people receive the right care in the right place at the right time. That means using our resources differently and deploying more of them over time in primary care and community settings.

The new £531 million GP package, which was agreed this week, is part of that. The forthcoming budget will allocate funding to the Government's priorities of the day, and the published budget will set out the spending plans for the coming financial year.

Sandesh Gulhane: I declare an interest as a practising NHS GP.

One in six Scots are on NHS waiting lists, with many facing unacceptable waits to see their GP, yet our grandstanding First Minister boasts about spending millions overseas, when junior doctors are thinking of striking. The Scottish National Party has consistently underfunded GPs in primary care, even though that is where 90 per cent of patient contact occurs. Hundreds of millions of pounds in Barnett consequential are not being spent on our health service.

Will the cabinet secretary take seriously the importance of GPs and follow Scottish Conservatives' calls for 10 per cent of the total NHS budget to be allocated to primary care and give the NHS the full Barnett consequential that it deserves?

Shona Robison: We have, for many years, passed on all resource consequential to the NHS. We set that out many years ago as our policy, and that is what we have delivered.

Waiting times are coming down and we have more GPs. However, the problem that Sandesh Gulhane cannot get away from is that the Tories' tax policy is going to cost around £583 million. That is £583 million less for the NHS, including general practice, and £583 million less for social care. The Tories cannot come here asking for more money when their tax policies mean less money for public services.

Local Authorities' Implementation of Scottish Legislation

7. Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what engagement it has had with local authorities regarding their implementation of Scottish Government legislation. (S6O-05072)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): In line with the Verity house agreement principles, the Scottish Government is committed to working in partnership with local government in the development and implementation of any new statutory obligations that impact on local authorities.

As with any organisation that is separate from the Scottish Government, it is for each local authority to ensure that it meets any legal obligations that it is subject to. There are a number of independent organisations and bodies that help to ensure that councils comply with their statutory obligations, including the Care Inspectorate, the Scottish Housing Regulator and the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman.

Clare Haughey: Many constituents have contacted me regarding South Lanarkshire Council's poor implementation of pavement parking prohibitions legislation. They tell me that, compared with other local authorities that have in place systems such as interactive maps of street assessments or clear accessible means to request an exemption, South Lanarkshire Council's procedures and processes are opaque.

Fines have been handed out to my South Lanarkshire constituents since March, and, as I understand it, the street assessment process is still on-going—nearly two years on from when the council should have been able to enforce the ban. Does the cabinet secretary agree that local authorities must ensure that residents have full transparency over council practices and guidance on implementing Scottish Government legislation if those measures are to be enforced fairly and effectively?

Shona Robison: I agree with Clare Haughey that transparency in those matters is crucial. She will appreciate, of course, that enforcement is not a matter for which the Scottish Government is responsible. That, of course, rests with local authorities. I share her view that it would be very welcome if local authorities were to act on the concerns that she raises, and I am very happy to have a follow-up discussion with her on the matter.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): At the point where legislative requirements are imposed on local government, we pass a financial resolution and local government is given the funds to cover the costs. Has the Scottish Government

done any analysis of how the costs of implementing that legislation have varied from the financial memorandum and how it has tracked the burden on local authorities on that basis?

Shona Robison: Mark Griffin raises a reasonable point. We would expect the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to raise those issues with us. If there is a change in the implementation of any legislation that is passed by this Parliament and there is a cost to local government that had not been foreseen, COSLA is pretty quick to raise such issues with us. I would expect COSLA's role to be to make us aware if there is a particular issue of concern with any piece of legislation. If Mark Griffin wants to write to me with more details, I am happy to follow that up with COSLA.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Rachael Hamilton to ask question 8.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Years of damaging Scottish National Party cuts to local authority funding and Labour's pernicious national insurance increase have created the perfect storm for the future of local community services.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Hamilton, I do not think that that is the scripted question.

Rachael Hamilton: Oh, I am so sorry. I have the first bit now.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That might have needed a spoiler alert.

Scottish Borders Council (Sport and Leisure Facilities)

8. Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government when it last met with Scottish Borders Council, and whether issues regarding the future of local facilities, including the potential closure of up to 30 sport and leisure facilities, were discussed. (S6O-05073)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): Here I was anticipating a really positive question from Rachael Hamilton. I will not get my hopes up.

Scottish ministers regularly meet councils, including Scottish Borders Council, to discuss a range of issues of mutual interest. Ministers have also committed to regular meetings with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities presidential team to discuss key priorities and issues for local government. The Scottish Government recognises the critical role of community sport and leisure facilities across Scotland and provided a record local government settlement in 2025-26 of more than £15.1 billion, which is a real-terms increase of 5.5 per cent and

which helps local authorities to support their local priorities.

Rachael Hamilton: A combination of Labour's pernicious national insurance rises and SNP cuts to local authorities have had a particularly damaging effect on local services. Last week, the spending watchdog the Accounts Commission published a report highlighting the impact of those cuts to culture and leisure services. In the Borders, libraries, sports facilities and museums are focal points for communities that provide health, wellbeing and leisure benefits. Will the cabinet secretary commit to mitigating the risk of closures and the deepening of inequalities that might result from the cuts, and will she bring forward a fair funding settlement for local authorities in the next budget?

Shona Robison: According to the Accounts Commission, for the past three years, we have provided local government with a real-terms increase, which is a fair settlement that supports its local priorities. In addition, this financial year, we have increased culture sector funding as a step towards investing at least £100 million, none of which Rachael Hamilton voted for in the budget. I make the point that I made earlier: if Rachael Hamilton wants more money for culture or for local government, she must address the point that the Tories want to cut public services by £583 million by their unfunded tax policies. They cannot come here asking for more money when, by their own admission, there would be £583 million less for public services under those policies. It does not add up.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): It is a bit rich for us to hear about economics from the party that brought us Liz Truss.

The issue of the potential closure of leisure facilities is entirely a matter for the Tory-led council in the Borders. At its meeting this week, the council was supposed to review those issues, but it has postponed that process until 10 November. Does the cabinet secretary agree that that is dreadful and that it increases the anxiety of all the workers and the people who rely on the facilities?

Shona Robison: Yes, I do. We provided Scottish Borders Council with an additional 6.2 per cent compared with 2024-25, which was higher than the average increase for local authorities. The member makes a number of very good points, and I would be happy to meet her to discuss the matter further, if she so wishes.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): If the SNP is funding councils properly, can the minister say why SNP-run Dumfries and Galloway Council is consulting on a package of cuts that includes removing music tuition from pupils and closing

leisure centres and which could result in citizens advice bureaux being entirely defunded across Dumfries and Galloway?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That question is not related to Scottish Borders Council, but I call the cabinet secretary.

Shona Robison: Whether it is Scottish Borders Council or Dumfries and Galloway Council, there has been a real-terms increase to local government funding, which Craig Hoy voted against in the budget. He would have provided no money to local government, because he voted against the budget. As he is the architect of the £583 million Tory tax policy, he has to explain how much he would cut from Dumfries and Galloway Council to pay for those unfunded tax cuts. I think that he needs to go back to school on tax policy and public sector funding.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions.

Douglas Lumsden: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Six SNP MSPs were selected for portfolio questions today, but only three questions were lodged, giving Opposition parties less opportunity to scrutinise the SNP Government. If SNP MSPs cannot be bothered to do their job and lodge questions, is there any way that the Presiding Officer can allocate the opportunity to ask questions to Opposition MSPs instead, so that we can hold this rotten SNP Government to account?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I thank Mr Lumsden for advance notice of his point of order, which is not a point of order.

I share his concern about the number of questions that are not lodged. I observe that that is not unique to one party, but, as Mr Lumsden says, it deprives members of an opportunity to ask questions. I simply reiterate the plea that has been made by the Presiding Officer to all members to ensure that, if they put their names in the ballot for a question, they are able to ask it.

We will have a brief pause before we move to the next item of business to allow the members on the front benches to change position.

Maternity Services (Safety)

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is a statement by Neil Gray on ensuring safe maternity services in Scotland. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:45

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): I am grateful to the Presiding Officer for the opportunity to make this statement. Members will be aware of Healthcare Improvement Scotland's report into acute maternity services at the Royal infirmary of Edinburgh in NHS Lothian, which was published this morning, as well as the BBC's "Disclosure" programme that aired last night.

I know that people will be concerned, but from the outset I reassure every pregnant woman and their family, in the strongest possible terms, that our maternity and neonatal services in Scotland are safe. Our hospitals are the safest possible places for women to give birth, and they ensure that mothers have access to the best possible care.

Any death or injury in maternity and neonatal services is a tragedy for a family. I found it incredibly difficult to read and listen to the experiences of people who were excited to be extending their families but are instead mourning the loss of their loved ones. I take this opportunity to extend my deepest condolences to Lori Quate—the husband of Jacqui Hunter and father of their baby Olivia—and to the families of baby Freya Murphy and baby Mason Scott McLean, who so bravely shared their stories for last night's BBC "Disclosure" programme. I also wish to convey my deepest condolences to families who have lost cherished loved ones while in the care of NHS Lothian maternity services.

This is an incredibly sensitive and emotive issue, and it is one whose effects will be felt across the chamber. I have not spoken about it before, but my family knows personally what it is like to suffer pregnancy loss. Indeed, at that time I also very nearly lost my wife due to inaccurate assessments of ectopic pregnancy symptoms, which is an experience that stays with me every day. Our family's experience differs from those of the families featured in the "Disclosure" programme and the HIS review, but I can absolutely understand the pain, grief and trauma that they went through. That makes me even more grateful to the families who have come forward. I share their personal determination to ensure that urgent improvements are made.

I acknowledge the commitment of our staff in maternity services across Scotland who continue to provide kind and caring support to families. I thank our hard-working midwives, nurses, doctors, clinicians and the wider national health service support staff who dedicate their lives to maternity care and who perform such an important role in our NHS. They care for families during the most exciting and, indeed, the most anxious times in their lives, witnessing the miracle of birth every day. I also recognise that there are deeply challenging times when something does not go to plan. Our NHS maternity staff are there to offer families compassionate and supportive care. I know that many other members across the chamber will have deep personal gratitude for the support that maternity care staff have provided to their families.

Before I turn to the substantive content of the HIS report, I want to provide members, and the public, with some important points of assurance. First, in the past 20 years, Scotland has made significant progress in reducing the risks associated with childbirth. Infant mortality has significantly reduced and, in 2024, stillbirth reduced to its lowest level. Although neonatal deaths have also reduced, we commissioned a review of neonatal mortality to understand what more needs to be done to reduce it further. The review was chaired by Dr Helen Mactier and published its findings last year, which led Healthcare Improvement Scotland to announce the commencement of its “safe delivery of care” inspections into acute maternity units across Scotland. The Scottish Government fully supported and backed that decision.

Those inspections started earlier this year. The first report, into NHS Tayside’s Ninewells maternity unit, was published in May. The second, into the Royal infirmary of Edinburgh, was published today. Although I know maternity and neonatal services are safe and the vast majority of women and their families have good experiences, the work done by HIS will help to ensure that we address issues such as those that have been found in Lothian.

It is also important that expectant parents have accurate information available to them. Members will be aware of some misinformation circulating both in the media and on social media in recent weeks regarding Scotland’s neonatal services model. To be clear, no neonatal units are closing. We are consolidating care for the smallest and sickest babies in three specialist units so that they have the best chance of survival. Pregnant women can access accurate information and advice on services available to them via NHS Inform.

I am deeply disappointed and concerned by the findings in the latest report, particularly those

relating to the experiences of women giving birth. I reassure Parliament that I have sought and received direct assurances from NHS Lothian’s chief executive that the health board is providing a package of support to women and families who use its maternity services, including a helpline, which will be available from today.

The report highlights a number of concerning findings, specifically related to oversight of patient safety; staffing levels leading to delays in care; staff feeling overwhelmed, unsupported and not listened to; gaps in incident reporting; and poor communication with women.

I am also greatly concerned about the findings relating to poor culture. Every member of staff deserves to feel valued, respected, and supported at work, and their wellbeing should never be compromised. We will not tolerate those issues in our NHS. I appreciate the bravery of the nurses who spoke out both in the BBC’s “Disclosure” programme and to HIS. That is how change and improvement happen.

On Monday night, I met NHS Lothian’s chief executive to discuss those issues and the wider concerns around patient safety oversight, leadership, staff wellbeing and delays in care. We are taking these concerns extremely seriously and I expect NHS Lothian to act immediately to implement all 26 requirements from the HIS report.

I also recognise that the report highlights some positive points, including respectful and responsive care, good teamwork and improvements in maternity triage. It illustrates the dedication, hard work, and compassionate care that are provided by staff working in very challenging circumstances. I thank the staff at Edinburgh royal infirmary for their commitment and tireless efforts to support mothers and babies, often in difficult circumstances.

In December, I directed the chief medical officer and chief nursing officer to work directly with NHS Lothian on the issues that I became aware of at that time. HIS undertook an unannounced visit in March and an inspection visit in June. The board has since made some improvements, in particular to maternity triage, and NHS Lothian has told me about its £1.5 million investment in additional staff, which it says has recruited 70 new midwives into the service, 30 of whom are already in place. I have also been assured that necessary staffing changes have been made and that leadership has been bolstered, for example by the appointment of a dedicated associate medical director for women’s services, and a range of cultural improvement initiatives, including the development of a culture charter.

However, I still have significant concerns about the pace and momentum of change, and I am

clear that we must see urgent improvements. That is why the Scottish Government has taken the decision to escalate NHS Lothian maternity services to level 3 of the NHS support and intervention framework. That intervention will provide significantly enhanced support and scrutiny of the improvement activity that NHS Lothian has outlined in its action plan. In escalating to stage 3, I expect to see evidence of improvement before the end of the year, particularly in relation to staff recruitment, training and development and the handling of adverse events. I will meet the chief executive of NHS Lothian again before the end of November to discuss progress on improvements.

Looking at the wider context, I have been asked to consider whether we should initiate a review of maternity and neonatal services. Our utmost priority will always be the safety and wellbeing of mothers and their babies, and our staff must always be a priority for our NHS.

In Scotland, we are working towards our shared vision of continuous improvement in maternity services. Although the Healthcare Improvement Scotland inspection reports will, in some cases, make for difficult reading for Government and health boards, I fully back the programme, which is working exactly as intended. This intelligence-led, independent inspection programme for acute maternity services allows us to take a real-time and local approach, ensuring that lessons are learned quickly, that improvements are made without delay and that good practice is shared widely.

The inspections are giving us vital insight into what is working in our maternity hospitals and what needs to change. The process is holding services to account. The NHS Tayside and NHS Lothian reports demonstrate that.

Local improvement action plans are already delivering change on the ground. NHS Tayside has already delivered the vast majority of its improvement actions following its inspection, with the remainder due to be completed by the end of the year. That is the sort of positive improvement that we want to see happening everywhere.

As we get further into the inspection schedule, we are seeing themes emerge, which means that we can now focus on actions to improve those areas. We have commissioned HIS to develop a set of detailed maternity standards that will describe the level of service that we expect to be delivered in every maternity unit, and those standards will inform future inspections.

Our Scottish patient safety programme's perinatal programme, which has been operating for more than 10 years, has also delivered a range of improvements in maternity services, such as

safety huddles, perinatal care bundles and stillbirth care bundles. The programme will also be used to mobilise improvements that emerge from maternity inspections.

On adverse events, when things go wrong, we expect boards to investigate fully. They must be open and honest with families about what happened, and make sure that lessons are learned to improve care. Last month, I wrote to every health board chief executive in Scotland to make clear my expectation that all boards will work with Healthcare Improvement Scotland to improve the timeliness and quality of significant adverse event review investigations and reporting and to provide regular reporting to HIS that strengthens oversight and scrutiny of such reviews.

To further strengthen our national oversight, I can announce today the establishment of a new Scottish maternity and neonatal task force. It will provide strategic, national leadership and will be chaired by the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health. The group will include senior figures from across our health system, independent bodies and third sector and advocacy organisations. It will report to me and will complement the existing audit and inspection system that is in place in Scotland. I want women's voices and their experiences of maternity services, as well as the voices of front-line midwives, to be heard, and I will make sure that they are part of the task force and that we listen to them.

Furthermore, I will meet Scotland's new Patient Safety Commissioner in November, and I will take the opportunity to discuss maternity services with her then.

Finally, members will be aware that I have also reached out to health spokespeople from across the chamber to invite them to meet me and the chief executive of NHS Lothian to discuss the findings of the HIS report in more detail.

Fulfilling our commitment to continuous improvement across our NHS is vital. We must empower our services and our staff to make the necessary changes that we need to ensure the safest and highest-quality maternity services in Scotland. I know that members will support me in that vision, and I welcome the opportunity to answer any questions that members might have at this time.

The Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary 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 on to the next item of business. I would be grateful if members who wish to put a question were to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): As I am a father of two young children and a practising NHS general practitioner who works closely with NHS staff and patients, this issue is particularly close to my heart.

I welcome Neil Gray's urgent statement today. Like all members in the chamber, I am sickened, appalled and, to be frank, terrified to read the findings of the report. My thoughts are with new mothers and families who have experienced such trauma at first hand and with the staff who have suffered.

This traumatic report highlighted a number of serious issues in our health service, including dangerously low staffing levels, a culture of fear, cover-ups, a failure to listen to families and a refusal to learn from mistakes that have been made—with pure luck seeming to get staff through sometimes.

Staff and mothers have been raising the alarm for years, but those warnings were silenced, which has shamefully put mothers and babies in harm's way. Let us be clear: two out of four hospitals in the Highlands have not been inspected for almost a decade.

We cannot rely on the BBC to show our problems. The buck stops with the cabinet secretary. After nearly two decades of Scottish National Party mismanagement, our health service is in permanent crisis mode. Until the SNP fixes the dire workforce planning, nothing will change. Surely, with the new task force, the cabinet secretary will halt the downgrading of maternity services under the best start model.

Given the severity of the report, why have NHS board members not been held accountable? What is the timeline to implement the 26 recommendations in full?

Neil Gray: First and foremost, as I said in my statement, my thoughts are with all the families who have been impacted and with the staff who have come forward. I made that clear in my statement, so I share the sentiments that Sandesh Gulhane sets out.

In my statement, I addressed the steps that NHS Lothian has taken to recruit more staff. The staffing complement for midwifery and nursing in Scotland has gone up under this Government, but I am not complacent about that, which is why it is important that we keep the matter under review and why the safe staffing legislation is so important to ensure the continued safety of our services.

I will not under any circumstances tolerate a culture of fear for staff who seek to raise concerns or report poor standards of behaviour. I have made that plain in the time that I have been in

office and in the discussions that I had with the chief executive of NHS Lothian. I have made plain to all board chief executives and chairs that I expect there to be a speak-up culture in the NHS. The "Disclosure" programme serves as a reminder of why such a culture is so important.

In my statement, I have set out the position on neonatal services, which has been underscored by midwives at NHS Tayside and, indeed, by Bliss, which says that it is the right model for us to follow.

On accountability, I cannot go into detail about human resources or employment matters, as Dr Gulhane will understand, but changes have been made and leadership has been strengthened at NHS Lothian.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): For years, midwives have issued warnings about the sustainability of services, but it seems that the cabinet secretary has not fully listened. The cabinet secretary has been told many times by the profession that our hard-working, dedicated staff face mounting pressures and an increasing workload. Junior midwives are being forced to enter the profession with limited mentorship and support. The Government mentioned an increase in midwife numbers, but what about the numbers of whole-time equivalent staff, the unfilled shifts and the changing complexities of cases, all of which have been raised by the profession? Staff on the ground are burned out, and it is clear that urgent action is needed.

Today, the cabinet secretary announced a new Scottish maternity and neonatal task force, but, after months, many of the nursing and midwifery task force recommendations have not actually been implemented—some of the work has not even been started. How can the Parliament be confident that the new task force will ensure the delivery of better outcomes for staff and patients on the ground? Has the cabinet secretary ensured that tight timeframes are in place for reporting on that?

Neil Gray: On the point about listening and hearing, when I became aware of concerns about NHS Lothian in December, I instructed the chief medical officer and the chief nursing officer to support NHS Lothian. When the report from HIS was shared with me last week, I made plain to NHS Lothian my expectation that there be an immediate response and that the recommendations in the report be set out. I am satisfied that the Government has done and is doing everything possible to ensure that there is public confidence and staff confidence in maternity services, not only in NHS Lothian but—as we heard in last night's important BBC "Disclosure" documentary—across Scotland.

It is for boards to employ staff and to ensure that the right staff skill mix is available, but I hear Carol Mochan's concerns about the need to ensure that the level is appropriate, given the concerns that have been raised in the HIS report on NHS Lothian. On Monday night, I raised those concerns directly with the chief executive of NHS Lothian, and I received assurances on her commitment to ensuring that staffing is increased to safe levels and that the right skill mix is put in place. I expect that to be the case across all boards, not only because of a report from HIS.

On the nursing and midwifery task force, I expect the recommendations to be implemented at pace. I will work with the new chief nursing officer, who comes into post in the next couple of weeks, to ensure that that is the case. On reporting, I set out in my statement my expectation of immediate action from NHS Lothian, and I will follow up with the chief executive by the end of November.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I thank the cabinet secretary for his statement and for recognising the concerns of maternity services, families and staff across the country. He has outlined his empathy with the situation and his interest in maternity services, particularly neonatal services.

The issue is of interest to my constituents. As a fellow MSP from the area that NHS Lanarkshire covers, the cabinet secretary will know the concerns that have been raised about the best start plan. However, misinformation means that many of my constituents are concerned that the neonatal unit is closing. As we know, that is not the case. It is the specialist services that will now be centralised, with the nearest one for my constituents being in Glasgow. Neonatal surgery, which is currently unavailable at Wishaw, is already performed in Glasgow.

Given that that is the case, will the cabinet secretary clearly outline the decisions that are set out in the best start plan, and how parents and families will be supported if their baby is transferred? Will he again reassure us that the neonatal unit in University hospital Wishaw is not closing?

Neil Gray: I made reference to that in my statement, because I have been concerned about misinformation that has been reported. I thank Clare Adamson for her question, and I thank the incredible staff at the neonatal unit in Wishaw general hospital for their life-saving work.

I am aware of the recent press and social media coverage about the neonatal units at both Wishaw general hospital and Ninewells hospital, and I state my concern about that misinformation. My utmost priority, and that of ministers, will always

be the families in Scotland, and the fear and alarm that that misinformation could cause is distressing.

No neonatal units are closing. We are consolidating care for the smallest and sickest babies in three specialist units at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital in Glasgow, the Royal infirmary of Edinburgh and Aberdeen maternity hospital, so that they have the best chance of survival.

I will make clear the reasons why the decision has been made to improve the model of neonatal care in Scotland. The model, which is set out in the 2017 report "The Best Start", follows clinical evidence that providing specialist care in units that care for higher numbers of very pre-term babies gives the best survival chances and clinical outcomes.

Very pre-term babies are those babies who are born at less than 27 weeks' gestation, who weigh less than 800g and who need multiple complex intensive care interventions or surgery. In Scotland, that will mean that only 50 to 60 babies who are born at the extremes of prematurity and a small number of the very sickest babies who require, for example, neonatal surgery will receive care through the model, with the vast majority of more than 4,500 premature babies continuing to receive care in the units closest to their home.

The Presiding Officer: I fully appreciate the sensitivity of the issues. I am keen to enable as many members as possible to take part in the session, and I would be grateful if we were succinct, as that would enable more members to be involved.

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Following the BBC "Disclosure" programme last night, which highlighted the harrowing experience of a patient from 2020, I was approached by a constituent who experienced similar issues with her maternity care at Ninewells hospital. Her baby was dropped by a doctor, she was given drugs, which were later described as unsafe in her condition, and she was told to remove a surgical bandage herself in the toilets 24 hours after birth rather than getting the correct support from staff.

Given that the cabinet secretary mentioned in his statement the progress that has been made through NHS Tayside's local improvement action plan, what reassurances can he give to my constituent and other women that those improvements will be sufficient to ensure safety? I note his comments about accountability for NHS Lothian, but how will the Scottish Government ensure that NHS boards are held accountable, especially as we are talking about one of the most vulnerable moments in a woman's life?

Neil Gray: Roz McCall is absolutely right. That is why it is so important that we get this right. My

apologies to the constituent who contacted her with those details. That is clearly a very distressing situation, and I would appreciate being furnished with those details so that I can follow up with NHS Tayside to ensure that the necessary response to that and the on-going care needs of that family are in place.

Healthcare Improvement Scotland has carried out an inspection of Ninewells. The recommendations have not just been accepted—their implementation is in train, and I expect them all to be completed by the end of this year.

On the back of Roz McCall's information, I will make sure that that case is also highlighted and that lessons can be learned.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): The cabinet secretary will be aware of the issues that local people, and we as local MSPs, have raised in Wigtownshire regarding the provision of rural maternity services.

Safety has always been my primary concern when addressing these matters. What assurances can the cabinet secretary give to our constituents in rural and more remote areas, such as the south-west region, regarding the provision of safe maternity services, and can he provide some feedback on the Government's recent meeting with the local Galloway community hospital action group?

Neil Gray: I fully recognise the importance of those issues for the people of Wigtownshire whom Emma Harper represents, and I know that my ministerial colleagues share that understanding. All women, irrespective of where they live, should receive high-quality, safe maternity care that is tailored to their individual needs and circumstances. The implementation of continuity of midwifery care through our best start programme is a key part of that and we are confident that, overall, maternity services in Scotland are safe and that the system of unannounced inspections gives us real-time assurance of quality and safety.

As Emma Harper highlights, I visited Dumfries and Galloway earlier this month and met service leaders and community groups on 15 October, including the Galloway community hospital action group, to hear directly about those issues. Following that meeting, I have asked NHS Dumfries and Galloway for further information, and I will share that with the Galloway community hospital action group.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): The risks to mothers and babies that were outlined in the HIS report and on the BBC's "Disclosure" programme are incredibly worrying. The cabinet secretary is reducing specialist neonatal provision at Wishaw and elsewhere, and mothers and the sickest babies from that area could have to travel for three

hours to Aberdeen because Glasgow is regularly full—in fact, Glasgow sends its overspill to Wishaw. Mothers in Caithness and Stranraer are having to travel hundreds of miles to give birth, and I met some of them recently.

I ask the cabinet secretary, therefore, to include provision for remote and rural areas in the task force work and to review the best start programme, as we could have five specialist neonatal units and not the three that the Government has settled for.

Neil Gray: I am happy to consider Jackie Baillie's ask for the task force to look specifically at rural and island community midwifery services. However, I do not accept her characterisation of the best start model—it is not true. Ensuring the safest possible care that has been recommended by clinicians and supported by Bliss and by midwives, including at Ninewells, is the model that we should be following to ensure the best outcomes for these babies.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): At the outset, I should say that I hear a lot of positive stories about maternity care, and my family and I have had three very positive and happy experiences in Lanarkshire, at the Wishaw maternity unit.

However, although this is not directly related to the situation in Edinburgh, I met a constituent this week who reported having had very difficult maternity experiences at all stages, including pre-birth, birth and aftercare. I have written to the cabinet secretary about that, so I will not go into the full details just now. However, at the heart of my constituent's complaint is that she did not feel heard in relation to the treatment and care that she received.

What more can be done to ensure that the services learn from such experiences, as well as from the experiences in Lothian, so that all mothers feel that they are an integral part of the care and decision-making process when they are pregnant and giving birth?

Neil Gray: I know that Fulton MacGregor wrote to me yesterday, and I will ensure that he gets a full response to that correspondence. He is absolutely right that women deserve answers, transparency, honesty and openness with regard to the care that they receive. That was the theme of concern that came through from the HIS report in NHS Lothian, and I have been absolutely clear with the board's chief executive that that must change and improve.

Fulton MacGregor is absolutely right that women must receive information that is appropriate to their needs and that they must, when they have questions about their care, including when there have been mistakes or

failures, have those properly investigated and fully resolved.

Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): NHS Lothian has responded to the HIS inspection report, citing its improvement plan and apologising to staff for the working culture and staff shortages. Although I am sure that we all welcome the recruitment of 70 new midwives, that is a staggering level of understaffing—NHS Lothian was short of more than 70 midwives, and whistleblowers had to sound the alarm about patient and staff safety. How did the Scottish Government not know what was happening in our maternity services? How will the minister take us from an NHS culture of reacting to bad news, to a culture of proactively assessing and evaluating the state of our NHS services so that we do not end up in this situation again?

Neil Gray: I appreciate the concern that Lorna Slater has set out regarding the revelations in the HIS report about staffing levels in NHS Lothian. I share those concerns and I said as much to the chief executive of NHS Lothian on Monday night—I said that I expect the staffing complement to be resolved and the skill mix in that staffing complement to be properly addressed.

On ensuring that we respond rather than react to the situation, I have been clear about the inspection regime that is in place with Healthcare Improvement Scotland, which is part of the reason why I am stood here today taking questions about these matters. We are uncovering areas where there is challenge and we are finding areas of success and sharing experience of both to ensure that we can learn and provide safer services going forward.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I have been working with Lori Quate for some time. As we saw in the programme last night, he lost his wife and daughter within 24 hours of each other. That was a traumatising experience. I welcome the cabinet secretary's statement, because it does not ask whether there is a problem; it acknowledges that there is a problem. These are not isolated cases; there is a problem with the system as a whole. We have seen from the inspections in NHS Lothian and NHS Tayside that that is the case.

The question now is how we deliver change. I accept that the cabinet secretary has set out a series of procedures and processes and a new task force. However, if he finds through that task force that a national investigation is required to stimulate adequate change across the country, will he agree to such an investigation? It is important that we learn the lessons from this, rather than its being forgotten as a one-time episode. Will the cabinet secretary consider a national investigation if that is what the task force finds?

Neil Gray: I very much appreciate Willie Rennie's testimony. I again offer my condolences to Lori Quate for the unspeakable and unimaginable pain and torture that he must be experiencing. I am grateful to Willie Rennie for his support and representation on Lori Quate's behalf.

In my statement, I set out the steps that I believe we can and are taking regarding the HIS inspection regime. However, I remain open-minded. Should further information come to light, or should any of the discussions that I have with the Patient Safety Commissioner, or the information that comes through the HIS reviews, require us to have more national oversight, I will consider that. It is important that we act now rather than wait for the outcome of a review. The HIS inspection regime allows us to operate live to ensure that we are addressing concerns and problems where they arise on a localised basis.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Midwives in Edinburgh have told me that they often feel like they are landing planes, with expectant mothers being told to sit in car parks or to go home. In one case, an expectant mother told me about giving birth on a bathroom floor. That trauma meant that the family has decided not to have any more children. This seems to be happening too often. What reporting of such incidents will take place under the reviews that the cabinet secretary has outlined to ensure that the task force takes into consideration the situations that are often not being reported?

Neil Gray: I absolutely recognise that a traumatic experience such as the one that Miles Briggs put on the record and the ones that were put on the record in the "Disclosure" programme can lead to families making very difficult choices about their family composition. I cannot imagine the challenge that is at play in those situations. There are significant adverse event review processes in place in the NHS across Scotland. As I said in my statement, I have written to all health board chief executives to set out my expectations regarding the speed, timeliness and robustness of those processes. As Miles Briggs has pointed to, I expect the task force to be able to look at some of those processes to ensure that it is informed about the actions that need to be taken, should they need to be taken.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Any negative childbirth experience can have short-term and long-term adverse consequences for women and their babies. It has been linked to difficulties with breastfeeding, poor self-rated health, post-traumatic stress and post-natal depression. What assurance can the cabinet secretary provide that support is available to women who, due to feeling fearful or being in

physical distress, have had a negative experience of childbirth?

Neil Gray: Ruth Maguire is right. That is why, in February this year, we published our pathway of maternity care, to set out the core care that all women and their babies should receive during the antenatal, intrapartum and postnatal periods. The pathway provides that all women

“should be given the opportunity to discuss their maternity journey with their midwife”

prior to their discharge from maternity services, and that

“any appropriate referrals to other services should be made at this time.”

I encourage any women with any worries or concerns about either their current pregnancy or their previous birth experience to speak to the midwife in the first instance, to ensure that they receive the appropriate care and support, tailored to their individual needs and circumstances.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): We have known about these issues for more than a year. In August 2024, new mother Louise Williamson spoke about her “horrific” labour after she was “repeatedly ignored”.

In December, in a verbal briefing given to Lothian MSPs and MPs on women’s services concerns, NHS Lothian advised that action was under way. Further assurances on progress were given to the same group on 20 June 2025, yet, three days later, on 23 June, an unannounced HIS inspection confirmed that nothing had changed.

Women deserve to know that their maternity services are safe. Today, NHS Lothian told MSPs that the issues

“will take time to resolve.”

What confidence can families have that, this time, there will be real, tangible changes?

Neil Gray: It is not true to say that nothing has changed. The HIS report explicitly goes into detail about the improvements that have been made in maternity triage processes, which have improved and have been given a good score.

However, as I set out in my statement, I share the concern about the pace of progress. That is why NHS Lothian has been escalated to level 3 of the NHS support and intervention framework for its maternity services—it is because I share the concern that the member outlines about the speed of progress. To provide Sue Webber, her constituents and other members across the chamber with reassurance about the completion of all the recommendations, that is also why I will be meeting the chief executive of NHS Lothian by the end of November to ensure that that progress is being made.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): The report that was published following the HIS inspection in June states that staff were

“working hard to provide compassionate and responsive care in very challenging circumstances.”

It made 26 requirements for improvement and escalated serious concerns to NHS Lothian and the Scottish Government. One of the main issues that were mentioned in the report was

“delays in escalation of care”,

which

“resulted in significant adverse outcomes for women.”

What can the cabinet secretary say to reassure pregnant women in my area of East Lothian and in NHS Lothian about that particular area, and what actions are being taken now—and have been taken since the inspection—in relation to that?

Neil Gray: I thank Paul McLennan for raising those points, which will be incredibly important to the constituents he represents in East Lothian. As I said in my statement, I know that people will be concerned—I am concerned—and, from the outset, I want to reassure every pregnant woman and their families in the strongest possible terms that our maternity and neonatal services in Scotland are safe. Our hospitals are the safest possible place to give birth and to ensure access to the best possible care.

When I met NHS Lothian’s chief executive earlier this week, she outlined the extensive package of work that the board has already put in place to address the findings of the report, recognising that some of the issues will take time to resolve. I impressed on her my direction that this must be resolved as quickly as possible. She also outlined improvements that have already been made. Those include the investment of £1.5 million in staffing, which has led to the recruitment of more than 70 additional midwives, 30 of whom are already in post and the rest of whom will be in post by the beginning of December. Leadership has been bolstered through the appointment of a dedicated associate medical director for women’s services, and the board has invested in staff training. NHS Lothian published its externally commissioned review of culture in May, and maternity teams are now developing their own culture charter.

I assure Paul McLennan that I take the concerns to which he referred extremely seriously, and I expect NHS Lothian to act immediately to implement the 26 requirements.

The Presiding Officer: I am keen to take all members who have indicated a desire to ask a question, so I would be grateful if people could be succinct.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Ind): I know from personal experience, when our first daughter died, how much care and love was given by the maternity unit here, in Edinburgh.

It is clear that there is an on-going issue, and I welcome the cabinet secretary's statement. Will he commit to coming back to the chamber early next year to give us an update on how things are progressing in Lothian? I am afraid that many of us in the city of Edinburgh are not confident that the changes that he outlined in his statement will be made quickly or efficiently.

Neil Gray: I thank Jeremy Balfour for sharing his very sad loss, and I offer my condolences to him for the pain and trauma that he experienced in those circumstances.

I have set out clearly to NHS Lothian my expectation that it must come forward with improvements, and I have set a timeline—by the end of November—for when I expect to hear more. I am more than happy to ensure that Parliament is kept informed of progress, whether through a statement, a Government-initiated question or a letter to committee.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I express my gratitude for the courage of whistleblowing NHS staff, because it is their willingness to speak up that is key to having a transformed culture of continual improvement.

I know that the cabinet secretary knows that, too often, families who are affected by maternity tragedies are left in the dark, while HIS and NHS boards appear to pass responsibility for transparency and accountability between each other. What assurance can he give that health boards will not go on managing reputational risk but will instead ensure that significant adverse event reviews in maternity cases are published, learned from and acted on?

Neil Gray: Stephen Kerr has a long-standing interest in supporting whistleblowers, for which I am very grateful. I share his desire for us to have a speak-up culture in our health service. I have made that abundantly clear on numerous occasions publicly, in Parliament and to our NHS board chairs and chief executives. I share Stephen Kerr's view that we need to have a speak-up culture, because that is how we will achieve progress, improvement and learning. I also share his concern about the need to ensure that information is shared transparently with families.

As I said in my statement, I have written to NHS board chief executives to set out my expectations on the timeliness and robustness of significant adverse event reviews. Mr Kerr will understand why it is challenging to have those published, but I am more than happy to have further conversations about how the process is working.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): The cabinet secretary will be aware that I, alongside other colleagues in the Parliament, have campaigned to stop the downgrading of Wishaw general's neonatal department. The Scottish Government might wish to use the term "centralisation", but the removal of specialist services from a neonatal department is downgrading. That is not misinformation—it is a fact.

I have also campaigned to secure overnight accommodation for parents of babies in neonatal wards, as there are not enough beds at present. That is another area in which the Scottish Government has not acted quickly enough.

Will the cabinet secretary confirm that the new task force will—as Jackie Baillie called for it to do—undertake a review of the best start model, with a view to having five specialist neonatal units as opposed to three? Can he give an update on the number of beds that are available for parents who need to stay with their babies in neonatal departments across Scotland?

Neil Gray: In response to Jackie Baillie and Clare Adamson, I set out the Government's position on neonatal services in Scotland, which is based on expert clinical advice and on ensuring that we provide the best possible care to the sickest babies—the most vulnerable babies in Scotland—who need access to the most specialist care. I was clear in setting out our position in that regard.

I am sympathetic to and willing to look at Meghan Gallacher's request with regard to overnight accommodation in neonatal settings, and I will respond to her in writing with more detail on that.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I should declare an interest, because I have a daughter who is a midwife.

Listening to the cabinet secretary's statement today, and to the questions and answers, spins me back to the start of my political career, nearly 10 years ago, when one of my first cases was a constituent who, tragically, had lost a child in childbirth. Over an extended period, we worked out that Crosshouse hospital was nearly 24 neonatal staff short, and that of course was addressed, but here we are, nearly a decade later. My colleague raised the issue of reputational management. How do we get past that? How do we get NHS boards to bin the idea of protecting reputation and reputational management, so that we can learn from mistakes that are made?

Neil Gray: I thank Brian Whittle for that. I understand that his constituent spoke to and gave evidence to the patient safety commissioner on those issues.

As I said to Stephen Kerr, I am absolutely clear in my expectations for the culture of the NHS and, indeed, wider public services around candour, disclosure and transparency. I am not interested in the protection of reputations. I am interested in ensuring the safe delivery of services and ensuring that our staff feel confident that they can raise concerns where they have them, and that they can go about their jobs to deliver the incredible, world-leading, compassionate and professional care that they do in the NHS here in Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the urgent statement.

Urgent Question

15:31

Asylum Seekers (Accommodation)

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding the housing of asylum seekers at Cameron barracks in Inverness.

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): I was deeply disappointed to learn about the Home Office's plans to accommodate people seeking asylum in Cameron barracks in Inverness from the media yesterday, rather than through, at the very least, a formal notification—or, as should have been the case, as part of a collaborative discussion before any decision had been made.

On hearing that Scottish Government officials had been notified that the Home Office was considering Cameron barracks, I wrote to the Home Secretary in September to seek an urgent meeting. I have been clear with the Home Office that the plans must fully consider the impact on the local community and the appropriateness of the site to accommodate that group of people. I understand that a meeting is in the process of being scheduled.

Edward Mountain: I am a bit confused because, when Alex Norris stood up in the House of Commons at 2 o'clock today to answer an urgent question, he said:

"My officials have been engaging directly and regularly in advance of this announcement with the Scottish Government, the relevant councils and local service providers, and will continue to do so."

That does not quite chime with what the cabinet secretary said.

My constituents are rightly concerned about their safety—not on the streets but in relation to their health. There are simply not enough resources in the Highlands. Inverness general practices are creaking at the seams, Raigmore is unable to keep up with appointments, and there are not enough dentists to go round. What assurances can the cabinet secretary give me that people in the Highlands will continue to get some level of health cover, with the extra 300 people who will be moving into Cameron barracks?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am happy to give Edward Mountain further detail on the timeline in writing, because it is important that we deal with the issues that his constituents have raised.

I say again that, when we had word that the move was being considered, I raised concerns in a

letter to the Home Secretary, and those concerns have not been answered. If that is what the UK Government considers to be a collaborative piece of working, we will have to agree to disagree on that point. I hope that I will meet the relevant UK minister in due course, because I have written to the Home Secretary again today to raise a number of concerns.

I say at the outset that Scotland welcomes refugees and asylum seekers, and it is important that we have our moral and international responsibilities at the forefront of our minds as we look to do that. That is exactly why such decisions should be taken collaboratively between the UK Government, the Scottish Government, local authorities and local service providers.

Given the way in which the decision was announced, I can understand why there are concerns about the provision of health services and about other local services. That is exactly why I have written to the Home Secretary to ask specifically for reassurance that full wraparound services will be provided in such a way that there is capacity on site to deal with the health or other requirements of those who may be moving. I would like us to have that at the forefront of our minds when it comes to how we can support asylum seekers and deliver local services. However, I can do that only if the UK Government works with the Scottish Government and local government.

Edward Mountain: It sounds as though the cabinet secretary has been in negotiation with the UK Government for some time. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Let us hear one another.

Edward Mountain: It was deeply concerning for constituents across the Highlands to find out about this only on Monday. According to what the cabinet secretary just said, the issue was raised back in September. It may have been raised before then—clearly, Alex Norris believes that it was raised well in advance, as that is the evidence that he gave to the House of Commons. Surely the point now is that it is up to the UK Government to start speaking to elected representatives, Highland Council and service providers to make sure that we have the appropriate services in the Highlands.

I reiterate that highlanders have always opened our doors to allow people to come up. We welcomed Afghan people who had worked with the British Army to stay in Cameron barracks. This is a different ball game. Three hundred young men are moving to Inverness and we do not know what their requirements are or what the services are. Highlanders themselves are not even getting housing services.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Again, we will have to agree to disagree on whether there has been a negotiation. I have laid out the concerns that I have raised with the UK Government on behalf of the Scottish Government.

I think that we can get to some agreement with Edward Mountain. Some of the points that he has raised are exactly the points that I have been raising and not getting answers to from the UK Government. That is why there was a concern. For example, on Monday, when the UK Government eventually informed Highland Council, the Scottish Government, despite being asked whether we could attend that meeting, was not able to attend it, because we had not been told about it. Again, there is a degree of frustration among ministers over how we can attempt to work together to be able to reassure people.

I say to Edward Mountain that the Scottish Government is working as closely as possible with local service providers and Highland Council. My officials have met Highland Council regularly, and I have reached out to meet Highland Council leaders, too.

Mr Mountain points out that there has been successful welcoming of cohorts in Inverness. That is an example of how the UK Government and the Scottish Government worked together to ensure that the planning for the Afghan cohort, in the very same barracks, was successful, because we did it collaboratively. If we could do it once, we can do it again. However, that requires the willingness of the UK Government.

Mr Mountain says that that was a different cohort. That is right, Presiding Officer, but they are also people who are seeking asylum, and we have an obligation to support them in a way that reassures local communities about the services that they require.

The Presiding Officer: There is a great deal of interest in this item. I am keen to enable as many members as possible to take part, so succinct questions and responses will be appreciated.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I am sure that the cabinet secretary shares my frustration that elected members at all levels were made aware of the decision to use Cameron barracks as asylum accommodation only through the media yesterday morning. That is a clear example of the disastrous management that is under way at the Home Office as it battles to outdo far-right parties with failing policies.

Over the past day, Inverness politicians have been receiving confused correspondence from constituents as the UK Government seems to be going out of its way to contribute to the hostile environment that it inherited from the Tories. Will the cabinet secretary advise what engagement

she has had, and anticipates having, with the evidently chaotic Home Office?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I agree that proper engagement on this is critical at all levels of government. Following my initial letter on 26 September, I have written to the Home Secretary again today to flag up the concerns that remain, and we are keen to work with her during the process.

The member is quite right to point out, as she has done on numerous occasions, that Scotland—and, indeed, the Highlands—has a long history of welcoming refugees and asylum seekers. If the Scottish Government were going to implement a policy that delivered for local communities and asylum seekers and ensured community cohesion, it would not go about it in this way. That is exactly why there is an intense level of frustration in the Scottish Government. In saying that, we stand ready to work collaboratively with the UK Government, should it wish to do so.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I am in full agreement about the need for joint working across the UK on these issues. However, let us be clear that the UK Government inherited a policy disaster from the Tories, who broke the asylum system. Under Labour, double the number of asylum decisions have been made, removals have increased by 30 per cent and the number of asylum hotels is down by close to 50 per cent from its peak under the Tories. It is going in the right direction, and we want to see that. The use of military barracks as a temporary measure is a practical step that will deliver better value for the public.

Mr Swinney and his Cabinet ministers certainly talk the language of supporting asylum seekers, but when the Scottish National Party-run Glasgow City Council wanted to pause refugees coming to Glasgow, the First Minister backed it to the hilt. Now, when the Home Office has proposed army barracks as an alternative to housing asylum seekers in hotels, the SNP appears to be equivocating on some of the issues. What actions will the cabinet secretary stand ready to take to ensure that this works?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: With the greatest respect to Michael Marra—I have to give him some kudos for attempting to deflect as much as he could—he cannot blame the Conservative Government for how the current UK Government handled the announcement yesterday. That had nothing to do with the Tories. There is lots that we can blame the Tories for, but let us accept where responsibility lies.

The Scottish Government recognises that there is a need to provide safe, supported accommodation for people seeking asylum—of

course there is—and we agree that the long-term use of hotel accommodation is not suitable and that alternatives must be sought. All that we are asking is that Labour considers the cohort, works out what services that cohort requires and then works with local government, the Scottish Government and local service providers to find the best place to accommodate people. The approach should not be to find somewhere to put people and then try to shoehorn everything else in after the decision has been made.

We all want to work with the UK Government, but that requires the UK Government to say what it will deliver on site, after which we will know more about the pressures that Mr Mountain raised and that people are concerned about. That is how we collaborate to implement a cohesive policy.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind): Does the cabinet secretary agree that we need to have a rational, calm discussion about these matters and that people have genuine concerns, which are not at all born out of racism but rather arise because of various practical matters that must be considered rationally and thoroughly?

Does the cabinet secretary also agree that it would have been better had there been a prior negotiation between the two Governments about which locations are suitable and which are unsuitable? Does she understand that Inverness has a very strong view that the central location of the barracks, which are beside a residential development and a school, is not the right location? Will she publish the letter that she shared with the UK Government?

I had a briefing on the matter with the Home Office this morning. Does the cabinet secretary suggest, as I believe, that Mr Norris, the relevant UK Government minister, should visit Inverness, give an explanation to people there and be open to questions from the press about what will happen and when, not least because the barracks are extremely cold and unfit for human occupation at the current time? The Home Office admitted that this morning, yet it said that it would be all ready in a couple of weeks' time—I will believe that when I see it.

I want to work with the cabinet secretary. I would like to see the two Governments working together—

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Ewing.

Fergus Ewing: —but, above all, having a rational, open discussion, so that we do not get involved in charges of racism here, which we all want to avoid.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Ewing.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Mr Ewing's suggestion that a UK minister visit Inverness is a

very sensible one. I would suggest that it is perhaps something that should have been done before the decision was made. It is very important that people from local communities are able to have their voice heard on this. I am sure that local representatives will do that at council level and in the Scottish Parliament, but the UK ministers have a responsibility, too.

We are here to represent our communities, and, of course, local residents have a number of concerns. I believe that many of those concerns are based on a concern about local service provision. That is exactly why I have written to the Home Secretary twice to lay out specific concerns, and I am certainly more than happy to make those letters available.

We are here to represent communities, but we are also here to reassure our communities, where at all possible, that asylum seekers can be part of our community. Indeed, they are part of our communities in many parts of Scotland, and the people who live here currently and those who may move here in the future can work and live together very well if practical matters are dealt with.

The Presiding Officer: We have much interest, so I would be grateful for concise questions and responses.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): People in Inverness and the Highlands are concerned about this issue, and part of their concern is about the way that it was announced. However, a large part of it, as Fergus Ewing and Edward Mountain have discussed, is about the availability of services, which are already stretched and will be put under more pressure.

If the cabinet secretary has accepted in Parliament today that she has been discussing the matter with the Home Office since September, can she outline what discussions the Scottish Government—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Ross.

Douglas Ross: The cabinet secretary wrote to the Home Office about the proposal in September, and she is going to publish that letter. What discussions has the Scottish Government been having since September about education, justice, local government and health, which would be impacted by 300 individuals coming up to Inverness? Does the cabinet secretary believe that any planning permissions are required at Cameron barracks to house those additional individuals? As Fergus Ewing said, that will not be sorted in a matter of weeks—it will take months.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The issue of planning is, of course, one for Highland Council to consider as the authority that makes planning

decisions, so I will leave that to Highland Council to discuss.

I am loth to get caught up in the semantics of this, but if sending a letter and not getting a reply is the member's idea of a discussion, we will have to agree to disagree on these issues.

I have raised concerns about the issue because it is important that we recognise that there will be an anticipated high level of support for those who may arrive in Inverness in a reasonably short period of time. We—the Parliament, Highland Council and other local service providers—need to be able to reassure ourselves about what the Home Office is going to deliver on site, and we must ensure that that delivery is on site and is available for people. We also need to be able to reassure ourselves about what financial support will be made available to cover any increased costs that will fall on local public services as a result of any decision that services are not delivered on site. Until we get some more information from the Home Office on those two points, I will continue to raise those points with it.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Forcing people who have fled war, persecution and violence into isolated institutional accommodation will do nothing to improve housing or community relations but everything to help private companies line their pockets with more cash. Will the cabinet secretary give an assurance that she will advocate for a migration and asylum policy that reflects Scotland's values of compassion and dignity and that she will seek devolved powers to manage asylum accommodation in a way that respects local communities and the rights of displaced people?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I reassure the member that, when I met with the previous Home Secretary, not long after she came into office, I made exactly those points about the need for a different approach to asylum and migration. Unfortunately, the Scottish Government's calls on that have been rebuffed. However, those points were reiterated in the letter that I sent on 26 September to the new Home Secretary, which not only talked about the issues around Cameron barracks, but set out the Scottish Government's principled stance on asylum and migration. It is very important that, as we rightly discuss the concerns of local people and local services, we remind ourselves that we are talking about people who are fleeing war, persecution and unimaginable horror in different parts of the world. We can never forget our moral and international legal obligations in relation to those issues.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): The lack of notice to, or involvement of, elected representatives at all levels in Inverness is unforgivable. Had they been consulted, they would

have told the UK Government that it is simply moving asylum seekers from one kind of unsuitable and costly accommodation to another. Compassion must guide our approach, but so, too, must common sense. Inverness is a welcoming town, but the centrality of the barracks will give rise to the same concerns—particularly about the impact on local services—that are leading the Government to end the use of asylum hotels in the first place. Does the cabinet secretary agree that alternative space must be found and that, with urgency, the UK Government should recruit 2,000 new casework officers to clear down those asylum claims?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The context that Mr Cole-Hamilton provided is important. Compassion and common sense are not too much to ask for in relation to a policy that deals with asylum seekers and people who are fleeing war and persecution. There is a requirement for us to ensure that suitable accommodation is provided. That is a requirement for the UK Government and the Home Office, but in the Scottish Government and, I am sure, on the part of councils right across Scotland, there is a willingness to work with the UK Government on it; indeed, we recognise our responsibilities in that regard. The UK Government is responsible for accommodation for asylum seekers, but there are devolved services involved.

Once again, I point to the fact that, where people have managed to come together—whether for the Afghan cohort, Syrian refugees or Ukrainians—there are demonstrations of how that can work, but it takes all levels of Government to do that. I am disappointed by the way that the announcement has been handled, but there is now the opportunity for the UK Government to work with the Scottish Government and others to make the correct decisions, as we go forward, on the use of Cameron barracks and on the policy in general.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. That concludes the urgent question. My apologies to those members whom I was unable to call.

Land Reform (Scotland) Bill: Stage 3

15:53

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is stage 3 proceedings on the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill. In dealing with the amendments, members should have the bill as amended at stage 2—that is, SP bill 44A—the marshalled list and the groupings of amendments. The division bell will sound and proceedings will be suspended for around five minutes for the first division at stage 3. The period of voting for the first division will be 30 seconds. Thereafter, I will allow a voting period of one minute for the first division after a debate. Members who wish to speak in the debate on any group of amendments should press their request-to-speak button or enter “RTS” in the chat function as soon as possible after I call the group.

Members should now refer to the marshalled list of amendments.

Section 4—Lotting of large land holding

The Presiding Officer: Group 10 is on lotting decisions. Amendment 175, in the name of the cabinet secretary, is grouped with amendments 59, 60, 185, 290, 61, 291, 62, 186, 63, 64, 292, 392, 65, 293, 294, 187 to 190, 66, 191, 67 to 70, 192, 71, 72, 193, 73, 74, 295 to 297, 14, 298 to 303, 2, 77, 306 and 3.

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): I will speak to the amendments in my name before turning to the other amendments in the group.

Amendment 175 will require a declaration to be included in the deeds of transfer for land where the lotting provisions apply to confirm that the transfer is not in breach of any lotting prohibition. That responds to feedback from Registers of Scotland, which highlighted that the change would increase transparency and better enable the keeper to perform their land registration functions.

Amendment 191 will remove the requirement for expert advice to be sought for every lotting decision following a review, replacing that with a duty on ministers to consider whether it is appropriate to seek that advice. The change will enable more simple review decisions—for example, a minor boundary change that is requested by a landowner could take place more rapidly—to minimise delay to sales, while still ensuring that advice is sought for more complex decisions.

I oppose Edward Mountain’s amendments 185, 67, 68 and 69, because they would have the

opposite effect, making it more difficult to obtain expert advice and delaying decisions.

My final amendment in the group, amendment 188, is a minor drafting correction to clarify that ministers should publish the latest version of guidance on lotting decisions

“as soon as is practicable after issuing it.”

I recommend that members support all my amendments in the group.

Let me turn to other amendments in the group. Amendment 65, in the name of Rhoda Grant, will clarify that ministers will take into account land that is being occupied as a croft, agricultural tenancy or small landholding when making a lotting decision. I am happy to support the amendment, as well as amendment 187, which will require ministers to have regard to the public interest in preparing guidance on lotting decisions.

Michael Matheson’s and Ariane Burgess’s amendments in the group focus on the provision of information relating to lotting decisions, particularly to community bodies. I am happy to support Michael Matheson’s amendments 298, 300, 301 and 303.

I have concerns that Ariane Burgess’s amendments would require ministers and the land and communities commissioner to share reports with any community body that they considered might have an interest in purchase. The pre-notification measures in the bill will already allow community bodies to be informed at the outset of the process, and they will also allow community bodies to apply to purchase only part of the land. Ministers will then be able to take that into account when considering the lotting decision.

Michael Matheson’s amendment 303 will ensure that information about lotting decisions will be provided to people who have provided details and wish to be informed of the proposals for sale under the pre-notification provisions. That is a more proportionate and workable approach. For those reasons, although I have sympathy with her intention, I encourage Ariane Burgess not to move amendments 293, 294, 299, 302 and 392.

I now turn to the amendments on timescales. I am happy to support Tim Eagle’s amendment 14, on appeal timescales, and his amendments 189, 190 and 192, which will impose timescales within which ministers must complete a review of a lotting decision and, if necessary, make a replacement lotting decision. At a review decision, ministers will have access to the information that supported the initial decision, meaning that a timescale of three months is reasonable.

However, I oppose Edward Mountain’s amendments 63 and 64, which would apply the three-month timescale to an initial lotting decision

and remove the related provision in proposed new section 67N(7) of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003. It is important that the timescales allow for more complex cases where engagement with the landowner and local communities and the provision of expert advice from a land agent will be required.

Tim Eagle’s amendment 290 would not have any effect, because the test for lotting decisions that is set out in the bill will already allow ministers to consider wider public interest decisions without that text being added. Similarly, his amendment 296 appears to clarify that compensation may be payable when land is not lotted, but that is already covered under the first ground for compensation that is set out in the bill. I ask members to oppose those amendments as well as the rest of the amendments in the group from Tim Eagle, Edward Mountain and Douglas Lumsden. The majority of those amendments were voted on and rejected at stage 2 and, ultimately, they would undercut the policy aims of the bill.

I move amendment 175.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I have 20 amendments in the group, but I will try to be as brief as possible. My amendments would make the proposed lotting process fairer and more sensible for all parties. They would enable the applicant to propose their own lotting plan, helping to tackle situations in which the landowner may be selling as a result of financial hardship, and to streamline decisions and help ministers.

Amendments 59 and 62 would enable the applicant to propose the lots within their application. They would oblige ministers to have regard to the lotting plan when they made the lotting decisions. Ministers would not be bound by the plan, so there is no real downside to agreeing to those amendments.

Amendments 66, 70, 73 and 74 would set out that the owner’s proposed lotting plan would be considered at different stages of the lotting decision process, appeal and any court consideration.

Amendment 60 would oblige ministers to rule that land need not be transferred in lots when the owner is facing financial hardship. I think that that is fair and equitable.

Amendment 185 would mean that lotting decisions concerning an owner who is facing financial hardship must be made with the help of a qualified specialist who has experience in the local area.

16:00

Amendment 66 would insert a subsection enabling the applicant to propose lots during the review of a lotting decision, and amendment 70 would simply oblige ministers to consider that plan.

Amendment 63 would reduce the period that ministers have in which to make a lotting decision from six to three months, in a similar vein to Tim Eagle's amendment 189, which I hope that the cabinet secretary will support.

Amendment 67 would ensure that the individual from whom ministers seek advice on the lotting decision is suitably qualified, rather than just appearing to the ministers to be suitably qualified. Amendment 68 would ensure that that person had knowledge of the land market in the local area. Those are both sensible amendments. In my experience, somebody could get a person in from one area of Scotland who had no idea of the different land market in another area of Scotland.

Amendment 186 would link the minister's lotting decision to land management plans and local place plans, and it would require ministers to determine that land need not be transferred in lots where lotting is not identified in the land management plan or the local place plan, both of which will have been approved. That amendment would increase the value and meaningfulness of land management plans and local place plans, both of which were, I believe, supported earlier in the bill process.

Amendment 77 is a technical amendment relating to amendment 186.

Amendment 291 would insert the provision that lotting is considered to be not in the public interest if it reduces the ability to achieve net zero emissions. We cannot lot a place if doing so will prevent our reaching the net zero targets that the Government is committed to.

Amendments 71 and 72 would oblige ministers to offer to buy the land if the lotting decisions that they make result in the land becoming less commercially attractive. That seems fair to me. Amendment 193 would further clarify that ministers' offers to buy land must be specified at an open market value as determined by the appointed valuer or the Lands Tribunal. Again, that is fair.

Amendment 64 would hold ministers to account regarding the time periods in the section.

I now turn to other amendments in the group. I do not believe that amendment 175, in the name of the cabinet secretary, is required.

On amendment 191, I find it strange that a minister who, at the time when decisions are going

to be made on these matters, might have no experience of land sales or lotting would feel that they were in a position to make a decision without seeking expert advice. I cannot believe that the Government is considering removing the requirement to seek advice, as it would decrease the Government's ability to stand up to legal challenge, which would therefore significantly increase costs.

Amendment 392, in the name of Ariane Burgess, is an administrative amendment that I do not believe is required.

Amendments 292 and 306, in the name of Douglas Lumsden, are sensible amendments because lotting will, without doubt, result in unemployment. Ministers should be held financially accountable if they demand that the land be lotted.

Amendments 189, 190 and 192, in the name of Tim Eagle, are eminently sensible as well. I will not go any further into them, because I think that I may have exceeded my time limit, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): I call Douglas Lumsden—no, I do not. Apologies—I was taken aback by Mr Mountain's kind comment. I call Tim Eagle to speak to amendment 290 and other amendments in the group.

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for her welcome clarification on amendment 290. In the light of those remarks, I will not move that amendment.

I also thank the cabinet secretary and her team for working with me on amendments 189, 190, 192 and 14. Those amendments relate to timescales for decisions following a review. They will require ministers to complete a review of a lotting decision and, if necessary, make a replacement lotting decision within three months of an application for review. Amendment 14 will increase the time that is available to a landowner to make an appeal against a ministerial decision on compensation from 21 to 28 days. I hope that the rest of the chamber can get behind those amendments today.

As currently drafted, the bill allows the landowner to seek compensation from ministers for loss or expense related to a lotting decision where that decision has stated that land may

"only be transferred in lots."

My amendment 296 would make that condition clearer by stating that compensation may be claimed in relation to a lotting decision. In the period before a lotting decision is made, the owner might have suffered losses that they would not have had were it not for the delay caused by a

lotting decision. The amendment would ensure that, if a lotting decision has caused a landowner loss or expense, they would be eligible for compensation.

Having said that, my amendments 2 and 3 seek to delete all the lotting provisions from the bill. Lotting prevents landowners from selling large landholdings in full and, instead, sees such landholdings sold in parts known as lots. Ministers appear to be trying to apply a solution to what they perceive as land inequality, to the detriment of the existing rural economy.

The bill makes what I have always maintained is a very dangerous assumption—that, if a landowner is operating at scale, they are creating problems. That is not the case. The realities of land management and farm production have forced people to scale holdings for their survival, and some of Scotland's most extensive landholdings are, in some areas, also our most vulnerable. Lotting could see landowners deal with further administrative requirements and financial burdens. Transfers of land would also be delayed and, perhaps most concerning, the value of land might decline. That means that viable businesses would be fractured and confidence could decline, and there is a very real possibility that interest in investment could also reduce.

In recent days, following a letter from two very prominent thinkers on land reform, very real questions have been raised about whether this part of the bill is ultra vires or outwith the competence of Scottish ministers. If their assessment proves correct, we should all be very worried. To ensure the protection, stability and future of our rural economy, I propose removal of the lotting provisions from the bill to ensure that that perceived historical unfairness is not fixed by a damaging policy. I urge the cabinet secretary and members not to push forward with the lotting conditions.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): In speaking to amendments 292 and 306, I echo the concerns raised by one of my constituents in north-east Scotland, with whom I know the cabinet secretary is familiar, because he is also her constituent.

Dee Ward manages land in Angus Glens, employing local people in delivering public goods such as food, energy, climate mitigation, nature restoration and housing. Dee wrote powerfully in *The Times* about the reality of the bill. There was no rhetoric in his words, just the real-world impact on the people, jobs and environment that depend on Scotland's rural estates. He said:

"The Government says it cares about rural communities and wants to grow the rural economy. Yet at the same time, through this Bill, Ministers are preparing to fragment rural businesses that are doing exactly those things—creating

employment, producing food, and providing homes for working families. There is an obvious inconsistency here. On one hand, the Scottish Government praises sustainable land management and environmental restoration. On the other, it's putting forward measures that would force those very operations to be carved up and sold off in pieces—with no thought for the livelihoods, the projects, or the progress that would be lost."

Dee Ward made the point clearly: integrated land use at scale allows estates such as his to fund vital environmental work, from flood management to biodiversity improvements. If we break that scale apart, we do not just risk economic loss; we risk environmental backsliding.

That is why I have lodged amendment 292, which is about fairness and accountability. If ministers decide to intervene and force a lotting decision, and if they decide that land may be transferred only in lots, they must also accept responsibility for the consequences of that decision. If people lose their jobs because ministers dictate how land must be sold, it is only right that the Government, not the businesses and workers who have no say in the matter, bears the cost of those redundancies.

Amendment 306 is consequential and would ensure that the legislative framework properly captures the new section in amendment 292. We should all want a Scotland where land delivers for people, nature and the economy, but that future will not come from punishing those who are already delivering or by imposing policies that make investment in rural Scotland a risk that is not worth taking.

My amendments do not undo the bill; they simply ensure that, if the Government takes powers to intervene in the marketplace, it also accepts responsibility for the human consequences of its decisions.

I urge colleagues to support amendments 292 and 306, to protect fairness.

Amendments 295 and 297 would provide some incentive for ministers to adhere to timescales when making lotting decisions, and I believe that they will add important safeguards to the bill.

At stage 2, the cabinet secretary responded to pressure by adding timescales for lotting decisions to new sections of the bill. However, she went on to negate much of the benefit of having timescales by adding that failing to adhere to them would not affect the validity of anything that is done by ministers under those sections. Although I can understand the argument that the lotting decision should remain valid in order to avoid even further delay, there should still be some consequence when ministers are slow to act, because further delay in the process is likely to cause loss and further detriment to the landowner and, potentially, to future buyers of land.

My amendment 295 would ensure that, when a lotting decision is appealed, the court may have regard to ministers' delay. I am not attempting to bind the court, but it may have regard to any delay.

Amendment 297 would require ministers or, as the case may be, the Lands Tribunal for Scotland to have regard to any delay when determining whether compensation is payable. Land transactions will already be significantly slowed down due to the operation of this part of the bill. We have heard serious concerns raised not only by landowners but by the banking sector and professional agents about the impacts that section 4 might have on Scotland's wider land market if the liquidity of land as an asset to secure borrowing is negatively affected. Without an incentive for ministers to act timeously, such impacts can only be exacerbated, which will have a knock-on impact on landowners and farmers' ability to borrow funds to invest and create much-needed growth and rural employment.

I ask members to agree to those amendments, because they are a small but necessary check and balance of ministers' powers.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): In discussions with the cabinet secretary, I have expressed my doubts about the effectiveness of lotting as the provision is drafted. To improve it, I have lodged amendments 392, 293 and 294, which would enable the commissioner to share the lotting report with local communities who might wish to purchase lots and make a more informed decision. I thank Community Land Scotland for providing support on the amendments.

Access to the land and communities commissioner's report will be vital in order for communities to decide whether they want to pursue a purchase of one of the lots. There is no reason why that report could not be shared with the local community by the land and communities commissioner or as defined by the prior notification process. The report would be shared with the landowner and Scottish ministers. If prior notification and lotting provisions are to function effectively and deliver greater transparency and community ownership, it is important that communities are given access to as much information as possible.

A case in point is the controversial sale of an estate in the Sleat peninsula in Skye by the Clan Donald Lands Trust. Clan Donald, the landowner, decided to lot the estate for commercial reasons, but neither it nor its agents gave the community access to the relevant information in a timely manner so that the community could make an informed decision about whether a purchase was possible. Ultimately, the community decided not to

pursue a purchase, but it had not been given the proper opportunity to assess its options. In some ways, the bill could assist with that issue through the prior notification mechanism, but if communities are to make full use of lotting decisions, they also need to be informed about how and why any lotting decision has been made and the resulting impact on their potential ownership of the lotted land.

Overall, however, I am interested to hear from the cabinet secretary when she winds up about the evidence base for the Government's particular approach to lotting, given that the entire burden is now placed on the seller and that the Scottish Land Commission's proposal would have created a forward-looking process that ensured community sustainability over the long term.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Amendment 65 would require ministers to bring forward guidance on lotting decisions that includes information on how they will consider crofts, agricultural tenancies and smallholdings on the land. The amendment would ensure that crofting and tenanted agricultural land are explicitly considered when Scottish ministers decide whether and how to divide land into lots. I hope that the guidance would ensure that ministers did not approve land division in a way that might disrupt crofting communities, farms and on-going agricultural use, and would thereby avoid arbitrary divisions that could harm rural livelihoods.

16:15

Amendment 187 seeks to impose a public interest test on lotting decisions. The lotting mechanisms within the transfer test are, potentially, a vital way of diversifying ownership and reducing concentration of ownership in a specific local area, and those mechanisms must be strengthened and enhanced at stage 3.

A crucial means of doing that will be to add further detail to the bill on what the guidance that underpins lotting decisions will contain and to make clear the centrality of the public interest test. That detail includes references to how the Scottish ministers must have regard to community wealth building, local housing provision and furthering community ownership, among other things. That would make it more transparent from the outset for landowners, communities, the land and communities commissioner and the Scottish ministers what types of considerations should underpin lotting decisions. I hope that it would also smooth decision making and mitigate any disagreement.

We are supportive of Ariane Burgess's amendment 392, which seeks to allow the commissioner flexibility as to the bodies that might

receive a copy of the report. As we know, bodies that would have an interest in land might vary depending on local circumstances.

Michael Matheson (Falkirk West) (SNP): Amendments 298, 300, 301 and 303, in my name, seek to provide greater transparency on the lotting process by ensuring that people who intend to set up a community body, are in the process of doing so or have recently done so are given early notice of a lotting decision. The amendments will achieve that by requiring the Scottish ministers to give information about lotting decisions to any person who has recorded an interest in being notified of possible transfers of land under the bill's pre-notification provisions. That would be in addition to a copy of the lotting decision being provided to the owner or a creditor.

I believe that the amendments will provide greater transparency on lotting decisions and will allow information to be shared with communities that might be impacted by them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the cabinet secretary to wind up.

Mairi Gougeon: I have a few brief comments. I will touch on Tim Eagle's comments first. On amendment 296, I want to emphasise that the compensation that he is looking for is already covered by the provisions in proposed new section 67V(1) of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003.

On some of Tim Eagle's other comments and the amendments that seek to remove sections and provisions in the bill, I suggest that taking that approach would ignore the impact that the concentration of land ownership has on our communities across Scotland and, ultimately, it would ignore the recommendations and work of the Scottish Land Commission on which the provisions in the bill are based.

In response to the point that Ariane Burgess put to me, we covered some of that in the discussion on group 2, where I understand that there were provisions in various amendments that sought to impose a test on the buyer. Again, we set out the rationale for the approach that we had taken in the policy memorandum, because there are a whole host of complexities in relation to some of those tests, whether they are in relation to compensation provisions or in relation to the bigger interference with article 1, protocol 1 of the European convention on human rights. That is why we set out the test for lotting decisions and the transfer test in the way that we have in the bill.

I appreciate that there are wider concerns about how the provisions will work. They are new, but this is a very important step forward in our land reform journey. I hope that members can get behind my amendments.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The question is, that amendment 175 be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

As this is the first division of the stage 3 proceedings, I suspend the meeting for around five minutes to allow members to access the digital voting system.

16:19

Meeting suspended.

16:25

On resuming—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the vote on amendment 175, in the name of the cabinet secretary. Members should cast their votes now.

I am aware that there might be an issue with the voting system, which we are looking into at the moment.

I suspend proceedings while we investigate.

16:27

Meeting suspended.

16:29

On resuming—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Further to the investigation, we hope that the voting system is now fully functioning. I imagine that we will shortly find out. We propose to re-run the vote on amendment 175. We will proceed with the division on amendment 175, and members should cast their vote now.

Apologies, members—we will suspend again. Thank you for your patience.

16:29

Meeting suspended.

17:18

*On resuming—***The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):**

Thank you, colleagues. I have a little update on the situation in which we find ourselves. I understand that there is a significant Microsoft outage affecting some products, and it is global. That is preventing us from voting.

The Parliamentary Bureau has just had a brief meeting and has agreed that the best option for now is to suspend. For those who wish to attend, the Poppyscotland event will be going ahead between 6 pm and 7 pm. The bureau will meet before 7 pm to ascertain the situation at that point, with a view to resuming business in the chamber at 7 pm. There will be an update at 7 pm, but for now we are suspended. Thank you for your understanding.

17:19

Meeting suspended.

19:10

*On resuming—***The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):**

Thank you, members. I will provide an update on the situation. The Parliamentary Bureau has considered all options in order to decide whether we can continue with stage 3 proceedings this evening. In doing so, we were very mindful of the fact that we are considering legislation, and we have concluded that we should not resume this evening for both technical and procedural reasons. I am postponing the rest of today's business. The bureau will continue to meet, and further information will be provided as soon as possible.

Therefore, I postpone the rest of today's business and I close this meeting.

Meeting closed at 19:10.

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Edinburgh
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The deadline for corrections to this edition is:

Wednesday 26 November 2025

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

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