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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 19 November 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 (Annabelle Ewing): Good afternoon. The first item of business is portfolio questions. The first portfolio is Deputy First Minister responsibilities, economy and Gaelic. I remind members that questions 5 and 7 are grouped together, so I will take any supplementaries on those questions after both have been answered.

Real Living Wage

1. **Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to encourage businesses to implement the real living wage, in light of reports that Scotland's level of real living wage employers is, proportionately, five times that of the United Kingdom as a whole. (S6O-05155)

The Minister for Business and Employment (Richard Lochhead): The Scottish Government has a long-term funding partnership with Living Wage Scotland to support the roll-out of the real living wage accreditation scheme. The number of accredited employers has increased from 14 in 2014 to more than 4,000 today, with at least 72,000 workers in Scotland receiving a pay rise as a direct result of their employer being accredited. That has made Scotland the best performing of the four UK nations: it has the highest proportion of workers aged 18 and over who are paid the real living wage or more. That level is now 88.7 per cent against a UK average of 85.4 per cent.

Marie McNair: The payment of the living wage is a huge step in tackling in-work poverty. Will the minister join me in acknowledging the businesses in Clydebank and Milngavie that are paying the living wage?

Furthermore, businesses are looking to the UK budget that is on the horizon. Last time, Labour hammered businesses. Will the minister join me in calling for a budget that reverses Labour's previous punitive approach?

Richard Lochhead: I join Marie McNair in acknowledging those businesses in Clydebank and Milngavie that are paying the living wage. In this day and age, with the cost of living, it is more important than ever that they do that.

The member rightly highlights the importance of the UK budget not only to workers' wages but to employers. The less money that employers have, the more difficult it is for them to pay the higher wages that they would perhaps wish to see. National insurance contributions and other measures are also an important part of the debate. The Scottish Government continues to try to have the best possible engagement with the UK Government on that, which is not always the easiest thing to do. The UK Treasury could be a lot more helpful with that engagement. We will continue to apply pressure to the UK Government in the run-up to the UK budget.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The latest data shows that, actually, the number of people receiving the real living wage in Scotland is in decline and has been for years. In 2022, the figure was 90.6 per cent; it has now dropped to 88.6 per cent. The numbers are going downwards and not upwards. Rather than congratulating itself, will the Scottish Government take some action to support businesses that want to employ people and pay them the real living wage but are struggling to do so at the moment due to Scottish National Party policies?

Richard Lochhead: As I said in my initial answer, the number of accredited employers has increased from 14 in 2014 to more than 4,000 today, and 72,000 workers benefit from that. We will continue to support the living wage agenda, which Conservative Party members have not always been the most enthusiastic about. It is perhaps a bit ironic that they are calling for more people to get the real living wage when it is not a policy that they have necessarily supported in the past. It is important that the UK budget and Scottish Government measures continue to support the promotion of the real living wage.

Workers Camps (Highlands and Islands)

2. **Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what economic assessment it has undertaken of the potential impact of proposed workers camps in and around communities across the Highlands and Islands. (S6O-05156)

The Minister for Business and Employment (Richard Lochhead): I am aware that a number of applications have been submitted to Highland Council for accommodation for temporary workers. Primary responsibility for determining the outcomes of planning applications rests with the council, as the planning authority, and the Scottish Government has not undertaken any separate economic assessment of those proposals. However, application outcomes must be

determined in accordance with the development plan, unless material considerations indicate that it should be otherwise. It would not be appropriate for the Scottish Government to comment on live or proposed planning applications.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Last month, the application for one of two proposed worker accommodation sites near Broadford in Skye was withdrawn. However, new locations are being considered and a 450-bed site is still being proposed for Ashaig. Only last year, Kate Forbes rightly said:

> "It is absolutely vital that big corporations do not just steamroll in and then steamroll out again leaving locals with nothing but memories of disruption, devastation and anger."

However, that is exactly what is happening not just on Skye but right across the Highlands and Islands, where massive energy infrastructure projects that have been steamrollered through by ministers and officials here in Edinburgh are leaving local communities paying the price for Scottish National Party targets on renewables.

Is the Scottish Government aware of the locations that are being considered as alternatives to the Torrin Road site, the application for which has now been withdrawn? How will the Scottish ministers ensure that the interests of local businesses are protected and that the concerns of local communities are heard?

Richard Lochhead: With regard to the proposal for a site near Ashaig, I hope that the planning authorities are ensuring that there is proper engagement between the applicant and the communities, and that they are fulfilling their role, too. That is the planning process that is in place, and it should be followed.

The rolling out of infrastructure to promote renewables in the Highlands and Islands is very important to the future economic wellbeing of the region. A few years ago, I read a book called "The Hydro Boys" by Emma Wood, which is about the roll-out of hydroelectricity in the Highlands. I wonder whether the Conservative Party would have opposed that initiative at the time, which brought electricity to the people who were living there.

With massive infrastructure projects, there are occasions when temporary accommodation is required. The planning process is there to ensure that all voices are heard and that planning applications are dealt with appropriately.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): The minister alluded to the fact that many of Scotland's biggest economic opportunities are in its most remote places. One of the ideas in Professor Anton Muscatelli's recent report on regional economic growth is that we need to have strategic master plans, which would address some of the legacy issues that Jamie Halcro Johnston asked about. Is it time to look at such measures to ensure that we have a lasting legacy in infrastructure such as housing when investments such as the ones that have been mentioned take place?

Richard Lochhead: We are always open to new ideas. A major economic transformation is under way in the Highlands at the moment, which will create many well-paid, good jobs across the whole of that part of the country.

In relation to Professor Muscatelli's report, although we are always open to new ideas, there are many issues over which we do not have control in this Parliament, such as transmission charges and other factors that influence how such major infrastructure projects are rolled out across the country. There is also the issue of the related community benefits. In theory, we would always want to support such ideas, but we do not have all the tools in the box that we would require to ensure that the process was done properly.

Ferguson Marine (Payments)

3. **Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government how much in total has been paid from the public purse to Ferguson Marine since the award of the contracts for both the Glen Sannox and Glen Rosa. (S6O-05157)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): The contract payments from Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd to Ferguson Marine Engineering Ltd, or FMEL, for the Glen Sannox and the Glen Rosa were £83.3 million. The Scottish Government loaned £45 million to FMEL prior to its going into administration. Between the nationalisation of Ferguson's and September 2025, the Scottish Government provided £152.1 million for the Glen Sannox and £143.8 million for the Glen Rosa.

Edward Mountain: That is really selective use of the figures. We know how much money has been paid. The other day, CMAL told me that £450 million had been paid, but I think that, by the time we add in the loans and the non-recoverable expenses, the figure is close to £700 million. If we take off the true cost of the ferries—£120 million—that leaves £580 million. If each of the workers at the yard was given £1 million, that would leave £280 million, which would be enough to order another six ferries for CMAL. Surely that would have made better sense than the investment that the Government has made.

Kate Forbes: I gave Edward Mountain the breakdown of the figures that have been provided. I think that, if he adds them up, he will recognise

the figure as the accepted figure. I tried to do some quick calculations while he was speaking, but it sounds as though the total figure is similar to the CMAL one that he mentioned. It is therefore a bit unfair to suggest that I was being selective.

Ultimately, we took the approach that we took, first, to ensure that the two vessels were delivered for the islanders and, secondly, to safeguard the yard for the future. We have protected the jobs at the yard. That was critical, which is precisely why the Government stepped in.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): In that answer, there was not one word of apology for the hundreds of millions of pounds that have been spent on the two ferries, which are late in being delivered for the islanders and which have embarrassed the workers as a result of the leadership of the Scottish Government. Can the Deputy First Minister tell us whether any further consideration has been given to the repeated calls for someone to pay the price for this disaster? Is any minister finally going to resign for it?

Kate Forbes: In the light of Willie Rennie's request, I am more than happy to repeat the apology that I have previously given from this desk in the chamber to all the islanders who have not been able to access a sustainable route because of the delay on the two vessels and because of the project being over budget.

CMutual and Maiden Life Försäkrings (Family Protection Plan Withdrawal)

4. **Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its engagement with the Financial Conduct Authority and other organisations regarding the impact on policyholders of the withdrawal of the family protection plan by CMutual and Maiden Life Försäkrings. (S6O-05158)

The Minister for Business and Employment (Richard Lochhead): The Scottish Government has engaged with the Financial Conduct Authority, which has confirmed that it is working with relevant parties to understand the background to the decision and the options for replacement cover. Its priority is to ensure that consumers are appropriately informed and have sufficient opportunity to consider options.

The FCA is also examining the conduct of firms against its requirements, and any decision to intervene will be guided by its statutory objectives and enforcement principles. The Scottish Government will continue to work with stakeholders to understand the implications for credit unions and their members.

Richard Leonard: Thousands of people—mostly elderly, some very elderly—have been abandoned and left in funeral poverty. Some of them join us in the public gallery today. Each of them took out the funeral policy and paid into it in good faith—many for more than 20 years—so that they could die with the dignity of knowing that their families would not face huge bills. Meanwhile, the greedy directors of the insurance broker CMutual have looted more than £3 million in dividends over the past five years.

Will the minister join me today in urgently pressing the Financial Conduct Authority to take out a section 166 order under the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000? Will the Government continue its dialogue with the coalition of United Kingdom credit unions until all those affected by the scandal secure justice? [*Interruption*.]

Richard Lochhead: Richard Leonard—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, could you resume your seat for a second?

I say to our guests in the gallery that you are welcome, but we do not encourage clapping, because we are in the middle of our parliamentary process. However, you are most welcome to observe our proceedings. Thank you for your understanding.

Richard Lochhead: Richard Leonard outlines a very serious situation. The Scottish Government and ministers share his concerns, which he has eloquently outlined to the chamber. I add my welcome to the visitors in the chamber who are facing that awful predicament. It is a very distressing time for the policyholders, especially as we approach winter. I am very much aware of the serious issues that we are discussing today.

Yesterday, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government and I had a productive meeting with Elaine Rae, the chief executive officer of NHS Credit Union, who told me that she represents 14 credit unions in Scotland. She was joined by Paul Sweeney, who is the deputy convener of the cross-party group on credit unions. That was a valuable meeting; it was helpful for ministers to understand the issues. If I get an opportunity to say hello to some of the people in the gallery after this session, I will take it.

We will continue to put pressure on the FCA. Although it is, of course, an issue that is reserved to the UK Government, the finance secretary is writing to UK ministers about it. We will do all that we can to ensure that policyholders are not left in the lurch and that those who are responsible fulfil their obligations; I know that members across the chamber would like to see that happen. It is a very important issue and it is causing a lot of distress—Elaine Rae expressed that very well when we met her yesterday. We will continue to stand up for the policyholders.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): Can any more be said about the Scottish Government's work with stakeholders to ensure that all those affected receive clear information about their options for reparation and have the appropriate support that they require?

Richard Lochhead: Various parties involved in the debacle are exploring a number of options. We are keen for all policyholders to be kept up to date with those options once they become a bit clearer. As I said, matters related to the FCA are reserved to the UK Government, but we will continue to have a dialogue with the authority and to press home that very important point. We will also continue to engage with stakeholders in Scotland so that we can stay abreast of their concerns as the situation develops over the coming weeks.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I welcome yesterday's meeting with the minister; it was very productive. However, I will press him on the urgency of the timescale. We have 12 days until people are cut off, so we need urgent action. Will the minister confirm that the Government will write to the FCA to press the need for the section 166 order to be served before policies expire at the end of the month? Will he also give a timescale on convening that working group with the credit union coalition so that we can work collaboratively to ensure that people are not left particularly vulnerable at this time of year?

Richard Lochhead: We absolutely will continue to press the FCA to take appropriate and tough action to make sure that policyholders are not left in the lurch. We will continue to engage with stakeholders. Yesterday's meeting was very productive, and I thank Paul Sweeney for his role in making sure that that meeting happened quickly. We recognise the urgency of the issue, and I hope that he gauged from the finance secretary's comments that she, too, recognises that there is a short-term challenge. I notice that she has just entered the chamber. The issues are being taken very seriously.

Shared Prosperity Fund and Pride in Place Programme

5. **Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what engagement it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding the UK shared prosperity fund and pride in place programme. (S6O-05159)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): There has been a concerning lack of engagement from the United Kingdom Government on the pride in place programme and the local growth fund, which is replacing the UK shared prosperity fund. Despite a clear commitment from UK Government ministers at the start of the year to engage meaningfully on new funding programmes, we have not yet been given details on funding and delivery, although the Welsh Government was given significant clarity and responsibility for funding more than a month ago. That is completely unacceptable. My colleague Shona Robison has raised that point, as have I, and it would be nice to get some clarity.

Kenneth Gibson: When the pride in place programme was announced in September, it was described by the UK Labour Government as "new funding". We now know that that was not true. What was sold as new investment in communities is a repackaging of the shared prosperity fund. Not only is there no new money, but some areas are worse off than before. Even Glasgow City Council's Labour group leader was shocked by that.

Does the Deputy First Minister agree that Scotland's communities deserve better than that sleight of hand from an increasingly desperate and chaotic UK Labour Government?

Kate Forbes: It will come as no surprise that I agree whole-heartedly. Communities are the beating heart of Scotland. They are key to anchoring local wealth and creating resilient places where people can flourish.

Following up communication from Shona Robison to HM Treasury, I wrote to the Secretary of State for Scotland, because the pride in place programme does not align with our approach to regeneration, and it is concerning that the UK Government's approach will leave many communities and local authorities worse off. I hope that the UK Government will recognise the impact of its approach and rethink that.

Pride in Place Programme

7. **Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the United Kingdom Government's pride in place programme in relation to its impact on devolved issues. (S6O-05161)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): We welcome all investment in Scotland's communities, but it is disappointing that we were not informed of the pride in place plans. We are opposed to the use of the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 to fund activity in devolved areas in Scotland, as that bypasses democratic scrutiny and accountability and does not make best use of public funding.

Pride in place funding for Scotland should have been allocated through the Barnett formula. That would have ensured a clear policy landscape and would certainly have ensured that the approach for

the Welsh Government was not different to that for the Scottish Government.

Clare Haughey: The Welsh Government has been allocated more than £0.5 billion of local growth funding, which it has been told that it can manage and distribute. Meanwhile, considerably smaller funding allocations have been made to Scottish local authorities through pride in place funding, completely bypassing the devolution settlement. What actions is the Scottish Government taking to challenge that gross imbalance in the treatment of devolved Parliaments?

Kate Forbes: The last time that public funding went to one part of the United Kingdom and bypassed the Barnett formula was in Theresa May's day. It is very strange that the Welsh Government has received a commitment that it will deliver the local growth fund directly but we have not had even the opportunity for a meaningful discussion on the delivery of the fund in Scotland. It is worrying that devolved Governments are being treated differently, which raises significant questions about the politicisation of public funding.

The Government has raised the issue with UK Government ministers both in writing and in person, and there is an opportunity for the Parliament to ask some questions about why the Welsh Government has received its commitment. It will have responsibility for determining how the money is spent, whereas we do not have such a commitment.

Stirling and Clackmannanshire City Region Deal

6. **Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on progress with delivery of the Stirling and Clackmannanshire city region deal. (S6O-05160)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): The Stirling and Clackmannanshire city region deal, which was initially estimated to bring £214 million of investment overall, is driving economic growth, productivity and prosperity.

To date, more than £35 million has been used of the total £90.2 million commitment by the Scottish and United Kingdom Governments, and progress continues to be made by regional partners across the deal. Employability support is being offered through the lone parent programme and the regional skills and inclusion programme. Innovation continues through the national aquaculture technology and innovation hub, which is due to open soon. Work on the Stirling digital hub is under way, and the regional joint committee recently approved business cases for Stirling's city park and a digital hub in Callander.

Keith Brown: The Deputy First Minister will know that the heads of terms agreement for the Stirling and Clackmannanshire city region deal sets out an ambition to unlock £640 million of private sector investment and deliver more than 5,000 new jobs across the region during its 10 to 15-year lifespan.

However, in June, in response to a written question, it was confirmed that the private sector investment secured to date stands at just £476,000, with 82 jobs created. In the spirit of supporting delivery and maximising the benefits of the partnership for local communities, will the Deputy First Minister set out how the Scottish Government, working with the UK Government and local partners, intends to accelerate progress and what revised milestones and performance measures are in place to ensure that communities—Clackmannanshire, in particular—see the level of investment and job creation that was originally promised?

Kate Forbes: We are committed to working with all the partners to maximise the benefits of the deal, which is now in its sixth year of delivery. Covid-19 delayed initial progress, but funding was reprofiled to safeguard the £90.2 million of Government investment. Inflationary pressures have also resulted in us working with partners to ensure that outstanding projects remain viable. We have been encouraging value engineering, where possible, and have been exploring other funding streams.

Beyond that, officials from both Governments meet staff of the programme management office fortnightly to ensure that momentum is maintained. That is in addition to annual conversations with all partners to monitor progress.

The bottom line for Keith Brown's constituents is that we will take on board the queries that he has raised today and ensure that they are taken into account in planning for the future of the deal.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The Stirling and Clackmannanshire deal is a 10-year programme, and we are now operating in year 6. The Government promised that 5,000 jobs would be created. In June, it celebrated and defended the creation of only 82 jobs and claimed that projects were still at an early stage. Does the Deputy First Minister really think that, six years on, people in Stirling and Clackmannanshire will find that explanation anything but disappointing? Real progress and real job opportunities for the people of Stirling and Clackmannanshire are needed.

Kate Forbes: I agree with the spirit of Alexander Stewart's question, in that we want progress to be as rapid as possible. Growth deals

are a unique way of delivering economic prosperity in Scotland because of the tripartite approach: the UK Government, the Scottish Government and local government are involved, and there is an opportunity for all of us to accelerate progress. The money has been committed and is protected, and it will be spent. We want to ensure that it delivers as many jobs as possible, so we will work cross-government to ensure that that is done.

Glasgow City Regional Economy (Covid-19 Lockdown Impact)

8. **Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it has taken to improve Glasgow city's regional economy, in light of the economic effect of the Covid-19 lockdown on the city. (S6O-05162)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): As Glasgow celebrates its 850th anniversary, we continue our support across numerous initiatives to improve regional economic growth. Our £500 million commitment to the successful Glasgow city region deal has delivered the new Govan to Partick bridge and the M8 crossing at Sighthill, and we will continue to invest in projects for another 10 years.

We transferred leadership of the Clyde mission to regional partners—an issue that Pauline McNeill is very interested in—alongside £26.5 million of funding. This year, we committed a further £2 million towards engineering and maritime skills. We established the investment zone in partnership with the United Kingdom Government and are actively working with partners to identify opportunities for further regional empowerment.

Pauline McNeill: Anton Muscatelli, in his report on regional economic development, said that Greater Manchester, which is a city of comparable size to Glasgow,

"has been more successful than Glasgow in growing its economy."

Glasgow has had many successes, as the Deputy First Minister alludes to, but Glasgow city centre has struggled to recover from the pandemic. In May, footfall was 7 per cent lower than it was in May 2019, before Covid. In addition, on the ways that people get into the city, Glasgow now has among the highest parking charges in Europe. Given the on-going challenges with reduced footfall and the impact that that has had on businesses, what specific action can the Scottish Government take to encourage an increase in visitor numbers and to support business?

Kate Forbes: We all want every part of Scotland to perform as successfully as possible and be as prosperous as possible. A week or so ago, I engaged with the economic delivery board for Glasgow, on which, as Pauline McNeill will know, there is representation from the university sector, businesses and local leadership. We are keen to work with the board to deliver on its ambitions for Glasgow.

The point about Manchester is frequently raised. It is my reflection that Manchester has excelled at being able to deliver quickly on planning and so on. Its reputation precedes it everywhere we go, considering that we talk about it a lot. There is good learning there on how to support all parts of Scotland, but it sometimes does not require as much structural change as we think to unlock economic prosperity.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on Deputy First Minister responsibilities, economy and Gaelic. There will be a short pause before we move to the next item of business to allow front-bench teams to change positions, should they so wish.

I do not see anybody moving, so we will go straight to the next portfolio, which is finance and local government.

Finance and Local Government

Scottish Aggregates Tax (Contribution to Circular Economy)

1. **Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government how the new Scottish aggregates tax, due to be introduced in April 2026, will contribute to creating a circular economy. (S6O-05163)

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): The Scottish aggregates tax will form part of the Scottish Government's broader support for the circular economy agenda and drive towards net zero. It will complement other measures to promote circular construction practices and is intended to help encourage the minimum necessary use of primary aggregates, maximise the use of recycled and secondary alternatives and incentivise innovation in alternative materials.

Maurice Golden: Will the minister commit to utilising public procurement to support the uptake of recycled aggregates, and if so, what are his plans for that?

Ivan McKee: Maurice Golden will be aware that Scotland has a very proactive approach to public sector procurement. The information that we publish on that is extensive and the tracking of performance against the Government's objectives is thorough. Net zero is one of the drivers of our procurement activity. If the member wants to follow up on that, I am happy to discuss it with him, but he can rest assured that we use all the

levers at our disposal, including procurement, to help us to deliver on the Scottish Government's circular economy and net zero objectives.

Community Asset Transfer Scheme

2. **Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what support is being provided to groups and people to make use of the community asset transfer scheme. (S6O-05164)

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): The Scottish Government funds the community ownership support service to provide expert asset transfer advice and support for community groups that want to make use of community asset transfer legislation. The Scottish Government also provides financial support through the Scottish land fund for communities across Scotland that wish to own and manage land, including asset transfers. Between 2021 and 2026, more than £32 million has been provided in that regard to 249 organisations.

Fulton MacGregor: As the minister knows, I have written to him about the current situation of Airdrie and Coatbridge Harriers, a fantastic local group based at the Coatbridge outdoor sports centre that has supported thousands of young people across the area for more than 30 years. The group recently appealed the council's decision to reject its application for a community asset transfer for the sports centre, but that was rejected as it was outwith the agreed timescales.

As the minister knows, I find that situation ludicrous, because it was the council, in its official letter to the group, that, as the minister noted, outlined the timeline for appealing. I find it unacceptable that our policies in this area have no commonsense safeguards built in to account for such situations, in which honest mistakes are made and groups miss out on real opportunities. What more can the minister do to support the group, and would his officials be willing to meet me, the group and the council to try to find a way forward?

Ivan McKee: I am aware of the situation that the member raises with the Airdrie Harriers asset transfer request. It is deeply regrettable, and I have responded in writing to the member on the matter. The situation now is that all those who are involved, including the authority and community organisations, must follow the asset transfer legal process, and ministers have no power under the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 to amend or extend that process.

However, the 2015 act is there to enable groups such as Airdrie Harriers to realise their aspirations for ownership of local assets. My officials have spoken to North Lanarkshire Council about that regrettable situation so that lessons are learned, and I expect the council to do everything in its power to support the group. There is no reason why a solution cannot be found outwith the confines of the legislation, and I urge the local authority to work with Airdrie Harriers to ensure the continued provision of sporting facilities in the area. I will also write to Jim Logue, the leader of North Lanarkshire Council, on the matter, and I am happy to meet the group if required, subject to my availability.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): High initial costs such as maintenance and insurance, lack of experience and funding are all still major obstacles to community asset transfers taking place. What is the Scottish Government doing to remove those obstacles and support communities?

Ivan McKee: As I indicated in my earlier answer, the Scottish Government has provided more than £32 million, which has enabled 249 organisations across the country to take advantage of the community asset transfer legislation that was introduced by this Government. The Government continues to look for opportunities through our broader work to build capacity in local organisations to enable them to take advantage of that legislation. I recognise that some groups will be more able than others to take advantage of it, and we will continue to engage with local groups across the sector to support their development as best we can to enable them to take advantage of those opportunities.

United Kingdom Budget (Scotland's Public Finances)

3. **Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its engagement with the United Kingdom Government regarding the upcoming UK budget and any implications for Scotland's public finances. (S6O-05165)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): I wrote to the Chancellor of the Exchequer two weeks ago seeking an urgent meeting, and the First Minister hoped to meet the Prime Minister, but the UK Government has not agreed to those meetings. The mixed messages and speculation on what the UK Government may do in its budget have been unhelpful as we consider the implications for our own fiscal position.

When I met the Chief Secretary to the Treasury last month, I stressed the importance of the UK Government speaking to us about the impact of its plans on Scotland and our finances. I am very concerned that, yet again, Scotland will be treated as an afterthought.

Gordon MacDonald: The UK budget will be delivered on 26 November, which is a month later than last year. What impact will that have on the Scottish Government's ability to plan effectively for 2026-27? Would the cabinet secretary agree that Scotland needs greater borrowing powers in order to smooth potential shocks that may be created by the UK budget?

Shona Robison: The late UK budget means that I am not able to deliver the Scottish budget until January. The uncertainty and lack of engagement from the UK Government has also been very unhelpful as we try to anticipate the impact on our own budget.

Under the current arrangements, we are managing considerable challenges and volatility with limited powers. It is clear that we need greater fiscal flexibilities to support effective budget management, and I have urged the UK Government to work with us to provide that. Although the chancellor has not accepted a meeting, I expect to speak to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury before the budget, and I will continue to press Scotland's case.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Last year, Labour broke its promise to workers that it would not increase tax by introducing a jobs tax, which has undermined jobs and investment and impacted growth. The Scottish National Party, across two of its budgets, has also broken its manifesto pledge, which has resulted in what the Auditor General for Scotland has pointed to as a £1 billion shortfall in the tax take and undermined growth in the process. Is it not the case that both Labour and the SNP have broken their pledges to the Scottish people on tax? Is it not time that both Governments focused on doing the right thing by Scotland, which is to focus on the tax take and not simply increase tax at every opportunity?

Shona Robison: First, revenues that are raised from tax are essential for public services. Of course, under the Tories' plans, £1 billion would come out of public services because of tax cuts that cannot be afforded. We have set out our intentions for taxation in our tax strategy. The tax policy for 2026-27 will be announced in the budget on 13 January.

Local Authority Funding

4. **Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide a response to COSLA's request for additional funding to support local authorities in the forthcoming budget. (S6O-05166)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): I welcome the meaningful budget engagement between the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities that has taken place throughout the year, including during my meeting with the new COSLA resources spokesperson at the COSLA conference on Friday 14 November. The outcome of the 2026-27 local government finance settlement will be announced as part of the Scottish budget on 13 January.

Audrey Nicoll: In May this year, the Accounts Commission forecast a £528 million revenue budget gap for 2026-27. As a result, increasingly difficult decisions are being made by councils to meet their legal obligations to balance their budgets. In its recent correspondence with the United Kingdom Government, COSLA set out the case for additional funding to the Scottish Government to facilitate a sufficient local government settlement, highlighting the acute pressures in social care and housing.

With the fiscal framework having been published, can the cabinet secretary outline how she will work with COSLA to ensure that there is effective delivery of the necessary budget provision, bearing in mind that the UK Government has delayed the autumn budget, which has seriously undermined the timescales that are available for the Scottish Government to publish its budget?

Shona Robison: The Scottish Government has a long history of working with local authorities and COSLA to ensure that council finances are sustainable. With our partners and local government, in the context of the recently agreed fiscal framework, we will continue to ensure that the budget challenges that are facing both spheres of government are properly understood. Despite a decade of UK Government austerity measures, the total local government finance settlement increased by almost 50 per cent between 2013-14 and 2025-26. The Scottish Government will continue to ensure that the people of Scotland receive the high-quality public services that they expect and deserve.

United Kingdom Fiscal Decisions (Impact on Scottish Budget and Local Government Funding)

5. **Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the impact of UK fiscal decisions on the Scottish budget and the certainty of local government funding. (S6O-05167)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): We are considering the implications of all possible United Kingdom budget outcomes for the Scottish budget, but the lack of any meaningful engagement from the UK Treasury is not helpful. I appreciate that

that will also have implications for local government. As I said earlier, we have a history of working with local authorities and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to ensure that council finances are sustainable. We will continue to work with our partners across the public sector to ensure that communities across Scotland receive high-quality public services.

Karen Adam: Across my constituency of Banffshire and Buchan Coast, public services are under real pressure. The Conservative-led administrations in Moray and Aberdeenshire have been making decisions that are harming some of our most vulnerable people, while passing the buck to the Scottish Government. Can the cabinet secretary set out what multiyear certainty and flexibility will be available in the next Scottish budget and the new deal for local government, given late and tightening UK fiscal events, so that my constituents can be confident that, regardless of local and UK decisions, the Scottish Government is doing all that it can to protect our public services?

Shona Robison: On 13 January 2026, I will set out the Scottish budget and the spending review, which are being developed against the backdrop of a late and highly uncertain UK Government budget. I confirm that the budget will protect and build on the substantial investments that the Scottish Government has already delivered for the people of Scotland. We will continue to work with our partners across the public sector to provide additional certainty and to address any budget challenges, including on how we operate and collaborate on reforming public services to ensure that they are sustainable and people centred.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

"Scottish median incomes fact sheet"

7. **Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the Scottish Fiscal Commission's recently published "Scottish median incomes fact sheet". (S6O-05169)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): The Scottish Government welcomes the Scottish Fiscal Commission's fact sheet. Its estimates of net median income in 2024-25 and 2025-26 show that a majority of taxpayers in Scotland are expected to pay less than taxpayers in the rest of the United Kingdom. That demonstrates that our commitment to ensure that the majority pay less than is paid elsewhere in the UK is being delivered.

Liz Smith: Once again, Scottish ministers have repeatedly told us about their interpretation of forecasts. Just for once, can we have an admission based on what has actually happened? The facts, as presented by the SFC and His Majesty's Revenue and Customs for outturn year 2023-24, show that median Scottish taxpayers paid more than their counterparts in the rest of the UK. Will the cabinet secretary finally accept the facts and stop misleading the public?

Shona Robison: Again, the SFC fact sheet, which was released on 11 November, shows that, after accounting for deductions from taxable income, most Scottish taxpayers are expected to pay less income tax than they would in the rest of the UK in 2024-25 and 2025-26. Accounting for deductions such as pension contributions is required to reflect the tax that is actually paid by taxpayers.

The fact sheet demonstrates that our commitment to ensure that the majority pay less than elsewhere in the UK is being delivered. For the remainder of the session, we will maintain the commitment that more than half of Scottish taxpayers will pay less income tax than they do in the rest of the UK. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Members, when a member has the floor it is only showing courtesy and respect to listen to them.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Whatever the Government's interpretation of the figures, I think that the cabinet secretary has to accept that many people feel that they are paying higher taxes and that Scotland has a reputation as a high-tax country, with no discernible improvement in public services. Will the cabinet secretary reflect that in future decisions about taxation?

Shona Robison: First, I acknowledge something that Willie Rennie said. People are feeling the pressure of the cost of living crisis. They feel that their income is not going as far, given the cost of food, utility bills and their mortgages, all of which are putting pressure on household incomes. I recognise that, but the Government's tax policies have raised important additional funding for public services.

As I said in an earlier answer, we set out in our tax strategy our position with regard to what we want to see going forward. Of course, we will have to see what next week's UK Government budget brings, but we recognise the importance of the issue to people's household incomes, and we have taken measures to help to sustain them. We will continue to do what we can in that spirit.

A77 (Road Safety Improvements)

8. **Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government how much it has allocated in its budget for the improvement of road safety on the A77 trunk road. (S6O-05170)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): Since 2007, the Scottish Government has delivered five major A77 improvements, totalling £64 million, including the £29 million Maybole bypass. In addition, approximately £425,000 has already been budgeted for road safety work on the A77 this year. We are working with local people through the south-west roads focus group and the A77 campaign group to develop recommendations for further targeted improvements on the A77.

Carol Mochan: The cabinet secretary clearly knows the concerns of local people regarding those roads, and I thank the Cabinet Secretary for Transport for meeting community campaigners to hear their concerns.

Given the key economic importance of the A77 not only to the south-west of Scotland but to the whole country, does she believe that the figure that she mentions is enough to significantly address the problem and ensure that it will deliver an economic benefit to the south-west?

Shona Robison: I am pleased that Carol Mochan recognises the Cabinet Secretary for Transport's engagement with local people. The Government recognises the strategic importance of the A77 to Scotland's economy. We value the critical link that it provides to the wider trunk road network and to the markets in the rest of the United Kingdom and Europe.

Making improvements to the A77 is one of the 45 recommendations that are included in the second strategic transport projects review, which was published in December 2022. The Government is committed to engaging with interested parties on strategic transport matters and supporting the users of the A77.

I know that the Cabinet Secretary for Transport will continue to listen to the views of local people.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): Although I welcome any funding for those vital upgrades, we have just learned that the Scottish Government has increased its own staffing costs by £53 million in 2024-25. Can the cabinet secretary tell communities from Maybole to Cairnryan why Government bureaucracy costs can rise by tens of millions of pounds a year, yet the A77 still receives nowhere near the focused investment that is needed to make it safe?

Shona Robison: I have just set out the investments that are being made in the A77, and major investments are happening in other parts of the trunk road network. I am sure that the member will be aware that the financial sustainability delivery plan, which was published in June alongside the public service reform strategy, set out a very clear direction of travel for reducing staffing numbers, particularly in corporate costs. That shows that we very much recognise the importance of diverting as much funding as possible to front-line services, and that is what we will continue to do.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on finance and local government. There will be a short pause to allow everybody to be in position for the next item of business.

Urgent Question

14:46

Scottish Men's National Football Team (World Cup Qualification)

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests with respect to the Scottish Football Association and FIFA.

I am delighted and thrilled to ask my question.

To ask the Scottish Government how it will recognise the Scottish men's national team qualifying for the world cup for the first time since 1998.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): Presiding Officer, I thank you and Douglas Ross for facilitating the opportunity for Parliament to come together to celebrate a momentous achievement on a momentous night. It has been a long time coming. I was 12 years old when Scotland last qualified for a world cup, and the family members of many colleagues across the Parliament will not have witnessed Scotland's men's team being at a world cup. It is a remarkable achievement, and one that we must celebrate.

I know that my colleague Ms Todd was jumping in the stands last night, and I was jumping about my living room with my son. Others will have been in pubs or at the game. The First Minister was able to pass on his congratulations in person to the chief executive of the SFA, Ian Maxwell, and to its president, Mike Mulraney.

I expect that the First Minister will also be writing to Steve Clarke and Andy Robertson about a reception at Bute house to ensure that the achievement is properly marked.

Douglas Ross: That is nothing less than they deserve. It is important to say that, when we apply for an urgent question, we have to explain why it is topical and urgent. I simply put in a note that the Parliament has never had the opportunity to discuss Scotland getting to the world cup finals, because, since devolution, we have never done so. That all changed after 98 incredible, breathtaking, nerve-wracking and emotional minutes last night. Steve Clarke and his squad guaranteed not just their place at the world cup finals next year but their place in the heart of every tartan army fan, by ending that 27-year wait for Scotland to return to the greatest sporting event in the world.

The match was bookended by outstanding goals. There was an overhead kick from Scott McTominay, when he defied gravity to fire the ball into the back of the net after three minutes; and, in the 98th minute, Kenny McLean scored from his own half with the final kick of the game to send Hampden into euphoria and Scotland into the world cup finals.

I am grateful to hear what the First Minister is doing about inviting the squad to Bute house. How can we further celebrate these heroes on and off the pitch, and how can we capture all that enthusiasm and filter it down into grass-roots football to ensure that we develop the next generation of talented footballers to carry on this great tradition and to guarantee that everyone, no matter their background, can get involved in the beautiful game?

Neil Gray: Douglas Ross is absolutely right. The first point that he made was about this being the first time since devolution that Scotland's men's team has qualified for a world cup. The Minister for Drug and Alcohol Policy and Sport commented to me earlier that she is the first Scottish sports minister to see Scotland's men's team qualify in person, which is a remarkable thing to consider, given the longevity of the Parliament.

The back and forth of the game last night was an emotional rollercoaster for all of us. There was something on social media that showed—among the reams of incredible output that came from the Scotland men's team, the BBC and various other outlets—the seesaw nature of the game, with Scotland qualifying at three minutes and Denmark qualifying at 56 minutes. The back and forth of the game encapsulated what it is to be a tartan army supporter and what we have lived through over the past 28 years, waiting for this moment.

We are considering what further steps we can take to mark the team's qualification and to build on it for grass-roots sport. Like Douglas Ross, I have an involvement that I must declare: as a volunteer youth coach, I will be at my son's football club this evening. I have no doubt that the enthusiasm from young boys and girls who see their sports team progress so well will inspire people to take up the sport and continue their endeavours to become the next Andy Robertson, Scott McTominay or Kenny McLean, who did so well last night in raising their game, performing for their nation and delivering something so momentous.

Douglas Ross: I will be honest: I submitted this question less interested in the Government's answers and more to give all the fans an opportunity to speak about their highlights from last night—there were so many.

The cabinet secretary is absolutely right to highlight the tartan army. "No Scotland, no party" rang out at Hampden and across Scotland last night—we heard it loud and clear. Although the

manager and the players deserve all the credit for doing the job on the pitch, making outstanding saves and scoring incredible goals to qualify as the winners of group C for the world cup finals, they have been supported every step of the way by the tartan army, who kicked every ball and headed every pass with the players.

Scotland fans have experienced the lowest of the lows and, last night, the highest of the highs. I am in no doubt that the world cup in 2026 will be the better for having the tartan army and the Scottish team there. Many lucky fans will get to go to the USA, Canada and Mexico, but many will remain here at home. What work will the Scottish Government do to consider flexibility around licensing laws to ensure that those who remain in Scotland can enjoy the atmosphere of the world cup and cheer on the team, no matter the time of the kick-offs and the matches, and to give a much-needed boost to our pubs in Scotland, which will also do well out of the tournament?

Neil Gray: I have heard some colleagues whispering, "What about a recess for the Parliament?" In all seriousness, Douglas Ross is absolutely right. Today is a day for celebration and one on which we rightly mark the incredible achievements of Steve Clarke, Andy Robertson, his team and all those who made yesterday happen, including the tartan army, given the remarkable support that it provides. Everywhere they go, the tartan army makes local communities better by raising and providing funds to the communities that they travel to. They bring an incredible spirit, which people in Germany were able to see in evidence last summer. I know that they will do the same and do our nation proud as they go to support Scotland wherever we go in Mexico, Canada or the United States.

We will give consideration to the wider points that Douglas Ross raised about what can be done domestically to support people who are here, supporting the tartan army, and to make sure that we make the absolute most of this remarkable opportunity.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): I advise members that there is quite a bit of interest in asking questions. I have allowed a bit of latitude, because I am sure that everybody wishes to relive the match in all its splendour. I will seek to take questions from as many individual back-bench members as I can, but they will need to be brief, and the cabinet secretary will need to be brief in replying.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): As well as the Scottish Government being asked what it can do to celebrate this success, it is incumbent on the Parliament to look at that, too. I do not know whether the cabinet secretary is aware of my motion for debate, which has already attracted cross-party support—although not the support of Douglas Ross as yet, so I look forward to him signing it. That debate will give Parliament as a whole the chance to discuss and celebrate our qualifying for the world cup. We should also note Kieran Tierney's fantastic goal, which has not been mentioned. [*Applause*.]

Some time ago, I made a suggestion to Mike Mulraney, who is the president of the SFA, that the oldest football in the world, which is housed at the Stirling Smith Art Gallery and Museum and was discovered in the roof well of Mary, Queen of Scots' bedchamber, could be taken to an international competition. It was taken to the world cup in Hamburg previously. I wonder whether the cabinet secretary would consider that. It underlines the point that football, in its present guise, started in Scotland.

Neil Gray: Absolutely. Keith Brown makes two very strong points. The first is on the importance of Parliament coming together. We have started to do that today, but debating his motion would give us a further opportunity to debate and celebrate this remarkable achievement.

The second is on Scotland's contribution to footballing history. Keith Brown spoke about the world's oldest football. My constituency hosted the first-ever penalty to be taken. As Scotland is going to the world cup, we must ensure that we make known internationally our role in the development of football across the world.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I will be brief, Presiding Officer, because I was losing my voice last night.

I join other members not just in congratulating Steve Clarke and his coaching staff, Andy Robertson and all the players on their historic achievement, but in thanking them for making history and for the memories that they will make for us next year. That achievement could act as a huge catalyst for participation in our national game.

What engagement will the Scottish Government have with consulates and the United Kingdom Government to support as many of the tartan army as possible in attending the games next year? As has been said, if there is no Scotland, there is no party.

Does the cabinet secretary agree with members on the Labour benches that the least that we can do is to recognise the achievements of Steve Clarke by awarding him a knighthood and making him Sir Steve Clarke for his services to football and to the country?

Neil Gray: On the latter point, Neil Bibby will know that that is beyond my responsibilities.

However, Steve Clarke deserves significant recognition. He has unquestionably become our most successful international men's manager. He has delivered a world cup and two European football championship qualifications. His success rate as the longest-serving international men's manager is remarkable, so he deserves due recognition. In whatever form that comes, we should celebrate it.

We are already actively considering how we can support and facilitate the maximum possible attendance at the world cup. In answer to the questions from Douglas Ross and Keith Brown, I said that we are also considering how we can provide support domestically. I would be happy to work not just with our consulates in Scotland but with the UK Government on doing just that.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I watched the football last night in the company of Kenny Gibson, Liam McArthur and Stuart McMillan. Who would have guessed that beneath the calm, suave and sophisticated air that Kenny Gibson exudes beats the heart of an absolute maniac?

The way in which we celebrated the win last night shows that sport is a huge unifier that can engage a nation. How will the cabinet secretary ensure that this world cup leaves a full legacy and has a positive influence on participation and overall health?

Neil Gray: Brian Whittle will know, given our athletics history—his more successful than mine—that I absolutely understand the power of sport to change lives and bring people together. That is similarly evidenced by our sports minister, Maree Todd.

We must ensure that, next summer, both the Commonwealth games and the men's world cup leave a lasting legacy that increases participation, and that we maximise the commercial, economic and tourism opportunities. We must continue to show ourselves in the best possible light internationally, as the tartan army always does at international games and tournaments. I am more than happy to continue to work on a cross-party basis to do that.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): We should win football matches more often, because I have never seen the chamber so united. People are even agreeing with Douglas Ross—that is how extreme it is.

Alex Cole-Hamilton wants to have a party, so I, too, want to agree with Douglas Ross about the licensing arrangements and having big parties with huge screens in different parts of the country so that people who cannot get across the Atlantic can enjoy the games back here. Will the cabinet secretary seriously consider that?

Neil Gray: Absolutely. We will need to work with our local authority and SFA partners to look at what we can do to maximise people's ability to engage with what will be a remarkable sporting summer to come next year, with the Commonwealth games and the world cup. Given the incredible endeavours of our Scotland men's team in getting there, we will want to ensure that we have some kind of fan zone or facility so that people can—I hope—celebrate Scotland bringing the trophy home.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: On that happy note, I will have to bring the urgent question to a close, because I need to protect the rest of the afternoon's business. I apologise to the members whom I was unable to call. There will be a short pause before we move on to the next item of business.

Skills System

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-19756, in the name of Daniel Johnson, on Scotland's skills system. I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons. I advise members that we have no time in hand whatsoever, so I will have to require members to stick to their allocated speaking time.

15:02

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): [*Interruption*.] Apologies, Presiding Officer. There were some odd flashing lights on my console—hence my swift manoeuvre.

I have a speech prepared, but I first want to reflect on the evidence that we took this morning at the Economy and Fair Work Committee, which is carrying out a short inquiry on artificial intelligence. We were told this morning that we have a three-to-five-year period after which we face the very real prospect of billion-dollar businesses with a single employee. We heard that the level of change in the way in which we organise and run businesses will also apply to public administration, and that we need to get the workforce ready now. We have three to five years, yet the Government is embarking on the sort of bureaucratic reorganisation that might take three to five years before we can even get going. That is the problem.

Scotland is bursting with ambition and potential, but our broken skills system is letting people down and holding the country back. Too many people with talent and aptitude do not have access to the training and opportunities that they need. Youth unemployment is rising, skill shortages are endemic and, across the economy, levels of in-work training are plummeting. That results in businesses whose growth is held back and an economy that is stifled. Most importantly and tragically, it results in individuals being denied opportunities and, indeed, better wages. That is because the Government has failed to prioritise skills for several sessions of Parliament.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): I am listening to the member with interest, and he will know that I believe that the scale of opportunity in Scotland is such that we need to have a skills pipeline. Does he accept that, with unemployment at fairly low levels—lower than the United Kingdom average—one of the challenges is the size of the workforce, and that getting specific talents and skills also requires targeted visas?

Daniel Johnson: That intervention from the Deputy First Minister ignores the fact that the number of people who are economically inactive is higher in Scotland than in the UK. Let us have that full and frank conversation—the Government, however, simply refuses to be full and frank.

At the previous election, the Scottish National Party promised 30,000 modern apprenticeship starts per year by the end of this parliamentary session, but it has failed. Only 25,500 places were funded this year, which is a shortfall of 4,500 and is 8,500 short of the 34,000 places that industry says that it needs to meet demand.

We have growing sectors in our economy that are crying out for more apprentices. Scottish Engineering has said:

> "Scotland needs an additional 58% of new engineers across 31 key roles by the end of 2027, over three quarters of which are delivered by apprenticeship programmes."

According to the Construction Industry Training Board, the construction workforce in the south-east of Scotland alone is 20,000 people short of industry demand. Those two sectors are critical to Scotland's economy. The construction sector is the literal source when it comes to building the growth that we need, but it is being hamstrung by a system that fails to prioritise according to its needs.

It is not about money; it is about choices. We know that the money that Scottish businesses pay through the apprenticeship levy far exceeds what the Scottish Government chooses to spend on skills. Scottish firms pay a payroll tax on the premise that the funds will go into workforce development, only for the Scottish National Party Government to plunder that money to spend it on mitigating its financial incompetence. Last year, the shortfall between what the Scottish Government was granted through the block grant and what it actually spent was £62 million. That is an estimate, because the Scottish Government will not publish the figure, and I note that the Conservatives have a different figure. We simply need that clarity. If we want a full and frank discussion, let us have transparency on the funding that is being delivered through the levy.

Confidence in the Government is low, and apprenticeship numbers are not keeping up with demand. The Government has scrapped the flexible workforce development fund and dismantled industry-facing bodies such as the Scottish Apprenticeship Advisory Board and Skills Development Scotland. We need a new and genuinely lifelong skills system that starts at school, opens up routes to work for young people in education and helps to retrain and upskill experienced workers so that they can take advantage of new and developing opportunities and industries.

Evidence suggests that between the ages of six and eight, children begin to form occupational aspirations. From the age of nine to 13, they begin to dismiss potential roles on the bases of gender, esteem or competence. As things stand, more than half of all young Scots who do not go to university do not have a clear line of sight to good jobs and training. By the time they arrive at the point at which they make choices about their future, they are disempowered by an education system that is decoupled from the world of work.

It does not have to be like that. In Greater Manchester, Mayor Andy Burnham is developing the Greater Manchester baccalaureate, which involves partnering with industry to deliver the combination of subjects and work experience that will set young people on a pathway to good work and training. In my constituency, Liberton high school has, despite the system, partnered with employers such as Balfour Beatty to pioneer a small-scale construction pathway that gives young people early hands-on experience in construction. With a clear vision that everyone matters, Liberton high school is doing its bit to get more young people into well-paying construction jobs, but it is the exception, and the programme is in doubt because of a lack of funding.

We need to get every part of the education system thinking about skills and the world of work. That is why, by working with industry to introduce clear pathways from school into jobs, training and education, a Scottish Labour Government would give every pupil the opportunity to fulfil their potential. Rapid changes in our economy—in technology, the climate and, imperatively, demographics—mean that we must stop viewing skills as a thing that people do once at the start of their careers.

Our modern apprenticeships programme is genuinely first class, but it is slow to adapt to economic changes and is inaccessible to learners who are already in the workforce. That is why we need to give learners who look to upskill or retrain the ability to do so while in work through a modular system that is all underwritten by student finance and that supports them in the same way that it supports those who do a university degree.

It has been eight years since the Scottish Government's enterprise and skills review outlined serious deficiencies in the skills system and three years since James Withers published his review, but instead of fixing the problems that users are experiencing, the Government's only foray into the skills base has been the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill, the only function of which is to shift responsibilities from one agency to another. That simply will not meet the challenges that we face over the next three to five years, as outlined at the beginning of my speech.

I move,

That the Parliament believes that Scotland's skills system is letting down young people and holding back economic growth, and further believes that there needs to be a new partnership between education and industry, with better careers advice in schools central to it, and new Scottish industrial pathways to link school subjects to future careers, guaranteed industrial placements for secondary school pupils including in industry and a clearing system for apprenticeships, so that good candidates do not fall out of the system.

15:09

The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Ben Macpherson): Excuse me—I lost my voice slightly at Hampden last night, as I am sure much of the country did, across different parts of our society. What we witnessed last night was a sense of resistant optimism, which I have talked about in the chamber before. That is relevant to the motion and the amendments that we are debating today.

I appreciate the constructive suggestions in the Labour Party's motion and the constructive tone of some of what is in the Conservative amendment. That is what we need. The principal problem with the motion, however, is that in its opening line it states, erroneously, that the

"skills system is letting down young people and holding back economic growth".

Yes, there is room for improvement, and we need to work together on that and on the challenges that have been set out in relation to the technological revolution that is happening across the world. However, such negativity is erroneous and is not helpful—let us be constructive and work together.

Daniel Johnson: Does the minister not at least agree that the fact that 4,500 fewer people than the Government's own targets are getting an apprenticeship means that young people are being let down?

Ben Macpherson: I have stated before, as have colleagues, that we have an ambition to grow the number of modern apprenticeships, graduate apprenticeships and foundation apprenticeships. At the moment, there are a record number of people in modern apprenticeships. Yes, there is more demand in the economy than we are meeting, and, yes, there are colleges that want to fill more places. We want to work together with them. We recognise the challenge. However, to state that the system is not working in any way for our young people, or for business and industry, is erroneous. A good amount of work is happening across the country between industry and educators in schools, in order to prepare our

young people, who are flourishing. heating. *[Ben Macpheson has corrected this contribution. See end of report.]*

For example, in the past few weeks, we have had Scottish careers week. That was a great opportunity for people from a variety of industry sectors to go into schools and other settings to help young people and those who are retraining to realise what career opportunities are available to them—whether in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, hospitality, care, the creative industries or many other areas. In recent days, I have had the great pleasure of attending many initiatives, including a conference that was jointly organised by the Federation of Small Businesses, the Institute of Directors Scotland and Young Scot. All those entities are working together with SDS, Developing the Young Workforce, the third sector, teachers, universities, colleges, parents, guardians and carers, and through initiatives such as the career services collaborative, to help people to find the next steps on their journey.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I agree entirely with what the minister has just said. Nonetheless, I was at a conference at Edinburgh Napier University on Monday at which people were saying that the number of older people who need to be upskilled is substantial, and growing. What measures is the Government putting in place with those agencies to ensure that there is that upskilling as well as the initial training?

Ben Macpherson: That is a significant point that gets to the heart of the skills agenda that we are undertaking through a programme and a set of primary legislative changes.

For Opposition members to state that there is only one thing happening, which is a piece of primary legislation, is incorrect. The Deputy First Minister and I are progressing a whole programme of work that does not require primary legislation to provide more skills opportunities. I have already committed that the Government's ambition is to increase the number of graduate apprenticeships. There is "Scotland's Offshore Wind Skills Priorities and Action Plan", the energy transition skills hub, the oil and gas transition training fund, and so much more that we want to deliver and build on, as well as—as I said earlier—a record number of 25,000 modern apprenticeships. *[Ben Macpheson has corrected this contribution. See end of report.]*

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Will the minister take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister is concluding.

Ben Macpherson: This year, we also have a record number of more than 110,000 vocational and technical qualification awards.

There is more to do. That is why the primary legislation is important. If we bring all the provision in to one institution, for higher and further education and apprenticeships, we can increase the offer and the efficiency and we can create flexibility, new opportunities and the agility to deal with the technological challenge, more opportunities for retraining—which will only become more important—and parity of esteem for people who are starting or changing their career.

There is so much more that I could say, but I will leave it there.

I move amendment S6M-19756.2, to leave out from first "believes" to end and insert:

"agrees that there needs to be greater partnership between education and industry, with better careers advice in schools central to it, and clear and coherent Scottish pathways to link school and college courses to future careers, improved placements for secondary school pupils, and better information on career choices, job prospects and earnings, alongside an ongoing commitment to apprenticeships; acknowledges the significant progress made over the years to deliver a record number of apprentices in training at the end of 2024-25; notes that, despite the impact of Brexit and a failing UK economic model, resulting in workforce challenges and barriers to trade, Scotland is the best performing part of the UK for inward investment outside of London, has a lower unemployment rate than the UK, and has near record positive destinations, and agrees that independence offers the best opportunity for Scotland's economy to grow and create wealth and prosperity for all."

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members who wish to participate in the debate but have not already pressed their request-to-speak buttons to please do so now.

15:15

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): When I saw that it was to be Labour business today, I thought that Daniel Johnson might have chosen to debate next week's tax rises by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, or perhaps the communications strategy of 10 Downing Street towards his colleagues, but instead we are talking about skills. I very much welcome that, because there is much in the Labour motion that we agree with.

Daniel Johnson is right in his basic proposition, because the simple fact is that Scotland's skills and apprenticeship system is not working. It is not working for business, it is not working for the economy and it is not working for young people, who are being robbed of opportunities. I heard Mr Macpherson's defence, but I say gently to him that he should look at the evidence that the Economy and Fair Work Committee took from stakeholders back in the spring. Every single stakeholder that we heard from said that the current system is not working, and that is why it needs to change.

Ben Macpherson: I challenge Mr Fraser and colleagues on that. The current system is working very well for many people, including many employers and many learners. Is it necessary for us to continue to improve the system? Yes, but let us work collaboratively on that as a shared challenge.

Murdo Fraser: I say to Mr Macpherson that he should go back and review the evidence to which I referred, because it gives a somewhat different picture.

Part of my concern is that the Government's focus is on structural reform and shifting apprenticeship funding into the Scottish Funding Council. We can see today the funding crisis that our colleges and universities are facing, and there is real concern that funding that currently goes into apprenticeships will be diverted into filling the black hole in funding for universities and colleges.

As Daniel Johnson said, we know that far more apprenticeship places are sought than are funded. According to Skills Development Scotland, there is currently demand for 34,000 modern apprenticeship places annually, but, in the most recent year, funding was provided for just 25,000 places. That gap means that we are not meeting the needs of our economy.

According to the Open University's business barometer survey, 56 per cent of Scottish businesses are currently experiencing a skills shortage. The shortage is greatest in acute sectors such as construction and engineering, where there is substantial demand for a future workforce but not enough people are being trained.

Investment in apprenticeships is money well spent. The evidence shows that, for every £1 of public money that is spent on training and apprenticeships, £10 is invested by employers, and that, for every £1 that is invested, between £4 and £5 is returned in tax.

Just a few weeks ago, I led a debate in the chamber on funding for the college sector. According to Audit Scotland, there has been a 20 per cent real-terms reduction in funding for colleges over the past five years, which is causing significant issues in that sector, including redundancies, the cutting of courses and reductions in campuses. Unless that trend can be reversed, we will continue to see an issue whereby our skills offer does not meet the needs of the population.

Daniel Johnson rightly mentioned the apprenticeship levy. I am consistently told by employers in Scotland that they are being disadvantaged in comparison with employers south of the border.

Kate Forbes: Will the member give way?

Murdo Fraser: I think that I am in my last minute.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You are.

Murdo Fraser: I apologise to the Deputy First Minister.

Whereas employers in England can directly access those funds, that is not the case in Scotland. The latest data shows that the SNP is siphoning off £171 million from the apprenticeship levy to spend elsewhere in its budget. Data from His Majesty's Revenue and Customs shows that at least £875 million was raised by the apprenticeship levy between 2020 and 2024, but, in the same period, only £704 million was spent on apprenticeships in Scotland. If we are serious about supporting apprenticeships, that apprenticeship levy money needs to come back into the sector and not disappear into the SNP's black hole.

This week, we set out our plans for a demand-led system for skills and apprenticeships. Those plans are covered in my amendment, which I am pleased to move.

I move amendment S6M-19756.1, to leave out from ", with better" to end and insert:

"; believes that this must be underpinned by a demand-led skills system that equips young people with the qualifications that employers need to grow Scotland's economy; notes that the Scottish National Party administration has failed to pass on over £170 million of Apprenticeship Levy funding and has provided around 10,000 fewer apprenticeship places than learning providers requested, contributing to a widening skills gap in key sectors including hospitality, construction, engineering and care; further notes that colleges have faced a 20% real-terms funding cut, leading to job losses, falling student numbers and financial instability, and calls for urgent reform to invest in colleges, fix Scotland's broken apprenticeship system, address skills shortages and allow local employers to shape training that matches their workforce needs."

15:19

Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): The Economy and Fair Work Committee has heard over and over again about the advantages of workplace learning, not only for traditional vocational careers but also for secondary school pupils and post-secondary students. I am still reasonably shocked by the relatively limited joint working between industry in Scotland and Scotland's universities and colleges, compared with course delivery in North America. When I graduated in engineering way back in 2000, I did so with more than two years of work experience in industry through my university's co-op programme. That involved paid work—at well above the minimum wage—in chunks of four, eight or 12 months.

In the United States and Canada, it is normal process for engineering companies to take on engineering students to undertake discrete projects, and to attract potential talent for long-term recruitment. That helps students to cover the costs of learning and it helps them to gain invaluable skills. When I arrived in the UK, I was offered two jobs in my first two weeks here on the basis that I had practical experience, even as a fresh graduate, which gave me a significant advantage over my UK peers.

There is a great deal of scope for improved connections between post-secondary education and industry in Scotland to support success in key industries and to make our graduates employable. There is also scope to find alternative funding streams to support the delivery of post-secondary education, perhaps by getting industry to fund either key placements of students or equipment that students might need to use. The Scottish Government should show leadership and set out intentions on that with urgency.

Apprenticeships in Scotland are a mixed story. Employers are very keen to hire apprentices, and apprenticeships are in high demand. A higher percentage of apprentices go on to work in the subject area that they have been trained in, compared with university students. However, I was unable to find statistics on that for college graduates, which somewhat begs the question about the difference in focus and funding between those two routes. It could be said that substantial public funds are being wasted on students who study at university but do not go on to work in their field of study. At the very least, that should be a matter of self-reflection for universities that are claiming financial difficulties.

Additional funding for apprenticeships to allow more people of all ages to take them up would be a sound investment in Scotland's future. About 90 per cent of the people who study in an apprenticeship go on to work in the field or sector in which they have studied, so that learning is valuable.

Several matters concern me about how apprenticeships are being delivered in Scotland, despite the positive headlines. First, the quality of apprenticeships varies widely, with no standards for minimum training hours or quality of instructors. I met an apprentice who worked for one of our local authorities. That young woman had no standard hours for training, and she was expected to do online training. If she did not get on with her supervisor or did not think that the training was adequate, there was no one that she could complain to, and her supervisor could fail her if she issued complaints. That is not a good standard of training.

Apprentices in traditional trades have union representation to look out for their interests and the quality of their instruction, but other apprentices lack that representation and have no one to turn to if they are mistreated or are provided with sub-par training. Apprentices need an independent regulatory body to ensure fair treatment and quality control. That is especially critical for apprentices in sectors that do not have a college affiliation.

Apprenticeships in Scotland are substantially focused on men, to the disadvantage of women.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude.

Lorna Slater: Not only are most apprentices men, but women apprentices are consigned to lower-paying sectors and lower-paying jobs. It is worth prioritising and correcting that.

15:23

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The good news is that there is huge demand for apprenticeships. It is fantastic that so many people are willing to learn and that we have excellent people who are prepared to impart their knowledge in our colleges and workplaces. There are also employers who are desperate to take new people—particularly young people—into their workforces.

The bad news is that, as we know, the system is disjointed. It has been criticised repeatedly by Audit Scotland and in the Withers report. My disappointment is that all the knowledge that James Withers shared is now being narrowed down into a structural discussion about whether SDS should have some of its powers removed and transferred to the Scottish Funding Council. We are not debating any of the other issues that we should be debating. I deeply regret that, because employers are divided and there is concern in the sector that we are not addressing those fundamental problems.

When I visited the excellent Dundee and Angus College yesterday, I heard stories from young people there about their lives being transformed. People who had not spoken for years had been lifted out of that state and are now on the verge of employment. Some really good people are being trained, and the opportunity for work is therefore increased. That shows the diversity in the sector.

I then went downstairs to see the plumbers, who told me that, because of the minimum wage, employer national insurance contributions and the state of wider business confidence, employer demand for apprenticeships in that sector has fallen. There is therefore potential for youth unemployment—particularly in Dundee, in this

case—as a result of failed employer demand. However, the college is unable to take on those young people to do higher national certificates or other qualifications, because its funding has been cut. The system is unable to flex based on the confidence in the sector.

I think that the minister, with his bill, is trying to get a whole-system approach, but the reality is that the whole system is the economy. It is not just about apprenticeships and universities and colleges—it is about everything. For example, yesterday's announcement of the delay to the heat in buildings bill will further knock confidence in the companies that are looking to employ plumbers. That has an impact on confidence so that we cannot transform the heating systems in buildings. What we need in our skills set-up is for the funds to follow the learner, but they also need to follow employers' needs now and in the future. That is a complex set of conditions, but instead of having discussions about that, we are back to a discussion about structures.

The thing that concerns me most is that we are not getting to grips with our 16 to 64-year-old working-age population. The economic inactivity in that group is one of the highest in the United Kingdom. It bounces between one in four and one in five. We need those people to work in order to pay the taxes to fund our public services. However, the economy—that whole system—is broken. That is what I believe. It is not just about the narrow apprenticeship system; the fact is that we are not focusing on the whole economy, the skills within it and economic inactivity. My plea is for us to have a wider debate about all those things so that we can get the economy moving, rather than having narrow debates about structures.

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

15:28

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): When I looked at the motion and the amendments for the debate, I could see in each a lot of positives on which we could agree. It would be great if political parties in this place were able to come together more. Daniel Johnson talked about a full and frank discussion, but we need to add honesty—about where we are, what needs to be done and how we move forward together in the interests of the people of Scotland.

A month or so ago, I was in Forth Valley College for a morning meeting, so I went for breakfast in its excellent cafe. I met a young man from Kirkcaldy, who told me that he was working for a firm in Fife, doing an apprenticeship. He was so excited to tell me about the college, his apprenticeship and how he was getting on. It is therefore important that we recognise that the colleges do not sit in isolation from the wider economy. There was devastating news yesterday about Mossmorran, where apprentices will need support on how to move forward. We need a joined-up approach to employment and the economy.

As Willie Rennie found when he went to Dundee and Angus College, I found Forth Valley College buzzing with people. In our debates, we should be careful not to talk down the success that is happening across Scotland's colleges. The Colleges Scotland "Keyfacts 2025" report outlined that.

Many people have a good experience in our colleges, but we need to be honest. Audit Scotland pointed out that, during the current parliamentary session, colleges have had a 20 per cent real-terms cut to their funding. Colleges such as Fife College and Forth Valley College have made it clear that they cannot continue with the cuts that they are having to make to their budgets.

As part of that honest discussion, let us consider what needs to happen on funding. The motion and the amendments all talk about links with schools; we need to make that link much stronger. We need to recognise that some pupils who come through the school system and come out the other end without the basic skills that they need will not be successful in a college education.

Daniel Johnson talked about the work that a school in Liberton is doing with employers. A lot of excellent work is happening with employers. I could rattle off umpteen schools in Fife that are doing really good stuff, and employers have bought into that. However, there needs to be more of a strategic approach to that.

Schools are signing up for a project in Fife called the hub, which I have mentioned to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills on a number of occasions. Pupils who are struggling in school—and, indeed, many pupils who do not want to go to school—go along to training workshops in Methil. Schools across Fife are using that. Many of the young people who I have talked to who have taken part have gone on to get an apprenticeship. Had they not had that opportunity, they would have come out of the school system with no opportunities. We also need to look at models of that kind. That hub is doing brilliant work, but it is struggling to get financial support. I have had meetings with Fife Council education officers to discuss how we can support that organisation. Schools are actively supporting it, and the outcomes are being demonstrated.

We need to be positive about what is going on, but recognise that there is a serious funding issue and that we need a more joined-up approach. I

wish that members from all parties in the chamber would start to work together and put the people of Scotland first.

15:32

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): I thank Daniel Johnson for the debate. It is enormously important that we discuss this issue in the chamber, to ensure that not only our young people, but those who are already in the world of work—Liz Smith made that point—have the requisite skill set that they need in order to take up the opportunities that exist in the labour market.

Those who are coming down the track are of fundamental importance. The nature of the labour market is changing. Daniel Johnson made the point about artificial intelligence changing the nature of our labour market. Automation will change the nature of our labour market, and changed patterns of consumption will do so, too. We also need to focus on the just transition, so debating the issue is important.

I absolutely agree that we should not be immune to any suggestion about how we can continue to improve our education and skills system. The minister made the point that we should not close down any discussion about how we can improve it.

Mr Johnson's motion says that we should improve careers advice in schools. I remind him that we have the careers collaborative, which is established and is already working towards that end. His idea about having a clearing system for apprenticeships is interesting and worthy of exploration. It would not be exactly analogous to the clearing system for universities, because it is a paid employment opportunity. However, I take on board the point that Lorna Slater made about the ability for pupils to attain graduate-level qualifications while simultaneously being in employment. We are starting to see that through graduate apprenticeships being embedded as part of our skills system. We should be willing to discuss that idea further.

However, I cannot agree with the terms of Daniel Johnson's motion, and I cannot agree with the notion that our skills system is letting down our young people. I agree with Alex Rowley that we should not talk down our system, but, when we use that type of terminology, we are at danger of doing so. The overwhelming majority of young people who leave school go on to a positive destination and have a life-changing experience, such as I had going on to further study at university, or going to college, into training—there are 38,000 apprentices in training right now—or into employment, and we should recognise that.

I will pick up on what Alex Rowley said about focusing on colleges. We have excellence in our colleges. For example, when culinary students from my local college, New College Lanarkshire, took over the restaurant in Parliament, Clare Adamson and I enjoyed their hospitality and the meal that they prepared. At its Motherwell campus, New College Lanarkshire also has a smart hub that helps hundreds of businesses to use robotics to improve their processes.

Mr Rennie mentioned Dundee and Angus College. I have had the pleasure of visiting that excellent college, which is doing excellent activity. Edinburgh College, in Mr Johnson's home city, with its digital care hubs, is preparing people for opportunities in health and social care, with a particular focus on technology-enabled care. I could go on with many examples from across the country that I have seen first hand.

We should reflect on the fact that, although our system can, of course, always be refined and improved, there is already excellence. If we are going to have the type of conversation that we should have about improving our education and skills system, we must bear in mind that we already have strong underpinnings.

15:36

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): MSPs have described how they feel that Scotland's skills system is failing too many young people and is holding back our economic growth. There is a need for a new partnership between education and industry, with better careers advice at its heart and clear, supported pathways from the classroom to the workplace. For too long, the system has lacked coherence, vision and investment.

I will begin by talking about colleges, which have a track record of linking education with industry, including through schemes such as the flexible workforce development fund. However, instead of colleges being empowered, they have been placed under limitations. I can remember when college reorganisation was pushed through without the funding that was needed to make it work. That reorganisation should have strengthened partnerships but instead narrowed access by placing restrictions on the broad and inclusive approach where colleges partnered closely with business and communities. As Alex Rowley said, more recent funding changes have also had a negative impact. The consequences have been predictable. Opportunities have been lost, partnerships have been weakened and too many young people fall through the cracks, as James Withers showed in his review.

Our colleges are striving to deliver for their learners and local employers, despite the financial environment that they face. Following yesterday's announcement about the Mossmorran plant, Fife College was swift to engage with Scottish Government officials on its preparations to support affected workers. Many of those working at the plant are Fife College students and graduates.

The college partners with more than 180 employers, including Babcock and RES Group, and delivers one of Scotland's largest modern apprenticeship programmes. Its new Carnegie campus is ideally placed to deepen those links, especially with the high schools that it has on its doorstep. Elsewhere in Fife, at Levenmouth academy, we have seen the value of co-location. Young people there are able to get hands-on experience of working on real community projects and they gain an early understanding of the practical skills that local industries need. That is the kind of partnership that we need to see more of, but it cannot be left to chance.

We need to address the failure to deliver the requested number of apprenticeships, which is leaving young people without the routes to employment and opportunities that they need, and leaving employers without the people that they need to plug the skills gaps that persist across our economy.

In our schools, careers advice must start earlier and be more ambitious. We know that children, even in primary school, begin to rule out jobs on the basis not of their ability but of their confidence; that might be because of stereotyping or because they simply do not see people like them in certain roles.

Parents need support, too. I meet too many parents who worry that their children lack a plan or who default to the assumption that university is the only route. Good advice can open doors to opportunities that they did not know existed.

We must be honest, as others have said, that, too often, careers advice is still gendered. Far too many girls are steered away from science, engineering and construction. Women who succeed in those fields are often framed as succeeding despite the barriers, when our job is to remove those barriers. That must be reflected in our classrooms, in our careers services and in the workplaces that young people are stepping into.

When we create links between education and industry, it must be with the goal of helping all young people to find the right route for them. Part of that should involve working to close the disability employment gap, but we have to build such an approach into our skills and pathway systems, rather than bolting it on at the end. Scotland cannot afford to waste talent, and we cannot keep relying on a fragmented skills system that leaves too many young people behind and leaves many employers without the workers that they need.

We need to pursue a vision for a flexible, lifelong skills system that recognises and supports the role of our schools and colleges, makes apprenticeships more responsive and builds genuine partnerships with employers so that Scotland's workforce matches Scotland's economic needs. That is how we raise productivity, close the skills gap and give every young person the chance they need to reach their full potential.

15:40

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): As always, I am delighted to speak in support of our education and skills sector. It is great to see Labour at long last accepting what I and my colleagues on the Conservative benches have been demanding in skills development for years. It shows that members of other parties, even if they are a little late, can join us and be persuaded to get on the right path.

Who would have thought that we would be debating the idea that we should be matching skills development with industry need? What has the Scottish Government been doing for the past 18 years? The answer is that there has been an on-going systematic dismantling of the FE sector. At a time when we desperately need a huge increase in apprenticeship numbers, the Scottish Government has squeezed funding for our colleges, forcing cuts year after year.

I have often said in the chamber that education is the cornerstone of every portfolio. I came into this place saying that education was the solution to health and welfare issues. A good education leads to decent, well-paid jobs, which has an impact on predicted health outcomes, leading to a reduction in the pressure on our national health service. Decent, well-paid jobs also lead to a higher tax take, which allows for greater investment in our public services.

The alternative is increased pressure on the welfare budget, which is exactly what we are seeing from the SNP Government. The Government's one-dimensional thinking is exactly what is holding back Scotland's economic potential and starving our pupils and those wishing to upskill of those important opportunities.

Among the many fantastic FE colleges across Scotland, Ayrshire College is a shining example of what can be achieved. It is working closely with local industry to develop apprenticeship programmes that are required in engineering, including in aerospace, trades and social care.

Prestwick Aircraft Maintenance Ltd, which is based at Prestwick airport and services Ryanair aircraft, is desperate to expand its operation and create more than 700 jobs. It is working with Ayrshire College to develop an apprenticeship programme in engineering and aircraft maintenance. PAML already contributes millions of pounds to the Scottish tax take, yet it told me last week that it is having to recruit from as far afield as Ethiopia and Turkey because of the lack of local apprenticeships.

XLCC plans to operate 200 apprenticeships by 2030, once its plant at Hunterston is operational. Again, the company is working with Ayrshire College to develop that skill set. The companies in the engineering cluster around Prestwick are also looking to expand. The limiting factor in that economic expansion is access to constant apprenticeship throughput. Meanwhile, Ayrshire College has reported that some 834 applications from qualified applicants for apprenticeship places have had to be turned away because of lack of Government funding. Those include 400 places in engineering, 120 in apprenticeships and 71 in social care. So much for the issues in social care staffing being only down to immigration; we cannot even give people in local communities the opportunity to work in social care.

The same is true for foundation apprenticeships. A lack of foresight means that there is a lack of opportunity for pupils. If someone is academically minded and good at exams, there is a pathway for them through the education system to university and beyond, but what about a pathway for those who would excel in travelling the foundation apprenticeship route into modern apprenticeships and on to successful careers? That is just as viable a route into great careers, but it is hugely undervalued by the Government.

We need careers advice in schools that enthuses pupils to consider the pathways into great local careers. That should include recruiting local industry to showcase opportunity, but we need a Government that will match that industry need with an investment in our education system that speaks directly to it. It is only when the Scottish Government wakes up to the economic opportunity that increasing apprenticeship places would offer that our economy will reach its potential. After 18 years of SNP mismanagement, however, it is obvious that it will not come from that department.

15:44

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to speak about the vital work that is under way across our education and skills system, which is helping people of all ages to reach their potential and is strengthening the foundations of Scotland's economy. At the heart of that effort is a simple belief that every young person deserves a chance to succeed, and that Scotland thrives when its people thrive.

The SNP Government is investing more than £2 billion to give people access to education, training and opportunities that shape lives. That investment is guided by a clear purpose: building a fair, prosperous and successful economy, supported by an education and skills system that is flexible, responsive and ready to meet the needs of communities, employers and future industries.

I have to make the same apology about my voice as the Minister for Higher and Further Education did, because I was at Hampden last night.

Nowhere is the importance of Scotland's colleges clearer than in my constituency of Coatbridge and Chryston. New College Lanarkshire, which is a campus in Coatbridge where I am a regular visitor, was recently named the further education institute of the year at *The Herald* education awards. It secured four awards, including the widening access award for its pioneering undergraduate school, which was created with the University of the West of Scotland. As the first degree-level school on a Scottish college campus, it is opening up fairer and more accessible routes into higher education. Almost half of its first cohort came from some of the most socially and economically challenged parts of Lanarkshire. With innovative programmes such as Scotland's first dental nursing degree and the learning well online platform for adult learners, the college is transforming opportunities locally. Successful students such as Chloe Sandilands, who was in the press after she overcame homelessness to become a champion for inclusion and wellbeing, have shown the life-changing impact of a supportive college environment. That is exactly what investment, innovation and fairness can achieve for places such as Coatbridge and Chryston.

Colleges across Scotland play a vital role every day. They are powerhouses of learning and aspiration, ensuring that learners gain the skills that our economy needs now and in the future. Tens of thousands of learners progress through Scotland's colleges each year, and the Scottish Government continues to support them, with more than £750 million invested into our 24 colleges and the apprenticeships that they deliver. However, we all recognise that colleges and universities are facing financial pressures, which have been intensified by the austerity that has been imposed by the UK Labour Government. Its cuts restrict

Scotland's public finances and limit our ability to invest even more in education.

Rising energy bills, inflation and increased employer national insurance contributions have created around £50 million in extra costs for Scotland's educational institutions. It is not just colleges and universities that have been affected; businesses in Coatbridge and Chryston and across the country are feeling the impact of rising energy costs and the national insurance increase. Those costs reduce their ability to hire apprentices and invest in local jobs. I hear that often from businesses when I am out and about visiting them, as I am sure other members do.

Despite the pressures, Scotland remains committed to expanding skills and apprenticeships. This year, the SNP Government is providing £185 million to deliver 25,000 new modern apprenticeships, 5,000 foundation apprenticeships and 1,200 graduate apprenticeships, while supporting more than 38,000 apprentices who are already in training. Supporting young people goes beyond qualifications. It means giving them confidence, guidance and personalised support. That is why this year's programme for government commits to improving school-age and adult career services, including better information on job prospects and earnings. We are also expanding recognition of prior learning, helping people to change careers and build on the skills that they already have.

As we look ahead, we must confront the reality that many of Scotland's skills shortages have been driven by Brexit and UK immigration policy. Scotland was taken out of the European Union against its will, losing £2.3 billion in revenue, and faces higher borrowing costs as a result. Labour's migration plans will make it harder to attract international workers and students. Those policies run counter to Scotland's needs and values and, by contrast, the SNP recognises the immense contribution that migrants make. That is why we have proposed a Scottish graduate visa, which would ensure that Scotland can retain the talent of those who study here.

Scotland has huge potential. By continuing to invest in education, apprenticeships and skills, we are ensuring that every young person has a chance to fulfil their future. Despite the pressures from Westminster, we remain determined to support learners, strengthen our economy and build a fairer and more prosperous Scotland for all.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sympathetic to Fulton MacGregor for the loss of his voice, but I would be grateful if members who were fortunate enough to have been at Hampden would not rub it in for those of us who were not.

We move to closing speeches.

15:49

Lorna Slater: In my opening remarks, I voiced my concerns about the fact that gender inequality appears to be built into our apprenticeship system. Not only are most apprentices men, but women apprentices are consigned to lower-paying sectors and lower-paying jobs. That cannot stand. Quota systems must be introduced to ensure that everyone is benefiting equally. Public money cannot be used to trap women in low pay. Increasing the pay of women is one of the most significant interventions that can be made to reduce poverty and increase income tax receipts.

To be honest, I have similar concerns about much of the provision of college courses, which is something that the Scottish Government theoretically has a say in. We appear to be using public money to teach boys to weld and girls to cut hair. That sort of intentional creation of gender inequality using public money must be challenged. Further, at a time of financial challenge, public money should be spent in line with Government priorities, such as net zero.

The final matter that I would like to bring to the Scottish Government's attention is that of apprenticeships in key traditional skills. From the creation of tartans and tweeds to the restoration of traditional masonry in buildings, there is a host of traditional skills in Scotland where the current cohort of workers is ageing. Those skills are important to the fabric of our history and culture. They have significance for tourism and for refurbishment of structures of historic significance. However, organisations cannot take on apprentices to pass on those skills, because the apprenticeship frameworks do not exist for them. Skills Development Scotland does not consider that there is sufficient interest in such skills to develop the relevant frameworks. If we do not update the guidance in that regard, we risk losing the ability to produce tweeds and tartans and to restore and refurbish our historic buildings. I urge the Scottish Government to reconsider the guidance, as responsibility for apprenticeships is moved to the Scottish Funding Council, to allow for—indeed, to encourage—the creation of apprenticeship frameworks in relation to skills that are culturally, historically or strategically significant, even if there will be only a handful of apprentices in any given year.

15:51

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): On Monday, Russell Findlay and I visited Edinburgh College to tour its construction facility—the Minister for Higher and Further Education will know it well, as it is in his constituency. We met lots of young people, not just from Edinburgh but from East Lothian. In speaking to them, we could see the

opportunity that they have finally been able to realise. I hope that, if they get the skills that they are there to learn, they will get the security that is provided by good jobs and will be able to get on with their lives. It was interesting to have conversations with young people who had a focus on exactly why they were there and who wanted to be there.

The debate has addressed a number of aspects that relate to that. In his opening speech, Daniel Johnson touched on the jobs of the future and on planning for them. As Murdo Fraser said, the skills system is currently not meeting our economy's needs. We need to be mindful of where we should be working collectively to make a change to achieve that. I do not think that the Government's Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill will do that, which is why the Scottish Conservatives will work to amend it. We need transparency on the apprenticeship levy and annual reporting, so that we can see where that money is going.

Our college sector is crying out for help. The Scottish Government and all parties need to hear that. Eleven institutions are not only reporting financial difficulty but clearly at a point of failure, and we need to collectively act on that. As ministers have said, the university sector is too big to fail, but I think that the college sector is too important to our economy to fail. Alex Rowley made important points about why that is.

Recent reports from the Scottish Funding Council and Audit Scotland have highlighted the dire financial situation that our college sector is now operating in. It is the key to the ability to get on in life for many young people—especially those who are furthest removed from our education sector and the workplace. Claire Baker mentioned disabled people in that regard. Ministers have clearly not been able to ensure that the opportunities that colleges offer are available for everyone in our society.

The minister mentioned the energy transition skills hub in Aberdeen's North East Scotland College. It is a great example of what we should be doing to plan for and invest in the jobs of the future. The problem is that the college will have no extra credits for that facility and will therefore have to look to reduce the number of courses that are taken by its student body—including courses in hairdressing, which was mentioned earlier—in order to provide that opportunity. Ministers need to understand and review the delivery of those credits in order to meet the needs of our economy and to ensure that those institutions have opportunities to deliver.

That is why Scottish Conservatives have made our proposals. I am a huge fan of school-college partnerships. We must look at where we can get our young people into training opportunities earlier—whether that is at age 14 or 15. When they have a spark, we must consider how to give them opportunities for their future.

We should have an apprenticeship plan and demand-led reform to meet the needs of businesses, to address the skills gap across many important sectors—almost every single sector in Edinburgh—and to support the jobs growth that we need in the east of Scotland.

It is time for a vision for our college and skills sectors, and I hope that the next Parliament and the next Government will realise the potential of our college and apprenticeship sectors. Those sectors want to deliver, and we need to give them the opportunities now to do that. I do not think that the Government's Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill will provide those opportunities, so I hope that all parties will send out a message from the Parliament that we need something bigger and better from the Government. We need to put our apprenticeships at the heart of our education system.

15:56

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): I will start by agreeing with Willie Rennie that it is great news that there is huge demand for workforce because of the opportunities in our economy. Often, Opposition debates go down a doom and gloom route about the state of our economy; it is great to see that completely reversed in this debate. One of the symptoms of growth is the need to recruit and ensure that we have the right skills.

I am grateful to Labour for bringing the debate to the chamber today. I am slightly confused, though—for Conservative Party Opposition debates, its back benchers at least turn up, but I think that fewer than half the Labour members are here this afternoon. I certainly think that this is an important issue to discuss.

I will go through some of the points that have been made. A number of people talked about employers and public sector colleges and schools that are doing an excellent job. I have certainly seen that myself. Just last week, when we launched the new workforce north scheme, which is a workforce plan for the Highlands and Islands to respond to the £100 billion of investment that is in the pipeline, we met a number of apprentices of different ages and from different backgrounds—some of them were career changers in their late 40s and some were straight out of school. That illustrates just how diverse apprenticeships are right now. This year's record of 110,380 vocational

and technical qualification awards demonstrates the growing recognition of those routes and their positive impact.

Willie Rennie: I am keen to return to miserableness. Could the cabinet secretary accept or address the point that I raised about the reduction in plumbing apprenticeships in Dundee as a result of low confidence in that sector? Does she think that we need to have a system that responds to the varying needs of different parts of the economy? There seems to be no flex for that.

Kate Forbes: I agree on the importance of plumbing apprenticeships. From speaking to a number of different employers, I know that even when there is a significant investment to be made—as I heard this morning—the challenge of securing tradesmen and women illustrates just how big the demand is and the need to ensure that there is that pipeline.

The issue of flexibility across the country is particularly close to my heart. The work that we have done in the Highlands and Islands with the workforce north scheme, for example, and the work that we are doing in the south of Scotland, which is tailored to specific opportunities, illustrates that there is already scope for flexibility in the system, and we should make the most of that.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): [*Made a request to intervene.*]

Kate Forbes: I have only five minutes and I am three minutes in.

Alex Rowley talked about the good work that is being done by employers. He mentioned the workshops in Methil—the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills was telling me how much she enjoyed her visit there. Claire Baker talked about the novel approach of the co-location of Levenmouth academy and Fife College. The Scottish Government funded more than half of that initiative, which illustrates our desire to support such co-location.

Jamie Hepburn and Fulton MacGregor talked about the strength of our education and skills system. We also heard about the work that is being done by one of my favourite colleges, Ayrshire College, which is right at the heart of our growth agenda, particularly regarding aerospace. I have had a lot of engagement with the college in recent months.

Daniel Johnson talked about the scale of in-work training. There are some useful statistics from the employer skills survey that show that, overall, 60 per cent of employees have received training in work. That figure illustrates the commitment from employers to support in-work training.

We also heard about opportunities for structural change. I heard what members said about not focusing so much on structural change that we lose the opportunity to make changes now. However, we have a time-critical opportunity to make structural changes to the education, skills, careers and employability system to ensure better alignment—that point comes through in Daniel Johnson's motion. We are also taking action right now to respond to need, including the provision of £2 million for engineering skills in the Glasgow city region area.

Finally, we heard from the Conservatives about the apprenticeship levy. That is all part of the Barnett formula grant, and how that comes through is not a decision that we can necessarily influence. However, I assure the Conservatives that we make a considerable investment in skills. I think that the Conservative figure is based on a freedom of information request to His Majesty's Revenue and Customs. We would certainly be open to working with the UK Government in the way that it worked with us from 2017 through to 2019-20, when it identified how much funding came through the apprenticeship levy. That was helpful for us, so we would certainly not argue against identifying the funding that comes through the apprenticeship levy.

16:02

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Because this is the first opportunity that I have had to do so, and because we are discussing skills, I congratulate the incredible skill that Scotland's men's football team showed last night in getting through to the world cup. I recognise the importance of that skill. [*Applause.*]

I am pleased to close the debate for Scottish Labour. We believe that education and skills are keys to unlocking potential. In their contributions, members across the chamber have highlighted how important the issue is.

Scottish Labour's approach to unlocking that potential is underpinned by three clear principles. First, skills reform should be industry led, with education providers and employers working in lockstep to harness expertise and get young people ready for the jobs of today and tomorrow.

Secondly, the system must be dynamic, adaptable and tailored to the needs and ambitions of pupils. Learners from the ages of 12 to 52 should have pathways available to them that give technical and vocational learning parity with academic pathways. That includes teaching Scottish industry standards in high schools, giving a clear pathway to jobs and offering a digital skills passport so that everyone can recognise skills consistently.

Thirdly, our skills system must be at the heart of expanding opportunities for young people. That means making it easier and faster to approve new apprenticeship frameworks, widening access to those frameworks and creating a clearing system—Bob Doris was right to draw comparisons with universities in that sense. I note that any such clearing system would have to be bespoke.

Apprenticeships are key to plugging our skills gaps, and we must broaden our thinking on how we can provide opportunities for learners to earn and learn. I agree with Claire Baker, Willie Rennie and others that we must do that with a focus on the whole economy. More school leavers than ever tell me that they want to work and train on the job and to secure their independence. We need to facilitate that. It is the Scottish Government's responsibility to look ahead to the challenges that our society will face in the future and do its best to prepare for them now, but it has failed to do so.

Daniel Johnson's opening remarks about AI and construction highlight just two critical sectors in which skills gaps are yawning. Sadly, Bob Doris and Fulton MacGregor pointing fingers elsewhere rather than at what their own Government is doing will not help us to address such gaps.

Willie Rennie: Skills are provided not just by colleges or through apprenticeships but by universities. The significance of artificial intelligence has not really been referenced in the debate. We must have a broader view of what the skills base is, especially as we move towards having greater demands for AI-related skills. I hope that the member agrees with that point.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Duncan-Glancy, I can give you time back for that intervention.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I agree whole-heartedly with Mr Rennie's point. Scotland's universities have an incredible contribution to make towards our skills base—indeed, they already do so. I am sure that, with support, they could make an even greater contribution.

The impact of the Government's approach has not just been seen in skills gaps in industry. It is letting down young people and workers across Scotland, who are missing opportunities that would quite literally change their lives. I must say gently to the minister that that is not erroneous—it is, indeed, a fact.

Young people and workers cannot wait for two, three or four years for another report, for another working group that goes nowhere or for outcomes that are aspired to but never achieved. As the Government stalls, young people are growing up without opportunities to gain skills that would serve them throughout their working lives and beyond, and people who are already in careers are failing to access the opportunities to upskill that they deserve to have.

The fact that nearly a quarter of a million young people are not in work—and that, significantly, many of them are from our areas of highest deprivation—shows that the Government is failing to mark out those paths clearly for all.

Carol Mochan: I know that we are running out of time, but I want to make a point about young people in more rural areas losing out. The lack of connectivity across Government portfolios such as transport is a real issue in my area. I wanted to put that point to the cabinet secretary and to express my hope that we could work together to resolve that for people.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Lack of coherence across policy areas is one of the reasons why Scotland has the problems and skills gaps that it does. There is no significant coherence across portfolios, including transport, education and the economy, and the Government must address that crucial matter.

As I said, the fact that nearly a quarter of a million young people are not in work, and that that trend is worse in our areas of highest deprivation, is representative of the Government's failure. That figure is not erroneous; I believe it to be a fact. It is also a scandal.

Young people's opportunities in life should not rely on who they know. When they need advice on how to achieve their dreams, the Government and the state should be there to support them. That is before we take into account the barriers to accessing apprenticeships that still exist for many young people. There are teacher recruitment issues in key subject areas that are needed for the economy; there is a persistent gender bias, which Lorna Slater mentioned; and the numbers of disabled people engaging in apprenticeships are not what they should be.

All that bias starts in people's early years. Of course, as many members have highlighted, demand often far outstrips supply. Angela Cox, the chair of Colleges Scotland's college principals group, told the Education, Children and Young People Committee that far more apprenticeships could be delivered in Ayrshire, but that they have had to turn hundreds of candidates away, especially in engineering.

Alex Rowley was spot on when he highlighted the crucial role that colleges play. However, instead of colleges being supported, campuses have closed and staff have lost their jobs, with staffing levels falling to their lowest level since devolution and 30,000 fewer students benefiting from the teaching that our colleges provide.

I am afraid that, as Brian Whittle said, we have been seeing the systematic dismantling of the college sector. The Government should break the habit of almost two decades and intervene. Not to do so would be a failure to accept reality; it would also show up the lack of coherence in the system. These vital institutions have been left without leadership from the Government. In that vacuum, colleges have stepped up and published their own cases for the sector. As North East Scotland College put it in committee,

"in the absence of direction, our college ... simply cracked on".—[*Official Report*, *Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 5 February 2025; c 11.]

That is not how a skills system should run. If the minister cannot even accept the facts, it is little wonder that the only response that we have to the skills gap is to rejig quangos.

While businesses are crying out for skilled staff, young people are being blocked from accessing opportunities by a system that does not work for them or for the economy, and people are failing to obtain opportunities to upskill. Scottish Labour has a plan to overhaul our broken skills system and to better link education with the world of work, so that young people and career changers across Scotland can fulfil their potential. In contrast, it is clear that the Government has no plan.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on Scotland's skills system. There will be a slight pause before we move to the next item of business to allow for a changeover of front-bench members.

Education

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-19754, in the name of Pam Duncan-Glancy, on education. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

16:10

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I apologise to members and, in particular to Bob Doris and Jamie Hepburn, for getting the two confused in my closing remarks in the previous debate.

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): Hear, hear!

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I am pleased to bring this debate to the chamber, which is motivated by my deep concern about the deteriorating learning and working environment in schools in Scotland. Education is a great leveller, when we get it right. It can open horizons, build skills and deliver opportunity. For many, it can be a route out of poverty and into good and fair work. Education changed my life, and it is incumbent on all of us here to ensure that we build and deliver an education system that gives every young person in Scotland the tools that they need to get everything that they want out of life.

Scotland's education system was once the envy of the world but, sadly, after nearly two decades of the Scottish National Party Government, that is no longer the case. It is not just me who worries about that. Satisfaction with our schools, especially among those who experience them first hand, is at an all-time low. When we look at the environment in schools, we can perhaps see why. Trade unions report that 44 per cent of teaching staff say that, in the past 18 months, they have experienced physical abuse or violence from pupils, and that 90 per cent have experienced verbal abuse. They have been sworn at, hit or punched, kicked, spat at and head-butted, and one teacher even had a firework thrown in their direction. Most worryingly, there is growing evidence that female staff suffer more frequent violence and abuse than their male colleagues, with nearly half of female teachers in Scotland saying that they experienced physical abuse or violence from pupils, compared with 36 per cent of males.

A report from School Leaders Scotland that was published in the summer found that school leaders have significant concerns about the rise in aggressive and abusive behaviour. One school leader commented:

> "The abusive and aggressive behaviour of a small but difficult core of young people, and the lack of available sanctions to use or support from the authority, makes the job seem not worthwhile at times."

At a GMB round table—I refer members to my entry in the register of interests in that regard—pupil support staff told me that violence in schools has become expected and seen as part of the job. One pupil support assistant shared that she even has an alarm that she charges every day and wears around her neck in case she is attacked.

Trade unions and others, including members, have long been calling for the Government to tackle the rising issue of violent and abusive behaviour. Workload is making things worse. Overworked staff and underresourced pupil support have left classrooms like pressure cookers. Forty-five per cent of respondents to an Association of Headteachers and Deputes in Scotland survey said that, if they could change one thing, it would be the support for pupils with additional support needs and distressed pupils. That is what I hear everywhere I go, including from parents who talk passionately about their worries on child and adult mental health services waiting times, which render help a pipe dream; a lack of speech and language therapists; and the lack of a pathway for neurodivergent young people to get the support that they desperately need.

Those are just some examples of the systemic issues that must be addressed if the Government's late advice on consequences and risk is to be truly helpful. The Educational Institute of Scotland is balloting its members, because this has gone on too long. The SNP Government promised action on non-contact time in its manifesto. With six months until the next election, that looks set to become another broken promise. The Government has also sat on—not acted on—a report that is now 10 years old that sets out ways to address workload pressures, yet we have teachers reporting working at least a day a week above their contracted hours. The Government has broken its promise on having 3,500 more teachers, and 15, 16 and 17-year-olds across the country are denied chances to study some subjects as a result.

It is not only that evidence and report that the Government has ignored. The Hayward and Morgan reports, as well as screeds of advice from experts such as Enlighten on the need for knowledge in the curriculum, and from others on the importance of teaching synthetic phonics, all sit on the cabinet secretary's shelf.

We have some of the most dedicated teachers and school staff, the most determined pupils and the strongest and most ambitious parents in the world, but the SNP Government's failure to listen to experts, act on advice and act fast to prioritise young people has left the attainment gap stubbornly wide, teachers struggling with unmanageable workloads, parents at the end of their tether and, ultimately, nearly a quarter of a million young people not in employment. I am afraid that its incompetence and distractions have allowed schools to deteriorate and denied young people the opportunities that they deserve.

Scotland's young people have enormous potential. Together, our job is to ensure that every child leaves education confident, resilient and equipped with the knowledge and skills that they need to thrive in work and in life. I ask the Government to reflect, change course, use this moment and reset. It should focus on retraining, support and working with staff; gather data on which teachers are needed, where and when; make pupil equity funding permanent; provide security in planning and address staff workload urgently; take action to make reporting and recording poor behaviour mandatory and consistent, to help improve the working environment and retain staff; rebuild the scaffolding around young people so that they get the support that they need from cradle all the way to career, so that they can get the best out of education and so that opportunity is spread at every age and stage; make classes phone free and make learning the priority; reform initial teacher education so that it meets the needs of the moment and aligns placements to a comprehensive workforce plan, which the Parliament voted for more than a year and a half ago but which we have yet to see from the Government; create a national register of supply teachers so that teachers can move to where they are needed and get jobs when they want them; and use technology and digitisation to reduce workload.

Many great ideas are proffered not only from these benches but from screeds of reports and experts across the system—from parents, pupils, teachers and staff—in Scotland. The Government must listen to them.

Things have deteriorated on this Government's watch, and this is not as good as it gets. We can have a system that delivers high and rising standards, the right support at the right time for every child and staff member and that unlocks opportunity for all—that is the future. That is what is at stake and what Scotland can have if it changes direction. After nearly two decades, it is clear that this Government cannot or will not do that, but a Scottish Labour Government will do that if we are elected in May.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises that pupils and staff are being failed by the deteriorating learning and working

environment in Scottish schools, overseen by the Scottish National Party administration.

16:17

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): Doom and gloom have haunted the Scotland national men's football team since we last qualified for the world cup in 1998, but last night they gave us all—a nation gripped with the possibility of what might be—a reason to believe again. Daring to dream, the Scotland men's team have given the country more than a bit of hope today.

However, I am afraid that no such hope is invested in the Labour Party's motion this afternoon. In fact, the motion might as well have quoted the words of the brilliant John McGinn, who, on leaving the pitch last night, declared:

"I thought we were pretty rubbish, to be honest."

Labour's motion has no ideas on how to improve our schools and, although I accept that there are challenges, I do not recognise the bleak picture of Scotland's schools that has been painted for us today. There is a huge amount to celebrate.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Did the cabinet secretary not hear the final minute—or minute and a half—of my speech, in which I outlined exactly what she and the Scottish Government could do to inject hope and opportunity into Scotland's education system?

Jenny Gilruth: I direct the member to her motion, which mentions nothing positive about Scotland's education system. However, there is a huge amount to be positive about in our education system.

Yesterday, I attended the Learning Places Scotland conference at the Scottish Event Campus, and it might interest Labour MSPs to know that officials from the United Kingdom Government's Department for Education were present. They wanted to learn more about how this Government has transformed the learning environments in Scotland's schools. Thanks to direct investment from this Government, the proportion of schools in Scotland that are in good or satisfactory condition has improved from roughly 62 per cent in 2007, when Labour was last in power in Scotland, to more than 92 per cent today. The learning environment in Scotland's schools, which is derided in Labour's motion, has been transformed under the SNP Government. Even if Scottish Labour cannot appear to accept that in its motion today, I very much welcome that civil servants working for Labour ministers in London can do so.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I appreciate the cabinet secretary being so generous and giving way again. Can she reflect on the fact that, for hundreds of schools across the country, the school condition survey has not been carried out for more than five years, so the data that she is referring to has not been updated?

Jenny Gilruth: I do not accept the point that the member makes. She has asked me several written questions on it; some of them pertain to private finance initiative schools, which were a feature of Labour's time in office and which mean that this Government is having to repay millions of pounds of taxpayers' money for those school buildings. I have less in my education budget because of actions that were taken by Ms Duncan-Glancy's colleagues in a previous Parliament.

However, there is a lot to be positive about in Scottish education, so let us look at some of the positives. Last week, I was pleased to secure agreement from the teaching unions to a 7.5 per cent pay increase over two years. That pay deal means that Scotland's teachers remain the best-paid teachers on these islands and ensures that our teachers get that pay increase in time for Christmas, which I know is welcome news. The agreement means that our classroom teachers will now earn up to £54,000, and those on the rung below depute heads will earn up to £74,205 from April—roughly £300 less than an MSP's salary.

Securing that two-year pay deal has been important in providing the impetus for securing progress on reducing class contact. As we have heard today, greater standardisation in education will also provide for more consistency for pupils. In relation to workload, we know that there is a need to standardise what is being asked of our teachers. Data should be about driving improvement and supporting quality learning and teaching. It is not fair that, for example, reporting requirements differ by local authority; expectations of our staff should be consistent. The Government will begin discussions with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on the standardisation of data collection to support the reduction of teacher workload.

That work is being supplemented by two CivTech challenges. One of those was launched back in summer 2024 and is building a tool that seeks to use artificial intelligence to streamline admin and planning in relation to ASN. This summer, we announced a further challenge, which is about identifying opportunities to use AI to support a reduction in teacher workload.

Teacher workload cannot be reduced without a role for pupil support assistants. I confirm my support for a national model of accreditation for pupil support assistants. I will be taking that forward with COSLA as a matter of priority.

Today's motion also makes no mention of poverty. We should be mindful that, last month, the NASUWT's survey of teachers told us their views on austerity: teachers said that the two-child cap means that kids from larger families are not able to be supported. I hope that Labour members will be impressing those points on their colleagues in London to ensure that the two-child cap is lifted across the United Kingdom, to lift those children and young people out of poverty so that they can attain their educational potential.

This year's education and skills budget provides a record £4.3 billion for Scottish education. It is imperative that that funding, which is protected at a national level, gets to Scots in the classrooms where it is needed. That is why I have appointed former headteacher John Wilson to provide the Government with an independent report on reforming school governance and funding. It is essential that that funding makes its way into our classrooms where it is needed most.

I look forward to the remainder of the debate and to listening again to the positives of Scotland's education system.

I move amendment S6M-19754.2, to leave out from "that pupils" to end and insert:

"the challenges in Scotland's schools post-COVID-19 pandemic, particularly with attendance and an increase in additional support needs (ASN); welcomes the additional funding agreed to in the Budget for 2025-26 to support outcomes for children with ASN, and to support and enhance the ASN workforce; acknowledges the key role that staff and teachers play to support children to succeed; welcomes the agreement last week, which ensures that Scotland's teachers remain the highest paid in the UK, with an uplift of 7.5% over two years; remains committed to undertaking further work to reduce teacher workload, which sits alongside the commitment to reduce class contact time, and agrees to recognise and celebrate the successes of Scotland's young people."

16:22

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I start on a positive note by thanking the Labour Party for sponsoring a debate on education. It is important that we have those; in January, the Scottish Conservatives sponsored a similar debate about our school environments. I would return to the subject every week, because parents, pupils and teachers are telling us that the problems that are still happening in our schools must be addressed. I do not see that as a negative thing—I see it as what people are looking for the Parliament to do something about.

In March, we secured a debate about ending violence in our schools. Maybe when the cabinet secretary is giving her closing speech, she can touch on some of this. We have seen a movement from the Scottish Government in the past year to recognise that we have a problem in our classrooms and that violence in our classrooms is something that we cannot just hope is not happening.

The number of teachers has decreased by almost 1,700 over the time that this Government has been in power. I think that that is because of the school environment. The number of post-probation teachers who find full-time employment has decreased and there has been a huge increase in the number of days that have been lost because of teachers in our school workplaces having poor mental health. More than 30 per cent of pupils are missing more than 10 per cent of their school learning because of that. Scotland's classrooms are now the most violent in the UK: between March 2014 and 2024, there were 490 reports of serious injuries to school staff in Scotland caused by violence. Adjusted for population, that rate is higher than the rate in England and Wales.

So, we have a problem, and we need to ensure that, rather than burying our heads in the sand, we look for solutions. I hope that the cabinet secretary will listen to those of us who have raised the issue.

In the debates that we led on the subject, we asked for a clear national policy on consequences. The cabinet secretary said that such a policy would be provided in the guidance. We must have a situation in which pupils are required to take responsibility for their actions; in which any violence in our schools is not tolerated; and in which the option of exclusion is available for teachers to take as a last resort, if they need to, with the support of this Parliament and the cabinet secretary. Ministers have acknowledged that the rise in violence and abuse in our schools must be addressed.

On Friday, along with the cabinet secretary, I attended the School Leaders Scotland conference. I was struck by the conversations that I had with teachers about the fact that technology and bullying are at the heart of their concerns. Although the First Minister has told us that work is being done on the issue, school leaders want the Government to provide leadership on what they should be doing. A ban on social media—

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Did Miles Briggs take away from that conference the message that I took away from it—he has hinted that he did—which is that, without 100 per cent support from the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament, school leaders will not be able to enforce such a ban?

Miles Briggs: I did. That is why I wanted to touch on the issue, on which our school leaders are asking for support. We must ensure that the Parliament and the Government hear that message, because if they do not, the issue will be

the subject of the next crisis that we debate. I was shocked by some of the conversations that I had about the bullying that young people are experiencing. I hope that the Government will realise that there is a need for more debate on the issue.

I am running out of time, so I will conclude. It is clear that the fact that violence is out of control in many of our classrooms needs to be addressed. The Scottish Government must ensure that teachers have 100 per cent support in tackling the issue. Scottish Conservatives would work to bring back common sense in dealing effectively with disruptive pupils by empowering our teachers and rolling out the mobile phone ban that is making such a positive difference in some of our classrooms.

I move amendment S6M-19754.1, to insert at end:

"; notes with deep concern the decline in standards and increasing pupil violence, which are intensifying pressures on teachers and support staff; believes that these trends reflect years of underinvestment and a failure to provide the support and resources needed to maintain safe and effective learning environments, and calls on the Scottish Government to deliver urgent action to raise attainment, improve discipline in classrooms and support teachers to deliver the high-quality education that every young person in Scotland deserves."

16:27

Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): I am glad that the Labour Party has given us the opportunity to debate the situation in Scotland's schools, although, frankly, I am depressed and disappointed by its motion. Teachers, support staff and their students all face huge challenges, and Labour had an opportunity to lay out potential solutions to those challenges in its motion. However, the motion does not do that—it represents a wasted opportunity.

The Scottish Greens recognise the challenges in our classrooms, and we have solutions to those challenges. I will start with the issue of teacher workload. Although teaching is a very well-paid profession, there are huge recruitment and retention challenges in the secondary sector. The most common reason that is cited by teachers who are considering leaving the profession is the crushing workload. Much of that workload does not even improve the quality of teaching and learning. It is bureaucratic and entirely unnecessary. A vast system of data collection has been established by national and local government, with the burden falling on overworked classroom teachers.

Let us take the example of standardised tests. The Scottish Greens oppose Scottish national standardised assessments entirely. We believe that they are rooted in a mistrust of teachers, and that the anxiety that they generate is simply not worth the limited data that is collected. In session 5, Parliament voted to scrap them in primary 1 entirely, but the Scottish Government ignored that and went on with them. They cost at least £5 million per year, which is hard to justify when education budgets are so squeezed.

Even if we accept the premise of SNSAs, the mission creep around them has created significant extra workload for teachers. Schools and councils have added their own reporting requirements on top of the core system. Teachers spend more and more of their week generating reports to feed the system, rather than focusing on the quality of their teaching and the needs of their pupils. SNSAs are just one example of the huge variety of data collection demands that are placed on teachers across the country. That is one area in which reform could be delivered quickly and save rather than cost money.

Green MSPs submitted a report to the cabinet secretary two years ago. Based on focus groups with teachers and headteachers from across the country, it laid out examples of unnecessary and inconsistent data collection. We strongly urge the Scottish Government to use that report as the starting point of a discussion with COSLA about how to reduce and standardise data collection in our schools.

Our report also highlighted how the RAG—red, amber, green—system creates an incentive for schools to focus on the amber students, where most of the measurable improvement gains are to be had, effectively acting as a disincentive to support pupils who are struggling and flagged as red. A system that revolves around blunt metrics is one that no longer sees our young people as individuals. That is the opposite of what the curriculum for excellence was supposed to have delivered.

We would also like the 2015 report on tackling bureaucracy to be dusted down and implemented. Many of those issues are not new; we did not need to reinvent the wheel to tackle them. However, we need to trust teachers. That level of trust requires safeguards—not more form filling and reporting but giving teachers the time and space for proper peer review and support.

There are huge strengths in our education system. We should not create a doom loop of political and media commentary. Raising the challenges and putting pressure on both levels of government to solve them is essential. That requires solutions. Our school staff and students deserve nothing less.

16:31

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Teachers and staff do some really good things in schools. They achieve an awful lot and transform young people's lives, and we should recognise that. However, I sometimes think that the Government is a hindrance rather than a help in that regard. We have massive challenges in our schools with behaviour, additional support needs and absence, which are all interconnected.

Moreover, many teachers leave the profession because they have just had enough—they are fed up with the regular attacks and the challenges of coping with the fact that 40 or 50 per cent of their classes, sometimes more, have additional support needs without the appropriate support to help them.

There is, of course, the long-vaunted closing of the poverty-related attainment gap, which has basically not changed since Nicola Sturgeon promised to close it about 10 years ago. In addition, international performance data triggered a serious debate about the performance of Scottish education.

The Government has lost its way. It spends most of its time repairing the damage that it caused in the first place, rejects the reviews that it commissioned and is failing to deliver on its own promises. Let us consider teacher contact time. It was a big promise, which the Government was supposed to have delivered by now. Although the last SNP manifesto promised that it would be 90 minutes a day, we know that it is 90 minutes a week. Teachers are furious, so much so that they are talking about going on strike at the start of next year. We should have delivered that promise by now, but the SNP has failed to do so and is typically blaming somebody else for that failure.

Then there is the poverty-related attainment gap. Although the cabinet secretary has not mentioned it, within a few months we are supposed to have closed the gap. The reality is that, although we are supposed to have made that progress, the gap has flatlined over the past few years, particularly in secondary school. It is worth reminding people—I know that it is boring—that the then First Minister said that we would judge her on education. However, she is nowhere to be seen now and the cabinet secretary does not even talk about that promise any more.

The education secretary has scrapped the regional collaboratives that the now First Minister introduced. However, you will notice that she continues to refer repeatedly to the fact that local authorities—32 of them—run the Scottish education system, with a hint that she wants to centralise education. If that is what she wants, she should come out and say it rather than just hint at it. If that is her policy, let us have that discussion. I do not think that Scotland wants to get into another debate about structures, just as we have done in the debate about skills. We should focus on the challenges that we face rather than have diversionary debates about structures.

On additional support needs, the cabinet secretary celebrates recruiting more ASN teachers, but it was this Government that cut the number of teachers in the first place, so it is not something that we should celebrate.

Finally, there was the Hayward review. That was commissioned by the Government and spent months—years—debating the issue and gathering the support of many people across the education world. However, as soon as the education secretary got a hold of it, she in effect rejected it.

The Government has no real vision. I do not really understand what it is trying to achieve. I would love it to focus, for instance, on parity of esteem between vocational and academic education, which would make a transformational difference to many young people who get lost at school because school does not fit their needs. I would love a proper programme of consequences and boundaries to empower teachers to manage their classrooms. I would love best practice on dealing with additional support needs to be shared across the country, so that young people with those needs get chances just like everyone else.

However, the Government is just lost. It does not seem to know what it wants to do with education. I just wish that that would change.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate, with speeches of up to four minutes from back benchers.

16:35

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I rise to raise in particular issues of spatial planning in schools. Glasgow is facing some significant challenges in that area. After many years of population decline, the city's population has increased by around 7 per cent in the past decade, and the increase in school rolls is projected to continue. Glasgow's secondary pupil school roll is forecast to grow by 18 per cent over the next decade, and the primary school pupil roll is predicted to grow by 4 per cent in the next two years.

The issue has been particularly acute in neighbourhoods in which there has been a high level of new-build development, such as Robroyston in the north of the city. I have recently undertaken a significant amount of work in that community, with the community council and parents. A statistically significant number of parents and people who are planning to have

children have told me that they are simply unable to access either secondary or primary school provision in the area.

The nearest non-denominational secondary school is Smithycroft, but Robroyston is right on the limit of that school's catchment area and children have to walk for an hour to get there, including through an unlit graveyard. That is quite an unsafe route. It is not at all well provisioned. That school is reaching capacity. The city's proposed strategy for the expansion of school capacity is not to build a new school, which is probably fair enough given the logistical aspects of running a school—the duplication of overheads in resourcing, and so on—but simply to construct modular accommodation. That has already happened in a number of schools across the city in recent years, and it is simply not optimal. Building glorified portakabins to accommodate expanding school rolls at secondary level is simply not acceptable.

I am keen to hear the cabinet secretary's views on how Glasgow City Council in particular is managing school expansion. There are 30 secondary schools in Glasgow, 29 of which are operated under public-private partnership model arrangements that will come to a conclusion in 2030. However, even under the PPP scheme, there has been proper expansion, such as the Bellarmine extension to St Paul's on the south side, which opened in 2023.

I would like the cabinet secretary to engage more directly with Glasgow City Council to understand its estates management programme and to challenge the conclusion that modular buildings are the solution. The situation is upsetting to parents and it is not good for the city's spatial planning in areas such as Robroyston, which are at the limits of existing catchment areas. Parents feel that their children are put under a lot of pressure to travel long distances to access schooling, including in inclement weather, and some are unable to access schools at all. The area is on the boundary with East Dunbartonshire. There was previously an arrangement with East Dunbartonshire Council—and, before that, Strathclyde Regional Council—whereby placing requests were much easier to facilitate. However, that has been less the case in recent years, as the planned capacity of the schools has been reduced.

There are a number of issues pertaining to the north of Glasgow, particularly in relation to secondary school capacity, but also for the primary estate. Modular buildings are being used at Wallacewell primary school to sustain capacity, and with Smithycroft now reaching capacity, the planned solution is to build modular buildings there. I really do not think that that is acceptable.

I have examined the modelling for school capacity planning in Glasgow. Although it looks good on the surface, the projections do not seem to tally with the lived experience of people in the communities. I am keen for the cabinet secretary to engage with Glasgow City Council on the issue and to explore options with East Dunbartonshire Council. With the rebuild proposal for Lenzie academy, could there be options to share capacity with new-build estates in the north of the city?

I have written to the cabinet secretary about that. I am still awaiting a formal response from her, but I am keen for her to meet me and representatives of the community to discuss the matter in more detail and consider how, with Glasgow's new director of education, when they are appointed, we can plan ahead in a more robust and resilient way. Although the modelling looks good, it does not tally with the lived experience of people in Robroyston.

16:40

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): I thank Sarah Boyack, who is sitting down the front, for lodging the motion. Never mind that Bob Doris was not even in the room! I say to Pam Duncan-Glancy that I am sorry about that joke.

As a member of the Education, Children and Young People Committee, I have found it to be a pleasure to work together with colleagues from across the chamber on a wide variety of issues concerning Scotland's education landscape. I have genuinely enjoyed my time serving on the committee. The dedication that is shown by colleagues from every party on the committee reminds me every week that, whatever our political colours, we are here for the same purpose—to improve education in Scotland and to give every young person the chance to develop and thrive.

In that vein, it is important that we ground the debate in the real challenges that our schools face—not in slogans or point scoring, but in facts. The Scottish Government's amendment highlights the challenges that we have faced post-Covid. The reality is that schools have struggled with reduced attendance, greater variation in pupil engagement and a significant rise in the number of pupils with additional support needs. That is why I welcome the additional funding to improve outcomes for children with ASN and to strengthen and expand the ASN workforce. Let us be clear that those steps will directly impact the classroom experience by ensuring that children who need the most support receive it and that the staff who deliver that support are properly equipped.

I welcome the recent agreement that ensures that Scotland's teachers remain the highest paid in the UK, as the cabinet secretary mentioned, with a

7.5 per cent uplift over two years. I also welcome the commitment to undertake further work to reduce teacher workload, alongside the commitment to reduce class contact time.

Crucially, we must celebrate the successes of Scotland's young people. Their achievements in classrooms and communities, including in the arts, sciences and sports, deserve recognition in the chamber and beyond.

I turn to the motion. There are challenges and we have work to do. To tackle those issues, we need to work together. Rather than attack, we should support the work that is being done. To say that pupils and staff are being failed is disingenuous and disrespectful to all those who work hard to improve our education system. I find it disrespectful when colleagues refer to the Scottish Government as the Scottish National Party Administration. I would hope for better from colleagues whom I have always respected. I frequently disagree with the actions of the UK Government, but I still refer to it as the UK Government out of basic respect for the institution. I would have hoped that we might hold ourselves to the same standard in Scotland.

Pupils and staff deserve a debate that lifts them up and not a motion that uses them as a weapon. They deserve co-operation and not division. Despite the wording of the motion, I remain, as always, ready to work with colleagues from all parties for the benefit of children and young people across Scotland.

16:43

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I thank the Presiding Officer and all colleagues for the support that they have shown to me during my recent period of leave. Being a dad is the best job in the world, and I join the ranks of those across the chamber who are perpetually caffeinated, who spend moments in morning meetings removing Ready Brek from their clothing and who often find themselves humming the theme tune to "Hey Duggee" while walking the corridors.

Perhaps it is fitting that my first contribution on my return is on the subject of education, because few issues that we debate in the chamber are as important as the learning experiences and life chances of our children and young people.

Current experiences in classrooms across Scotland have been recounted in some detail in the debate. Violence and disruption are on the rise, attendance is falling dramatically, there are cuts to the additional support that is needed for our children and young people, and teachers are feeling undervalued and burned out. The evidence is stark from trade unions, individual teachers, school leaders and young people, who often capture that reality with their mobile phones. It is not only the Labour Party, Opposition MSPs or the media who are saying that—it is a reality in our schools and communities.

The cabinet secretary cannot continue to bury her head in the sand. Back in May, when I asked the First Minister about violent attacks in Renfrewshire that were uploaded to social media, I was assured that there would be meaningful action rather than more talking shops. He told me that the Government had listened and was taking a number of measures. The EIS said of the Government plans:

> "Whilst there are elements of the plan which are helpful, the EIS has been clear that the action plan must be backed up by sufficient resources to deliver meaningful change to ensure that Scottish schools are to be safe places to learn and to work."

The NASUWT found that, in 2025, a shocking 62 per cent of teachers were not aware that the national action plan on relationships and behaviour was being taken forward.

It seems that the view of the First Minister and the cabinet secretary is that that is all somebody else's issue. We heard some of that rehearsed in the helpful contribution from Willie Rennie. If it is not councils, it is teachers themselves, who, according to this Government and its amendment to the motion, should be happy with their lot and stop complaining. Indeed, I think that there was an air of "You've never had it so good" from the cabinet secretary and ministers.

I am constantly inspired by our teachers. I come from a family that has teachers in its ranks. Teachers inspire and shape our young people, often in extremely difficult circumstances, but they are being let down by a lack of leadership. Leadership can be at the heart of many of those challenges. When I was on East Renfrewshire Council, I was the education convener, and I had the privilege of appointing headteachers to many of our schools. In doing so, I learned very quickly that leadership can make all the difference in a school community, but there are now significant challenges in recruiting headteachers. People do not want to enter that promoted post because of the challenges therein. There is a clear struggle, because leadership comes from the top.

It was interesting to hear the cabinet secretary refer to the Scotland football team and Steve Clarke. It is clear that he leads from the front, but I am not sure that the Government's leadership can be compared to the bold vision and energy of Steve Clarke. I thought that that was a bold comment at the beginning of the debate.

I am sure that people across Scotland who are watching the debate will be asking what it will take for the Government to take its fingers out of its

ears and listen to teachers who are walking away from the profession that they love. What will it take for the Government to listen to young people and parents who are worried about what goes on in our schools? If I was to have a restorative conversation with the cabinet secretary, I would say to her gently that it is clear that we need a new direction and that that is the only way to solve the current crisis in our schools.

16:48

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank Labour for bringing the debate to the chamber on an afternoon that has focused on education and skills.

I say at the outset that the issues in our education system in no way reflect the hard work and dedication that is provided by teachers and support staff across the country. However, why do we find ourselves in a position where Scotland's classrooms are the most violent in the UK, more than a third of our teachers have been attacked with a weapon, more than 64,000 school bullying incidents have been reported by 25 local authorities, and in a survey by NASUWT in March, 83 per cent of its members in Scotland said that the number of violent and abusive pupils had increased in the past 12 months? Why are we in a position where we are the worst in the UK?

If we do not look at those issues objectively and without prejudice, we cannot change the outcomes for teachers, children and young people across Scotland. I would like to highlight how I think some of those issues could be addressed.

A developing mind has an essential need for boundaries. According to child development experts such as Dr Ross Greene, author of "The Explosive Child", and Dr Dan Siegel, co-author of "The Whole-Brain Child", children who grow up with clear and consistent rules tend to have better self-control, stronger decision-making skills and healthier relationships.

Without boundaries, children can struggle with self-regulation, develop anxiety and find it difficult to respect others' limits. I believe that boundaries and an understanding of consequences are essential, and issues in that regard are a contributory factor to the reason why Scotland has a greater proportion of violence than the other three of the four UK nations.

That opinion is not mine alone—there are increasing doubts among unions and experts about the Scottish education policy of restorative approaches to behaviour management. Mike Corbett of the NASUWT in Scotland has stated:

"The wholesale adoption of the restorative approach to pupil discipline has definitely been a problem",

and said that

"You can't offer a quiet chat and no serious consequences for this level of disruptive behaviour."

Although a structured conversation between staff and pupils to address incidents of poor behaviour is certainly an option, it has to be backed up with robust consequences that are completely accepted and understood.

Martin Whitfield: We are talking about restorative practice. Is it not right to say that that approach works only once a person has developed the skills of empathy and of understanding the consequences of their own actions?

Roz McCall: Yes—I could not agree more with that, at a certain level. However, the consequences have to be accepted not only by the pupil but by the parents, the teachers and the local authority alike. I urge the Scottish Government to re-address its approach in that regard.

Another issue that is having a detrimental effect on behaviour in our classrooms is the rise in additional support needs in a classroom setting. There is much evidence coming forward as to the detriment to our young people as a result of things such as the extended lockdowns through the pandemic and the harmful side effects of smartphone apps. It is essential that we accept the current position and provide ASN staff accordingly.

As I have previously mentioned in the chamber, the number of pupils with additional support needs has increased significantly. In 2024, there were 284,448 pupils in Scotland's schools with additional support needs, which represents a record high of 40.5 per cent of the total pupil population. Conversely, the number of ASN teachers has decreased, to a record low of 2,837. In 2010, one ASN teacher was supporting 20 pupils, but by 2024, the same teacher was supporting more than 100 pupils. Without proper investment in ASN support staff, the difficulties in our classrooms will continue to rise.

In conclusion, we can make the policy changes that will actively change the outcomes for Scotland's children, but only if we have a Government that is willing to do it.

16:52

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): The cabinet secretary opened her speech by talking about Scotland's men's football team and the hope that they have given us all with the great result that they had last night. In celebrating the result, I have to remind members that all roads to the United States lead to Paisley—or rather, go through Paisley, whether it is going to Paisley international

airport or the fact that Steve Clarke, John McGinn, Kenny McLean and Lawrence Shankland all played for the mighty St Mirren in Paisley. As always, there is a Paisley connection.

Three of those players were youth players. Currently, St Mirren—along with the University of the West of Scotland, which is connected to the debate—has a programme to ensure that players who do not make it to the top grade in football get the opportunity to do something else and look at another career.

The cabinet secretary was right to bring up the importance of hope. We all know the story of Pandora's box, which was not actually a box—it was just a sealed container. Pandora opened it and released all the troubles of the world, and only hope remained inside the box. That tells us that things can be better and that, in difficult times, we can make things a lot better. However, I get the impression from listening to Labour Party members that if they ever had what was left of Pandora's box, they would just toss the jar.

I turn to the reality in my constituency. On Friday, I was at a flexible learning resource for senior-phase pupils with additional support needs at a school in Foxbar in Paisley. I was meant to be there for only a short time, but I ended up spending about an hour and a half or two hours there—with my office manager going backwards and forwards regularly to try to get me out—because it was so interesting to listen to those young people who are in that resource to learn. They probably knew more about politics than a lot of the members in the chamber today.

As always, I will talk about my personal circumstances. My granddaughter Daisy was diagnosed with autism. In the past year, she has been put into a class along with other neurodivergent young boys and girls, and she has moved forward.

In saying that, I recognise, as I always must, the real challenges that teachers and school staff are dealing with every day, whether that is the rising number of children with additional support needs, the lingering effects of the pandemic, or the pressures that come from supporting families through a cost of living crisis that is not of Scotland's making. Our teachers are carrying a huge weight and I put on record my gratitude to them all. Their commitment, compassion and professionalism are the backbone of Scotland's education system.

However, acknowledging challenge is not the same as accepting the bleak and, frankly, uninspiring picture that is painted by Labour's motion. Scotland's teachers and young people deserve better than a narrative that overlooks progress, ignores success and, at times, seems more focused on political point scoring than solutions. The truth, which is backed by evidence from across Scotland, is that the Government is delivering improvements and is investing heavily in working side by side with teachers to build a better education system. Look at the facts: attainment is rising, pass rates for national 5, higher and advanced higher are up in comparison with not only last year but pre-pandemic levels. Literacy and numeracy attainment in our primary and secondary schools are also at a record high. If that is failure, I would hate to see what success looks like to Opposition parties.

Record numbers of young people—more than 110,000—are achieving vocational and technical qualifications. That is proof that the Scottish Government's commitment to create multiple pathways is working. Our teachers are working hard and our young people are achieving more than ever. The Government is investing more, delivering more and supporting more than any other Administration in the United Kingdom.

For the debate to be valid and constructive, we must accept the current successes in education and see how we can take them to the next level. Only then can we really say that we are looking to build a better educational landscape for our young people.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches.

16:57

Lorna Slater: In my opening speech, I talked about the crushing workload challenges that teachers face as a result of the expansive and unnecessary bureaucracy that is built around our curriculum. The other major challenge that we hear about more than any other from teachers and school staff is the lack of support for children with additional needs. Much like workload and bureaucracy, that challenge is not new, but the situation has gotten much worse recently. The grim reality is that many children with additional support needs must catastrophically fail before the support that they need is put into place. Trauma has become a prerequisite of support, when it could be avoided entirely.

There is a range of reasons for that, one of which is that the underpinning legislation is simply out of date and is no longer fit for purpose. The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 set out rigid criteria for a co-ordinated support plan, which is the only kind of plan for children with additional support needs that has statutory underpinning. That makes it the only plan that gives a child and their parents or carers the option of going to a tribunal for redress if their needs are not met. In hindsight, the criteria for a

CSP should never have been included in the bill; they should have been set out in regulations, which would have made it much easier for them to evolve in response to changes in our schools and society at large. For example, we have massively expanded access to mental health counsellors in schools, which is an area of progress that we should all be proud of. However, because those councillors are located in schools, they do not count as a separate source of support. The 2004 act requires there to have been support from at least two sources for at least 12 months in order for a child to qualify for a co-ordinated support plan. The step forward in access to mental health support has perversely led to a step backward in access to CSPs for some young people.

However, that is far from the whole story. It certainly does not explain why only one in every 150 children who has a recognised additional support need have a CSP. Not every child who has additional needs requires a CSP, but thousands more do, and they are not able to get one. The 2004 act needs to be updated, which must include revising the criteria for a CSP, as well as creating a power for those plans to be updated by regulation in future. The Greens were disappointed when the Scottish Government announced that it would drop the proposed learning disabilities, autism and neurodivergence bill in this session of the Parliament, as that would have been our opportunity to at least fix that aspect of the 2004 act.

I hope that the next Government makes the time for an LDAN bill and for a full revision of the 2004 act, either as part of that bill or through a stand-alone piece of legislation. Changing legislation alone will not solve the huge challenges that are faced by young people with additional needs and those trying to support them, but it is an essential part of the process.

The other area for improvement is staffing. Children with complex needs are often supported and cared for by staff who have no specific training in that area at all. That is why the Scottish Greens have been working with the Scottish Government on proposals for a qualification and registration system for ASN assistants.

There are solutions to the problems that our schools face. This Parliament should be far more focused on those solutions than is often the case in these debates, but I am glad that we have at least had the opportunity to discuss those issues. They could not be more important to the people we represent—individuals, families and communities—and to our society as a whole.

17:00

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): In my teacher training course, the only thing that really mattered was how I could get on in front of a class. Forget all the theory, the coloured pencils, the size of the lines on the paper and what I wrote on the blackboard—that shows how long ago it was—what mattered most was how I got on with young people and, crucially, whether I could build trust between me and my pupils. That trust was partly dependent on the innate chemistry in the room but also on the environment in which the teaching and learning would take place.

I do not just mean the physical state of the building, although that is important, but the atmosphere in the classroom and whether it was based on calm self-discipline, with the expectations of high standards being well understood and adhered to, and with pupils and teachers recognising that certain structures and routines are beneficial to good-quality education.

We need a school system that works and a curriculum that inspires and is complemented by an exam system that not only aspires to the highest possible standards but is diverse and responsive to the needs of different pupils. We need a system that rewards hard work, that stands for no nonsense from disruptive pupils or, as can happen on occasion, disruptive parents, that does not pander to pupils and parents, that allows headteachers to have autonomy, and that values extracurricular activity because of what it adds to the educational experience in terms of building resilience, self-esteem and confidence.

As has been rehearsed this afternoon by several speakers, in too many cases, despite all the good things that are happening in Scottish education, we have seen a breakdown in classroom discipline, in relation to which many factors are at play. That is true in society as well as in schools, but that does not excuse it; indeed, it makes it even more important that we address the issues.

What do I want to see? First, I want to see far more autonomy for our headteachers. One example of where I think that a change could be made in that regard concerns a local authority that tells all its schools that, on their five in-service days, they must all do the same topic, irrespective of whether that topic is relevant to that particular school. That cannot be right.

We need a far more rigorous approach to the three Rs, because business and industry still moan about far too many young recruits not having a grasp of the very basic skills. No one should underestimate the frustration that young people feel if they cannot read, write and count

properly, which leads to poor behaviour and a lack of motivation.

As I have said many times before in the chamber, we need to reform the middle years of secondary education so that our model is much more like the European one that values parity of esteem and develops meaningful apprenticeships at a much younger age.

We need to address the problem of the disengaged. Longer-serving members in this Parliament will recall the Newlands Junior College initiative in Glasgow, which produced excellent results when it came to motivating our most disengaged pupils. How sad it was that that could not continue because of a political agenda.

Lastly—this is probably a bit controversial, but I will say it—I am strongly of the view that we are far too inclined to make pupils believe that they cannot do things rather than that they can do things. We tend to make them think that they have a problem when they do not. That is where extracurricular activity comes in—members will not be surprised to hear me say that that includes residential outdoor education. Every young person has it within themselves to be good at something, and we should all ensure that they have the opportunity to develop their skills.

I support Pam Duncan-Glancy's motion and Miles Briggs's amendment.

17:04

Jenny Gilruth: I welcome the MSPs and parties who have come forward with solutions during the debate. We have just been hearing from Liz Smith, a fellow former teacher, about the importance of the three Rs. She also talked about the role of local authorities, which we have heard about from others today, in perhaps dictating the content of in-service days, and about the importance of listening to the profession in that regard. Her final points about our curriculum and how we might better meet the needs of all learners, particularly outwith the formal curriculum, are really important.

One of the aspects that Miles Briggs, Willie Rennie, Martin Whitfield, Ross Greer and I were discussing on Friday at the School Leaders Scotland conference at Loch Lomond was school funding post-pandemic. Pam Duncan-Glancy was not able to be there, but she has talked about making PEF permanent. I put on the record that I have made clear the commitment that, if my party is re-elected next year, we will continue that funding. I know that Scottish Labour has a similar position on that issue.

There is a big-picture question about school funding that we have not really interrogated today. My question for Labour members and for the rest of Parliament is about whether it is enough. I do not think that it is anymore. Our schools are now meeting the needs of a variety of different parts of society, whether that be health needs or income maximisation for parents and carers. We need to look at the totality of funding that goes to schools. I heard Mr Rennie's points, a number of which, I have to say, I do not agree with, but I think that John Wilson's appointment is an opportunity to look again at radical approaches to school funding. Our schools are now meeting needs that go beyond our educational requirements, and we need to reconfigure budgets to recognise that.

Liz Smith: I understand what the cabinet secretary is saying, but it is not all about money; it is about a cultural change that is required in our schools. As my colleague Roz McCall said, it is about ensuring that we have the right culture. We accept that there are many things that schools are doing well, and we should be enhancing that. However, it is not just about money; it is about that culture and how we build the trust between pupils and teachers.

Jenny Gilruth: I very much agree with Liz Smith's points. In reflecting on our own teaching, we understand the importance of building trust with pupils and the class. That was fundamental to all that I did in my time in teaching, and I know that that was the case for Liz Smith, too. That trust was eroded during the pandemic, and we should be mindful of the challenge that, for many young people, returning to formal education has been difficult.

We heard from a number of members this afternoon about the important role of our teachers and support staff. Willie Rennie and others talked about the importance of teachers in our schools, and George Adam also spoke specifically to that point.

Willie Rennie was right to speak about the increase in the number of additional support needs pupils, which we also heard about from Roz McCall and George Adam. I was pleased that Willie Rennie's party, supported by the Green Party, voted for the Government's budget last year, which provided an extra £29 million for the ASN workforce.

Another stream of work that we have committed to undertaking is a wider cross-party review of ASN. As part of that, Willie Rennie came forward with a very positive suggestion on holding a national conference. I confirm that we will be holding a national conference on best practice in relation to additional support needs. That was a very sensible suggestion from Willie Rennie, and I hope that he recognises that the Government is very much listening to his views in this space.

On ASN, I also highlight the national data summit that I opened last Wednesday at Murrayfield. Part of the challenge, particularly in relation to the additional support needs that we see across the country, are the various approaches to monitoring, tracking and measuring ASN. The variety of approaches disturbs the national picture, because it does not necessarily give us an accurate data set. The national summit that we had last week was extremely important, and I look forward to continuing to work with COSLA on arriving at a national understanding of how we measure ASN better to get that accurate picture.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I am very much encouraged by the cabinet secretary's points about data. Will she reflect on Lorna Slater's point about co-ordinated support plans, which are used much less frequently than their equivalents in England? Pupils with additional support needs need a plan, but co-ordinated support plans are currently applied only if they co-ordinate delivery of support from beyond the school. Is that not a flaw?

Jenny Gilruth: I hear Daniel Johnson's point—Lorna Slater made a similar point. We have debated the issue at the Education, Children and Young People Committee. Co-ordinated support plans carry a statutory responsibility that other plans do not. There is often a reticence at local authority level to use CSPs because they are statutory, but we will consider that in the wider review. Lorna Slater made an interesting point in that regard.

Too often, I have at my door parents and carers who are frustrated by the system when it has not worked for their child or young person. We need to resolve those matters. We need to recognise where the powers rest, which is at local authority level, but we also need to provide clearer national direction in that regard.

I am conscious of time, Presiding Officer. I praise our young people and their teachers for the hard work that goes on every day in our schools and for their achievements. In short, we must give our schools hope. Some of the speeches that we heard this afternoon provide us with the necessary impetus to that end.

17:10

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): I draw to members' notice my entry in the register of members' interests.

It is a pleasure to close the debate on behalf of Scottish Labour. It is a debate that speaks to the heart of what education should be. To pick up on the memories of Liz Smith—and, no doubt, of the cabinet secretary—of teacher training, teachers are often told, "You are the weather in the classroom." That relates to Liz Smith's intervention about the importance of culture. The weather in the classroom is about the culture that is developed.

What should that culture be? What should that weather be? There should be a safe, supportive environment where every child can learn and every teacher can teach without fear. However, that is not the reality that many children and teachers experience in Scotland's schools today. That is not to talk down our staff and certainly not to talk down our young people, their parents or the communities that stand around them—it is a reality.

There has been an unacceptable deterioration in classroom behaviour. There has—factually—been a shocking rise in the number of violent incidents. The EIS reports that 80 per cent of its branches experience weekly "violence and aggression". In Aberdeen alone, incidents have surged by more than 300 per cent since 2019. There is both subjective evidence and objective mathematical evidence of an increase. Teachers are being pushed, they are being hit by objects and they are being assaulted. Police Scotland has said that there were 63 cases of weapons being brought into schools in just three months of this year.

Those are not isolated events; they are symptoms of a crisis. Figures from the Scottish household survey that were published this week show that among adults in Scotland—we are mostly not talking about people who interact with schools on a daily basis—69 per cent were satisfied with their local schools. That figure is down from 81 per cent in 2011, which shows the perception that our communities have of the schools that sit at the heart of our communities.

I will talk about some of the speeches that we have heard. One of the many statistics that Miles Briggs talked about was that 30 per cent of our pupils are missing more than 10 per cent of their teaching. That is an unacceptable figure. We discussed that situation at the SLS conference on Friday.

Willie Rennie made another comment about the Hayward review; I have forgotten the number of times that he has raised it. Why has he done that? It is because, like so many previous reviews and reports, the review sits on a shelf gathering dust.

Paul Sweeney picked up on the spatial planning problem, which is a particular regional problem that speaks to a breakdown in the understanding between local authorities, the Scottish Government and families who have lived experiences.

Paul Sweeney: It was unfortunate that the cabinet secretary ran out of time to refer to my speech. Will Martin Whitfield invite her to respond to my letter of 4 September?

Jenny Gilruth: It was responded to.

Martin Whitfield: I think that Paul Sweeney has an answer, if that makes it on to the record.

I welcome my colleague Paul O'Kane back to the chamber—he has been missed. It was almost disappointing that he had to refer to a previous question that he asked in the chamber about the fact that young people are filming violence in schools and uploading it to the internet, where it will live for ever. There is dissatisfaction that there has still not been a realistic solution to that problem.

Time is short, so I turn to the cabinet secretary's amendment, as well as the speeches by the cabinet secretary, Lorna Slater and Bill Kidd regarding the amendment. I refer—begrudgingly, I suppose—to the standing orders and the Parliament's guidance on the purpose of motions. The purpose of motions is not to provide solutions; motions are the core procedural tool to manage parliamentary business and allow us to have a democratic debate, which is what has happened this afternoon.

If I look at the Government's amendment, I see that it paints a picture of progress, of glory and of almost the perfect environment. It cites the pay deal and vague commitments to workload reduction. However, let us be honest: none of that addresses the core issue, which is that teachers do not feel safe, pupils do not feel safe and families are losing confidence in our schools.

The amendment ignores the reality that the scaffolding of support around young people has collapsed. Additional support needs provision is stretched to breaking point, CAMHS waiting lists are unmanageable and support staff numbers are falling dramatically. Those failures feed a vicious cycle: unmet needs lead to the dysregulated behaviour that we have heard about, which drives teachers out of the profession, leaving classrooms even more unsupported.

I would suggest that the Government's amendment is complacent. It celebrates a pay deal, which, of course, is welcome, but ignores the fact that, even with that pay deal, 80 per cent of teachers are considering leaving the profession because of violence and aggression. We must confront that reality.

I am conscious that time is short. In restoring confidence in an education system that should be the pride of Scotland, not a source of fear and frustration, let us send a clear message today that this Parliament does not accept unsafe schools, will not accept broken support systems and will not accept excuses. Let us send the message that we will act to make our schools safe, that we will act to support them and that we will act to make them fit for the future.

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

Jenny Gilruth: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. During the debate, I did not have the time to answer Paul Sweeney's point. I have checked with my private office and I can say that, following his request for a meeting, a response was sent to him last Wednesday. I have asked for that to be re-sent to him, and I am more than happy to meet him and engage on the issues that he has raised today.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, cabinet secretary. That was not a point of order, but your point is on the record.

Urgent Question

17:17

Professor Alexis Jay (Comments)

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports that Professor Alexis Jay's comments on grooming gang inquiries were misrepresented during a debate on the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill.

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes): In stage 3 of the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill, replying to Mr Kerr's proposed amendment that the new post of victims and witnesses commissioner for Scotland should carry out research into child sexual abuse, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs raised awareness of the work led by Professor Alexis Jay, who now sits on our national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group. Ms Constance noted specifically that Professor Jay had been the chair of an independent inquiry into child sexual abuse in England and Wales and that Professor Jay had put on record in the past that, in regard to child sexual abuse and exploitation,

"people should just get on with it".

It was minuted at the strategic group's meeting in October that the Professor Jay quote was correct but that it was from January and not made in relation to the amendment or the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill. Ms Constance did not state that Professor Jay was speaking directly about the amendment. She made a general point on Professor Jay's views on calls for inquiries and that she, too, wanted to get on with the work that is needed to protect our children.

Liam Kerr: I thank the minister for that response, but I am surprised that the justice secretary is not here answering for her misrepresentation. Perhaps the minister will set out why in her response.

When the Parliament was asked to vote on my amendment, which would have ultimately led to a Scottish grooming gangs inquiry, had it been agreed to, members of the Scottish Parliament voted, in part, on the basis of information that was put before them by the cabinet secretary that was false. Does the minister concede that those MSPs who voted against my amendment might have voted in favour but for the false information? How does the Government propose to give the Parliament another chance to vote for a Scottish grooming gangs inquiry, but one that would, this time, be based on accurate information?

Natalie Don-Innes: I should just set out that Ms Constance would have answered the question, but she is currently travelling on Scottish Government business.

Mr Kerr is not setting out properly the effect of the amendment that he lodged to the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill. All that the amendment would have required was that the victims and witnesses commissioner, who has not yet been appointed, undertake a report to consider whether any further action was required in that respect. That is not something that could happen today. The commissioner would have to first be appointed and consider whether it was appropriate to take any action. Essentially, it is distortion to say that a grooming gangs inquiry proposal was in front of the Parliament and was not supported.

Liam Kerr: That is more sophistry from the minister, first on the correction and then on what actually happened during the passage of the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill. [*Interruption*.]

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

Liam Kerr: We must never forget that the issue is really about the victims of this most heinous and vicious of crimes. One wrote to the First Minister saying that it is clear that abuse is on-going and demanding a rapid audit into grooming gangs in Scotland. Another, in powerful and harrowing testimony, told how she was trafficked to Scotland and abused in Glasgow and Edinburgh. Victims deserve answers and they deserve justice. Can the minister confirm that, now that the cabinet secretary is making accurate representations, she will finally grant a full Scottish grooming gangs inquiry?

Natalie Don-Innes: The Scottish Government takes the matter very seriously. I reiterate the First Minister's comments of last week in which he expressed admiration for the courage of victims in speaking out. I am deeply saddened to hear of any such instances, and I continue to encourage anyone who has been the victim of such abuse to report it to the police, who, of course, take those crimes very seriously.

Protecting children from harm is an absolute priority. That is why we are taking a number of actions and have been very clear that we are prepared to give consideration to a grooming gangs inquiry. However, we need to be clear on whether that is the best use of time and resources or whether there are other steps that would be more impactful for the victims and the people who are affected.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): This week, I wrote to the cabinet secretary to ensure that the

Government is not dismissing the fact that Scotland does not yet know the extent of the problem of grooming gangs, and asking for a briefing on the issue for Opposition parties. Given that the Scottish Government, in persuading Parliament not to vote for Liam Kerr's amendment, relied on the words of, and quoted, Professor Alexis Jay but had not spoken to her, can the minister, on behalf of the cabinet secretary, tell Parliament whether the Government has now spoken to her? Do you have her advice on whether there should be a further inquiry into the sexual abuse of children in Scotland?

The Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair, please.

Natalie Don-Innes: I have been clear that protecting children from harm is an absolute priority for me and the Government. Sexual abuse and exploitation are abhorrent crimes that have devastating impacts on victims and their families. In my response to Mr Kerr, I set out clearly the position on the comments around Ms Jay and on the positioning and the clarity that needed to be provided in relation to the amendment. I have been clear that we are taking a number of steps in relation to the actions that Police Scotland and the national group are progressing.

I understand the importance of the issue to members. Subject to the usual parliamentary processes, business managers have been informed that we intend to bring forward a parliamentary statement before the end of the year to inform members of next steps.

Pauline McNeill: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I rarely raise points of order, but I seek your guidance. What was the point of your selecting the urgent question? I asked a specific question: I want to know whether the Government asked Professor Alexis Jay for her advice. If I cannot even get an answer on that, what is the point of having an urgent question?

The Presiding Officer: Although standing orders are silent when it comes to responses, it is of paramount importance that members, including ministers, give accurate information to the Parliament, correcting any inadvertent errors at the earliest opportunity. Responsibility for the content of members' contributions is generally a matter for the member making them, but it is extremely important that answers are as comprehensive and accurate as time allows in any item of business.

Natalie Don-Innes: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am not clear on how I have given any false information. Professor Alexis Jay sits on the national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group, so her advice is regularly sought through that process. I believe that that answers Pauline McNeill's question.

The Presiding Officer: That was not a point of order, minister.

I call Sharon Dowey.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I seek your guidance. I understand that, on a motion without notice, the Presiding Officer can extend any period of debate, including a question session.

Given that a very specific question has not been answered, I wonder whether you might consider accepting such a motion at this time so that a further question can be put.

The Presiding Officer: We are currently within the time that we have available today. As we have not yet gone over that time, I am content that we continue to use it.

I call Sharon Dowey.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): Professor Alexis Jay's comments on the grooming gang inquiries were misrepresented. Presumably, she was keen to ensure that the cabinet secretary was aware of that as soon as possible. Will the minister set out or disclose to us what communications on that were passed between the professor and the Scottish Government and when?

Natalie Don-Innes: I am sorry, but I do not have that information specifically to hand. I am more than happy to provide that information if it is available. However, as I have been very clear, those comments were clarified at the most recent meeting of the national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group. As I said, I am happy to provide that further information.

Daniel Johnson: Again, I ask the very specific question: has the Government sought the advice of Professor Jay as to whether an independent review of child abuse cases is required in Scotland? Was that specific question put to Professor Jay? Yes or no?

Natalie Don-Innes: I have given a specific answer to that question. Yes, advice has been sought from Professor Jay via the national CSAES group.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the urgent question.

Business Motions

17:27

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-19810, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 25 November 2025

2.00 pm	Time for Reflection
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by	Topical Questions
followed by	Stage 1 Debate: Children (Withdrawal from Religious Education and Amendment of UNCRC Compatibility Duty) (Scotland) Bill
followed by	Committee Announcements
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time
followed by	Members' Business

Wednesday 26 November 2025

2.00 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.00 pm	Portfolio Questions: Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands; Health and Social Care
followed by	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party Business
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.10 pm	Decision Time
followed by	Members' Business

Thursday 27 November 2025

11.40 am	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
11.40 am	General Questions
12.00 pm	First Minister's Questions
followed by	Members' Business
2.15 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.15 pm	Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body Questions
followed by	Portfolio Questions: Social Justice and Housing
followed by	Scottish Government Business
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time

Tuesday 2 December 2025

2.00 pm	Time for Reflection
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by	Topical Questions
followed by	Scottish Government Business
followed by	Committee Announcements
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time
followed by	Members' Business

Wednesday 3 December 2025

2.00 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.00 pm	Portfolio Questions: Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, and Parliamentary Business; Justice and Home Affairs
followed by	Scottish Labour Party Business
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.10 pm	Decision Time
followed by	Members' Business

Thursday 4 December 2025

11.40 am	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
11.40 am	General Questions
12.00 pm	First Minister's Questions
followed by	Members' Business
2.30 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.30 pm	Portfolio Questions: Education and Skills
followed by	Education, Children and Young People Committee Debate: Widening Access to Higher Education
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 24 November 2025, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[*Graeme Dey*]

Motion agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motions S6M-19811 and S6M-19812, on stage 1 timetables for bills. I call Graeme Dey to move the motions.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Building Safety Levy (Scotland) Bill at stage 1 be completed by 9 January 2026.

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Contract (Formation and Remedies) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1 be completed by 19 December 2025.—[*Graeme Dey*]

Motions agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:28

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S6M-19813, on a committee substitute. I ask Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that Colin Beattie be appointed to replace Collette Stevenson as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee.—[*Graeme Dey*]

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

Motion without Notice

17:28

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 11.2.4 of standing orders, that decision time be brought forward to now. I invite the Minister for Parliamentary Business to move that motion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time be brought forward to 5.28 pm—[*Graeme Dey*]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

17:28

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are seven questions to be put as a result of today's business.

I remind members that if the amendment in the name of Ben Macpherson is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Murdo Fraser will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-19756.2, in the name of Ben Macpherson, which seeks to amend motion S6M-19756, in the name of Daniel Johnson, on Scotland's skills system, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

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

17:29

Meeting suspended.

17:31

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: I remind members that if the amendment in the name of Ben Macpherson is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Murdo Fraser will fall.

We move to the division on amendment S6M-19756.2, in the name of Ben Macpherson. Members should cast their votes now.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)

Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Ind)
Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-19756.2, in the name of Ben Macpherson, is: For 58, Against 60, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that amendment S6M-19756.1, in the name of Murdo Fraser, which seeks to amend motion S6M-19756, in the name of Daniel Johnson, on Scotland's skills system, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)

Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]
Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Abstentions

Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-19756.1, in the name of Murdo Fraser, is: For 53, Against 64, Abstentions 1.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-19756, in the name of Daniel Johnson, on Scotland's skills system, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

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

Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Ind)
Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-19756, in the name of Daniel Johnson, on Scotland's skills system, is: For 61, Against 57, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament believes that Scotland's skills system is letting down young people and holding back economic growth, and further believes that there needs to be a new partnership between education and industry, with better careers advice in schools central to it, and new Scottish industrial pathways to link school subjects to future careers, guaranteed industrial placements for secondary school pupils including in industry and a clearing system for apprenticeships, so that good candidates do not fall out of the system.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-19754.2, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, which seeks to amend motion S6M-19754, in the name of Pam Duncan-Glancy, on education, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)

Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]
Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Abstentions

Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-19754.2, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, is: For 64, Against 53, Abstentions 1.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-19754.1, in the name of Miles Briggs, which seeks to amend motion S6M-19754, in the name of Pam Duncan-Glancy, on education, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)

Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]
Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-19754.1, in the name of Miles Briggs, is: For 53, Against 63, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-19754, in the name of Pam Duncan-Glancy, on education, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)

Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]
Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Abstention

Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-19754, in the name of Pam Duncan-Glancy, on education, as amended, is: For 63, Against 54, Abstentions 1.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises the challenges in Scotland's schools post-COVID-19 pandemic, particularly with attendance and an increase in additional support needs (ASN); welcomes the additional funding agreed to in the Budget for 2025-26 to support outcomes for children with ASN, and to support and enhance the ASN workforce; acknowledges the key role that staff and teachers play to support children to succeed; welcomes the agreement last week, which ensures that Scotland's teachers remain the highest paid in the UK, with an uplift of 7.5% over two years; remains committed to undertaking further work to reduce teacher workload, which sits alongside the commitment to reduce class contact time, and agrees to recognise and celebrate the successes of Scotland's young people.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-19813, in the name of Graeme Dey on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on a committee substitute, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that Colin Beattie be appointed to replace Collette Stevenson as the Scottish

National Party substitute on the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Rural Communities (Challenges)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-19548, in the name of Finlay Carson, on the growing tide of on-going challenges facing rural communities. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes the reported ongoing challenges faced by rural communities, including those in Stranraer, Wigtownshire and across Dumfries and Galloway, in accessing timely and high-quality healthcare; believes that people in these areas often experience longer waits for GP appointments, hospital treatment and emergency services, compared with the national average; expresses particular concern about the reported current shortage of GPs in Wigtownshire, which is placing additional strain on practices and impacting patient care; acknowledges the additional pressures on NHS boards and staff in delivering care across large geographic areas; notes the view that every person, regardless of where they live, should have equal access to essential health services; further notes the calls on the Scottish Government to set out clear plans to tackle rural health inequalities, including measures to recruit and retain healthcare professionals, including what it sees as much-needed midwives and dentists, address GP shortages, improve ambulance response times and expand diagnostic and treatment capacity in Galloway Community Hospital and other community health hubs, and notes the calls for both an increased provision of community beds and step-down facilities to reduce delayed discharge and enable care closer to home, and for the Scottish Government to work with communities to ensure that future health policy reflects the needs of rural Scotland.

17:43

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I thank all members from across the chamber who supported the motion. I will be clear: rural Scotland, including areas such as Stranraer and the Rhins in Dumfries and Galloway, has been let down, not by geography but by Government choices. Those choices have stripped away vital health and care services without ensuring that replacements were ready, and they have left families facing a worsening healthcare crisis.

For years, I have warned that the greatest threat to rural healthcare is not distance but a chronic failure to recruit and retain the workforce that is needed to deliver care. That failure lies squarely at the door of the Scottish National Party Government.

What is happening in Wigtownshire? General practitioner shortages are critical—just recently, the Mull of Galloway practice handed in its notice. Patients in Stranraer wait weeks for an appointment, if they can get one at all. When people cannot access primary care, conditions

worsen and hospitals come under greater pressure.

Ambulance response times in the Rhins are longer than the national average, not just because of geography but because crews are stretched to breaking point. It is hard to recruit paramedics locally, and those who join the service face impossible workloads. At Galloway community hospital, diagnostic and treatment capacity is limited, and the birthing suite has gone, so some mothers now have to travel to Dumfries to give birth, fearing that their babies might arrive in the car. That is not progress; it is neglect.

Jason Jordan, who is the assistant general manager at Galloway community hospital, recently said:

"We have an outstanding team of staff working at the Galloway and every effort is being made to deliver a first class service."

He is right—the staff are outstanding. However, there is still too much reliance on Dumfries and Galloway Royal infirmary, which is almost two hours away.

The consequences of poor planning are clear. Cottage hospitals have closed, but promised community hubs and step-down facilities have yet to materialise. The result is delayed discharge and bed blocking. I spoke to a constituent from Newton Stewart who should have been discharged but had nowhere to go, because the local cottage hospital had closed and there was no funding for home adaptations. He spent months stuck in an acute ward, blocking a bed that he knew someone else needed, and he felt guilty about it. That is what happens when services are dismantled before alternatives exist.

NHS Dumfries and Galloway faces a £58 million funding black hole. Integration joint boards are staring at cuts that make it impossible to invest in community care or recruit staff. Those cuts are not just numbers; they mean fewer services, longer waits and more worry for rural families. The Government promised 800 new GPs by 2027, but there is no sign of those GPs. Rural practices are struggling—vacancies remain unfilled and community pharmacies are under pressure to try to pick up the slack.

That is not workforce strategy; it is workforce crisis. However, the Government's response is to produce more reports, more consultations and more talking shops. As Dr Gordon Baird from the Galloway community hospital action group said,

"You can't fatten a pig by weighing it."

Scotland does not need more reviews; it needs action.

I make it clear that none of those failures are the fault of our local NHS staff or ambulance crews, who are doing an incredible job under impossible circumstances, working long shifts and driving hundreds of miles to deliver care. They deserve praise, respect and support, not the constant pressure that is caused by poor planning and underfunding. They are heroes, but heroes cannot hold up a broken system for ever.

What needs to happen? The motion calls for a clear funded plan to tackle rural health inequities. That means recruitment and retention incentives, including housing support, relocation packages and career development for rural posts. If we want doctors, nurses, midwives and paramedics to come to rural Scotland, we need to make it attractive and sustainable.

We need to restore local capacity and ensure that no service is removed until a replacement is operational and staffed. There should be no more dismantling of maternity units, leaving women with few safe alternatives, and no more closing of cottage hospital beds without alternative step-down facilities being put in place. That means investing in community beds and step-down facilities, which would prevent delayed discharge. That is as much about patient dignity as it is about freeing up acute beds.

I acknowledge that there have been improvements to service provision at Galloway community hospital, which have been driven by the wonderful staff. However, we need to see evidence of expanded diagnostic and treatment capacity, with the workforce to deliver it. That would restore confidence among local people that they can access care close to home. We need to rural proof planning and staffing by recruiting and training paramedics locally and ensuring that resources match geography in order to improve ambulance response times.

As a Gallovidian through and through, and as a rural Conservative, I, along with my colleagues, have made a commitment. Tomorrow, voters in Stranraer and the Rhins will choose a new representative. Julie Currie, our Conservative candidate, brings NHS experience that will deliver on our Conservative commitment—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Carson, I caution against electioneering in the chamber.

Finlay Carson: My apologies, Deputy Presiding Officer.

Scottish Conservatives believe in fairness and that where someone lives should never determine the quality of care that they receive. That is why Scottish Conservatives are calling for a rural health guarantee; equal access to essential services for every patient, regardless of their postcode; a workforce action plan that incentivises recruitment and trains staff in rural areas, not just empty promises; and investment in community-

based care, because care that is delivered closer to home or in the home is better for patients and for the NHS.

The Government has had years to fix the system, but, instead, rural communities have been treated as an afterthought. They pay the same taxes as everyone else and deserve the same standard of care, but, right now, they are being asked to accept less—less access, less choice and less safety.

It is about equality versus equity. Rural communities are not asking for equality; they are demanding equity. Equality assumes that giving everyone the same resource will produce the same outcome, but that ignores the unique challenges that rural areas face, such as long travel times, a limited workforce and smaller hospitals. Equity means tailoring support so that rural patients have the same chances of getting timely and safe care as those in urban centres. That requires additional investment, flexible service models and a recognition that one-size-fits-all policies perpetuate disadvantage rather than solve it.

I say this clearly: rural Scotland will not be left behind; we will not accept the dismantling of local services without replacements being in place; and we will hold the Government to account until every patient, wherever they live, has equitable access to care.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise members that there is a lot of demand to speak in the debate. I am conscious that we have already been late in starting, so I will require members to stick to their speaking time allocations if I am to get everybody in.

I call Christine Grahame.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Deputy Presiding Officer, can I go after the next speaker? I am having technical difficulties with my Surface laptop.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I think that we can do that.

Christine Grahame: Thank you.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Douglas Ross, assuming that he is ready to go.

17:51

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am always happy to accommodate Christine Grahame in any way that I can.

I am delighted to contribute to the debate, which has been brought to the chamber by my friend and colleague Finlay Carson, who has ably articulated the problems in his constituency in the south of Scotland.

I will take us up to Moray, in the north-east of Scotland, and talk about some of the problems that we are experiencing there. I could highlight many issues in the debate, but I will focus on just two.

The first issue concerns the on-going campaign by the save our surgeries Burghead Hopeman group. I have raised this matter time and again in the chamber, and we have had meetings with the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care and with the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health. I am sorry that neither of them is in the chamber tonight, but I will relay the debate to them and highlight the issue again.

We have a proposal from a campaign group that is made up of people who want to see a difference in their community. They have been met with challenges—their local surgery has shut down and they have come up with an alternative, but they continue to come up against obstacles from the Scottish Government, Moray health and social care partnership and others. A proposal from the group is sitting with the Scottish Government, but it has had no response. I urge the Minister for Drug and Alcohol Policy and Sport, after the debate, to go back to her officials in the health department to get a response for the save our surgeries Burghead Hopeman group.

I have tried the same with the new chief executive of NHS Grampian. I raised the plight and the campaign of the save our surgeries group with her when I met her a couple of months ago, but I am still waiting for a response for the group from NHS Grampian. I urge the minister and NHS Grampian to engage constructively with SOS Burghead Hopeman, because it has plans that can improve local healthcare. Those plans are innovative and could make a real difference to those two communities, and I hope that they are taken seriously.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): As ever, Mr Ross is speaking up for his rural constituents.

What do you think that viewers of the debate tonight should read into the fact that not one single SNP member supported the motion that brought the debate to the chamber and the fact that the debate is very sparsely attended by SNP and Labour members?

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

Douglas Ross: I think that it is very disappointing. I will listen closely to the speeches from SNP members when we hear them. However, I note that we have members' business debates to try to get cross-party support. We do

not always agree with every word in a motion, but I have supported SNP motions in order to allow a subject to be debated. I am grateful that Finlay Carson was able to get support in order to have this important topic debated in the chamber, but I think that, when people look around and see the vast number of empty seats in the middle and on the other side of the chamber, they will wonder why those MSPs are not here to raise constituency concerns about healthcare issues.

In my final minute, I will relay the details of a case that I have already articulated to the cabinet secretary—I have provided him with further information. The case highlights what we are facing in Moray. A father and husband had a heart attack on Saturday 1 November. He stayed in the accident and emergency department at Dr Gray's hospital, where he was based for four days, in completely inappropriate conditions. He was transferred to Aberdeen Royal infirmary on Thursday 6 November. He was told that he needed an angiogram, but the Scottish Government has told NHS Grampian that it will not pay for angiograms to be performed at the weekend. I want to know why, in one of the biggest health boards in Scotland, we are not performing that important procedure at the weekend. He had to wait until the following Monday—he got his angiogram and was released on Tuesday 11 November, well over a week later. Why was that treatment and vital test delayed, and why was he then forced to find his own way home from Aberdeen to Moray?

The family has put forward a very sensible solution: that we have a shuttle bus between the ARI and Dr Gray's, or back to Moray, so that people can use that type of facility to get to and from those two medical centres, rather than having to rely on the good will of friends and family. I think that it would make a real difference if the minister could take forward that solution.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am not getting an indication from Ms Grahame that she is ready just yet, so I will call Craig Hoy and possibly come back to Christine Grahame after that.

17:56

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): I thank Finlay Carson for bringing this important debate to the chamber. Today, we are talking about one overarching issue: the SNP's neglect of rural Scotland. It is a neglect that is based not on geography, history or economics but on one thing only: constitutional politics. For years, the SNP has systematically and cynically neglected the rural parts of Scotland that do not support independence. Areas such as Dumfries and Galloway, the Scottish Borders and Aberdeenshire have been forgotten about by a Government that values independence-supporting central belt areas and communities more than it values the communities that I represent.

The numbers speak for themselves. In March, Dumfries and Galloway councillors were forced to find £30 million in savings over three years, blaming what they described as an "unprecedented funding gap". As has been made clear, NHS Dumfries and Galloway is currently trying to find £58 million in savings, otherwise it will be cutting front-line services. I say to the minister that there is no clearer case of the SNP's neglect of rural areas than the challenges that Dumfries and Galloway Council currently faces. However, the chickens have come home to roost, for the council is now run by a minority SNP administration, which is having to clear up the mess that was created by SNP central Government.

That is the reality on the ground. Rural bus funding has been systematically cut, and the SNP council leader is now begging ministers for additional cash as lifeline supported services face the axe. Rural primary schools have been systematically underfunded, with the closure of some village schools, the loss of headteachers, who have been replaced by pool teachers, and the removal of additional support needs provision entirely from rural schools, which has forced children into larger town-based settings. That includes children in a village who have had to move schools less than three years after their own school was closed.

There is systematic defunding of core services. This year, Dumfries and Galloway's SNP council is being forced, by the SNP Government, to consider removing funding entirely from the citizens advice bureaux network. That £1 million saving could result in the loss of £15 million in social and economic benefits that are delivered by the services that the citizens advice bureaux provide.

The cuts do not end there. Music tuition is at risk in Dumfriesshire schools, which means that only the privileged few whose parents can afford to pay a private tutor will be able to learn a musical instrument. There have been proposed closures of leisure centres, including Hillview leisure centre in Kelloholm, which will strike another blow to rural residents. It will mean the loss of a space where people can play sports, go to the gym and have community and social gatherings. That is a clear loss to a rural community, and it has been brought about by SNP neglect.

Today, I say to the SNP that enough is enough—it must call a halt to the chronic underfunding of rural public services, and it must stop diverting money elsewhere. The political motivation at the heart of Scotland's resource allocation has to be brought to an end. Rural

health services and rural councils must be properly funded—with a fair funding formula, not the pork-barrel politics of John Swinney's SNP.

Roads such as the A75 and the A76 need urgent action. The state of disrepair on rural roads has reached crisis levels on the SNP's watch. My constituents—often elderly ones—are sick and tired of the SNP Government ignoring rural parts of the south of Scotland. They are sick and tired of seeing their services suffer while the SNP pump primes the areas of Scotland where it is buying votes to deliver on its only priority. That kind of SNP pork-barrel politics has to end because, under John Swinney, it is independence at the expense of all else, particularly the rural residents and communities that I represent.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I see that Ms Grahame is still not ready, so I call Rhoda Grant.

18:00

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I thank Finlay Carson for securing this important debate. His motion speaks about the impact of urban-based policies on Dumfries and Galloway, and that is reflected in my Highlands and Islands region, where we suffer very similar challenges—I am sure that any member who represents any part of rural Scotland would say the same.

This week, the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee took evidence from stakeholders from rural Scotland, who talked about access to services. They told us that car ownership is a necessity to enable people to access services, given the lack of public transport. Even where there is public transport, it can be unaffordable.

Accessing the health service is not free at the point of use, because the cost of getting there means that people cannot access the services that they need. Failure to attend can also mean that they come off a waiting list altogether. I was told by a constituent of a case in which an elderly resident could access hospital appointments only if they were made on her GP's day off, so that her GP could drive her to the appointment. That is an absolutely crazy situation.

We were also told that, although running a car costs about £50 per week, which adds to the cost of living in rural Scotland, it is necessary for people to carry that cost because it is the only way that they are able to access services.

I probably do not need to speak again about mothers from Caithness having to drive to Inverness to give birth. That journey is equivalent to driving from Edinburgh to Newcastle. If people do not have a car, they have to take a train or even a bus, and the journey is much longer. I recently heard of a mother who, just a couple of days after delivering her baby by caesarean section, had to make a four-and-a-half-hour journey by train, on her own, carrying her newborn baby. I know that there are similar issues in Stranraer.

Housing was another theme that came across as a major issue when we heard from witnesses at the committee meeting. There is little or no affordable housing in rural Scotland for local people in order to allow them to stay in the areas in which they were brought up, so many are being forced to move away. Housing was also raised as an issue in relation to recruiting staff to provide essential services. People would apply for posts and some would even start work, only for them to find that they could not find a home, so they were forced to leave. Rural health and care services are left to depend on expensive agency staff and, in many cases, those services cannot run at all.

All of that leads people to leave, so the problems create a downward spiral of depopulation. Centralisation happens in all aspects of daily life in rural Scotland. We saw it with the centralisation of police and fire services, which have since retreated from those areas. Police stations have closed and retained fire stations are not staffed to a level that allows them to go to an emergency.

Those issues are replicated throughout all of rural Scotland. We need to find solutions that provide people in my region—and in Dumfries and Galloway and elsewhere in rural Scotland—with equitable access to services.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Sharon Dowey.

18:04

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): The challenges that my colleague Finlay Carson has laid out are moving and troubling, and illustrate the experience of an area that faces a number of problems through no fault of its own. However, those challenges will be painfully familiar to people in other parts of rural Scotland, too.

Further north, in Ayrshire, we can empathise with all those issues, and I am sure that colleagues across the chamber who represent other areas of the country will say the same. The bottom line is this: small towns and villages have been neglected by the SNP Government, and that has been the case for almost two decades now.

Few cases sum up the issue better than the fate of the Carrick Glen national treatment centre. That project was supposed to upgrade significantly the level of care for patients across Ayrshire and Arran

and provide staff with a far better environment in which to work.

However, two years ago, it was decided to hit pause on the scheme, even though around £5 million had been spent on it. The building now sits lifeless, contributing nothing, and yet sucking out millions of pounds that could have been invested elsewhere.

It would have been better if the Scottish Government had come good on its pledge to complete the project—by now, the centre would be up and running, and serving the local community well.

However, the problems in NHS Ayrshire and Arran go much further than that. The organisation is tens of millions of pounds in debt and needs huge loans simply to break even. Scotland's public sector watchdog said that the challenges facing NHS Ayrshire and Arran were "unprecedented" and that there did not seem to be any plan to get out of the situation.

The Scottish Government needs to ask itself how things have got that bad. NHS Ayrshire and Arran is not the only health board, nor indeed the only public sector organisation, that is facing dire financial challenges, as Rhoda Grant mentioned. It is difficult to see how things will get better, especially as parts of Ayrshire have the fastest-growing elderly population in the country, which will only place additional pressure on health and social care.

The SNP Government has promised the people of Ayrshire many things, but it has delivered few. I will give members a few facts on Ayrshire. Shockingly, more than 11,000 people in Ayrshire have been waiting more than a year for an out-patient appointment—that is the second-highest number in any health board. That includes almost 2,800 people who need general surgery. NHS Ayrshire and Arran also had the longest waits for an audiology appointment, with people waiting 62 weeks on average for an appointment and 115 weeks to actually get hearing aids fitted. People are waiting on average 26 weeks for orthopaedic treatment, with one in 10 waiting more than 72 weeks.

That is on top of the trouble that people have in accessing a dental appointment. The SNP promised to scrap dental charges for everyone, but it has failed to deliver, and now 40 per cent of people in the most deprived areas in Ayrshire have had no contact with a dentist in two years, and one in four primary 7 pupils are suffering from tooth decay.

Instead of focusing on things that could make people's lives better, nationalist ministers have obsessed about independence to the cost of everything else. The evidence is on show in almost every debate that the Parliament has. Rural Scotland might be more remote, and might happen to be in less accessible places, but it is a vital part of the country, and it deserves as much attention as everywhere else.

I fully support the motion that Finlay Carson has lodged, and I hope that those SNP members who have turned up today take the messages from the debate back to their Government ministers, whose time for acting is fast running out.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I now call Christine Grahame.

18:08

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer, for allowing me to resolve my technical issue—so far, so good, but it is early days yet.

I congratulate the member on securing the debate, and I agree with him on the following points. There are huge pressures on the NHS at all levels across Scotland, with specific challenges in delivery in rural areas. In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic still has a residual impact on health and social care, and then there are the demographics, with an increasing number of elderly people—I am one myself, being 81—requiring healthcare.

The Borders has an ageing population, with the fifth-highest proportion of people aged 65 and over in Scotland, and a declining birth rate. If we add together the declining birth rate, young people leaving for towns and cities and older people retiring to the scenic Borders, we see that the ageing demographic can only increase, and there will therefore be more demand on health and social services.

That is the background, but NHS Borders is using innovative processes to tackle those demands. I do not congratulate NHS Borders willy-nilly—in this instance, the board deserves it. There is the hospital at home service, a Scottish Government initiative that has been piloted in the Borders that allows patients to be cared for—as it says on the tin—in their home. It is targeted mostly at older patients with suitable health conditions—with the patient's consent, of course—and it has an overall 90 per cent-plus satisfaction rating.

We know that people prefer to be at home, if that is suitable, and that recovery is accelerated and their sense of wellbeing increases substantially if they are. It is no wonder—who would not prefer to be treated and supported at home by professionals, with family and friends in familiar surroundings, reunited with the cat and "Bargain Hunt" while lounging on the sofa?

As a result of its success, the region's health board has been allocated £600,000 from a £3.6 million Government pot. Not only is recovery better, but hospital beds are freed up, as is staff time. The service tackles the spectre of delayed discharge. The virtual-ward model monitors patients in their house, with regular clinical follow-up and access to specialist advice.

In 2023-24, more than 14,000 older patients across Scotland used the service. A new report from Healthcare Improvement Scotland estimates that £14.9 million was saved in "traditional hospital admission costs", with an estimated further £36.3 million saved in post-hospital care as a result of a reduction in re-admissions. That is more than £50 million in total.

In the Borders, the hospital at home service is currently limited to the central Borders. I have proposed to the cabinet secretary that it could be extended using community hospitals such as Hay Lodge hospital in Peebles. At present, some patients are already discharged to that hospital if it is suitable for them, often as an interim measure, following their discharge from the Borders general hospital, before they return home. With the hospital at home service, some patients could go straight home, which would, again, free up beds and staff, this time in Hay Lodge.

For completeness, I highlight the issue of accessing GP practices, which is, as members know, more complex. Most are private practices—businesses—that are contracted by the NHS to provide certain services, so GPs are not NHS employees. That is why there is such a divergence in how, for example, people can make an appointment.

Nonetheless, I conclude where I began: by broadly congratulating NHS Borders on modernising delivery. That includes its work in liaising with housing associations and reserving key workers' houses; those key workers include staff in the health service, so that has encouraged recruitment to the Scottish Borders.

All those measures are tackling the delivery of healthcare across that extensive rural area, and I commend them—and commend NHS Borders—to members. I hope that those measures can be replicated, for example in my old hunting ground of Dumfries and Galloway.

18:12

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I thank the member for bringing this really important members' business debate to the chamber. In some ways, I am a little bit shocked. I had a speech prepared, but I am not going to go through my speech—I will speak for a shorter time.

I am my party's spokesperson on rural issues, but what shocks me is that we are all having exactly the same problems. I was going to speak about exactly the same things that Finlay Carson, Sharon Dowey and members of the Labour Party have spoken about. I was going to speak, for example, about the fact that we have ambulances queuing outside Dr Gray's hospital and Aberdeen royal infirmary for hours on end, with patients stuck in the back, because they cannot get inside.

I was going to talk about the fact that I have one constituent currently on my books who presented to their GP in May with what turned out to be breast cancer, and they are only now starting treatment. That is a young woman with a young family who has waited months and months for treatment. In my eyes, that is not acceptable.

I was going to talk about the lack of beds. Grampian has the least acute bed space in the whole of Scotland, and yet nothing is being done to correct that. I was going to talk about delays to people being able to leave hospital because we have shut down community hospitals.

Christine Grahame: I am obliged to the member for taking my intervention.

I am not aware of this—perhaps you can advise me. Does NHS Grampian operate the hospital at home model, which has made great progress in the Borders?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Through the chair.

Tim Eagle: I was on the IJB in Moray when the hospital at home model was being discussed, and I remember making the point at the time that the model works only if we have people in communities who can run it. We do not have those people, so we end up sending people home early from secondary care, who do not then get the support that they need. That puts more and more pressure on primary care, and then we all attack the GPs.

I should declare a slight interest here—this is not actually in my entry in the register of members' interest, but I declare that my wife is a GP.

There are heartbreaking real-life consequences as a result of what we are currently facing in healthcare in rural Scotland. It is simply not good enough, and I cannot carry on coming to the chamber and making the same arguments over and over again and getting no answers from the Government. There are five SNP members in the chamber tonight. I am not attacking those who are in the room, but this is more than a members' business debate—it is about the really serious, life-altering impacts of what is currently going on in rural Scotland. That must change, and that is my message.

18:14

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I thank my friend and colleague Finlay Carson for securing the debate, which I have been listening to intently. I did not map out a speech—I thought that I would just listen to what everybody had to say—but I will draw members' attention to an issue that happened with one of my constituents, which I think highlights exactly what we are talking about today.

An elderly constituent approached me after a change in policy in rural Lanarkshire. He must get a vitamin B injection every 12 weeks. Previously, that was done at his local GP surgery, which was a 10-minute walk from his home. Following the changes, my constituent—who is on the NHS waiting list for a double knee replacement, which affects his mobility—must now make an appointment with a GP to get his prescription, take the prescription to the pharmacy, then phone his closest community treatment and care service, which is in Larkhall, to make an appointment for the injection, and then take a three-hour round-trip journey on a bus that he reports does not run according to the timetable. What used to take a single appointment at his GP now takes him days.

When we asked NHS Lanarkshire what could be done to reduce the journey that my constituent must undertake in order to get a simple, routine injection, the advice was that he could join a self-administration pilot or select a closer treatment service. Neither option is patient centred or able to produce a good patient outcome in this case. The fact is that there are no closer treatment services that do injections, and he does not feel confident enough to self-administer.

I have listened to colleagues across the chamber, and particularly note what Douglas Ross said about the trauma that his constituent suffered. It strikes me that this issue is not just about poor patient outcomes, which is the most important thing, but is also about waste. What a waste all of this is in a system that is crying out for investment. When we talk about the need to clear out the waste and redistribute resources to the front line, the issues that have been raised today are exactly what we are talking about.

On the issues of health and how healthcare is delivered, I think that we should be looking at how we deliver the basic services to people across Scotland, no matter whether they live in rural or urban areas or on the islands, or what the demographics of that area are. People should be able to readily access their GPs, dentists, A and E departments, pharmacy services and—certainly—maternity services. However, the reality is that delivery in urban areas will be different from delivery in rural areas and on our islands. We have to take cognisance of that, because the reality is that that basic level of service has to apply across all our communities. Most people who live in a rural area will accept that they will have to travel for specialist treatment such as a knee or hip replacement. However, they should not have to accept that we do not get the very basics of healthcare right.

I am a big advocate of the adoption and development of technology, including artificial intelligence. That approach would positively affect rural areas and islands to a greater extent than urban areas. That is one of the major solutions.

We cannot just talk about health in isolation; we need to look at other services. Education is part of health, as is access to leisure services and the community participation that is associated with those facilities, which Craig Hoy talked about. Of course, in many ways, the problems that we face in relation to health are the same as those that we face in relation to those issues.

When I think of the south of Scotland, I can see that transport by rail and road are also part of the solution, because we are talking about creating communities that are sustainable and that offer good local services and give people opportunities to be part of those communities. Trying to apply urban solutions to rural areas and islands just will not work.

18:19

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I, too, thank Finlay Carson for bringing today's debate to the chamber, and I was pleased to support his motion. As we have heard, people in rural areas face unique challenges in accessing healthcare. I therefore welcome this debate and the opportunity to highlight the day-to-day realities of those who live in my rural South Scotland region.

Issues have been raised with me not only by my constituents who are patients, but by our hard-working NHS staff. Living in a rural community should not limit people's access to basic healthcare, as Brian Whittle has mentioned, and there should also be ways of managing more specialist care. However, for many constituents and staff, it is frustrating that things do not run smoothly. Many people in those communities feel disconnected from their healthcare, as services seem to move further and further away, and many of my constituents have told me that they feel a sense of doom, because they cannot see any improvement in rural healthcare.

Last year, we debated the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee's findings on remote and rural healthcare, which revealed profound inequalities in access to services and care. That is a really important issue. The report reinforced what has long been known, which is that those

communities experience greater inequalities in accessing healthcare compared with those in our more urban and central areas. That is true across health services—including maternity services, which I will mention only briefly, as Scottish Labour highlighted the issue in the chamber just a few weeks ago.

Mothers in Wigtownshire, in my South Scotland region, do not have a dignified service, and it is important that we address that. I know that there are staffing pressures, but women are travelling 70 miles to receive care. Those mothers, their husbands, their partners, their family members and other campaigners say that they are extremely concerned about the difficulties that might arise during that process.

I also want to mention staff recruitment, retention and training, because it is a real concern that has been raised with me. I have asked the Government a number of times about its plans to expand the apprenticeship-type model for healthcare workers, as recommended by the nursing and midwifery task force, which offers a great opportunity to grow skills in our communities. I have talked to many people about that model, which would allow people in rural areas to train, work in and be committed to their local area, whether they live there because they want to or because they cannot, for whatever reason, move away. I have been talking about the issue for five years now, but it does not feel as if it has edged forward at all. Perhaps the minister could come back to it in her closing remarks.

Lastly, I would like to highlight the workforce problems in South Ayrshire. That region might not be what some would traditionally think of as rural or remote, but people in communities such as Girvan feel that things are just becoming worse and worse. In my discussions with constituents and staff at the local hospital, I hear that it is often difficult to recruit and retain staff. These challenges are real for both patients and staff.

The Government might point to on-going work, but the reality is that communities need action and tangible changes for them and their families. What communities need now is delivery, and that is what we would like to hear more about.

18:23

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): My colleague Finlay Carson's motion is absolutely spot on, and I thank him for bringing the debate to the chamber. Under the SNP, taxpayers are paying more and getting less.

Last year, community hospitals in the Borders faced a challenge when NHS Borders proposed the closure of 92 beds across Kelso, Duns and Hawick in my constituency, and in Peebles in the neighbouring constituency. My constituents are aware of the difficulty of delivering healthcare in rural areas, and the potential bed closure sparked huge concern, with nearly 4,000 people signing a petition to protect the community hospitals.

I acknowledge that a review is under way, but NHS Borders faces a significant financial challenge. Last year, its opening deficit was £28.1 million, leading to the potential for cost savings to be required in front-line services. Those services are being impacted right across the board, and, furthermore, delayed discharges in the Borders are already among the worst in Scotland. The Scottish Government should—and does—have a duty to ensure sustainable access to vital treatment options provided by community hospitals, especially in rural areas, because they plug those gaps.

The rural inequalities do not stop there. The average waiting time for a laparoscopy procedure for endometriosis in NHS Borders is 53 days, while the longest wait time is 126 days.

Christine Grahame: I hope that the member will agree that the demographics in the Borders are extremely challenging, with an increasing elderly population that is living even longer and requiring even more healthcare and social care. That is a huge issue in areas such as the Borders.

Rachael Hamilton: Christine Grahame has made my point for me: we should not have inequality, simply because of a geographical difference between urban and rural communities. In fact, the Government should be supporting rural communities because of that difference.

I recently met Jenni Minto, the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health, for an update on the much-lauded women's health plan. The Scottish Government said that it would bring endometriosis waiting times down to less than 12 months by the end of this parliamentary session, but has it done so? No. People are still waiting eight and a half years. That means, if someone's symptoms started today, they would not get a diagnosis until 2034.

I shared with the minister the traumatic story of my constituent, Samantha Hogg, who said that she had been waiting for a diagnosis since she was 12. She is now 25, and she was scared about the damage that the wait was causing. She was told that she would have to wait two years for a laparoscopy procedure at the BGH, and she was in so much pain that she went private.

It does not stop there. Concerns have been raised in the Borders about diagnoses for ADHD and autism and whether the health board still provides that service. In a recent case covered by

the *Border Telegraph*, an anonymous patient reported that their doctor had said:

"You clearly are [ADHD], you meet the criteria but the Borders have withdrawn their adult services and no longer will diagnose or provide services for ADHD or ASD, so you would need to go private."

There is a pattern here, and I could go on, but I do not have much time. I just believe that rural health boards must be supported and that the rurality that my constituents live in must be recognised, and I ask the SNP Government to consider the fact that its resource allocation formula is inadequate and insufficient.

The Scottish Government is not on track to recruit 800 GPs by 2027, and the overreliance on locums and outsourced workforce is costing millions. It is evident that rural communities are being left behind. They are being used as a dumping ground for renewables, with the SNP overturning 99.9 per cent of appeals, leaving communities completely ignored.

Rural crime is up, with essential machinery and equipment being stolen because the Scottish Government failed to replicate Westminster legislation. Bus funding has been cut, leaving villages such as Swinton and Leitholm unable to access key services. Banks have withdrawn from high streets. Post offices have closed, with the likes of St Abbs left without even a postbox. Broadband is patchy, creating a digital divide.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to close.

Rachael Hamilton: Let us think about the physical and mental impact of what is happening in rural areas, areas that only the Scottish Conservatives are standing up for.

18:28

The Minister for Drug and Alcohol Policy and Sport (Maree Todd): I thank Finlay Carson for bringing this important debate to the chamber, and I thank all members for their contributions.

I wish to respond specifically to a number of contributions towards the end of my speech. I will also try to pick up on some of the issues as I go.

As the chamber is aware, I represent a rural area: Caithness, Sutherland and Ross. The motion rightly highlights the challenges faced by rural communities, including those in Stranraer, Wigtownshire and across Dumfries and Galloway, in accessing timely and high-quality healthcare.

The 2025-26 budget commits a record £21.7 billion to health and social care, including £139 million for rural infrastructure. That funding will improve primary care access, expand diagnostics at Galloway community hospital and boost GP recruitment and retention.

In addition, we have announced the largest-ever investment in GP services—£531 million over three years—to stabilise practices and strengthen access in rural areas. Our GP action plan includes measures to strengthen recruitment and retention in rural and island areas, such as through the rural fellowship, reviewing the golden hello scheme to ensure the right incentives for harder-to-fill posts, and refreshing the GP retain and sustain scheme, which opened to new entrants in August 2025.

We have expanded multidisciplinary teams in general practice. More than 5,000 whole-time equivalent staff were working in services such as physiotherapy, pharmacy and phlebotomy as at March 2025. We are also working with boards in areas such as Borders and Shetland to model the best practice for those teams.

On maternity services, we expect all NHS boards to deliver care as close to home as possible, while ensuring safety for mother and baby. On 29 October, we launched the Scottish maternity and neonatal task force, which is chaired by the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health. Its role is to provide national leadership, set the scope for a comprehensive review and act on lessons from Healthcare Improvement Scotland's inspections. Crucially, it will examine rural provision, including in Caithness in my constituency, and in Stranraer. I know that that is important for rural communities.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care met service leaders and local groups in Stranraer last month, and my colleague Jenny Minto, the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health, visited Caithness in July. In all those areas, boards have increased local services.

Finlay Carson: I appreciate that the minister and her colleagues have met groups across rural Scotland, but nothing has changed. There is still no maternity birthing suite in Stranraer, despite independent professionals suggesting that a midwife-led birthing suite is the way forward. That has to do with the lack of midwives. There is a desire to have births as close to home as possible, but your Government is simply not delivering that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Speak through the chair.

Maree Todd: I recognise the challenges that the local health board is facing with recruitment for midwifery. Home births that are supported by a midwife are available, and there has been a step forward in the increasing of local services, such as scanning and antenatal care, which reduces the need for long journeys during pregnancy. That is welcome progress. We are also implementing our best start recommendations on the continuity of

carers, community hubs and the greater use of Near Me for remoter consultation. It is unfair to characterise that as no progress.

When families must travel for specialist or neonatal paediatric care, our young patients family fund helps to cover food, travel and accommodation costs.

Looking ahead, the service renewal framework sets out a long-term reform agenda. One major change is improving access to services and treatments in the community, including planning for the unique needs of rural and island communities. Alongside the population health framework, it prioritises improving access to treatment, shifting the balance of care closer to people's homes and ensuring that resources deliver the greatest impact.

A key part of that is the new subnational planning approach, which brings decisions closer to regions to reflect local priorities and integrate health and social care. That will deliver consistent core services nationwide so that everyone receives high-quality care, flexibility for remote and rural needs, and fair resource allocation that accounts for geography, workforce and transport, not just population size. Those approaches already embed equity of access as a core principle. Our recent direction letter asks health boards to demonstrate how remote and rural services are protected.

Access to healthcare is not just a service, it is a fundamental right.

Douglas Ross: Does the minister think that it is right that patients in NHS Grampian—and perhaps elsewhere; I am unsure—cannot get an angiogram over the weekend, despite being told that they need it, because the Scottish Government will not pay for it? Does the minister defend her Government refusing to pay for angiograms over the weekend in NHS Grampian?

Maree Todd: I am certainly more than happy for colleagues—it would probably be the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care—to look into that issue and get back to Douglas Ross. I recognise the need to access angiograms promptly, and there is certainly a need for prompt diagnosis and access to path labs. I know that we have made progress on access to good healthcare for myocardial infarction.

Access to healthcare is not just a service—it is a fundamental right. However, the Scottish Human Rights Commission has shown that rural communities still face systemic barriers. That is why our reforms put human rights at the heart of health policy by embedding the PANEL principles of participation, accountability, non-discrimination, empowerment and legality, and aligning with the forthcoming human rights bill to guarantee fairness for every citizen, wherever they live. We will continue to expand diagnostic and treatment capacity at Galloway hospital and other hubs.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): Will the minister take an intervention?

Maree Todd: I am quite short of time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back, minister.

Maree Todd: That is fine.

Douglas Lumsden: We are talking about fairness. Last week, my dad went from Aberdeen all the way down to Glasgow to the Queen Elizabeth or the national treatment centre—whatever it is called—because he requires a cataract operation. He travelled for five hours to get down there, spent 15 minutes in an initial consultation and then spent another five hours going back. Where is the equality in that?

Maree Todd: Brian Whittle talked about increasing digital access to healthcare. It sounds to me as though there was no need to put hands on Douglas Lumsden's dad, so that should have been a Near Me consultation rather than a 10-hour round trip. Those are issues that we face all over Scotland.

There is no doubt, however, that the national treatment centre programme is delivering for everyone in Scotland. The national treatment centre in the Highlands is delivering beyond what was expected. People are saying to me just how amazing the experience is.

Christine Grahame: There is a model in the Borders called Near Me, which would in fact have dealt with Douglas Lumsden's issue.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Grahame, can we have your microphone? It might be tucked away.

Christine Grahame: Everything is on.

That would have dealt with the very serious issue that Douglas Lumsden raised. A patient can have a video call with their allocated consultant about an issue so they do not have had to make such a journey just for a consultation. That is operational in the Borders, using videos.

Maree Todd: I am proud of the Near Me technology, which is now used all over the UK and in Ireland. It came into its own during the pandemic. It was developed in Caithness, in my constituency, because of the challenge of travelling down to the hospital and it is now well used all over the UK. It could do with being used more, in fact.

We are continuing to expand diagnostic and treatment capacity at Galloway community

hospital and other hubs. We are improving ambulance response times by reducing hospital delays, enhancing triage and increasing safe treatment at home or in community settings.

The provision of community beds and step-down facilities has been increased to reduce delayed discharge. Dumfries and Galloway's home first work is a great example of shifting care into local settings, as is the investment in hospital at home around the country, flow navigation centres and, as we have mentioned, Near Me. Work with communities to co-design services that reflect local needs is vitally important.

Christine Grahame: Will the minister take an intervention?

Maree Todd: I have a number of issues to cover before I finish.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am not sure that I can give you an awful lot more time back.

Maree Todd: I have taken a good number of interventions. Let me wrap up with some of the specific points that were raised during the debate.

I say to Douglas Ross that I am more than happy to chase that response for the save our surgeries group. Sharon Dowey raised some issues about audiology, which is a recognised challenge in our healthcare service and we are working to improve that. The issues with dentistry were largely caused by Brexit and the pandemic. The south of Scotland was particularly dependent on European dentists but we have taken action to try to improve that situation and we are seeing the benefit.

I agree with Carol Mochan's point about apprenticeship and local earn as you learn, which would also be helpful in my area. There has been some progress on that front, with nurses, including mental health nurses, training in situ, but we need to expand it to other professions. Being a fellow member of a regulated health profession, Carol Mochan will understand that the barriers to that do not all lie in the Government's hands; there are barriers within the professions, but it is important that we continue to pursue that.

I assure Tim Eagle that NHS Grampian has hospital at home. There are 35 patients a day using that service at the moment, and there are plans for expansion to respiratory and other areas.

I am sorry that I have not managed to respond to everyone's points. I want to finish the debate by saying a huge thank you to our health and social care workforce for their resilience and for their innovation. It is very clear that there is a lot of innovation across the country, including in rural areas. The debate has highlighted the challenges that are faced by communities in Stranraer, Wigtownshire and across Dumfries and Galloway.

We are acting on the motion's calls, investing in GP recruitment and retention, expanding diagnostic capacity, improving ambulance response times and increasing the number of community beds. We will continue to work with local communities to ensure that future health policy reflects their needs. I invite members to support those reforms and to work collaboratively across the Parliament to ensure that we deliver equitable access to care for every person, wherever they live.

Meeting closed at 18:39.

Correction

Ben Macpherson has identified an error in his contribution and provided the following corrections.

The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Ben Macpherson):

At col 30, paragraph 8—

Original text—

At the moment, there are a record number of people in modern apprenticeships.

Corrected text—

As of 26th September 2025 there were over 38,000 modern apprentices in training.

At col 31, paragraph 5—

There is “Scotland’s Offshore Wind Skills Priorities and Action Plan”, the energy transition skills hub, the oil and gas transition training fund, and so much more that we want to deliver and build on, as well as—as I said earlier—a record number of 25,000 modern apprenticeships.

Corrected text—

There is “Scotland’s Offshore Wind Skills Priorities and Action Plan”, the energy transition skills hub, the oil and gas transition training fund, and so much more that we want to deliver and build on, as well as—as I said earlier—as of 26th September 2025 there were over 38,000 modern apprentices in training.

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