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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 11 December 2025

[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 11:40]

General Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good morning. The first item of business is general question time.

Forth Valley College (Alloa Campus)

1. Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what action it has taken to support Forth Valley College's Alloa campus, in light of the recent reported concerns that it may be closed for financial reasons. (S6O-05275)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Ben Macpherson): I last spoke with the principal of Forth Valley College at an event earlier this week and last met him formally on 18 November at the Alloa campus. I remain assured that the college leadership team is committed to doing all that it can to keep the campus open.

The Scottish Government is supporting the Scottish Funding Council's college infrastructure investment plan. Through that plan, the SFC has supported the college to undertake an urgent feasibility study to identify and explore all possible options. A contract for that work was signed on 2 December and the work will inform the college board's deliberations in the new year.

Alex Rowley: The college projects that it will be millions of pounds in the red. A feasibility study will, in itself, still need resources.

In its recent publication on the draft budget, Colleges Scotland highlighted that, under the current model, the college sector is unsustainable without significant change. The publication calls for "above inflation investment" and a commitment to sustainable funding to reverse years of underinvestment in the sector. Does the minister accept that, if we are to reverse the dire state of further education finances, the Scottish Government must commit to above-inflation investment and sustainable funding models moving forward?

Ben Macpherson: With regard to Forth Valley College and the Alloa campus, as I have said, the contract for the work on the feasibility study was signed on 2 December and that work will inform the college board's deliberations in the new year. As well as that, in the new year, I will be working with the principal to assist the college with

organising a round table that will bring together all interested parties in the locality to consider the future of the Alloa campus, with a shared intention for it to continue to be used for the common good of the local area and of all the stakeholders who benefit from it now and could benefit from it in future.

On the budget considerations for the college sector more widely, including Forth Valley College, ministers are constructively engaged with Colleges Scotland as the representative body for the sector. We are having good discussions; indeed, ministers will be having discussions with Colleges Scotland today. However, as Alex Rowley would expect me to say, decisions on next year's budget are still being considered and will be relayed to Parliament on 13 January.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): Funding is at the heart of this issue, but Colleges Scotland has also made clear the unaffordability of the employer national insurance contributions. Has the minister been able to have any further discussions with the United Kingdom Government, which levied that charge? It is having a disproportionate impact on many businesses but, arguably, nowhere more so than on colleges.

Ben Macpherson: The member has raised important points. Although Scottish Government ministers, including me, have recognised the financial pressures on our college sector, whether through the Audit Scotland report or the work of the Scottish Funding Council, we have to recognise collectively that the scenario includes external pressures that are outwith the Scottish Government's control. It was deeply disappointing for a range of reasons, including for our college sector, that the position on employer national insurance contributions was maintained in the UK budget. It is putting unhelpful and undesirable pressure on our colleges, as it is on many other organisations across the public sector.

The Presiding Officer: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Legal Aid (North East Scotland)

3. Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what measures it is taking to address the reported legal aid crisis, to ensure that people in the North East Scotland region are able to access support. (S6O-05277)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): The Scottish Government recognises the concerns raised by Maggie Chapman, including the importance of ensuring access to justice for people in North East Scotland. The Scottish Government values the legal profession and continues to fully fund legal

aid while advancing reforms to improve access and sustainability across Scotland and not just in the north-east.

We will soon lay regulations to remove unnecessary financial tests for children's hearings. We will widen the eligibility for summary criminal cases, incentivise early resolution for solemn criminal cases and ensure fair remuneration for solicitors across Scotland. Additionally, the Scottish Government provides funding to citizens advice bureaux across the country and in North East Scotland, and we support the Civil Legal Assistance Office, which operates locally to offer advice and representation on civil legal issues.

Maggie Chapman: I know that I am not alone in having increasing numbers of constituents come to me about legal aid issues. Each one says a similar thing: they spend weeks, sometimes months, trying to find a legal aid solicitor, only to be told no, either due to the complexity of their case or sheer lack of capacity. Most are in marginalised groups, and they include single migrant parents, disabled people and a single mum who is a survivor of domestic violence that involved financial abuse and coercion. People can sometimes end up self-representing, but they have spent so long looking for legal aid that they do not have time to learn how best to advocate for themselves. How can the Scottish Government ensure that my constituents are able to realise their right to access to justice?

Siobhian Brown: I thank Ms Chapman for highlighting these complex challenges on behalf of her constituents. The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that everyone, particularly people from marginalised groups, gets the access to justice that they need.

However, the current legislative framework does not guarantee access to legal advice and representation. Solicitors decide whether to undertake legal aid cases and, if they do, which clients or cases to accept. It is important to note that the Scottish Government cannot compel solicitors to take on a case. As I have already noted, the on-going reforms aim to improve the situation, and solicitor availability will be considered as part of any future changes to the system.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): In order to address the issues that we have heard about, as well as the legislative framework, the Scottish Government's 2021 programme for government promised a legal aid reform bill during this parliamentary session. Given that there is only three months to dissolution, has the Government broken another promise?

Siobhian Brown: No, and we are all aware of the timetable for this parliamentary session. There

have been many members' bills as well as Government ones. I have been engaging with the legal profession for nearly three years now, and I have ensured that we will take forward legal aid reform in the next parliamentary session. In the meantime, there is a lot of secondary legislation going ahead now that will be delivered in this parliamentary session.

Carers Allowance Supplement

4. James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide further details of the December carers allowance supplement payment, including its anticipated impact on carers and how it will ensure that all eligible carers receive their payment promptly. (S6O-05278)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Social Security Scotland will pay an extra £293.50 to more than 96,000 unpaid carers from 4 December. Since its introduction in 2018, the carers allowance supplement has provided more than 1 million payments, delivering hundreds of millions of pounds to help to ease financial pressures and improve wellbeing. The vast majority of carers receive the payment automatically, but anyone who has not received it by 15 December should contact Social Security Scotland. This year, eligible carers in Scotland will be £587 better off than those elsewhere in the UK, recognising the essential contribution that they make to communities right across the country.

James Dornan: Given that more than 96,000 carers were due that payment from 4 December, and recognising the significant contribution that unpaid carers make to our communities, will the cabinet secretary outline what further steps the Government is taking to widen support, particularly in light of the recent expansion of eligibility for the young carer grant? What advice is available to any carer who has not received their letter or payment by 15 December?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I said in my original answer, those who have not received their payment by 15 December should contact the agency for further details. Mr Dornan is quite right to point to the extended eligibility for the young carers grant, which, of course, is available only in Scotland and eligibility for which has been extended to the age of 19.

Yesterday, I was delighted to talk to carers in Hamilton about the improvements in support from March 2026, as part of which those with multiple caring roles who receive carer support payment can be paid an extra £520 per year for every additional cared-for person through the carers additional person payment. Again, that is available

only in Scotland, and it will provide extra support to around 18,000 carers in the next financial year.

Moreover, from March 2026, carers will receive four more weeks of support when a caring role ends due to a bereavement, which will provide more stability at what is a very difficult time.

Neonatal Wards (Overnight Beds)

5. Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what progress it has made on increasing the number of overnight beds for parents in neonatal wards. (S6O-05279)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): "The Best Start: a Five-Year Forward Plan for Maternity and Neonatal Care in Scotland", which was published in 2017, recommended that all neonatal facilities should provide emergency overnight accommodation on the unit for parents, and that accommodation should be available nearby for parents of less critically ill babies. Boards are expected to include provision for that in their planning.

Every neonatal unit in Scotland has provision for families to stay overnight, where required. All neonatal intensive care units, and the majority of local neonatal units and special care baby units, have rooms on or near the unit, with other accommodation available nearby to allow parents to be with their babies. The majority of boards also provide support to allow siblings to stay, to ensure that families are supported to remain together.

The Scottish Government also provides support to all families with babies in neonatal care to cover the costs of food, travel and accommodation as part of our young patients family fund. If hospital accommodation is not available, the health board will usually be able to book and pay for nearby accommodation for families in advance.

Meghan Gallacher: I thank the minister for her answer and for taking the time to meet me yesterday to discuss concerns relating to neonatal care.

Bliss Scotland has been championing the need to increase bed numbers, which is an issue that must be taken seriously. At present, for every 10 babies who need neonatal care, only one bed is available for parents to stay overnight. I could not imagine being a parent of a newborn baby who was sick and vulnerable and being told that I could not stay with my child in the same location.

It is understood and accepted that the Scottish Government must do everything that it can to increase the number of beds. Would the minister be willing to keep me and other members who are interested in the issue up to date on the progress that the Scottish Government makes and on any

discussions that it has with local NHS boards on the issue?

Jenni Minto: I appreciated being able to have a conversation with Meghan Gallacher outwith the chamber to ensure that we both understood the importance of having the right accommodation available nearby or in neonatal units to support families at what can be a very traumatic time.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care has just written to Ms Gallacher to lay out the Government's plans, which will involve officials engaging with health boards that do not have adequate accommodation to ensure that that is provided.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): In parts of my South Scotland region, a lack of overnight beds in neonatal wards could result in parents facing a 100-mile round trip to see their baby. I understand that the recently announced maternity and neonatal task force will review rural service provision. Will the minister ensure that consideration will be given to supporting families in rural areas who have babies in neonatal wards?

Jenni Minto: Given that I, too, represent a rural and island constituency, the issue of such travel is high on my agenda, and it will be considered.

Debt (Gendered Impact)

6. Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what consideration it gives to the gendered impact of debt in its child poverty and social security policies. (S6O-05280)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The Scottish Government recognises the impact of debt on families, particularly women, and it encourages all public bodies to share good practice on debt collection. Our approach includes having a social security system that is underpinned by the values of dignity, fairness and respect.

We have committed to exploring further pilot activity on gender budget tagging for the 2026-27 budget, building on the work that was done last year with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. We are consulting a range of stakeholders on the development of our final tackling child poverty delivery plan, including the National Advisory Council on Women and Girls, to ensure that the plan tackles gender inequalities.

Ruth Maguire: It is well understood that domestic abuse can entail financial abuse, including coerced debt, and that single parents are around three times more likely to have experienced domestic abuse. Unfortunately, public debt processes too often do not reflect that

knowledge and understanding, and they can perpetuate the impact of financial abuse and coerced debt.

The excellent report by Professor Morag Treanor for Aberlour Children's Charity, One Parent Families Scotland and the Trussell Trust recognises that the issue requires action from all spheres of government. Will the Scottish Government consider reforming council tax joint liability rules, for example, so that women who are fleeing abuse are not automatically made responsible for debts that have been accrued by their abusers, to protect victims/survivors from debts that result from financial abuse and coercion?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I recognise the challenge that many women face when they are faced with domestic and coercive abuse of that kind. The Aberlour report shines a light on that important issue, and the Government is taking action, but we are always keen to see what more we can do through the child poverty delivery plan.

I hope that I can reassure Ruth Maguire, at least in part, by pointing to the Scottish Government's funding for Citizens Advice Scotland's council tax debt project, which extends right across Scotland, to improve access to services for people who are struggling with council tax debt, provide wider, more holistic support and ensure best practice by councils.

There is also the financially included project, which responds to economic abuse and includes a national helpline that my colleague Mairi McAllan launched officially yesterday.

The Housing (Scotland) Act 2025 also places a duty on Scottish ministers to undertake within one year a review of the impact of joint and several liability for council tax arrears—

The Presiding Officer: Briefly, cabinet secretary.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: —for those who have experienced or are experiencing domestic abuse, who are primarily women, as suggested by Ruth Maguire.

NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde (Support)

7. Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what support it is providing to NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, in light of reports that the national health service board is dealing with a much higher rate of flu patients compared with previous years. (S6O-05281)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): We are working closely with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde to support it this winter, as we are seeing levels of flu that are higher than usual for this stage of the winter

season. We have provided funding to support initiatives such as virtual hospitals and flow navigation models, which help patients to get the care that they need while reducing unnecessary accident and emergency visits.

Our vaccination programme is also vital in supporting health boards to respond to flu this season. We work closely with boards to make vaccination accessible, supporting them with national resources and funded initiatives such as mobile vaccination units.

Paul Sweeney: Staff in Glasgow hospitals say that beds are filling up at an alarming rate due to what has today been called a super-flu. In other health boards, hospital visitor restrictions are in place. Scotland appears to be facing a worst-case scenario this winter, but the situation could have been managed more effectively if the suggestions that we made to ministers months ago had been heeded.

Flu vaccination rates are unacceptably low. It is shocking that more than 300,000 fewer adults have been vaccinated this season compared with two years ago. That is completely unacceptable. What additional measures will the Government introduce to rebuild Scotland's vaccination rate before our healthcare system is completely overwhelmed?

Neil Gray: In his narration, Mr Sweeney has compared apples with oranges in relation to eligibility for flu vaccinations a year ago in comparison with this year. Eligibility is decided on the basis of Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation advice on vaccinations. If we compare like with like, particularly among adults, we are substantially ahead on vaccinations issued compared with where we were last year. Our flu vaccination programme started in September and we have vaccinated more than 1.5 million people.

Of course there is more to do, and it is never too late to pick up a vaccine, which is why the Government and I encourage everybody who is eligible for vaccination, whether they are a member of the public or a member of staff in health and social care, to make sure that they take it up.

The Presiding Officer: I call Davy Russell for a brief question 8.

Social Housing Waiting Lists

8. Davy Russell (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to Shelter Scotland statistics stating that there are 109,000 families on waiting lists for social housing. (S6O-05282)

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): We have the most confidence in those estimates, which are based on the Scottish household survey. They contain no double counting of households across multiple housing lists and are not dependent on keeping the administrative housing lists up to date. They will, however, contain some households who are already living in social rented housing and looking to transfer to another location.

Estimates from the 2024 Scottish household survey are scheduled for publication in January next year. Of course, the Government is entirely focused on work to ensure that supply can meet increasing demand.

Davy Russell: There are 5,000 families on the waiting list in my constituency alone. What action have you taken to improve the new-build situation, as the statistics say that there has been a significant drop in new builds over the past three years?

The Presiding Officer: Always through the chair, please.

Màiri McAllan: The Government is taking action across the board to increase the supply of social and affordable homes, building on a record that shows that we have built more than 140,000 affordable homes since we came into government, more than 100,000 of which have been for social rent.

There is £808 million available in this year's affordable homes budget, which we are putting towards the construction of new homes. We are now also asking councils to acquire family homes in particular off the market, to ensure that children spend less time in temporary accommodation.

Of course, that comes in advance of the £4.9 billion-worth of funding that will, as we have set out, be invested in the coming four years.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes general question time.

First Minister's Question Time

12:01

Grooming Gangs Inquiry

1. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): Our party—through my colleague Liam Kerr—lodged an amendment to the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill to secure a grooming gangs inquiry in Scotland. The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs, Angela Constance, rejected it and said that further inquiries were not necessary. She told the Parliament that a leading expert, Professor Alexis Jay, "shares my view"—that is a direct quote.

However, Professor Jay does not share Angela Constance's view. In an email to the justice secretary, which we forced the Government to release, Professor Jay says that her views

"had nothing to do with Mr Kerr's amendment, or the position in Scotland".

Professor Jay asked for her position to be "clarified". Can John Swinney explain why, therefore, his justice secretary did not correct the parliamentary record?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The comments that the justice secretary made in the stage 3 proceedings on the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill were, as I said to Mr Findlay last week, a reflection of the general comments that were being made about the issues at that time.

The issues that Professor Jay raised were corrected in the minutes of the national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group, which were published as a consequence of that meeting, and the release to the public of that information clarified the point that Professor Jay was concerned about.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I call Russell Findlay. [*Interruption.*] Let us hear Mr Findlay.

Russell Findlay: That answer might have held water last week, but it does not any more.

The justice secretary brazenly misrepresented a leading child abuse expert in order to block a grooming gangs inquiry in Scotland. The Scottish ministerial code requires Government ministers to correct

"any ... error at the earliest opportunity."

It also states:

"Ministers who knowingly mislead the Parliament will be expected to offer their resignation to the First Minister".

The justice secretary misrepresented an expert and then denied doing so when asked by journalists. She failed to correct the record and she has not even apologised. Why is it not obvious to John Swinney that she has broken the ministerial code?

The First Minister: For the reason that I set out in my earlier answer today and in my answers last week—that the justice secretary was making a general comment on the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill. The issue about which Professor Jay was concerned—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: —has been addressed in the minutes of the national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group.

What the Government is doing, which is what the justice secretary was setting out to Parliament at that time and which has been set out to Parliament on numerous occasions, is taking forward the essential work that is necessary to make a judgment about whether a separate grooming gangs inquiry is required, because the view that has been expressed to us—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: —is that the evidence base is not sufficient for us to take such a decision at this time.

As I pointed out to Mr Findlay previously, even if the amendment had been agreed to by Parliament on that occasion, there would have been no ability to take forward a grooming gangs inquiry, because it relied on the appointment of—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Sorry, First Minister. I say to members that this session is for scrutiny, and it is difficult to have that when we cannot hear one another.

The First Minister: That amendment relied on the appointment of a victims commissioner, who has not yet been established in office and cannot take the action that was proposed.

The Government is addressing the substance of the issue to ensure that we come to the correct conclusion on the steps that we have to take.

Russell Findlay: I know that Angela Constance was not making a general point. Everyone in the chamber knows that Angela Constance was not making a general point. John Swinney knows that Angela Constance was not making a general point. She twisted a statement about England to deny victims an inquiry in Scotland. Professor Jay asked her to correct this falsehood on 26

September, but she did not do so, and she has still not done so. Then, on 25 November, Angela Constance doubled down. She told the media that she had not misrepresented Alexis Jay. We only know about that now, in December, because we have dragged the information out of this secretive Government.

Grooming gang victims were failed by the authorities, and they are now being failed again by the Scottish National Party Government. How can they trust John Swinney and his justice secretary to deliver the honest answers that they deserve?

The First Minister: One of the points that I have been trying to stress to Parliament on the handling of this important issue—I recognise its importance—is about the care that the Government has to take about decisions about a grooming gangs inquiry, given the role of the Scottish child abuse inquiry, which the Government established in 2015.

Earlier this week, Lady Smith, who chairs the Scottish child abuse inquiry, set out the basis of the phase 10 hearings of that inquiry. The inquiry's press statement says:

“It should be noted that, where any conduct which constitutes grooming is alleged”,

the Scottish child abuse inquiry

“is able to investigate it if, overall, the circumstances in which it occurred are within its Terms of Reference”.

It adds that

“Grooming which took place outwith the establishments themselves may, depending on ... particular circumstances, be within”

the terms of reference.

The Government has already established a statutory public inquiry that has the ability, as Lady Smith has confirmed, to examine issues in relation to grooming gangs. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, members.

The First Minister: That is some of the work that the Government has to do to make sure that we properly respect the independent inquiry that we established by statute, which has the power to look at many of these issues.

Russell Findlay: That is desperate, desperate deflection. The SNP has repeatedly closed the door to the Scottish child abuse inquiry for grooming gang victims in the past, and it will continue to do so. On Tuesday, I met a grooming gang victim known as Taylor, along with her mother. That afternoon, they then went to meet John Swinney. They, along with other victims, have lost all trust in Angela Constance.

John Swinney is continuing to defend a justice secretary who misrepresented an expert, misled

the Parliament, misled the public and misled victims. Everyone in the chamber, no matter their politics, should expect honesty from Government ministers, and, if mistakes are made, they should at least be corrected. If John Swinney will not sack the justice secretary, we will give the Parliament the chance to have its say with a vote of no confidence. Will the First Minister order his MSPs to support his failing justice secretary?

The First Minister: It is really important that I make it clear to Parliament that the Government has no ability whatsoever to close the door of any route of inquiry of the Scottish child abuse inquiry—indeed, we would break the law if we tried to do so. [*Interruption.*] More to the point, Lady Smith would have none of it from the Scottish Government. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: I am sure that members will agree that robust scrutiny is possible without shouting from a sedentary position.

The First Minister: It is really important that I make it clear to Parliament and to the public that the Government has no ability to hinder the role of the Scottish child abuse inquiry in any way.

I met Taylor on Tuesday, with members of her family. I apologised to Taylor, because it was obvious from what she said to me that she had been failed, as so many young people in care have been failed by our care system. That is why we established the Scottish child abuse inquiry, to ensure that those individuals could find justice. That is why we commissioned the independent review of care. That is why we are taking forward the delivery of the Promise, to ensure that care-experienced individuals in our society are never subjected to any abuse in the future.

That is the commitment of my Government, that is my focus and that of all the members of my Cabinet, and that is exactly what we will continue to do.

Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs

2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): This morning I lodged a motion of no confidence in the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs, Angela Constance. It is clear that she misrepresented Professor Alexis Jay on the serious issue of grooming gangs and misled the Parliament. She has had repeated opportunities to apologise and correct the record, but she has failed to do so. Despite what John Swinney says, she has had repeated requests from Professor Jay to correct the record but she has failed to do so, and victims do not have confidence in her. It is now clear that she cannot stay in her position. She must resign, or John Swinney must sack her. Why is John Swinney defending the indefensible and refusing to do so?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am setting out to Parliament the substance of the issue and the actions that the Government is taking to ensure that we improve the lives of individuals who have suffered in the past as a consequence of abuse in the care of the state. That is what we are doing, and the Government will take forward that agenda.

Anas Sarwar: It is clear that victims have lost confidence in the justice secretary, and this looks like a First Minister trying to protect one of his own rather than doing the right thing by victims across the country. The rules are clear that a breach of the ministerial code is a sackable offence, but this Scottish National Party Government is addicted to cover-up and secrecy. The truth is that Angela Constance is not just a stranger to the truth; she is a stranger to competence as well.

Our justice system is in utter chaos. Violent thugs have joined the ranks of those being released early from our prisons, a sexual predator is less likely to end up in jail now than was the case five years ago, hundreds of drug dealers go unarrested, shopkeepers are left to defend themselves from professional gangs of shoplifters, and violent crime is on the rise, with more and more children falling victim.

Angela Constance and the SNP are soft on crime but experts at covering up. Will John Swinney explain to Scots why this incompetent and untrustworthy justice secretary is still in post?

The First Minister: Let me address what I think is the right thing to do. The right thing to do is what we did. What Angela Constance did in 2015 when she was Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning was to set up the Scottish child abuse inquiry. There was much resistance to that inquiry, but Angela Constance took the decision to set it up. That was absolutely the right thing to do, and I applaud her for taking that decision and for the justice that it will bring to individuals.

On the question of how the criminal justice system is operating, let me tell Mr Sarwar that, according to the latest data, the number of people who were given a custodial sentence has increased by 13 per cent from 2022-23, and there were 221 rape and attempted rape convictions, which is an all-time high. That was driven both by a high level of prosecutions and by a 10-year high in the conviction rate for rape and attempted rape. That is what the justice system is doing: it is standing on the side of victims, ensuring that the perpetrators of violence against women are brought to justice. I am proud of the Government's record in bringing criminals to justice.

Anas Sarwar: Victims do not believe you, and they do not buy it. The First Minister talks about

doing the right thing in 2015. Do the right thing now and sack the justice secretary.

The Presiding Officer: Speak through the chair, please.

Anas Sarwar: The SNP Government is addicted to cover-up, and no issue is out of bounds for its spin.

The rules are clear that Angela Constance must go; victims are clear that Angela Constance must go; and every single person who is sitting at home watching John Swinney make these pathetic responses knows that Angela Constance must go. But John Swinney thinks he knows better.

Angela Constance misled the Parliament on the issue of grooming gangs; the Minister for Health and Social Services used public money to get chauffeured to football matches; his predecessor misappropriated public money to watch football on his iPad; and John Swinney, Nicola Sturgeon and Humza Yousaf all wiped their phones during the pandemic—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Sarwar.

Anas Sarwar: They do not want to hear it, Presiding Officer. They all wiped their phones during the pandemic, so we will never know what really went on. They think that the rules do not apply to them. They think that they can always get away with it. Why do John Swinney and the SNP hold the people of Scotland in such utter contempt?

The First Minister: I do no such thing. What I do in office is focus my Government on making sure that it delivers for the people of Scotland, and it is doing so. On health, we have the highest number of operations undertaken since the pandemic; levels of literacy and numeracy across our primary and secondary schools are at a record high; business investment has exceeded 10 per cent of gross domestic product for the first time in 20 years in Scotland; unemployment is lower in Scotland than it is in the rest of the United Kingdom; and child poverty is falling in this country when it is rising in the rest of the United Kingdom. That is all because of the focus of my Government. I serve the people of Scotland with every fibre of my body, and I intend to continue doing so.

Taxation (Funding for Local Services)

3. Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Across the country, families just cannot get the services that they need locally. Every day in schools, children with additional support needs are being failed by a near total lack of specialist staff. More than 10,000 children will spend this Christmas in temporary accommodation, and far too many elderly and disabled people and their

families just cannot get the care packages that meet their needs. At the other end of the spectrum, the wealthiest people in Scotland just keep getting wealthier.

For all the mistakes that she made in her budget, the Chancellor of the Exchequer's mansion tax plans for England will raise hundreds of millions of pounds. However, that cash will be grabbed by the Treasury, rather than going to local councils. Does the First Minister agree with the Scottish Greens that we could use a Scottish mansion tax to fund local services, such as education, housing and social care, to deliver the support that our communities so desperately need?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I recognise many of the challenges and pressures that Mr Greer puts to me with regard to additional support needs. As a consequence of the agreement that we reached in the budget last year, in dialogue with local government, we invested more money into additional support needs. We have not only restored but exceeded previous budgets for housing, to ensure that we tackle the temporary accommodation issue. The greater than real-terms support for local government delivered a stronger position to deliver care packages, although I accept the pressures.

The issues that Mr Greer raised are material to the Government's budget, which will be settled in January. I welcome the dialogue that has taken place with the Scottish Green Party. We are open to the ideas and suggestions that are being made, and we will give them every consideration. However, from the extensive discussions that he and I have had on these issues over the years, Mr Greer knows my commitment to investing in public services to meet the needs of the public.

Ross Greer: I appreciate the efforts that the First Minister and the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government have made to take into consideration the budget proposals that the Greens have already made, but this is an opportunity that we cannot afford to miss. The chancellor's English mansion tax is definitely an overcomplicated and limited way of achieving a progressive outcome, but it is progressive to tax the wealthiest people in the most valuable houses fairly.

Two years ago, the Scottish Government developed proposals for far more effective changes to council tax for the higher bands. If those proposals were dusted down and those changes were made to bands F, G and H, it would put a desperately needed £126 million into local services, which is enough for thousands of additional support needs teachers or social care workers. The First Minister surely agrees with the Greens that our local services need more funding

and that it is only fair to ask wealthier people to pay their fair share so that we can deliver that.

The First Minister: There is a lot in what Mr Greer said that I agree with. As he knows, the Government has taken the decision, which, of course, is not warmly welcomed across Parliament, to ask people on higher incomes to pay more in taxation than they would if they lived in other parts of the United Kingdom. That is exactly the right thing to have done. We will consider other proposals, as Mr Greer knows. He is involved in discussions with the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government and the Minister for Public Finance, which I am fully across. We look forward to coming to conclusions when the Government's budget is set out to Parliament in January.

United Kingdom Government Child Poverty Strategy

4. Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what assessment the Scottish Government has made of the potential implications for its work to eradicate child poverty in Scotland of the UK Government's child poverty strategy. (S6F-04525)

The First Minister (John Swinney): Any measure taken by the United Kingdom Government that helps us in our work to eradicate child poverty is welcome. The decision to lift the two-child limit—this Government proposed and pressed for that lifting—is welcome, but the UK Government's strategy still fails to recognise the damaging impact of the benefit cap or the local housing allowance freeze, which only further drive families into poverty.

We will continue to engage with the UK Government on those questions and, of course, we will set out to Parliament in March the next tackling child poverty delivery plan, which is our statutory responsibility.

Marie McNair: I thank the First Minister for that answer. Thousands of children are in poverty under Labour because it has kept Tory austerity. It bungled the scrapping of the two-child policy by keeping the benefit cap. Many families with more than two children may still be capped. The child poverty strategy was an opportunity for the UK Government to deliver real change, but it has fallen short of the bold action that is needed. In fact, the United Kingdom House of Commons library found that, if Labour matched key Scottish National Party Government policies, it could lift an additional 1.1 million children out of poverty across the UK.

While Starmer struggles to get a grip on the ever-growing poverty levels across the UK, what assurances can the First Minister provide to the

people of Scotland that the SNP Scottish Government will do everything that it can to reduce child poverty here even further?

The First Minister: The action that this Government is taking is making a real difference. I assure Marie McNair that the Government's focus in Scotland will remain absolutely on eradicating child poverty, and that it is a central issue for discussion in the Government's budget.

The UK Government's decision to scrap the two-child limit comes after sustained and concerted pressure from the Scottish Government and charities, and it is welcome. However, other measures are needed, and the Government in Scotland will take those steps in relation to the budget. I committed that, should the UK Government remove the two-child limit, the resources that this Government was going to spend on that would be allocated for other anti-child-poverty measures, and I reaffirm that commitment to Parliament today.

Childhood Dementia Awareness

5. Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): To ask the First Minister what assessment the Scottish Government has made of, and support it is providing to, childhood dementia awareness. (S6F-04519)

The First Minister (John Swinney): I thank childhood dementia Scotland—a collaborative partnership of experts and organisations set up by Alzheimer Scotland—for its work to raise awareness of the issues that are associated with childhood dementia through its new report. There is clearly more work to be done to understand the causes and the impact of childhood dementia, but we know that it is caused by a number of rare genetic conditions.

That is why we are collaborating with NHS Education for Scotland and NHS Inform through the rare disease action plan to improve awareness and understanding of rare conditions among healthcare professionals and the public. We will, of course, carefully consider the recommendations that childhood dementia Scotland set out.

Miles Briggs: At lunch time, I will host a round-table discussion in Parliament alongside Alzheimer Scotland to discuss the findings of the report, which was published yesterday. Most people will not be aware of the rare genetic conditions that affect almost 400 children in Scotland and cause symptoms of dementia. The report has provided important evidence on prevalence, gaps in support and the impact that that has on families across our country.

Despite the courage and resilience of families who live with childhood dementia, too many families feel isolated and have to fight for the

support that they need, as childhood dementia does not fit into many of the current pathways. Will the First Minister and the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care agree to meet me and campaigners, and will the Government consider the key recommendations in the report on childhood dementia being placed in the national dementia strategy, and those on developing national standards and better research in Scotland?

The First Minister: I am grateful to Miles Briggs for highlighting the issue and the important research work that has been carried out. I welcome the fact that he will be meeting campaigners and experts on the subject today. Of course, with the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, I would be happy to meet the member and representatives of the organisations to look at those questions.

Essentially, Mr Briggs makes an argument that I accept entirely, which is that the way through is not to try to fit individuals into services, but to ensure that services meet the needs of individuals, who in this case are vulnerable children with acute health requirements. That is what I would call person-centred care, which must be at the heart of our health service. If we embark on our discussions considering how best we can deliver that proposition, I think that we can make progress. I am very happy to take forward those discussions.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank the First Minister for his words on the matter. In Scotland, there is no framework, consistent referral pathway or single approach to the care of children with dementia. Sadly, 50 per cent of children with dementia die by the age of 10. Does the Scottish Government recognise that it is an urgent issue? Will it provide an official response to Alzheimer Scotland's recently published report on childhood dementia?

The First Minister: Yes, we will provide a response. My answer to Miles Briggs will be how I will advise the Government to respond, which is that it should be in the frame of pursuing person-centred care. Carol Mochan makes the point that, sadly, many of the children who are affected by childhood dementia have a relatively short life expectancy. Maximising their life expectancy so that every precious moment is available for their families to be with them is absolutely vital. I will ensure that those issues are reflected in the Government's response to the research that is being carried out.

NHS Scotland

6. Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to the independent investigation into

NHS Scotland by the retired consultant surgeon and former president of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow, Mr Mike McKirdy. (S6F-04529)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government carefully considers all reports on the performance of the national health service.

Jackie Baillie: Mike McKirdy's comprehensive report lays bare the consequences of the lack of delivery in our NHS after almost two decades of Scottish National Party spin. Despite what the First Minister says, very little has improved under the SNP.

Let us take the longest waits: the former First Minister, Humza Yousaf, said that he would end waits of more than two years by September 2022. Three years on, thousands of people are still waiting. Now, the First Minister is promising to end all waits of more than a year in just four months' time but, last month, we learned that 11,246 people are still waiting for more than two years.

I ask the First Minister: who should the public trust—the SNP, which overpromises and always underdelivers, or Mike McKirdy, a respected consultant who says that more of the same will not be enough? Is that not why Scots cannot afford another five years of the First Minister's failing SNP Government?

The First Minister: Before I come to the substance of Jackie Baillie's question, one of the issues that will affect the performance of the national health service is the upsurge in conditions that put it under incredible pressure. Today, the national medical director of NHS England, Professor Pandit, has issued a statement, which I shall read:

"This unprecedented wave of super flu is leaving the NHS facing a worst-case scenario for this time of year."

I am simply saying that the health service will undoubtedly face enormous pressures when waves of cases come our way—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: That is exactly what is happening with performance in accident and emergency departments, because of flu pressures. If it is happening in England, it is likely to be happening in Scotland—which it is.

On Monday, Mr McKirdy said that his strongest advice to the Scottish Government should be a relentless focus on delivery. I reassure Jackie Baillie that that is exactly what is going on, which is why, in the period since April, new out-patient waits of more than a year reduced by 17.9 per cent. In the same period, the waiting list size for new in-patient and day-case procedures over 52

weeks has reduced by 26.1 per cent. It is why the number of general practitioners is increasing. That is all happening because this Government is relentlessly focused on delivery.

There is nothing for Jackie Baillie to worry about, because, as we saw from the opinion poll yesterday, nobody trusts the Labour Party on the national health service, and more people trust me and the SNP.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): The evidence is clear that Scotland's NHS is turning a corner, with downward trends across nearly all waiting list indicators. To suggest otherwise does a huge disservice to our fantastic NHS staff. I suggest that Jackie Baillie and her colleagues think twice about the impact of their scaremongering about our health and social care system in Scotland and the effect that that is having on the wider population—and perhaps also reflect on the dismal record of their colleagues in Wales and England before turning to our record. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Ms Harper's question.

Emma Harper: Can the First Minister advise how the Scottish National Party Government is working to deliver our health service in Scotland, continue to drive down waiting times, and invest in a well-funded and well-supported NHS for those who need it?

The First Minister: The first thing to say is that we put in place record financial settlements for the national health service, which the Labour Party could not bring itself to vote for. We have also put in place the investment to make sure that we are increasing GP numbers and that operations are performing at levels that we have not seen since January 2020, before the pandemic. We have also seen an increase in the number of diagnostic tests performed, and, as I have just repeated to Jackie Baillie, long waits of more than a year have been down for five months in a row.

What this Government is doing is focusing on the people's priorities. We are tackling the issues in the national health service, and we are delivering for the people of Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: We move to constituency and general supplementary questions.

Baird Family Hospital

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): My question relates to an issue that cannot be blamed on the super-flu.

Aberdeen's new maternity hospital is facing further delays, more than a decade after it was first given the go-ahead. The Baird family hospital

was originally planned to open in 2020, but more setbacks have meant that it might not be finished until 2027 at the earliest—that is seven years late. Millions of pounds of taxpayers' money has been spent on rectifying design flaws. Local women are paying the price for that incompetence, while staff are struggling to cope with rising waiting times for maternity services, gynaecology, breast screening and breast surgery. First Minister, will you engage with NHS Grampian and visit the site to see for yourself the problems that are causing the delays?

The Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

The First Minister (John Swinney): I understand the significance of the points that Tess White raises. Obviously, the safety of national health facilities is absolutely essential. During the design phase of the Baird, issues have been raised about hospital construction projects that have been completed in other parts of Scotland, and those issues are the subject of inquiries. We have to be mindful of the safety issues, which explains a lot of the issues at play.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care engages in detail with NHS Grampian to press for the earliest possible progress. I totally accept the importance of those services being available for Tess White's constituents, and I assure her that there is relentless focus on those issues. However, we have to be mindful of the safety considerations that must be applied in all cases.

Voluntary Sector (Financial Pressures)

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): The First Minister will be aware of the significant financial pressures in the voluntary sector, with inflationary energy and food costs and, of course, increased national insurance payments. That increase in national insurance will cost the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals an extra £400,000 a year, which has led to it having to look for voluntary redundancies. Does the First Minister share my concern that the Scottish SPCA will have to cut its services at the very time—after the festive season—when there will be an upsurge in demand as unwanted pets, given as Christmas presents, are rejected and abandoned when the novelty wears off?

I declare an interest as convener of the cross-party group on animal welfare.

The First Minister (John Swinney): Christine Grahame raises a serious issue. We are all concerned about the sustainability of the third sector in light of the additional costs that it has to meet due to the increase in employer national insurance contributions. That increase has been a

significant factor for all sectors, and in particular the voluntary sector, to deal with.

I am happy for the Government to co-operate with the Scottish SPCA in any way that we can to ensure that its important advisory and support services are available at all times during the year.

University Funding (Job Losses)

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): The First Minister will be aware that, over recent months, the University of Edinburgh has been embarking on cost-cutting measures, including 350 voluntary redundancies, salary freezes and reductions in hours.

Constituents of mine have highlighted a communication that the university has circulated, which outlines the possibility of compulsory redundancies. The University and College Union estimates that one in eight jobs could be lost. However, it is not just about Edinburgh university. Yesterday, the University of Strathclyde announced plans for 70 job cuts.

Does the First Minister accept that that is the result of long-term underfunding of Scottish universities by the Scottish Government? More important, what does he say to university workers who are contemplating a Christmas when they do not know whether they will have a job in the new year?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The issues in the university sector are complex. For example, the United Kingdom Government's stance on migration does not help the university sector, because it does not help with the attraction of international students, which is one of the very significant factors that have affected the resources of the university community.

Of course, I accept that the Government publicly funds a proportion of university income, and these issues will be the subject of debate in the budget process. However, last year, Mr Johnson never supported the budget. The universities would have got nothing, according to Mr Johnson, because he was not prepared to support the budget.

I simply encourage Mr Johnson to engage with the Government, so that we can all make progress in supporting the universities and, into the bargain, their employees.

Business Investment (Confederation of British Industry Report)

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): A new report from the Confederation of British Industry shows that business investment in Scotland has risen to a 20-year high, in contrast with a fall across the United Kingdom. This success for Scotland's economy comes despite

the UK Government's tax on jobs and its low-growth model. How does the Scottish Government plan to build on that momentum and continue to deliver economic growth, even within the limits of devolution?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The CBI report is very welcome, because it indicates that business investment in Scotland has risen to a 20-year high, in contrast with a fall across the rest of the United Kingdom. That goes alongside the fact that unemployment in Scotland is lower than that in the rest of the United Kingdom, which is another indication of the strength of economic performance in Scotland.

Of course, we have heard the views of the credit rating agencies, which said that Scotland had a strong and diverse economy and that it benefited from prudent financial management of its public finances and from its institutional strength.

The CBI report demonstrates that Scotland is an attractive place for investment, that it is a successful and dynamic economy and that it has good stewardship of its public finances.

Supreme Court Judgment

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): On Tuesday, I had a constructive meeting with Chief Constable Jo Farrell. She assured me that Police Scotland is complying with the Supreme Court judgment on the definition of the word "woman". The chief constable told me that Police Scotland did not wait for any guidance from the Equality and Human Rights Commission, but instead produced its own interim guidance, which is based on biological sex. I ask the First Minister again—especially bearing in mind the Sandie Peggie judgment—why it has taken almost eight months for other public bodies to follow the law.

The First Minister (John Swinney): One of the issues of which we have been mindful is the need to ensure that the complex legal judgment of the Supreme Court is correctly and properly applied in guidance. We have published new guidance in relation to a number of areas, such as schools and workplaces within the Scottish Government.

Obviously, there are issues that we have to continue to work through, as we saw in the judgment that was announced at the beginning of the week, on Monday, in relation to the employment tribunal to which the member referred. That is a further range of complexity that has to be wrestled with.

I reassure Pam Gosal that the Government is doing the work to ensure that those issues are properly addressed, and we have already done so in relation to the documents that we have published.

Crozier v Scottish Power UK plc

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I hope that the First Minister will join me in welcoming yesterday's Supreme Court decision in the case of Crozier v Scottish Power and commend Elaine Veale, whose father, Robert Crozier, died from mesothelioma in 2018, for her unrelenting struggle in an eight-year battle with his former employer, Scottish Power UK plc, to win the case.

Will the First Minister join me in condemning the actions of Scottish Power in resisting and obstructing the claim? Will he welcome the fact that, on this occasion at least, the Supreme Court has understood the clear intention of this Parliament in passing the Damages (Asbestos-related Conditions) (Scotland) Act 2009?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Mr Leonard raises an example of the importance of addressing the issues involved in the damages legislation and the enormous suffering that individuals with mesothelioma have experienced.

I associate myself very much Mr Leonard's comments, and I am glad that the issue has been resolved satisfactorily, but it should not have involved going to such lengths to ensure that justice could be achieved.

Energy Costs (Support)

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Scotland is an energy-rich country, but people are struggling with sky-high bills to heat their homes. For too many years, Westminster has squandered Scotland's energy, while failing to provide any meaningful support to people in Scotland to raise living standards.

While Westminster is sitting on its hands, can the First Minister advise what steps the Scottish National Party Scottish Government is taking to support people on low incomes with their fuel bills this winter? Can he say any more about what we could do differently with full powers over Scotland's energy from the fresh start of independence?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Over this winter, the Government will invest more than £196 million in our winter heating benefits, providing vital support towards the cost of energy to those with a greater need for heat, including low-income households, families with disabled children and young people, and pensioners. In addition, low-income Scots, including pensioners, will continue to receive our winter heating payments, which are worth £59.75, this winter. Those payments are available only in Scotland. Those are some of the measures that the Government is taking within its existing powers.

Of course, people in Scotland are attracted by the very clear argument that it is vital that the enormous energy potential of our country benefits the people of Scotland. With all of the generation capability that we have, it is absurd that we have such high levels of fuel poverty. It is only the fresh start of independence that will address that issue.

Non-domestic Rates Revaluation

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Hospitality and self-catering businesses across the country, which are already suffering from rising costs, are reeling this week from a rates revaluation that sees, in some cases, a threefold increase in the bills that they are likely to face, which they simply cannot afford.

I know, and the First Minister knows, that the assessors are independent of Government, but ministers set the statutory framework—the rules, the assumptions, the timetables and the methodology—under which the assessors operate. Will the First Minister take urgent action to address the issue before yet more hospitality businesses have to close their doors?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I understand the concerns that Mr Fraser raises with me. As he correctly says, the assessors act independently on this question. However, I am concerned by the detail that I am hearing about some of the decisions that have been arrived at, which is why the Minister for Public Finance has already engaged in considering the implications of the issues and what is driving the changes in the methodologies that are producing those results.

I assure Mr Fraser that the issue is already being addressed by the Government. It is an important issue, because it will affect the sustainability of many businesses as a consequence of the proposed changes. The matter is being pursued by ministers at this time.

Prisoners (Palestine Action)

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): Seven prisoners who are in their second month on hunger strike are now at risk of death due to their deteriorating health. They are part of a larger group of political prisoners who are being held under special terrorism conditions due to alleged association with the proscribed group Palestine Action. I oppose the ban on Palestine Action, I support those who have protested against the ban and I add my voice to the call for their immediate bail while awaiting trial.

On behalf of my constituents in the North East Scotland region who care deeply about the issue, will the First Minister join me in opposing any curtailing of human rights and the intimidation,

discrimination and victimisation of those who oppose genocide?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am a very strong supporter of human rights. I have deep anxieties with regard to what I am hearing about the consideration that is being given to curtailing the application and scope of the European convention on human rights in the United Kingdom. The obligation to observe the ECHR is one of the great developments during my lifetime. It has strengthened individual rights, and we are the better for it. I am concerned by the direction of travel on that question, and I assure Mercedes Villalba of my support on it. This evening, I will attend a Scottish Human Rights Commission event in the Parliament.

Mercedes Villalba will appreciate that custodial decisions are arrived at by the application of law in the United Kingdom and that it would be inappropriate for me, as First Minister, who has to observe the rule of law, to make any comment about independent decisions that are arrived at by prosecutorial or judicial authorities.

NHS Waiting Lists (Automatic Removal)

Foysol Choudhury (Lothian) (Ind): A constituent of mine who is on a national health service waiting list recently received correspondence from NHS Lothian informing them that, if they did not confirm within 21 days whether they wanted to remain on the list, they would automatically be taken off it. Although I understand that that policy is in line with Government guidance, I am concerned that it might result in a vulnerable patient, such as one who is elderly or who has special educational needs, missing out on essential treatment without their consent. Will the First Minister agree to instruct ministers and officials to review the policy to ensure that vulnerable patients are not struck off waiting lists unfairly?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Any individual who requires healthcare treatment should get that healthcare treatment. That is the simple premise behind the national health service, and it is applied in all circumstances. It is important that we have up-to-date information on the medical conditions of individuals to enable us to plan their treatment, and that is exactly what the national health service ensures.

Whitesands Flood Defence Scheme

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Scottish National Party-run Dumfries and Galloway Council is set to vote today on the controversial £68.6 million Whitesands flood defence scheme, which is opposed by many residents and businesses. The Scottish Government is expected to fund 80 per cent of that project, despite serious questions

remaining about its impact and effectiveness. Given that the Scottish Government faces a massive budget black hole and that Dumfries and Galloway Council could potentially be closing rural schools to deal with its financial crisis, will the First Minister withdraw his Government's financial support for the Whitesands flood defence scheme project, which is likely to do more harm than good for residents, businesses and the local economy?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Flooding at Whitesands has been a long-term issue. There has been significant parliamentary and political pressure for a scheme to be put in place. A number of very well-designed flood prevention schemes have been put in place in different communities in Scotland that have provided respite for families who are affected. I simply observe that early weather information suggests that there will be very heavy rain in the south-west of Scotland over the course of this weekend, so there are challenging circumstances out there at all times.

Flood defence schemes are developed locally. They are put to wider discussion across all local authorities to determine the funding priorities, and the Government allocates funding to them accordingly. That is, essentially, the Government collaborating with a locally based approach to the design of flood prevention schemes. Mr Hoy is asking me to take that power away from local authorities and to decide on the issue in the centre. Normally, Mr Hoy rails against the Government deciding on such issues. I have had much correspondence over the years from people who do not like the scheme that is proposed at Whitesands, but it is important that we listen carefully to the expert advice about the right course of action on such issues.

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

12:49

Meeting suspended.

12:51

On resuming—

Neurodevelopmental Conditions (Support)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-19319, in the name of Daniel Johnson, on welcoming the report by the Royal College of Psychiatrists on support for neurodevelopmental conditions. The debate will be concluded without any question being put, and I ask members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes the publication of the report by the Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland, *Multi-system solutions for meeting the needs of autistic people and people with ADHD in Scotland*; notes the reported unprecedented increase in the number of people across Scotland, including in Edinburgh, seeking support for neurodevelopmental conditions (NDCs), particularly attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism; understands that, as of March 2025, over 42,000 children and 23,000 adults were waiting for a neurodevelopmental assessment, and that this represents an increase of over 500% for children and 2,200% for adults since 2020; further understands that there is currently no standardised national pathway for diagnosis, treatment and support for NDCs, and that in the absence of appropriate services, individuals are being referred into general mental health pathways, not because they have a mental illness, but because there is nowhere else for them to go; believes that this is placing unsustainable pressure on Scotland's mental health system; further believes that timely diagnosis and intervention for ADHD and autism can significantly improve quality of life, reduce suicide risk and prevent secondary mental illnesses; commends the work of the Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland in developing a comprehensive, value-based framework to address these challenges, and notes the view that simply expanding existing structures is not a sustainable solution, and that a multi-system and society-wide response is needed.

12:51

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):

I thank members from across the parties who have supported my motion to enable this debate to take place. The debate is important for a number of reasons, not only to discuss the recommendations in the report by the Royal College of Psychiatrists but to mark the progress that we have made.

It is a little bit more than eight years since I first stated in the Parliament that I have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and that I take medication for it. Then, in 2018, I held, I think, the first debate in the Parliament to discuss ADHD by itself.

We have made much progress. When I reflect on the context then and the context now, I think that it is now much easier to talk about ADHD. There is a much greater understanding and

acceptance of it. Indeed, I find myself attending national health service briefings and other meetings at which I am not the only person raising the issue. Colleagues around the chamber find it equally important and raise the issues, too. That is fantastic.

However, there has also been an odd flipping of the situation. Back in 2017, there was stigma; it was difficult to speak up and the Government often found itself justifying why diagnosis and prescribing took place. Now, we have public demand for diagnosis, assessment and prescribing, and the Government is explaining why those things are not taking place. Most recently—and we need to talk about this in the debate—the Government has been explaining why diagnosis is not required.

That situation is dangerous, and we need to take care. We have to consider the scale of the problem. There are 42,000 children waiting for assessment—that is a 500 per cent increase. We also have 23,000 adults waiting for assessment—that is a 2,200 per cent increase. Unfortunately, we have had to rely on the Royal College of Psychiatrists to produce those numbers, because the Scottish Government is not producing them.

Behind those numbers is not just a cost in terms of the frustration and human misery caused by a failure to diagnose and provide support, but a real economic cost. It is estimated that undiagnosed autism spectrum disorder costs the economy £44 billion and undiagnosed ADHD £17 billion. In the prison population, 25 per cent are estimated to have ADHD against 3 to 5 per cent of the general population. There is a real cost to failure that we have to address. Indeed, there is not one single neurodevelopmental condition that is not overrepresented at least threefold in the prison population. That is why the report by the Royal College of Psychiatrists is so important—it sets out a clear plan of what we can do now in wider policy, and in clinical action and policy, to address the issue.

On the point about there being no need for a diagnosis, the report contains important recommendations—in particular, recommendations 1, 2 and 5 of the 10 that are made—on non-clinical pathways and how we can adjust approaches in education and wider public policy to help people with ADHD and autism. Those practical, reasonable adjustments do not need a diagnosis. Recommendations 9 and 10, which are about improving understanding more widely across the general population, are important, too.

However, the bulk of the recommendations in the report are on clinical pathways and access to diagnosis. Explicitly, recommendation 3 talks about increasing access to medication. I am not

denying that medication is important. Let me be very clear, as I have been clear in the past: for me, as for many people, medication was the biggest single step that I could have taken to help me with my condition. Indeed, it is what many people approach me about, as they do constantly. They say that medication helps with their ability to hold down a job, maintain relationships with their family and deal with the chaos that ADHD often brings.

The report also sets out the need for new guidelines, including from the Scottish intercollegiate guidelines network, as we do not have any SIGN guidelines for ADHD. We also need new general adult psychiatric standards, and we need a four-tiered model for accessing diagnosis and support. Those are clear and practical points.

Another feature of the report is its statement that we need to tackle primary care head on. In recommendations 3 and 4, the Royal College of Psychiatrists makes it explicit that we need to bring forward a structure and a means by which general practitioners can actively participate in prescribing. We have seen changes and advances in our understanding of the condition, which is critical.

Let us talk about the other elephant in the room: shared care. The reality is that GPs across this country have stopped what was once the understood and received practice of entering into shared care on the basis of a private diagnosis. I do not think that someone should have to have a private diagnosis to get the treatment that they want, and I certainly do not want a system that relies on that, but we do need a pragmatic approach.

I have had lots of conversations about that in recent months, and GPs will say that they are not allowed to do shared care any more, but that is not true. Health boards are clear that they are not preventing it, and even the local medical committees say that the guidelines that they have produced do not prohibit it. However, health boards, GPs and local medical committees seem to be undertaking some kind of mutual blame activity, and are all pointing the finger in another direction.

We need a pragmatic approach in which it is recognised that private diagnoses are very often made by the very same people who would make an NHS diagnosis. Therefore, I am asking for that sort of practical approach with, as has been called for, the standardisation of what a good diagnosis looks like, so that we can accept diagnoses that have been made elsewhere.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): Will the member give way?

Daniel Johnson: I am very happy to give way to Sandesh Gulhane, but he will have to be brief.

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

I would just note that, when someone gets a private diagnosis, it is no longer shared care, as they will no longer be seeing that private consultant. What we really need is for the diagnosis to be transferred into the NHS for shared care to happen.

Daniel Johnson: I do accept that, and that view is adopted in the standardised approach. It is shared care if the person continues to see the private practitioner, but the NHS GP does the prescribing. However, we do need standardisation, pragmatism and, above all else, clarity.

To the minister, I say that we should have the numbers so that we can understand how many people are waiting; we should have clear standardised approaches; and we must have a plan to clear the backlog, because, behind it, tens of thousands of people are in crisis.

12:59

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I thank Daniel Johnson for securing the debate. Daniel and I have had a couple of chats about this issue over the past couple of months, and we are all aware of the issue through our constituents. It is multilayered and multi-agency, and it impacts on children and families in health and education settings.

As many others will have done, I met the RCP in Scotland just last week to discuss its report. A few issues have come through. A key issue is the impact of neurodevelopmental conditions on many aspects of people's lives; indeed, they have major emotional, social and health impacts.

Daniel Johnson's point about access to diagnosis and medication is incredibly important. As we have discussed, there is also an issue in relation to GPs in health boards such as NHS Lothian. The issue of standardisation is really important, given that different GPs take different approaches.

Daniel Johnson mentioned the number of people who are impacted—NDCs impact roughly 10 to 15 per cent of the population. It is good that people are beginning to talk about the subject, because I think that such conditions are probably significantly underdiagnosed.

Between 2019 and 2021, the number of referrals increased between 500 and 800 per cent across health boards. That increase is being driven by several factors, one of which is that society is more aware of such conditions. In

addition, there are unmet historical needs, as well as population growth. There is no denying the impact of Covid, either.

As the RCP has said, this debate is not necessarily about finance, although I will touch on that subject in a moment. More important is the need for standardisation of the referral, treatment and support pathways, and I hope that the minister will pick up on that issue—I have already had a quick chat with him about it. Without a nationally agreed pathway, it is difficult to see how we can move forward. The pressure will only grow in the coming months and years as people become more aware of neurodevelopmental conditions. Constituents regularly approach me on the subject, because, even within East Lothian, GPs take very different approaches.

As for what we should do in the future, which is the key issue addressed in the RCP report, there are some lessons that we should take on board. As part of the national autism implementation plan, a feasibility study on pathways was undertaken in 2021; the fact is that we are still talking about pathways, and there is still a need for such pathways to replace single-condition approaches. That is an important point. Those pathways must be accessible across the 14 health boards.

Daniel Johnson also talked about the need to deliver local stepped care pathway models. I interact with Stronger Together for Autism and Neurodivergence, which is very active in East Lothian, and that is one of its key aims. Such models include third sector and community services, such as access to self-help, peer support and a range of other services prior to—and, of course, after—diagnosis.

The RCP makes a number of other key recommendations that must be progressed. For example, it talks about the need for a governance framework and a competency-building framework at all levels of service provision.

Daniel Johnson touched on the delivery of the RCP's four-tiered pathway proposal. The first tier involves a national public health approach, which is all about developing a public health campaign to promote awareness and understanding of neurodevelopmental conditions, with an emphasis on self-management.

The second tier is the availability of national self-help resources, which will involve creating a centralised platform to provide comprehensive self-help. The third is about establishing specialist third sector commissioning for NDCs. That provision must be localised; indeed, we have discussed the importance of that with NHS Lothian. There is almost a blame game going on, with the health board saying that GPs are responsible for local provision, and we need to

clear that up. A key issue is how we prioritise investment in developing local provision, and there needs to be a multidisciplinary approach that includes clinicians and GPs.

There is much more that I could say, but I conclude by thanking Daniel Johnson for securing the debate. The issue will continue to be debated, and I look forward to hearing from the minister on the RCP's report in particular.

13:03

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): The RCP's report lays out in clear and evidence-based terms what many of us have been warning of for years. Demand has soared. As of March 2025, more than 42,000 children and 23,000 adults were waiting for a neurodevelopmental assessment. We are not talking about a marginal increase. Since 2020, children's waits have risen by more than 500 per cent, and adults' waits have risen by 2,200 per cent. Those numbers represent lives on hold: children becoming adults and being sent to the back of the queue again; parents in despair; and adults left without clarity, support or hope.

However, let us be clear: the scale of the crisis is not simply the result of increased demand; it is also a result of the fact that, for years, the Government has reassured itself that everything is fine. It is most certainly not fine and, shamefully, the Government knows it because it has conflated data, changed the way in which data is collected and used flawed data to game the system.

The royal college's recommendations are not radical and they are not rocket science. As Daniel Johnson said, access to medication is pretty basic. The recommended actions are the basic building blocks of a functioning system. The Scottish National Party Government should have put in place a clear national pathway with timely diagnosis and treatment and seamless support years ago. Instead, we have chaos.

Data collection is fundamentally poor. NHS Grampian cannot separate neurodevelopmental cases from child and adolescent mental health service cases in the data. We cannot even understand the scale of need. NHS Lanarkshire provided data that was two years out of date, and when we phoned the board, we learned that the real waiting time is two years longer than was publicly reported. That is not transparency.

Daniel Johnson: Does Sandesh Gulhane agree that it is confusing when health boards say that they cannot report data but they can say how long people are going to wait? They clearly know what people are waiting for, but they are not reporting it. Does that not also confuse the member?

Sandesh Gulhane: It absolutely does confuse me. What health boards say to their patients about waiting times and what they publish are completely separate. We have seen that in NHS Lanarkshire. What we are talking about is not transparency but obfuscation, and it is unacceptable.

Without access to correct data, how can a service possibly be planned? Without a clear pathway, people will fall through the cracks, and the situation is placing intolerable pressure on an already overstretched mental health system.

We know about the consequences of that. We heard Daniel Johnson talk about worse educational outcomes, higher rates of unemployment and the significant overrepresentation of individuals with autism and ADHD in the criminal justice system. Untreated ADHD increases the risk of substance misuse. Untreated autism increases the risk of anxiety, depression and suicide. Early diagnosis is not optional; it is life changing and life saving.

The minister has called for a round table on 15 December. I will be honest and say that I am sceptical about that. We have had countless round tables and warm words, but we rarely see action, so I would like to ask a few questions.

What has been done since the minister appeared before the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee on 28 October? Has he met members of health boards to ensure that data is collected appropriately? Is reliable data now being collected? What steps have been taken to ensure transparency?

Scotland needs a multisystem, society-wide response. We cannot simply expand broken structures. We need coherent pathways from diagnosis to treatment to long-term support, and we need those now. The royal college has done its job; it is time for the Scottish Government to do its job.

13:07

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Daniel Johnson for bringing this important debate to the chamber. Working with other members across parties, Daniel Johnson has been a real champion in the Parliament for people with autism, ADHD and other neurodevelopmental conditions.

The report adds to the growing body of evidence that change is needed to our approach to assessment, diagnosis and support for neurodivergence in Scotland. Members might be aware that, earlier this year, the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee conducted an inquiry that gave people and families who have experienced neurodevelopmental services the

opportunity to share those experiences and recommend changes to ensure that we can better serve our neurodiverse constituents. I look forward to the report being published. It was an important inquiry and many lessons were learned, so I hope that the report will reflect that and will be useful in adding to other on-going work in the area.

The royal college report rightly points out that, despite the dramatic rise in need, Scotland still lacks a dedicated and standardised pathway. It goes on to say that, in the absence of appropriate services, individuals are being referred into general adult mental health pathways, not because they have a mental illness but because there is no suitable alternative. The report points out that those services have never been designed to assess or support people with those conditions and they have just become a catch-all for those referrals.

That structural mismatch is now overwhelming the system. Waiting lists have grown to unmanageable levels. It is therefore important that issue is addressed.

I think that members will recognise what the report is saying, and I want to raise the voices of my constituents, because the frustration of people and families cannot be overstated.

Over the four years that I have been in Parliament—I have said this before—the most frequent requests that I have got in casework have often been very simple. Constituents ask, “Please can you help me understand?”, whether it is to do with waiting lists or service provision for people with autism, ADHD or neurodivergence. They ask, “Can you help me?” with primary school or secondary school, or as children move between primary, secondary and further education, when families often find themselves in conflict.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Is the member aware and does she agree that, historically, ADHD has been underdiagnosed in girls and women as a result of differences in the presentation of symptoms? While boys often display hyperactivity and externalised behaviours, girls might show inattentiveness, emotional sensitivity and internalised struggles. The profession is only just realising that. Does the member agree that part of the strategy should focus on girls and women?

Carol Mochan: I thank the member for that important intervention; I have had that issue raised with me in casework.

I believe that colleagues in the chamber have heard very similar requests from constituents. More recently, I have heard about the use of the private sector for assessment, which can be incredibly stressful, as other members have mentioned. Many children—and, as we now know,

adults—are seeking private assessment after having made many attempts to get an assessment through the national health service. The long NHS waiting lists and the lack of service mean that exhausted families are often using much of their own money and resources to get a diagnosis. That is very stressful, and even after they do that, there is no clear pathway for them.

Many of us in the chamber have heard about how poorly co-ordinated shared care is. That has been mentioned today, so I will not go over it again. However, I note that families are often rejected not just for medication, but by GPs and CAMH services. A constituent raised with me a similar situation in our education system. Parents seek a diagnosis, and then, within the education system, children are denied community services such as occupational therapy or speech and language therapy because their private diagnosis does not link in with the school's way of recording and reporting, and supporting people.

Parents report to me that they feel that public services—health services, social care, education and criminal justice—lack a basic understanding on the front line. That is an important point, and I will finish on it. The resources are often there, at what has been described to me as quite a high level, but the question is how we enable the front-line teams to pick up on the issues.

I would have liked to say more, Deputy Presiding Officer, but I appreciate the time.

13:12

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I congratulate Daniel Johnson on securing this important debate. Mr Johnson and I co-hosted an event in October: the RCP report was launched in the morning, and a session took place later where colleagues came along to ask questions. I thought that it was a really helpful session. The report, in my view, is a very important offer to all of society in Scotland.

I will highlight one of the key messages that came out of that session, which was very unusual for the types of events that we all attend as members. Usually, when we go to such events, we always hear, “Can we get more money?”, but one of the key messages from that event was that there is a lot of money in the system—as Carol Mochan just touched on—that could be better invested in people. There was certainly an ask for more money, but it was not the key issue.

The 10 recommendations in the report are all extremely important, but I will touch on just three. The recommendations are helpful in promoting engagement and trying to deliver better outcomes for autistic people and people with ADHD. I have engaged extensively with constituents and with

family members who have children with autism or ADHD, and I know that there is a societal challenge in Scotland that we have to try to address. There are, of course, wider issues in this area that exist not just in Scotland but around the world. Nonetheless, in Parliament, we need to think about what we, as parliamentarians, can do.

I sent the report to constituents to let them read and digest it, and make up their own minds as to what they think that it can actually do.

All 10 of the recommendations have merits, but some would be challenging to deliver, particularly in a short timescale. To me, recommendation 1, which Daniel Johnson touched on, is really important. I will read out the title for the *Official Report*. It is:

“Demand driven by the need for support in the workplace, in places of education and from the benefits system”.

What is proposed could be transformational in terms of healthcare being offered. There is a challenge regarding the Department for Work and Pensions, because we do not have those powers here. It might therefore take a bit of time to deal with that recommendation, but it should be dealt with. Constituents have regularly raised issues with me regarding a need for diagnosis before care is provided. The five suggestions that are made under recommendation 1 could be beneficial in that regard, although I am of the opinion that some of them would be challenging to deliver—the one that involves the DWP in particular.

Recommendation 2 calls for a public health-informed approach. That makes sense and, if we push for it, it could be achieved as a quick win.

Recommendation 5, which is on page 15 of the report, is about national strategies and resources. To me, it is one of the most important recommendations. I hear from people who are concerned regarding the high percentage of people who are diagnosed with neurodevelopmental conditions. It is challenging for those who need support, including those who need more advanced support, and the recommendation is crucial to help to deliver that.

I am conscious of time, so I will not go through all the recommendations, but I welcome the report, which is helpful. I hope that the recommendations will stimulate further discussion and dialogue, but also decision making so that we can get better outcomes for the people we all represent. We have societal challenges, but the report can certainly help to move the dial. Healthcare professionals have provided a set of recommendations to help. They know that there is money in the NHS system that could be better invested, and the recommendations are very worthy of consideration and further discussion,

because they could genuinely make a huge difference for the people we are here to represent.

13:17

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I thank my friend and colleague Daniel Johnson for bringing the debate to the chamber. I applaud his continuing drive to deliver a better pathway for those with neurodevelopmental conditions, and I applaud him for using his own experience to highlight the subject. I also thank the Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland for its comprehensive report on multisystem solutions for people with ADHD and autism.

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder involves differences in attention, impulsivity and hyperactivity. Mr Johnson gave a comprehensive overview of the system's failings and the dire need to deliver support and a national strategy for the hugely increasing number of people who are seeking assessment and support for neurodevelopmental conditions, given all the negative impacts that are associated with lack of support.

I will not rehearse all the important issues that Mr Johnson spoke about so well, but the one that worries me the most, which has reared its head again, is the lack of coherent and consistent data collection. As I have said many times, our health service lacks a universal system that allows data collection. In one way or another, we will have to address that across the health service in general, because such a tool would be a huge help in tackling issues.

I also want to highlight prevention, which is one of my favourite topics. I have some limited experience of coaching athletes with autism and fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, and what I have witnessed—

Daniel Johnson: Will Brian Whittle take a brief intervention?

Brian Whittle: I will.

Daniel Johnson: As I often say to people, beyond medication, the other critical factors are good sleep, hygiene and exercise. I emphasise that access to sport is critical in helping people to manage ADHD.

Brian Whittle: I thank Daniel Johnson for finishing my speech for me. [Laughter.] I was going to say that I witnessed young people flourishing and developing in a training environment that delivered structure and self-discipline in their lives. It was great to see, and one of them even ended up doing a college course on health and fitness.

More telling is what happened to those athletes during Covid, when they were starved of that structure in their lives. Without that framework and focus, there was a significant slide, which was much worse than that for the other athletes in the squad. One ended up not being able to control his eating and being unable to get out of the house to take part in activities. He ended up putting on so much weight that he never got back to training—and he was an international athlete.

Having access to activity, a pathway to self-expression and a route to channel their energy can be so important for some people who have neurodevelopmental conditions, because it can help to provide balance.

I spoke to the Royal Society of Psychiatrists and some autism representatives in the third sector to see whether there was any agreement on the points that I am exploring. Thankfully, there was agreement.

I take every opportunity to highlight the importance of sport and activity to the nation's wellbeing. I suggest that, in these instances, they can be even more important. I also suggest that the continued decline in opportunities to be active in the school environment and in our communities might be a contributing factor to the exponential and unprecedented rise in the number of people who are requesting ADHD assessments. I consider those numbers to have always been there, under the surface. However, I wonder whether, as part of prevention and, as Daniel Johnson put it, the non-medicalisation of the condition, many people with neurodivergent conditions would benefit from a reversal of the decline in opportunities to channel their hyperactivity.

Again, I thank Daniel Johnson for bringing the debate to the Parliament.

13:21

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I, too, thank Daniel Johnson for bringing the debate to the Parliament. I also thank him for his bravery in being so vocal about some of the challenges that he has faced, which is not something that people appreciate enough.

My interest in this issue was triggered by the eminent Dr Premal Shah, who set up the Lothian adult ADHD and ASD clinics. He is a long-term family friend and quite the force in this area.

I agree that the report is excellent. I enjoyed reading it, and I congratulate the Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland on its work. I particularly liked the framing of this issue as a "wicked problem"—one that is complex, interconnected and resistant to quick fixes. We need to bear that

in mind. It is not just a health issue; it is a systemic challenge that touches every part of society.

We know that neurodevelopmental conditions intersect with education, employment, justice and social care. We also know that people are being referred into mental health pathways that were never designed for them, which—we must not forget—is overwhelming clinicians as well as delaying care for those who have severe mental illness. The number of vacancies in psychiatry is rising, and burnouts are accelerating. The system is fundamentally under strain from every angle.

We have heard waiting list figures for assessments. Some regions are experiencing delays of more than five years, and I have also had a high number of inquiries from my constituents about their own issues.

I want to focus my brief remarks on the financial cost of those problems to our economy. The figures that have been quoted directly reflect a loss of productivity, and we know that there are productivity challenges in Scotland and across the United Kingdom. Higher unemployment rates increase reliance on benefits. Businesses are losing skilled workers who cannot access timely support. Schools struggle to keep pupils engaged, which leads to lower educational attainment and reduced future earnings. The justice system bears additional costs through higher rates of offending linked to untreated conditions. Every delay in diagnosis and intervention translates into lost economic output and increased public spending. That is a cycle that we cannot afford to ignore.

We know that the funding is fragmented and insufficient. Unless there are dedicated funding streams, we cannot establish the specialist pathways that are needed. However, as I have said, the problem is complex, and so are the mechanisms for funding. We need to acknowledge that. I agree with the pragmatic approach that is suggested in the report that there should be, in the interim, a separate funding stream that is dedicated to wider service development.

Much more thought needs to be given to the potential for digital solutions. Coming from an information technology background, I know that that is easy to say, but I absolutely acknowledge the complexity, and I appreciate how difficult it will be to provide those solutions. However, if we could start to unlock the data sources, that would result in some very powerful tools.

I will pick up on some of the points that have been made on data. We cannot solve what we cannot see. I absolutely agree that we need robust data collection, but we need that data to be disaggregated by sex. We know that ADHD and autism present differently in women and girls. We know that women are much better at masking and

at using coping strategies to hide distress, but that delays diagnosis. Such girls are underidentified in childhood, and women can often reach a crisis point before receiving—

Daniel Johnson: Will Michelle Thomson take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: It would need to be brief, as the member is about to conclude.

Michelle Thomson: I am indeed. I was coming to my last sentence.

Without sex-specific data, we risk designing services that fail half the population. That is not a technical detail; it is the foundation for equitable care.

13:25

The Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing (Tom Arthur): I thank members from across the chamber for what has been a thoughtful and constructive set of contributions. The strength of feeling that we have heard on behalf of autistic people, people with ADHD and those with other neurodevelopmental conditions, as well as their families and those who support them, underlines both the scale of the challenge and, I think, our collective determination to deliver meaningful change.

I thank Daniel Johnson directly for securing the debate and for acknowledging the important work of the Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland in producing its recent report. The college has made a valuable and timely contribution. The Scottish Government welcomes its focus on multisystem reform, early intervention and support based on need, not simply on diagnosis. Those principles strongly echo our own approach, and they reflect the perspective of professionals, families and communities, whose voices must continue to shape the way forward.

Members are absolutely right to highlight the unprecedented increase in demand for neurodevelopmental assessment and support. We are not alone in saying that. As I have said previously, that trend is emerging across the United Kingdom and internationally, with growing pressure on systems that were never built to manage demand on the present scale. We must meet the challenge, however, and we must do so in a way that recognises the diversity of neurodivergent people's experiences and the complexity of the systems that they interact with across health, education and social care.

Members have spoken about waiting times. We appreciate that waiting for assessment or support can be challenging, but we are working hard to make that experience better for individuals and families. A diagnosis can be profoundly important

to a person's identity and understanding of themselves. For some, particularly those seeking ADHD medication, it is essential.

Diagnosis alone is not the solution, however. A traditional NHS waiting-list model cannot meet the scale or complexity of the need that we now face. I have heard from many experts about the risks in overmedicalising our response. As the royal college has emphasised, a co-ordinated multi-agency response is required, focusing on timely, needs-based support from the outset. For children and young people, the national neurodevelopmental specification sets a clear expectation that support should begin on the basis of need and should not be contingent on a clinical diagnosis.

Implementation has undoubtedly been challenging in the face of rising demand, but we have already taken significant steps. We have invested in service pilots, in the testing of digital assessment tools and in family support initiatives, and we are working to strengthen multi-agency pathways, building around our getting it right for every child national approach. We have also published the joint review of the implementation of the national specification, jointly carried out by Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. The review identifies short, medium and long-term actions to support children's service partners to deliver the specification more effectively.

To drive that important work forward, we have established a new cross-sector task force, jointly chaired by senior leaders from education and health. Its purpose is clear: to accelerate and co-ordinate systems-wide improvement, drawing on lived experience, clinical expertise and good practice across Scotland.

Brian Whittle: I have listened intently to what the minister has said. I agree with much of it, but I caveat that getting a diagnosis involves an element of relief for many people, who then recognise that they need to deal with something. There is a relief and a mental health issue in getting a diagnosis.

Tom Arthur: I appreciate the problems. In emphasising the importance of a needs-based approach, I want to be absolutely crystal clear that I recognise the importance that is placed on diagnosis. I would not want my remarks to be misconstrued in any way, whether unintentionally or intentionally, nor to be suggestive of any language that relates to notions of overdiagnosis. I want to be very clear about the approach. My focus is on ensuring that people can access support as quickly as possible and that diagnosis should not act as a barrier to or means of gatekeeping that. I recognise that, for many, great importance is placed on diagnosis for identity and

self-understanding and, in some cases—when it comes to ADHD in particular—for access to medication. We recognise the need to address all those issues quickly. However, as I have said, we need to do that with sensitivity and rigour, recognising the complex and diverse nature of the issue.

Members have raised the importance of pathways, including adult pathways. We are committed to ensuring that adults receive support that is as consistent and responsive as possible. Recent work is helping us to move firmly in that direction. That is why we have fully accepted the recommendations of the adult neurodevelopmental pathways report and are working with partners on implementation. Our autistic adult support fund and our investment in the national autism implementation team are already supporting more flexible, needs-based approaches for adults across Scotland.

Rightly, members have emphasised the lack of robust national data. Improving data is essential if we are to plan effectively, understand unmet need and support targeted investment.

Daniel Johnson rose—

Tom Arthur: Before I take an intervention from Daniel Johnson, I will say that work is already under way with health boards and local authorities to understand that data, including what data is currently collected and how we can move towards a more coherent national approach.

On the points that Dr Gulhane raised, I am happy to confirm to him that I have continued my on-going engagement directly with health boards. Indeed, I met a health board just this morning and spoke at length about the importance of neurodevelopmental support and an understanding of the particular challenges and pressures that are faced.

I give way to Daniel Johnson.

Daniel Johnson: I am grateful to the minister for giving way. The point about data is important. However, I will ask him about pathways, because there are clear and specific steps for having a consistent four-stage pathway. Most critically, it is about requesting SIGN guidance for ADHD and, most fundamentally, looking at who can prescribe and at what point in the system they can do so. Has the minister asked his officials to look at those specific points?

Tom Arthur: All the issues that Mr Johnson has related are part of the wider considerations. As was touched on, a summit is coming up on Monday at which we will have an opportunity to discuss a lot of the issues in more detail.

I have noticed the time, Presiding Officer. I have now gone over what was allotted to me.

Again, I thank members from across parties for their contributions. The challenge is significant. It requires a response that involves the whole system and all of society but, ultimately and most important, is also focused on the needs of the individual.

Michelle Thomson rose—

Tom Arthur: I was intending to conclude, but I am happy to take an intervention.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Make it very brief.

Michelle Thomson: It will be extremely brief. I genuinely consider it imperative that data is disaggregated by sex, for the reasons that I have outlined. Is the minister able to commit to that?

Tom Arthur: That absolutely needs to be considered as part of the process. When it comes to understanding any data, we would not want to limit ourselves to sex, as important as that is for the reasons that Michelle Thomson set out about different presentations, such as when it comes to masking, for example; those are important points but, as has been touched on by other members, we also need to understand the socioeconomic implications. There is a lot that we have to do on data, and I recognise that.

I will close by again thanking members for their contributions. I look forward to working constructively with members of all parties, and wider partners, to improve our response.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate.

13:34

Meeting suspended.

14:00

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Climate Action and Energy, and Transport

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The first item of business this afternoon is portfolio question time, and the portfolio is climate action and energy, and transport. There is quite a bit of interest in asking supplementary questions, so I make my usual plea for brevity in questions and responses.

CalMac Ferries (New Vessels)

1. Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to ensure that the CalMac vessels being constructed in Turkey are delivered on schedule and on budget. (S6O-05283)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd and the Cemre shipyard are working hard to fully commission and deliver the MV Isle of Islay as soon as possible, and the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee was updated on the December target on 28 November. I can assure the Parliament of CMAL's, CalMac's and the shipyard's combined strong focus during the final stages of vessel delivery.

I meet CMAL regularly and have spoken of the possibility of delivering the remaining three vessels earlier than at the six-month intervals currently indicated. CMAL is discussing all options with the shipyard to deliver the vessels as soon as practicable, and further updates will be provided. I am pleased to report that the costs for all four vessels remain on budget. When the MV Isle of Islay is delivered, the communities of Islay and Jura can look forward to a more resilient and modern ferry service.

Sue Webber: Last week, it was announced that the MV Isle of Islay is going to be delayed. Considering that that is the first of our four vessels that are being built in Turkey, will the cabinet secretary say, in detail, what actions she is undertaking to ensure that the remaining three vessels will be delivered on schedule? How is she working with CMAL to ensure that the vessels can enter service more quickly and that they will not require immediate repairs on their arrival in Scotland?

Fiona Hyslop: The CMAL and other testing—the sea trials and so on—for the first vessel will help to identify whether anything needs to be done, before the other three vessels begin sea

trials. That is a very practical aspect. I regularly meet CMAL representatives to ensure accountability with regard to how the vessels are progressing. CMAL staff are regularly at the Cemre yard to ensure that progress is being made.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): The four ferries being built in Turkey deliver precisely zero social or industrial value to the Scottish shipbuilding industry, and CMAL has confirmed that the tender scoring for the new northern isles freight flex vessels is weighted 70 per cent to quality and 30 per cent to cost, and only 3 per cent of the quality element score relates to community benefits. Yet again, that fails to meet the key recommendation of the national shipbuilding strategy that a minimum 10 per cent social value weighting should be applied to evaluations in new competitions, in line with Treasury green book guidance and the Cabinet Office social value model, so that a 30-year cross-Government shipbuilding pipeline encourages participation from the United Kingdom supply chain. Will the Scottish Government move to enforce the minimum 10 per cent social value weightings for new competitions from now on?

Fiona Hyslop: We continue to have community opportunity and benefit across Transport Scotland contracts—a community benefit figure that is comparable. However, the member might be aware that there was only international interest, particularly in relation to the northern isles freighters that are being replaced—[*Interruption*.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Sweeney. Cabinet secretary, please continue.

Fiona Hyslop: In terms of—[*Interruption*.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please continue, cabinet secretary.

Fiona Hyslop: With regard to international yards and shipbuilding competitive tenders, and what can be enforced internationally, the member must understand the challenges of trying to enforce something in another jurisdiction.

Ferry Services (Island Communities)

2. **Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to protect and improve ferry services to Scotland's island communities. (S6O-05284)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): We set out our long-term vessels and ports plan in May. The first of six major vessels, the MV Glen Sannox, was delivered into service earlier this year, and we expect the first of the Islay class vessels to be delivered soon. We have commissioned seven electric vessels for routes across the west coast. Taken together, those

measures mean that the Government has invested in renewing more than a third of CalMac's entire fleet. We have also awarded the new Clyde and Hebrides ferry service contract and CMAL is progressing the procurement of two freight vessels for the northern isles routes that serve Orkney and Shetland.

Katy Clark: Islanders on Cumbrae are concerned about CalMac proposals for scheduled maintenance windows, which could lead to a direct cut to the island's vital lifeline ferry services, and believe that CalMac and Transport Scotland must drop the proposals, which could mean that services are withdrawn for either six hours per week or one 24-hour period per month. Will the cabinet secretary provide reassurance that there will be no reduction in service and capacity next year, and that the 2026 summer timetable will match this year's one?

Fiona Hyslop: The Largs to Cumbrae service will benefit from the cascade and redeployment of existing younger vessels for that route, and a new slipway and shoreside facilities for Cumbrae are currently being built, following the awarding of more than £10 million of Scottish Government funding.

On the maintenance proposals, one of the points of the new direct award contract is that there is engagement, particularly on things such as maintenance. Maintenance is important, and I was keen to ensure that maintenance was in the contract as a regular part of the servicing of our vessels. That is the correct thing to do, but it has to be done with communities. That is why it is a proposal that can be engaged with. I have had representations from people in Cumbrae and others, including from Mr Gibson, who is the constituency MSP. I encourage all communities, when they are looking at the maintenance schedules, to engage directly, and I have asked CalMac to ensure that it is engaging.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): There is no justification for the reduction in service to Cumbrae, which has been excellent for many years, and people wish it to continue that way. I commend the cabinet secretary and CMAL for the £13.5 million, which is the total level of investment, going into Cumbrae for the new slipway and associated works. Will the cabinet secretary give an update on phase 1 of the small vessel ferry replacement programme and how Cumbrae, in my constituency, will benefit from the cascading of vessels?

Fiona Hyslop: The small vessel ferry replacement programme is progressing well. The seven new vessels in phase 1 will help to improve connectivity and the resilience of island communities with their electric operation, which will help to reduce carbon emissions. Progress is

demonstrated by the steel cutting for the first vessel, which took place in September this year, two months ahead of the original schedule. Further construction milestones will take place soon, as the build programme gathers pace. As I have indicated, the Largs to Cumbrae service will benefit from the cascade and redeployment of existing younger vessels for the route, which, again, is an improvement on top of the investment for the slipway and shoreside facilities that Kenneth Gibson mentions.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Shared cabins were removed on the northern isles ferry service without consultation. No thought was given by the Scottish Government to the impact that that decision would have on the concessionary voucher entitlement, which has in essence been halved. The cabinet secretary wrote to me saying that entitlements could not be restored as it would be unaffordable and would exacerbate capacity challenges, but there is no recognition of the connection between those issues and the loss of the shared cabins policy. Will the cabinet secretary agree to meet me so that we can discuss the issue in full again?

Fiona Hyslop: I have previously met Beatrice Wishart in her constituency, and she knows, as I explained then, that the decision on shared cabins was the operator's. The Scottish Government did not introduce that directly, but, in supporting the operator's responsibilities, I understand why it did that, and I think that Beatrice Wishart does as well. On how we can benefit the community, the new contract, in which I am sure Beatrice Wishart will have an active interest, is being developed. My colleague Jim Fairlie is leading on that for the Government. These are the sorts of issues that can and should be raised as part of the preparation for the new contract as it is developed.

Net Zero Policies (Cost)

3. Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government when it will publish further details of the estimated true cost of its net zero policies for households in Scotland. (S6O-05285)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): The draft climate change plan, which was published on 6 November, is the first climate change plan in the United Kingdom to set out an assessment of the costs and benefits of the policies within it. Most of those financial benefits are expected to accrue to households and businesses. The draft plan includes the net cost, which is financial costs minus financial benefits, of delivering its policies. That is in line with the approach that is used by the Scottish Fiscal Commission and the Climate Change Committee. That cost to the Scottish

economy from 2026 to 2040 is estimated at £4.8 billion.

We are seeking views on the presentation of costs and benefits during the plan's consultation period and will consider those for the final publication.

Roz McCall: The much-delayed climate change plan that the cabinet secretary mentions revealed that the Scottish National Party's net zero plan will cost the Scottish economy £4.8 billion by 2040, as she has said. The plan also admits that many of the proposals have not been fully costed. There is a lack of detail on how those costs will be split between households, businesses and the public sector. Will the cabinet secretary commit to publishing more detail on those proposals, including how much the average Scottish household will be left out of pocket by the plan?

Gillian Martin: It is a 15-year plan. Uncertainty around United Kingdom Government action, technological advancements and market decisions make the distribution of costs extremely challenging to estimate. We have set out the costs in line with the legislation. We know that the scale of change that will be needed for the next part of our net zero journey is significant, and that delivering our net zero target by 2045 will require the transformation of our economy and society, underpinned by sustained investment, both public and private. I end by quoting Professor Graeme Roy, the chair of the Scottish Fiscal Commission, who said:

"Doing nothing, not responding to the challenge of climate change, will be far more expensive and damaging to the public finances than investing in net zero ... it is simply not an option."

I agree whole-heartedly with Professor Roy.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have a number of supplementaries, which I hope will be brief.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): It is vital that we ensure that Scotland's buildings become warmer, greener and cheaper. However, the high cost of energy continues to be prohibitive to many energy-efficient heating upgrades. Do you agree that we need substantial reform of the energy system to achieve affordable climate goals? Can you give any more detail on the Scottish Government's work?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members should speak through the chair.

Gillian Martin: Bill Kidd is absolutely right that, in an energy-rich nation such as Scotland, no household should be struggling to heat their home. Measures that were announced by the chancellor will reduce average bills by only £12 a month, while significantly scaling back investment in

energy efficiency and clean heating, when those are the actions that would cut bills permanently. Most powers in this area are reserved to the UK Government, so it is important that it uses its full powers and the levers at its disposal to make clean heating more affordable. It is vital that the electricity and gas markets are further reformed.

On the Scottish Government's work towards energy efficiency, we recently consulted on proposals for homes in the domestic private rented centre to meet new energy performance certificate heat retention rating band C by the end of 2033. The requirement will apply to new tenancies from 2028. We also recently introduced new regulations on energy performance certificates, which will bring an improved EPC rating system into force. We are taking steps to ensure that poor energy efficiency is no longer a driver of fuel poverty, which will positively contribute to the eradication of child poverty.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We will need brevity in both questions and responses.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I very much agree that the lack of action there has a cost. It is really important to look at it at a local level. Will the cabinet secretary comment on why we are not getting the same focus on the homes that are vulnerable to flooding? At the moment, the figure for that is 284,000 homes, and the Scottish Government's website says that another 100,000 will be vulnerable to flooding over the next few decades. What will be done to ramp up support for households that are currently at risk?

Gillian Martin: If the member does not mind my saying so, that is a bit of a tangential question about flooding, although it is an important issue. Most of the flood protection schemes are in the hands of local authorities, which are given substantial funding to put them into action. Given that the initial question was not about flooding, I might have to write to Sarah Boyack to give her more detail.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests. This week, I met local home owners and constituents in Glasgow who spoke passionately about the co-operative retrofit model. The model works in communities to share information about options for retrofitting for all income groups. Is the cabinet secretary aware of the co-operative work in that space? What support could she provide to help communities and local industry to replicate and adapt the co-operative retrofit model for their areas, including community organising, peer support, specialist consultancy, and start-up grants?

Gillian Martin: I am always keen to hear about action that is happening on the ground that can be

replicated throughout the country. Certainly, I will take an interest in that particular scheme, and I will pass on the comments to Mairi McAllan, the Cabinet Secretary for Housing, whose portfolio might have appropriate levers in place.

Road Safety Management (Safe System Capacity Building Programme)

4. David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the road safety management safe system capacity building programme in Scotland being awarded a Prince Michael international road safety award. (S6O-05286)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): I am delighted that Transport Scotland has received that prestigious award. The Government recognises that, in order to really embed the safe system approach to road safety, leadership and co-ordination need to be set out from the top, and that is why we invested in that programme for the people of Scotland.

It is critically important that we continue to change the road safety culture in our country. The programme consisted of publishing the world's first safe system manual for practitioners and a cultural maturity playbook, and providing bespoke training for more than 500 of our partners. The success of the project solidifies Scotland's position as a world leader in safe system delivery. It is vital that we continue to work with partners at all levels to reach our vision of Scotland having the best road safety performance in the world by 2030.

David Torrance: The award is welcome recognition for Scotland, but we must never lose sight of the fact that one life lost on our roads is one too many. As the Government continues to work towards realising its long-term vision of no one being killed or seriously injured on Scotland's roads by 2050, how will the Scottish Government build on the work that it has already undertaken?

Fiona Hyslop: Any life lost on our roads is one too many. We are committed to that vision zero ambition, and we need to build on those foundations. That is why we have invested record levels of funding in road safety—£48 million for this year. That includes measures to reduce casualties across the trunk road network. The money also helps local authorities through the road safety improvement fund and is helping with 20-mile-per-hour roll-outs, targeting safety cameras and delivering national driver behaviour change campaigns.

We are engaged in a mid-term review to assess where we go next. Yesterday, I chaired the national road safety partnership, in which Police Scotland, local authorities and a variety of other partners, including Public Health Scotland, come

together to help to drive that improvement. I have taken a keen interest in that approach, and I think that the leadership that the partnership provides will start to bring about the necessary change.

Energy Profits Levy (North-east Impact)

5. Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the impact of the energy profits levy on energy jobs and the energy supply chain in the north-east. (S6O-05287)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): The United Kingdom Government's retention of the energy profits levy in its current form will continue to hit jobs and investment across Scotland's energy sector. Those reserved policy decisions are driving an accelerated decline of North Sea oil and gas before renewable alternatives are sufficiently developed, placing a just energy transition at risk.

The Scottish Government continues to monitor and consider a range of evidence in relation to Scotland's energy sector. As part of that approach, we review reports on employment from industry, trade unions and other bodies. Analysis that was set out in a recent joint letter from Offshore Energies UK and Scottish Renewables found that replacing the energy profits levy with a fairer fiscal regime could unlock £40 billion in investment and safeguard 160,000 jobs across the UK.

Karen Adam: The energy profits levy threatens jobs and investment in the north-east, particularly in my constituency of Banffshire and Buchan Coast, yet Scotland produces a vast surplus of low-cost energy. Does the cabinet secretary agree that it should be unthinkable for an energy-rich Scotland to have anything other than energy-rich Scots, and that Westminster UK Government control is what stands in the way of that?

Gillian Martin: I absolutely agree with Karen Adam's assessment of the situation. In an energy-rich nation such as Scotland, no household should be struggling to heat its home and no business should be struggling to pay its bills and keep its head above water. The UK Labour Government promised that it would reduce bills by £300 when it came to office, but choices made by the Chancellor of the Exchequer to significantly scale back investment in energy efficiency and clean heating will not permanently cut bills.

The UK Government's damaging approach to the energy profits levy means that Scotland's energy industry is facing an existential threat. When he met the Prime Minister at the British-Irish Council on 5 December, the First Minister made it clear that the decision to extend the EPL to 2030 threatens tens of thousands of jobs across the UK

energy sector and places the entire energy transition at risk.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): I agree that the energy profits levy is a disaster and threatens jobs, but so does the Scottish Government's presumption against new oil and gas. The cabinet secretary does not want to debate the energy strategy next week, so can she tell me when the Scottish Government will bring forward that energy strategy? Will it remove the disastrous presumption against new oil and gas?

Gillian Martin: The judgments and issues in the energy strategy and the just transition plan are informed and influenced by a range of on-going developments in the UK Government's energy policy and recent court decisions. Those include, but are not limited to, the announcement by the UK Government about the North Sea future plan, of which we have had no advance sight. We are taking sufficient time to analyse and reflect on those developments and their impact on Scotland—a point that I have made many times before to Douglas Lumsden.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): Since its introduction, the energy profits levy has raised more than £11 billion for the public purse and is forecast to raise a further £11 billion by 2030, redistributing excessive profits from energy giants to those struggling in fuel poverty, including in the north-east region.

Does the minister not agree with Great British Energy's founding premise that

"the ... people should have a right to own and benefit from our natural resources"?

Will she not join me in welcoming the launch of GB Energy's £1 billion supply chain initiative—which is called energy, engineered in the UK—to grow the domestic supply chain and create jobs in Scotland?

Gillian Martin: Mercedes Villalba might be a cheerleader for GB Energy. Fair play to her—if she wants to get behind what GB Energy is doing, that is absolutely her right. However, would it not be great if the £11 billion that has gone to the Exchequer as a result of the EPL was ring fenced for decarbonising our gas supply? Would it not be great if that went into just transition? Would it not be great if it brought forward a great deal of investment in low-carbon opportunities, which would help the just transition? Frankly, I do not know where that £11 billion is going. Until we have details on that, maybe we are all a bit in the dark about what the EPL is actually doing, other than destroying jobs in the north-east, because it is a tax on the people and the sector in the north-east of Scotland.

Pedestrian Safety Improvements

6. Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on pedestrian safety improvements. (S6O-05288)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): The Scottish Government is committed to enhancing safety across Scotland's road network. "Scotland's Road Safety Framework to 2030" set out a vision for Scotland to have the best road safety performance in the world by 2030. The framework contains mode and user-specific targets that focus on our priority areas, including pedestrians.

In the 2025-26 financial year, the Scottish Government has invested a record £48 million in road safety, alongside significant investment in sustainable and active travel programmes to promote pedestrian safety.

A dedicated stakeholder group has also been established to monitor risks, identify emerging trends and develop targeted measures for pedestrians and other vulnerable road users. Those actions demonstrate our on-going commitment to making Scotland's roads safer for everyone.

Elena Whitham: Community councils and local groups along the A77 in Ballantrae, Girvan, Kirkoswald and Minishant in my constituency have worked tirelessly with me to press for pedestrian safety improvements. I welcome the mitigations that Transport Scotland is now putting in place.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that that kind of community-led campaign work is to be commended and that even greater progress can be achieved when national and local governments work together, hand in hand with our communities?

Fiona Hyslop: Yes, I commend those communities for their campaigning for road safety improvements. With regard to working together to identify individual issues, Transport Scotland is working with local campaign groups and local authorities and is systematically going through some of the issues.

I have heard directly about the benefits that will come to Ballantrae and some of the issues around Kirkoswald. Those issues can also be supported through the road safety improvement fund, a £14.5 million fund that delivers targeted road safety schemes. Sometimes, that is about junctions and sometimes it is about pedestrian aspects.

The road safety framework includes local partnership forums, which help with best practice and partnership working. Communities that live in those areas know best and have that experience. I

am certainly pleased to see progress being made on the A77.

Road Improvement Projects (Environmental Impact)

7. Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what research or assessments it has carried out in the south-west of Scotland to understand the environmental impact of recent or planned road improvement projects. (S6O-05289)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): All trunk road maintenance and improvement projects, including those in the south-west, undergo environmental assessment to identify potential impacts and ensure that appropriate mitigation is implemented. Environmental considerations are central to the design and assessment process of all our road projects. Where projects meet the criteria, they are subject to screening to determine whether statutory environmental impact assessment is required. If further assessment is required, the findings are published in a report and subjected to statutory consultation before Scottish ministers make a decision on whether the project should proceed.

Finlay Carson: A strategic and economic impact report that was published by three local authorities makes it crystal clear that dualling the A75 and A77 could result in 95 million tonnes of carbon dioxide savings and unlock £5 billion in benefits, slashing haulage costs and cutting journey times. Yet, after years of promises, the Scottish Government has produced little or no timetable, no budget and no plan. Only last week, ferry and haulage bodies said that nothing less than a dualled bypass for Springholm and Crocketford is acceptable.

Why is the Government content with endless reviews while businesses, communities and climate targets pay the price? Will the cabinet secretary replace spin with spades and commit to a funded and time-bound programme with clear milestones and road improvement plans for the A77 and A75, and report back to Parliament?

Fiona Hyslop: Since 2007, we have invested in the A75 and the A77—£50 million for the A75 and £64 million for the A77. The A75 schemes include overtaking opportunities at Newton Stewart and Barfils to Bettyknowes—[Interruption.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary, please resume your seat. There have been a number of occasions when questions have been asked and questioners, with some others, have joined in and heckled throughout the answers. We are going to listen to the questions and the responses with courtesy.

Fiona Hyslop: Thank you, Presiding Officer. I think that, when the chamber is a bit empty, people perhaps do not realise how their voices carry.

The A77 schemes include the Haggstone climbing lane, the Glen App wide single carriageway, Park End to Bennane, Symington to Bogend and, of course, the Maybole bypass. The member talked about Springholm to Crocketford, where the Scottish Government is leading on the design work. We are consulting locals on that, and looking at different aspects, including where there might be dual carriageway potential, or whether it should be a single carriageway, and associated issues. There are also initial immediate safety measures to be taken around Springholm and Crocketford, which I think the member asked about and wants to see.

Things are happening. I absolutely recognise the economic importance of the A75, not just to the local area, but primarily through its having been identified as a union connectivity route to Northern Ireland and onward to Ireland for exports. I absolutely understand that.

The member made the point about road improvements and the use of certain routes helping to save fuel. I understand those issues. Economic issues as well as environmental assessments have an impact on the business plans, and I have given a flavour of what has been happening in the south-west.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have run over time, but we have a bit of time in hand this afternoon, so I call Craig Hoy.

Battery Energy Storage Systems

8. Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the long-term impact of battery energy storage systems on biodiversity and fire safety, and the long-term landscape and visual impact. (S6O-05290)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): With new development proposals, potential impacts on communities, nature, landscape and visual amenity, including cumulative effects, are important considerations in the decision-making process. All applications are subject to site-specific assessments.

The Scottish Government has commissioned a scoping study on the potential environmental impacts of operating battery storage, with work expected to complete early next year. However, health and safety law is reserved to the United Kingdom Government and regulated by the Health and Safety Executive.

The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service continually reviews its operational response to emerging technology, including battery storage, to keep communities safe.

Craig Hoy: Yet more and more developments are being approved. In Dumfriesshire, concern is mounting over battery storage developments, including the Belriddings battery energy storage system near Torthorwald and at Milton farm near Beattock. Residents are rightly concerned that those developments are in the wrong location; for example, Milton farm is close to the A74, which would be severely impacted by smoke in the event of a fire.

What is the minister doing to give communities a greater say when it comes to such large-scale energy projects? Why will the Government not support my call for an immediate moratorium on further onshore large-scale renewables in areas that now feel battered, bruised and at risk as a result of the onward march of battery storage, turbines and megapylons?

Gillian Martin: I will not comment on any applications, whether potential or already in the system. A submission by officials on 15 May set out a proposed approach to improving the policy understanding of BESS through internal research to inform our thinking on potential policy positions on the technology, partly in response to community and political concerns about the framework that underpins BESS development.

Officials have proposed the publication of an initial statement and a call for evidence early next year to inform future policy statements on the technology. *[Gillian Martin has corrected this contribution. See end of report.]*

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): To maximise the benefit of Scotland's renewable energy resources and reach net zero, it is vital that we invest in storage capacity. Will the cabinet secretary say more about the role that storage systems play in our renewables mix and about how the Scottish Government is working to make sure that our local communities see the benefit of local infrastructure?

Gillian Martin: Paul McLennan is right that storage plays an important role in managing the variability and intermittency of renewable energy sources, balancing the grid, enhancing security of supply and ensuring that we can store energy instead of paying operators to turn off the generation. There is currently just over a gigawatt of operational storage in Scotland, mainly from pumped-storage hydroelectricity. To achieve our net zero targets, we will need more. I am confident that we can achieve that—there is currently a strong pipeline of projects not only in BESS but in other areas of storage.

Communities should share directly in the benefits of energy projects, including those relating to storage. Around £30 million was offered in community benefits last year across different energy projects. We are refreshing the national guidance on that—the good practice principles—to ensure sustainable and meaningful outcomes from Scotland's energy transition.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio question time. Before we move to the next item of business, there will be a brief pause to allow front-bench teams to change.

Grangemouth (Just Transition)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a statement by Gillian Martin on progressing a just transition at Grangemouth. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:31

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): I am delighted to update the Parliament on the tangible progress that is being made to secure Grangemouth's long-term and sustainable future. The industrial cluster remains essential to both Scotland's just transition to net zero and the future prosperity of our economy. The measures that I will set out today are illustrative of our commitment to realising the site's potential. Grangemouth has a proud industrial history. For generations, it has powered Scotland's economy and provided thousands of highly skilled and highly paid jobs. I am committed to continuing that legacy.

I want to be clear that the Scottish Government will not shy away from taking concrete action to address the challenges that the cluster faces and to support the people who rely on it. I want to ensure that Grangemouth helps to lead the way in our journey to net zero through new green energy opportunities and that we bring the valued and skilled workforce with us on that journey. We remain fully committed to using the limited regulatory and fiscal levers that are at our disposal to ensure that those who live and work at Grangemouth are not left behind in our transition to net zero and that they will, in time, benefit greatly from the opportunities that come to the industrial cluster.

Since the launch of project willow, there has been wide-ranging interest in Grangemouth. I can confirm that Scottish Enterprise has received more than 140 inquiries from businesses that are interested in establishing new projects in the industrial cluster. They include projects that align with the recommended technology pathways, as well as complementary projects that, if deployed, would deliver high-value jobs and industrial opportunities at Grangemouth.

The level of interest from domestic and international operators is testament to the dedication of the highly skilled workforce, which has undoubtedly secured the cluster's reputation. It also illustrates Scottish Enterprise's tireless efforts to actively seek out new opportunities, and it shows that Grangemouth is a good place to do business. By continuing to work with businesses to assess their potential and appropriateness and

then putting in place the right level of public sector support, we can unlock Grangemouth's potential by making the proposed projects market investable. That is why the First Minister has announced that £25 million will be made available during this and future financial years to support new projects and initiatives that secure Grangemouth's long-term and sustainable future.

Today, I am pleased to announce the first significant funding awards for projects at Grangemouth—a hugely important milestone. This morning, I attended a groundbreaking ceremony for a project that is being progressed by MiAlgae, a home-grown, pioneering Scottish business. I welcome that the United Kingdom Government has listened to the direct calls made by me and by others across the chamber and has joined the Scottish Government and Scottish Enterprise in allocating up to £3 million between now and 2027 to support the construction of the company's new commercial-scale bioreactor at Grangemouth.

The project will be capable of producing commercial-scale volumes of omega-3, a vital ingredient for global food and health industries. The facility will upcycle whisky by-products to produce omega-3. That is a clear example of the circular economy in action and will have tangible benefits for businesses and customers across the economy.

Presiding Officer, £1.5 million of that support represents the first funding from the Scottish Government's Grangemouth just transition fund. MiAlgae believes that, if the project expands as planned, it will create up to 130 new direct jobs at Grangemouth by the end of 2029 as the company scales its technology and delivers subsequent bioreactor modules.

Although MiAlgae's technology is not directly aligned with the pathways that are identified in project willow, its potential to create jobs and stimulate new industries at pace is exactly what our just transition plan is about. It represents a major step forward in diversifying the cluster and thus securing the future of the industrial base at Grangemouth.

However, MiAlgae is just the beginning. I am proud to announce that, subject to final negotiations and confirmation of public funding conditions, the Scottish Government and Scottish Enterprise will provide funding support to Celtic Renewables, a company at the cutting edge of biorefining technology, at Grangemouth. The Scottish Government is allocating £6.23 million from our Grangemouth just transition fund to support the next stage of the company's acetone-butanol-ethanol—ABE—biorefinery project. Assuming that Celtic Renewables reaches commercialisation as planned, the project is expected to create up to 149 direct jobs at

Grangemouth by the end of 2030. As with MiAlgae, those numbers are only set to increase as the business continues to scale up its technology and expand the market for its products.

Critical to securing a long-term and sustainable future for the Grangemouth industrial cluster is ensuring that the foundational components are optimised to attract investment. Therefore, I am pleased to confirm to the Parliament that we are also providing up to £595,000 to Scottish Enterprise to ensure that key enabling works to prepare the site for future investment are progressed at pace. Those activities will centre on addressing infrastructure, utilities, land and connectivity challenges across Grangemouth. Those challenges have been put to me by businesses, Fife Council and others through the Grangemouth future industry board. I trust that that is a clear sign that we are listening to the needs of businesses and, in collaboration with them, delivering on our commitment to take targeted action that secures the long-term and sustainable future of the industrial cluster.

Most important, we continue to prioritise the workforce and the local community, who are central to that work. On 29 October, in partnership with Unite the Union, the First Minister announced that new conditionality would be applied to all funds awarded as part of the Grangemouth just transition fund. That will take the form of a guaranteed interview scheme, for workers who have been made redundant at Grangemouth, for the new roles that will be created as a result of the funding that I am announcing today. I am grateful for the support that Unite the Union has provided in bringing that proposal to fruition. Its expertise and insight have helped us to drive forward our activity and ensure that workers are at the forefront of our efforts.

That represents a just transition in action, helping workers to secure new opportunities and ensuring that their vital experience, skills and knowledge are not lost to Grangemouth or Scotland. It shows that the Scottish National Party Government is putting people at the heart of change.

Furthermore, I confirm to the Parliament that the Scottish Government intends to continue funding a community participation manager to support Grangemouth's just transition for the next two years. That role, which is funded as part of the greener Grangemouth programme, is a key delivery partner for the Grangemouth just transition plan, and its existence is one of the recommended actions in the plan. Critically, the role remains a key conduit to ensuring that the voices of the community are at the heart of everything that we do in pursuit of the cluster's transition. My commitment to provide an additional

£150,000 over the next two years will support CVS Falkirk & District to continue that critical work.

Grangemouth is changing and, as a result of the Government's actions, the hope of a bright future is being built. From biorefining to innovative start-ups to global players, the site is a beacon of Scotland's green industrial future. It is a story of partnership between Governments, industry, trade unions, the workforce and communities. It is a story of resilience and ambition. It is a story that shows that Scotland can lead the world in delivering a just transition that creates jobs, attracts investment and tackles climate change head on.

However, today's announcements are by no means the limit of our ambition. More must be done and will be done. I give my commitment to members—not least my colleagues Michelle Thomson, Michael Matheson and Falkirk Council leader, Councillor Cecil Meiklejohn, who have been unwavering in their commitment to stand up for their constituents, local businesses and, crucially, the workforce and local community—that the Scottish Government will not rest until we have explored every opportunity and realised our ambition of a long-term and sustainable future for Grangemouth.

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

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement. This is a step in the right direction for my constituents in Falkirk, Grangemouth and the wider community. I hope that everyone in the chamber will welcome jobs being created at the Grangemouth site. However, considering that many of those jobs will not be operational for another five years, it falls short of what the workers at Grangemouth refinery deserve.

The SNP's anti-oil and gas rhetoric affects not just the thousands of oil and gas workers in the north-east, but our industrial heartlands at sites such as Grangemouth and Mossmorran. Although I welcome the jobs that have been created, as outlined in the statement, they are ultimately a drop in the ocean compared with what we need.

The Scottish and UK Governments promised retraining opportunities for those who were made redundant at Grangemouth. Will the cabinet secretary confirm that the retraining opportunities will give them the skills that they need for the new roles that have been created?

Although the new funding is welcome, the project willow report found that billions of pounds of private investment would be needed to secure the long-term future of Grangemouth. Will the cabinet secretary tell the Parliament how much investment the Scottish Government has managed to secure so far and what plans it has to attract more investment in the future?

Gillian Martin: There were quite a lot of questions in there. I will try to deal with them all.

We are funding a skills intervention, delivered by Forth Valley College, to retrain and upskill workers who are directly impacted by the refinery closure that was announced by Petroineos. The intervention brings protected skills support investment from the Scottish and United Kingdom Governments of up to £2 million. The skills intervention has been extended to include shared services workers at Ineos Olefins and Polymers Europe, who, unfortunately, are also facing redundancy as a direct result of the cessation of refining at Grangemouth.

I am pleased to report that engagement in the process has been very high, with workers using the reskilling to secure employment in in-demand industries, including the renewables sector. More than 300 workers have already accessed the support so far.

We had an account from the principal of the college this morning, at the Grangemouth future industry board, in which we heard that 185 individuals have completed retraining and 49 are actively undergoing retraining. As a result of the monitoring that the college has in place on the final destinations of those who come through its training programmes, the principal was able to say that more than 80 of the applicants who responded about their final destination have secured employment. That does not account for the employment of those from Petroineos who have not undergone the training and who have gone straight into jobs following the redundancy that they faced at Petroineos.

It is not fair to say that the jobs from the projects that we have announced today will not materialise for five years. MiAlgae will start recruiting now, and I was told that the first modules of the plant will be open in April next year. [*Interruption.*] Sorry, Presiding Officer, but I am hearing noises off. As I said, the plant will be open in April, which is when they will start to produce omega-3.

As I set out, those are just the first two of many announcements that we will make as a result of the work that has been done through project willow and the task force that has been run and headed up by Scottish Enterprise. More than 140 bids have come in for project willow work, but they

have been whittled down to the ones that are most likely to get to financial close.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):

I, too, thank the minister for providing advance sight of her statement. The £3 million investment in MiAlgae is, of course, welcome. It comes with £1.5 million of investment from the UK Government, which forms part of the £14.5 million that the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced in the budget, which will help to transform Grangemouth into a low-carbon tech hub. That is in addition to the £200 million that has been pledged by the National Wealth Fund.

So, the minister is right: ultimately, this is a story of partnership between Scotland's two Governments, and between industry, trade unions, the workforce and the communities. However, it is also clear that there was no plan prior to Petroineos's announcement or the UK Labour Government's election. What lessons have been learned so that that partnership can be continued, to make good on the potential and to unlock the amounts that the two Governments have pledged?

The work in relation to Grangemouth highlights Scottish Enterprise's interesting role in facilitating the addressing of infrastructure, utilities, land and connectivity challenges. Is that perhaps a model for how it can act in the future, particularly with the Celtic Renewables project?

Gillian Martin: I warmly welcome the spirit in which Daniel Johnson made his remarks. It has been a highly collaborative process. From the get-go, I and the UK energy minister, Michael Shanks, have worked very hard with Scottish Enterprise and the unions to facilitate the deployment of the project willow opportunities. I pay massive tribute to Scottish Enterprise. More than 140 project proposals came in. It could easily have taken years to go through those, but it has gone through that process quickly and has identified the two projects that it has been possible to announce today. Other projects will be announced, but we cannot talk about them yet. They include some exciting going concerns.

However, it is not true to say that work on a just transition in Grangemouth started only last year. Such work had been going on for years through the Grangemouth future industry board, which Scottish Government ministers chaired. I was very pleased, in a spirit of working collaboratively with the new UK Government, to invite Michael Shanks to co-chair the Grangemouth future industry board. That shows that it is a joint effort that is delivering results. Both Governments are delivering results, but we are working hand in hand with all the interested parties in the Grangemouth community, including employers, the college, community councils and the local council, as well as Skills Development Scotland.

It has been a fruitful process. Is it a blueprint for how we might want to continue in the future? Absolutely.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: A large number of colleagues want to ask a question, so I would be grateful for brevity in the questions and the responses.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I thank the cabinet secretary and all our Scottish agencies for their determined efforts to create a just transition for Grangemouth. I note that the UK Government has now joined the Scottish Government and Scottish Enterprise to support the allocation of up to £3 million for my MiAlgae's bioreactor with £1.5 million over two years.

However, has the cabinet secretary managed to get any clarity on the promise that the UK Government made on 23 February this year, that it would provide £200 million? By my calculations, it is still £198.5 million short.

Gillian Martin: I thank Michelle Thomson for that question and for her dogged determination in holding both Governments to account on our duties to step in and secure the future for Grangemouth.

It is right to say that the UK Government pledged £200 million of National Wealth Fund moneys to projects associated with Grangemouth. On a number of occasions, I have made the case to UK ministers on the imperative of releasing that money as soon as possible.

The National Wealth Fund should be a far more flexible operation than it has been in the past. It is waiting for projects to get to the financial investment decision stage. Obviously, we were using the £25 million just transition fund to help projects to get to the FID stage.

The National Wealth Fund needs to be a lot more flexible. I had a chat with Michael Shanks, the UK energy minister, about that this morning, and he agrees with me. The National Wealth Fund is engaging with prospective developers, as are the Scottish Government and its partners. We need clarity that National Wealth Fund moneys will be deployed in the near future, and I hope to be able to say that more of that £200 million will be able to be deployed in the future.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): Can the cabinet secretary tell me whether the closures of the Grangemouth refinery and the Exxon plant at Mossmorran have impacted on the viability of the Acorn project? Will she deliver the £80 million of funding that the SNP Government promised, to safeguard the future of carbon capture in Scotland?

Gillian Martin: It was very disappointing to hear that Storegga is walking away from the Acorn

project, but Acorn remains a very attractive going concern. The point has been made to me many times by those who want to see carbon capture happening in Scotland that it needs to be given the same amount of money as is associated with the carbon capture projects that will be located in the north of England. That will accelerate the growth not just in carbon capture but in a lot of industries that are associated with it.

We all need to get behind calling on the UK Government to give the same parity to the Acorn project as is given to other projects. We stand by our commitment to the Acorn project.

Michael Matheson (Falkirk West) (SNP): I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for her statement and for the announcement of new investment in the Grangemouth area in the coming years.

The cabinet secretary will recognise that it is important that we try to retain many of the skills that have been lost through the closure of the petrochemical site in the Falkirk and Grangemouth area. We need to make sure that secure investment is made in the area in the short term as well as the medium to longer term, but there is a risk that too much of Scottish Enterprise's work is focused on project willow, which is medium to longer term. Will the cabinet secretary ensure that Scottish Enterprise intensifies its work to secure early employment opportunities in the Grangemouth area in order to maximise the opportunity to retain skills in the area?

Gillian Martin: I absolutely agree with the sentiment of Michael Matheson's question. We must look at short-term, medium-term and long-term opportunities for Grangemouth. When I went to the MiAlgae site, it had already started doing the groundwork for the building of its facility, and it is hoping to open that facility in April, so it is hitting the ground running.

Scottish Enterprise has also been looking at other short-term, medium-term and long-term projects. I am particularly excited about the opportunities that might exist in sustainable aviation fuel, as that could be a game changer. I am also interested to see what might come about as a result of the two projects that we are announcing today and what other opportunities might come through to Scottish Enterprise.

Scottish Enterprise has demonstrated that it is not just looking at what project willow has looked at in terms of viable sectors, but that it is willing to take on other projects that might be outwith the parameters of project willow, to secure the outcomes that Michael Matheson has just mentioned.

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I remind members of my voluntary register of interests.

I welcome today's announcement of new jobs in Grangemouth. I have a long-held view that the fate of too much of our economy is concentrated in the hands of too few boardrooms in too many far-away places and that we are too dependent on foreign direct investment. Look at what happened at the refinery itself—that should be a lesson to us all. I welcome the fact that both of these businesses are in local ownership and control. I think that that is a good start.

What undertakings has the Government secured about investment, about jobs and workforce planning, about the timetable for those jobs, about research and development, and about freedom of association—in other words, trade unionisation? Are these documented either in planning agreements or in a memorandum of understanding with these businesses?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We will need briefer questions and responses.

Gillian Martin: I will use the two companies that we announced funding for today as an example. Celtic Renewables is already on the Grangemouth future industry board, as is Unite the Union, and there were regular discussions about unionisation at those meetings. There is also the jobs prioritisation scheme, which came from Unite the Union itself. Unite came to the Scottish Government and put forward the idea that there should be conditionality associated with any funding that was given to any of the successful applicants for project willow funding and just transition funding, which would involve those who had lost their jobs at the Grangemouth refinery being prioritised and guaranteed an interview.

MiAlgae was at GFIB today as an observer, but it has been offered the opportunity to come on board as a member, and Unite the Union was speaking directly to MiAlgae about the issues that Mr Leonard has raised.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): It is clear that investment can bring success; we saw that with the jobs announcement. The £14.5 million funding for Grangemouth that was announced in the UK budget was a welcome, if overdue, step forward. Will the cabinet secretary join me in calling on the UK Government to now go further and to at least match the Scottish Government's commitment of £25 million for the just transition fund to support initiatives for Grangemouth?

Gillian Martin: It is a long overdue step in the right direction, as Bob Doris mentioned. Let me be clear: the UK Government can and must go further, just as it has in other parts of the United Kingdom. We have, for some time, been pressing the UK Government to match the Scottish Government's commitment of £25 million via the

Grangemouth just transition fund to support initiatives at Grangemouth—[*Interruption.*]

Despite noises off from the Labour benches, it is a positive thing. I am having a collaborative and constructive dialogue with UK Government ministers in the sector, and there is an understanding there—[*Interruption.*]

I say to Mr Johnson that it is not something to witter on and be bitter about; it is an example of both Governments working together—it is a good thing.

However, we have also said that the national wealth fund commitment needs to be enacted. Again, I have listening ears in that regard, but I think that members will share my frustration that the national wealth fund has been a little bit too restrictive in getting that funding deployed. We await the detail of what that will mean in practice for those who live and work at Grangemouth.

I have to say that, although the collaboration has been taken forward very well by both Governments, we need to see an end to the energy profits levy, because that is the source of the problem in respect of many of the jobs that are being lost in the energy industry and beyond.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): The future of Grangemouth has always been linked to Mossmorran, and for decades they have shared a common workforce. A few weeks ago, the Deputy First Minister came to the chamber and talked about expanding the Grangemouth investment task force to include Mossmorran as a potential location for projects. Can the cabinet secretary give members an update on that?

In addition, given that it seems that a number of projects have now been selected, is it too late—I hope not—to incorporate Mossmorran into the thinking around the work of that task force and could consideration be given to successful projects that can include both sites?

Gillian Martin: The Deputy First Minister is with me just now and she is leading on the Mossmorran situation, after the very disappointing announcement by ExxonMobil. Although she is leading on that, I, too, have met ExxonMobil to discuss some of the guarantees that it is going to put in place around, for example, its skills offer for those who face redundancy.

The company has told me that it is also trying to redeploy workers from the Fife plant to its operations in other parts of the country, and it is also going to retain some workers to provide the steam associated with the neighbouring Fife natural gas liquids facility, which is operated by Shell.

On the general point that Mark Ruskell raised, as a result of the project willow work, which has been concentrating on Grangemouth, there are a great deal of projects that may not have been right for Grangemouth but may be well suited to Mossmorran, and the Deputy First Minister is engaging with Scottish Enterprise on what those might be.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I declare an interest, as my wife works for Celtic Renewables, so she will be very pleased this evening, although she has kept the news very secret over the past few days.

I want to explore the issue of guaranteed job interviews for those who have lost their jobs at Ineos. Are we tracking those who are going to lose, or have already lost, their jobs? Do we know where they are ending up? What is the prospect of them returning to the site in Grangemouth?

Gillian Martin: There are a number of things in that question, and I want to give members some of the detail. Those workers have access to skills opportunities at Forth Valley College. The college is trying to monitor them as they leave the training, and it was able to tell me that, of those who respond to its final destination surveys, more than 80 have come back and told the college where they have found employment, which is great.

In relation to the workforce that has been made redundant by Petroineos, one of the difficulties is that it holds the data on who those people are and it has not released that to the Scottish Government. Helpfully, however, we have links with the unions that are involved on the site and we are getting feedback from them.

Quite a lot of the workers have not accessed skills opportunities because they have found employment elsewhere. Regrettably, I do not have details on this—Petroineos might have them—but I hope that not as many workers as I fear have had to go abroad for employment. However, that is probably a risk that has been taken. That makes it all the more important that we secure future opportunities for the site to encourage them to come back home.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Despite election promises to save jobs at the refinery, the Labour UK Government failed to intervene to prevent its closure. Does the cabinet secretary share my concern that the Treasury's full financial weight is not being put behind saving industrial sites in Scotland in the same way as it has been elsewhere in the UK?

Gillian Martin: I do. Notwithstanding that we have been collaborating very closely on the issues with Grangemouth, we need to look at the interventions that have been made in other parts of the UK. It is not just on the SNP benches that

there has been some criticism of that. There has even been criticism of it from the Labour benches at Westminster, to be fair to the representatives who have made that point in the same way as Rona Mackay has done.

If the UK Government was serious about supporting Grangemouth and Mossmorran, it could put the full financial heft of the Treasury behind supporting the transition. It has been done in other industrial towns in England and Wales, and I support that. However, the UK Government must also address the root causes. There is never usually a silver bullet in such situations, but the energy industry and the supply chain have been saying for months and months that, if there is anything close to a silver bullet, it is repeal or reform of the energy profits levy, which is having a direct effect on job losses in Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We are over time for the statement and questions. I am conscious that we have additional time this afternoon, so I will get the other speakers in, but they will need to be brief, as will the cabinet secretary's responses.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): A report by Future Economy Scotland found that only one green job is created for every three that are lost in the oil and gas supply chain. The new jobs at Grangemouth are extremely welcome, but does the cabinet secretary recognise that there will be no true just transition, whether at Grangemouth, Mossmorran, Harbour Energy or elsewhere, without removal of the windfall tax by the UK Government and a reversal of the Scottish Government's long-standing presumption against new oil and gas?

Gillian Martin: The member would expect me, in my role, to be speaking to representatives from across the energy sector wholesale, and they are squarely putting out the fact—this is not just the oil and gas industry, but also the supply chain and the renewables industry—that it is the EPL that is causing the most damage. [*Interruption.*]

Offshore Energies UK has offered an alternative fiscal regime to the UK Government, but it ignored that at the budget a couple of weeks ago. It needs to look at it again. The ball is still in its court. I have to say—[*Interruption.*]

I have to say that I cannot hear myself think, so I am just going to sit down, because Liam Kerr is heckling me from a sedentary position.

Liam Kerr: I was waiting for an answer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can we please ask questions with a degree of respect and also listen to the responses with a degree of respect? I will give some latitude for members to respond

and react to what is being said, but it needs to be within reason.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I note that the UK Government said this morning that, when Labour came into office,

"there was no plan for Grangemouth."

Can the cabinet secretary confirm whether that is accurate? Although the UK Government might not have had a plan, it does not reflect my understanding of the Scottish Government's efforts.

Gillian Martin: That quote from the UK Government is probably about the former UK Government, which certainly did not have any interest whatsoever in helping Grangemouth out.

It is obviously disappointing to hear that kind of thing, because we have worked so collaboratively together. The UK Government's statement about the Scottish Government is not accurate. It simply does not reflect the extent of the Scottish Government's commitment to securing a just transition, which began years before the 2024 general election.

We have committed to securing a future for Grangemouth industrial cluster, with work on the just transition plan and, crucially, engagement with local communities. A Scottish Government minister has chaired the Grangemouth future industry board since 2023, and I invited the UK Government to co-chair it when it came into office.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): It is good to see that, rather than absorbing hundreds of millions of pounds of losses, the UK Government and Scottish Government are working together to create new industrial activity at Grangemouth. The two announcements are to be commended, particularly the guaranteed interview scheme to reabsorb redundant workers, pioneered by Unite. That is really welcome.

How can we convert the 140 projects more rapidly? Two in the space of 12 months seems like a low rate of conversion into real projects on the ground. Will the minister commit to using the full power of the Government to punch through any blockages around the progress of those projects—whether those blockages are to do with staffing, planning, policy or finance—so that we can mobilise and create more industrial employment?

Will she consider how the Scottish Government might co-invest with investors in equity shares to create industrial activity so that we can crowd in wealth and have long-term state control?

Gillian Martin: I am not going to be able to give a succinct answer to all the questions that were parcelled up in there, but I will say to Paul Sweeney that there are no blockages to deploying

the Scottish Government's funding. We must ensure that the projects have been triaged by Scottish Enterprise before we can announce the ones that are to be developed and brought to fruition. That obviously takes time, and due diligence is very important. When we give public money to any ventures, we need to be absolutely assured that they are going concerns and that they are going to achieve what they have set out to achieve.

I come back to my central point. Today's announcements are just the start of the announcements coming off the back of project willow and the results of the task force run by Scottish Enterprise. I have been so impressed by the speed at which Scottish Enterprise has worked, and I think that it deserves great commendation from everyone, regardless of party affiliation.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland Reform): In order to deliver all those welcome new jobs, the local college, Forth Valley College, needs to be in a secure financial position, but it is facing the prospect of having to close a campus. I want to see a budget settlement that ensures that no colleges close and no campuses close. Does the cabinet secretary agree with me?

Gillian Martin: I was in Forth Valley College this morning, at the Grangemouth future industry board, and the principal was there, making the point that, in order to put as many people as possible through the skills uplift and training—as is required by the two announcements that we have made today, which will require specialised skills—there needs to be support from the Scottish Government. We have given support as a result of the skills intervention.

Graham Simpson: What about Alloa?

Gillian Martin: Graham Simpson will just have to wait for the budget to see what else there is.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the item of business. Before we move to the next item, there will be a brief pause to allow front-bench teams to change.

British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015 Inquiry

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-20059, in the name of Karen Adam, on behalf of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, on the committee's British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015 inquiry.

15:08

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to open the debate on behalf of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee on our recent report on the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015. A decade has passed since the bill was enacted, in what marked a significant milestone in promoting the use and understanding of BSL across Scotland. The committee agreed that this was an opportune moment to consider the impact of the 2015 act and to identify where further improvements could be made.

As most people in the chamber know—and as I will now sign—I am what is called a CODA, which is the child of a deaf adult. My father is deaf and I grew up around deaf people and in and around their community, so I know and understand how important it is for deaf people to have inclusive language—first language—to be able to live inclusively in their society. We welcomed the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015 when it became law.

As a result of the 2015 act, the Scottish Government and listed public authorities are required to publish national and local plans every six years. The second national plan, which was published in November 2023, set out a range of actions to tackle barriers that BSL users face, with the aim of helping to make Scotland the best place in the world for them to live, work, visit and learn. That is an aspiration with which the committee fully agrees. From the outset, we sought to approach our inquiry in a constructive manner and to make informed recommendations on areas where further concrete actions could benefit BSL users across Scotland. I thank the Deputy First Minister for her written response to our report, and I was pleased to see that the Scottish Government had accepted, or partially accepted, the vast majority of our recommendations.

The committee took evidence from organisations representing deaf people, academics and others working to minimise barriers. We also held informal engagement sessions with deaf and deafblind people with first-hand experience of using BSL, to hear about the challenges that they can face. Those discussions

were invaluable in shaping the committee's scrutiny, and I would like to place on the record the committee's sincere gratitude to all who assisted us.

It is important to note that the 2015 act covers deafblind users of tactile BSL, in addition to those signers with whom many of us will be more familiar. Deafblind stakeholders explained how they often feel marginalised as a smaller community, of which there is less understanding among public and professionals alike. They therefore called for tactile BSL to be routinely included and placed on an equal footing to BSL, and not just treated as an afterthought.

Stakeholders widely acknowledged the 2015 act's positive impact in raising awareness, increasing visibility of BSL and empowering deaf communities. Initiatives such as Contact Scotland BSL, a 24/7 video interpreting service, were praised as being transformative. Examples of improved service access include better interpreter support, deaf awareness training and inclusive recruitment practices. The committee strongly welcomed the positive feedback that was received with regard to empowering BSL users and increasing visibility of the language, but was equally mindful that significant challenges remain and that more needs to be done to address them. For example, the shortage of qualified interpreters in rural areas remains a significant barrier.

I turn to the substance of the committee's report. We covered a wide range of key policy areas. I intend to focus on the three that received the most feedback from stakeholders: education, health and justice. I look forward to listening to contributions from other members in the chamber, who I am sure might reflect on other policy areas.

I will briefly discuss our conclusions on the local and national plans that public bodies are required to publish under the 2015 act. The first national plan was widely praised for the collaborative work that went into it, although concerns were also raised about inconsistent implementation, lack of enforceability and insufficient funding. However, feedback on the second national plan was more mixed. Many stakeholders felt that it lacked measurable goals, timelines and accountability. Some expressed disappointment that their recommendations had been watered down or omitted, and they called for clearer targets and better resource allocation. The committee regretted that the collaborative spirit of the first plan had not been fully carried forward, and it recommended greater transparency and stakeholder engagement in future planning.

In respect of local plans for public bodies covering areas including health, education and justice, the committee notes the need for local flexibility to address specific needs and the

importance of raising local ambitions on BSL. We welcomed positive examples of meaningful engagement with BSL users and collaborative working with relevant partners, but we noted that, unfortunately, not all listed authorities adopted that approach. We also heard from the Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland that, three months after the statutory deadline of 6 May 2024, only 72 per cent of listed authorities had published plans in English, with only 62 per cent having published them in BSL. The committee agrees with stakeholders such as Deaf Links, which described that data as "extremely disappointing."

I therefore welcome confirmation that funding will be made available to the ALLIANCE to deliver a BSL network to strengthen monitoring, data collection and accountability. Nonetheless, that is not the BSL board that the committee recommended, and in summing up, I welcome the Deputy First Minister's reflections on how we can help to ensure democratic accountability and how it will compare with the BSL board under the UK act.

One of the most important policy areas for BSL users is education, with a particular focus on early years provision. We heard that some deaf children start school or nursery with no knowledge of the language, and that is unacceptable. Deaf Links described the poor experiences that many deaf adults have had as children. It told us:

"They do not want another generation suffering in the way that they have suffered: not being able to get a job or an education; being treated like a second-class citizen; not being able to access the hearing world in any way, shape or form; and having their life chances reduced because they are deaf and use BSL."—[Official Report, *Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee*, 3 June 2025; c 13.]

For many deaf people, BSL is not an additional language but their only language, which is a crucial difference.

Although investment in Gaelic schools is absolutely rightly celebrated, parity of esteem has not been extended to BSL, despite the fact that deaf children simply cannot choose another language in order to get on in society. It is therefore welcome that the Scottish Government is working with partners to update the existing qualifications guidance for teachers of children with sensory impairments. The committee looks forward to considering the results of the recent consultation on proposed revisions to the guidance when available, as well as the outcomes on the Scottish Government's review of the curriculum.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Looking back on the legislation as someone who was involved in it at the Government end, I think that Karen Adam touches on an important point,

which is the importance of BSL as a language and all the human dignity that that implies. I realise that the act is about more than symbolism, but does she agree, as I am sure she will, about the impact that it made on that community to know that, symbolically, the country had recognised their language for what it is, which is a language?

Karen Adam: I absolutely agree with Alasdair Allan. That has been part of the understanding that we have been trying to get across to people that BSL is not just a support for people with a disability or a hearing impairment; it is a language with a whole culture embedded in it, and that is how it needs to be treated.

While welcoming the work on guidance for teachers, I reiterate the need for parity with Gaelic-medium education.

I will turn briefly to healthcare and justice. It is clear that improvements have been made in respect of the provision of interpreters for pre-arranged appointments, but BSL users told us of the barriers that they face when contacting emergency services. The committee recognised that communication barriers can exacerbate what are often already stressful and traumatic situations. It is therefore pleasing to learn that the police, fire and ambulance services are working with partners on an app to help deaf people communicate with first responders in emergencies.

Another aspect of the justice system that our report considered in detail relates to the experience of deaf survivors of domestic abuse. We heard powerful first-hand testimony from a BSL user who had experienced such abuse. Although I do not have time to discuss that in any detail, I am sure that other members of the committee will do so later in the debate, and I look forward to their contributions.

I conclude by reiterating my thanks to all those who contributed to our inquiry and to the Deputy First Minister for her response. The response is encouraging, in so far as the door is clearly open for further improvements to be made. It is my sincere hope that our recommendations can contribute to helping to make Scotland the best place in the world for BSL users to live, work, visit and learn.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the findings and recommendations in the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee's 4th Report, 2025 (Session 6), *Report on British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015* (SP Paper 872).

15:19

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

Forbes): It is important to have this debate to reflect on the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee's report, and to mark the 10-year anniversary of the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015, which we have been doing over the past few weeks. I welcome our guests in the gallery—it is wonderful to have you here.

BSL is one of Scotland's languages and is used by many people every day. I am proud that Scotland has been a leader in BSL not just in recent years but over the past few centuries. I thank the many MSPs who have contributed to that progress, particularly Mark Griffin for his tireless work in lodging the bill that became the 2015 act; Karen Adam, the convener of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee; and the rest of the committee's members. The cross-party group on deafness also does critically important work in advocating for BSL users and the deaf and deafblind communities in Scotland. More importantly, I thank the BSL community for the role that it has played in educating people about BSL and wider aspects of deaf culture. As a community, it has continued to campaign for the full realisation and delivery of the act and for greater understanding and recognition of BSL as a language.

When engaging with the community, I have seen at first hand the difference that the act has made and what more can be done to tackle the remaining barriers. If the act raises expectations about what equity should look like, it also reveals the gaps in current provision. Although it is good to have support from committee members, MSPs and the wider BSL community, constructive challenge as we look ahead is even more important as we work to deliver the actions that are outlined in the current BSL national plan.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Will the Deputy First Minister take an intervention?

Kate Forbes: I would love a challenge from Martin Whitfield.

Martin Whitfield: I have no challenge. Does the Deputy First Minister agree that part of the committee's report suggests that the momentum behind BSL has been lost, particularly after the first national plan, and that there has been a level of disappointment with the second national plan? Does she agree that we need to grasp the momentum that existed when the 2015 act was passed, to put BSL where it belongs as a language in Scotland and a first language for so many people?

Kate Forbes: I certainly think that the committee's report and its scrutiny have given BSL added impetus. To be blunt, I do not think that we can ever have enough momentum to carry us

through, so I am happy to accept Martin Whitfield's request for added impetus and more momentum.

There are a number of recommendations in the report that can focus our minds. As Karen Adam said, the Scottish Government has accepted the vast majority of the recommendations. The only ones that we did not accept are either because they are not for us, or because they need a bit more detailed work, but there are very few of those. None of my comments should be misrepresented, as so much work has been done, particularly in recent years.

The British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015 is flagship legislation that everyone should be proud of. It places a duty on the Government and on listed authorities to promote and increase the use and understanding of BSL, which is key to bringing about the change that we want to see. The BSL plans are the vehicles for that promotion. Two plans have been published in the past 10 years, sitting alongside local BSL plans produced by listed authorities. The current national BSL plan concludes in 2029. At the heart of it is a clear focus on the accessibility of public services and tackling the systemic barriers that BSL users face in their daily lives. The 10 priority themes in the plan are areas that the deaf and deafblind communities have told us are important to them—education, health, justice and culture; all the same themes that were highlighted in evidence taken by the committee. Those are wide-ranging sectors that cover all aspects of society. As I said to the committee this week, often, somebody's experience in one part of Scotland might differ from a person's experience in another part of Scotland, which is why local BSL plans could arguably be more important for some communities. We have been clear that our six-year plan is not static; it is not something that we write and then leave. It is an iterative process that can respond to new and emerging challenges, and we have agreed to learn from and build on the actions that are in it.

The committee's in-depth report is excellent. It took evidence from those with lived experience and reflected on the impact that the act has had. The report rightly recognises that the act is something that empowers people, increases the visibility and use of BSL, and continues to improve access to services for BSL users. However, the report also shows us more about the continued barriers and challenges that the community faces.

There are 44 recommendations. We have assessed each recommendation against two factors. First, the extent to which it aligns with the priority areas and actions in the national plan, and, secondly, its overall deliverability, including resource and cost implications.

We have accepted, either in part or in full, 40 of the recommendations. We have agreed to consider three recommendations further because they need more detailed analysis. People agreeing to things without doing the analysis up front is the bane of my life, because it is one thing to say that one is going to do something and it is quite another to make sure that one delivers on that. It is important that we do that detailed analysis first.

There is one recommendation that we have declined, and that is because it is for the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service and not the Scottish Government.

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): The Deputy First Minister has said that the quality of provision differs across Scotland, so can she explain why she does not support the establishment of a national oversight board?

Kate Forbes: I think that I mentioned in committee that we are certainly interested in exploring that further. For me, the key is not whether I think that it is a good idea—I have seen how that model, in a slightly different guise, operates in relation to Gaelic, for example, with Bòrd na Gàidhlig—but what the community thinks. If there is widespread support from BSL users, the Government is not going to stand in the way and is not averse to the establishment of such a board. However, for us, it is critically important that we identify whether that is an approach that is of interest to the BSL community. I have tasked the relevant team of my officials with initiating that informal consultation and those conversations with BSL users. I think that I confirmed at committee that I would be keen that we build up the initial detailed work that could then be taken forward by the new Government after the election, which could implement the measure if it has widespread support.

We recognise that, to deliver on our ambition, it is important that we work together to deliver collective action to strengthen outcomes for BSL users. One point that came through the committee's scrutiny concerned local experience and whether there is adequate monitoring and reporting of that varying level of access at a local level. That is why we have established the listed authority network, which was delivered on our behalf by the ALLIANCE. That is an example of the creation of a space in which to share good practice among listed authorities, to share resources and to identify solutions to challenges around the implementation of local BSL plans. The network will have its first meeting with listed authorities on 15 December, and I very much look forward to seeing the work that comes out of it. Of course, that complements the work of the British Deaf Association Scotland, which we fund to work with listed authorities to foster community

connections and share information on how best to engage with BSL users.

Since the national plan was published, we have launched the new Contact Scotland BSL service, which will include a pilot of video remote interpreting for the first time; we have provided £375,000 to develop and launch the SignPort app, which will make booking interpreters easier; we have established the BSL justice advisory board to bring together justice sector representatives and the BSL community, which touches on a theme that was raised by a number of committee members; and we have continued to fund BSL organisations through the equality and human rights fund.

I am keen to take the committee's report and move at pace to implement and deliver some of the recommendations that are perhaps easier to deliver than others, as well as exploring some of the other recommendations that require that element of consultation or detailed analysis work. The conversations that I have had with BSL users this year have been inspirational and have also shaped my thinking on the Scottish Government's actions in the national plan. The BSL users I have met have reflected on their educational journeys and the improvements that could have been put in place to better support them, and they have highlighted the importance to them of various initiatives.

Someone who worked tirelessly to shape the 2015 act asked why deaf and deafblind people have to continue to always fight for their rights. That point struck me, and that is why the Scottish Government remains committed to the actions in our BSL national plan, taking on board Martin Whitfield's call for greater momentum, working on a cross-party basis and to delivering as many of the committee's recommendations as quickly as possible.

15:30

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I am pleased to open the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives and also to speak as a member of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee. I thank the committee and its clerks for putting together the report, and I also thank everyone who provided evidence to the committee as part of our inquiry, which we began early this year.

According to the latest Scottish census, there are just over 117,000 BSL users in Scotland, which amounts to 2 per cent of the population. In 2015, the Scottish Parliament passed the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015, which has increased BSL visibility, improved access to

services for BSL users and delivered greater empowerment of the deaf community.

However, as the evidence sessions and the report that we are debating today have made clear, some challenges remain. I will focus on two areas: first, the experience of deaf children when it comes to education; and secondly, issues relating to access to justice, particularly for deaf women who experience domestic abuse.

Deaf children face many barriers to things that their hearing peers take for granted. For instance, they often arrive at school without any well-developed language. That is unacceptable, which is why I am pleased that the committee agrees that deaf children should be able to learn their native language of BSL as early as possible. In the committee's private sessions, we heard from deaf pupils and their parents, who said that, in many cases, pupils placed in mainstream schools faced difficulties because there were not enough BSL specialists. Teachers were not properly equipped to deal with those pupils' needs. One of the pupils we spoke to said that it was extremely difficult to keep up with the work and, therefore, she failed her exams.

Many deaf pupils wish to study in mainstream schools, but the status quo is simply not acceptable. Too many deaf children are leaving school without the language and support that they need and are thus being set up to fail in later life. That is not just a future risk—it is happening now, and the consequences are lifelong. That is why I hope that the Scottish Government takes important steps to invest in deaf education, such as by increasing the number of qualified teachers.

I turn to the issue of deaf survivors of domestic abuse. Deaf women are more likely to experience domestic abuse than hearing women. I was shocked to hear in evidence to the committee that deaf women often assume that domestic abuse is a normal behaviour.

Such sentiments were also expressed at an event that I attended a couple of weeks ago, which was sponsored by East Dunbartonshire Women's Aid and was entitled, "Empowering deaf women to report domestic abuse". We were told that deaf women do not know the meaning of words such as "coercion" and "consent". We were told that there are only three BSL-trained domestic abuse advocates in Scotland, all of whom are based in Dundee. I was told by representatives of East Dunbartonshire Women's Aid that funding remains a major issue for many women's aid organisations, which makes it extremely challenging to recruit independent domestic abuse advocates who are skilled in sign language interactions. The barriers are even bigger for deaf women in rural areas, who are forced to travel for hours to access such support.

Those women have also been let down by the justice system. While putting together my Prevention of Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill, I met a survivor who had slurred speech. When the police arrived at her home, her abuser told authorities that she was drunk, so she was not taken seriously. The police and women's aid organisations do not always have interpreters, as many interpreters do not feel comfortable taking on such cases.

I clearly remember Lucy Clark, a deaf advocate and survivor of domestic abuse, telling the committee that finding an interpreter is always at the forefront of deaf women's minds. Even when there is an interpreter, many deaf survivors feel more comfortable speaking to someone else whose first language is BSL. However, in order to have a better picture of the extent of the problem, we need proper data. That is why my bill would place a duty on public authorities and third sector organisations to collect data such as disability status. I am pleased that that element of my bill received strong support during the consultation process as well as during the evidence that was given to the Parliament's Criminal Justice Committee.

On Tuesday, I asked the Deputy First Minister whether she believed that better data collection would help us to better understand the full extent of the problem. I was pleased that she agreed, and it is now incumbent on the Scottish Government and MSPs of all parties to support my bill.

It is important to remember that Scotland's deaf community is one of the most marginalised communities in our country. I hope that Parliament comes together in welcoming the report and agreeing to its recommendations. Although I was pleased to hear some warm words from the Deputy First Minister in her opening speech, I hope that they are followed by some concrete actions to make the lives of deaf people a little bit easier.

15:36

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I offer my thanks to the committee for all the important work that it carried out before publishing the report. On behalf of Scottish Labour, I welcome the report's findings and, of course, the opportunity to speak today and contribute to the discussion on how the committee's report can be used to build on the 2015 act and the national plan.

I welcome the 2015 act's positive impacts on BSL users, including increased representation and visibility of BSL, as we have talked about. The 2015 act has clearly been a momentous step

forward in empowering users, strengthening provision and supporting BSL users to speak up for their rights. I note the points made about the language of BSL, and I thank Karen Adam for her response on important points about language and culture.

Developments over the past decade should be welcomed as we take the next step in considering what further improvements can be made in the short and long term to support BSL users. As was made clear from the committee's inquiry, despite examples of positive work, much more is required to improve user experience, and I welcome the fact that the Government has recognised that.

One of the main themes in the report is the concern about gaps in the implementation and enforceability of the 2015 act, which is an important issue that we should explore. Following the ALLIANCE's analysis of the second round of BSL plans from all listed local authorities, it was disappointing to hear that only 72 per cent of authorities published plans, and only 62 per cent met their statutory duty that requires that the plans be published in BSL. That is a failing by the local authorities—the step that they should be taking is quite clear.

I understand that the Scottish Government does not have a regulatory function under the 2015 act, but we should have serious concerns about the fact that we have passed legislation that is not being complied with or properly monitored. We must have a discussion in the Parliament about how we can help with that important matter.

I hope that the Scottish Government can set out what further action it will take to ensure that any legislation, including the statutory duty placed on listed local authorities, is complied with and that consideration is given to how best to support authorities to fulfil legislative requirements. As a Parliament, we should think about how we can support local authorities. I am sure that the action plans that the Deputy First Minister set out will help with that.

People who live in rural areas face a particular disadvantage when it comes to accessing services, due to a shortage of interpreters. In those communities, getting an interpreter can often involve travel over really long distances as there might not be suitably qualified people in the local area. Pam Gosal made the point that, in certain circumstances, BSL users often want to have some relationship with the person they are speaking to.

I recognise the challenges that local authorities face, particularly in rural areas. However, living in remote and rural communities should never be a barrier to accessing the care and services that people need; everybody should have equal access

to those services across Scotland. We need to do much more work to make sure that people are trained in providing them.

We know that living in a remote and rural area can also increase feelings of isolation and loneliness. Will the Government outline any work that is being done to support the key roles of groups and facilities such as deaf clubs, which aim to bring communities together, and to ensure that all people feel supported and included? I know that it can be difficult in my area to secure premises, to get people together—because of issues with transport—and to make sure that people know that such facilities are available.

I would like to address many areas of the committee's report, including those on the challenges around early years provision and equal access to education. Others have mentioned—and constituents have spoken to me about—how difficult it is to enter early years provision and then move into primary and then secondary education.

Martin Whitfield: Is it not at those transitional periods—when children from the BSL user community are going into school and nursery for the first time, going to high school and going from the broad general education into higher education with assessments—that far more work needs to be done and a far better understanding from the education community of the differentiated needs is required?

Carol Mochan: I thank Martin Whitfield for that intervention. I was going to make that point.

Martin Whitfield: Sorry.

Carol Mochan: No, it was a very welcome intervention. Many families talk about supporting their loved ones, about them becoming settled in their preschool and then needing to move, and about having to go through the transition again, so it is so important that we address that issue. There is much more to say, as others have mentioned.

I hope that the Government places an emphasis on this issue and that it is committed to tackling the barriers for young BSL users and their wider families. This is a really important piece of work, so I look forward to a cross-party response to the committee's work, which Kate Forbes spoke about.

15:43

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I speak in today's debate as a member of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee. I thank the clerks for their assistance in the production of the report and all those who submitted their views on the subject. I welcome our guests in the public gallery.

Ten years on from the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015, the committee decided to hold a short inquiry to consider the actions that have been taken by the Scottish Government and the public authorities that are listed in the act to tackle the barriers that BSL users face. We focused on two things in particular: first, whether the act, the current BSL plan and listed authority plans are improving the lives of BSL users; and, secondly, what changes could be made in the short and long terms to improve the lives of BSL users.

The 2015 act was a landmark piece of legislation for this country. By enshrining British Sign Language in primary legislation, it acknowledged deaf citizens as a distinct language community. The committee welcomed the positive feedback that was received on the impact that the act has had in improving the daily lives of BSL users. I am pleased that it was noted that it has helped to increase the language's visibility and to empower deaf BSL users to access services and participate in society using their preferred language.

However, there are some challenges, and a number of key themes emerged during the evidence sessions. For the sake of time, I will touch on only two of those.

Justice was a key policy area to arise in the discussions, particularly for deaf people with experience of domestic abuse. As we approach the end of the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence, it is important to touch on that part of the report in particular. I express my sincere thanks to Lucy, a deaf domestic abuse survivor, who provided important testimony on the barriers that BSL users can face when engaging with the police and courts.

Progress was noted under the access to justice actions in the national plan, but, in her evidence, Professor Napier, chair of intercultural communication and associate principal of research culture at Heriot-Watt University, said that several issues that would improve access for BSL users in the legal system had not been addressed. Professor Napier noted that research in the USA estimated that deaf women are two to three times more likely to experience domestic abuse than hearing women. The cause of that is

"potential perpetrators using their hearing status as part of the power dynamic".—[Official Report, *Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee*, 3 June 2025; c 58.]

The committee agrees with our witnesses that deaf women in particular should have better access to education and information about their rights and the law and that deaf-specific service providers would help to achieve that. Therefore, the committee invited the Scottish Government to consider what further steps could be taken in that

regard. I welcome the fact that, in her response, the Deputy First Minister noted that the Scottish Government continues

“to engage with Deaf Links and the Sign Loud team at Heriot Watt University and University of Edinburgh, a project focused on experiences of domestic abuse and communication barriers, to consider deliverables that will make a difference to Deaf women within the new Equally Safe Delivery Plan.”

The committee agrees that consideration should be given to how emergency services should be alerted to the fact that a person is deaf before attending an emergency call to enable interpretation to be provided, even if that is initially done online. I welcome the fact that the Deputy First Minister's response notes:

“The Scottish Ambulance Service ... are currently working with BDA Scotland to look at what facilities they currently have in place for BSL patients and service users and how they can improve and develop in this area”.

On healthcare, particularly mental health services, some further concerns were raised that warranted further discussion. For example, the committee invited the Scottish Government to respond to concerns that were raised by BDA Scotland and the Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland—the ALLIANCE—about the need for a robust approach to ensuring that older deaf BSL users have access to appropriate services and care packages. It also invited a response on the ALLIANCE's comments about the likelihood of the number of deafblind people increasing and its calls for an increase in the number of social workers for the deaf.

I welcome the fact that the Scottish Government published an equalities impact assessment alongside the mental health and wellbeing workforce action plan to help to identify and form actions that are needed to address inequalities in the mental health and wellbeing workforce. That specifically included action on promoting BSL resources.

I am pleased that the Scottish Government's “British Sign Language (BSL): national plan 2023 to 2029” represents its continuing commitment to making Scotland the best place in the world for BSL users to live, work, visit and learn. I am also pleased that, overall, the Scottish Government has accepted in full the vast majority of our recommendations. It is clear that the BSL community should be at the heart of our decision-making process to ensure that we get things right. It is vital that we work together with the community to tackle the barriers, improve their lives and deliver the 2015 act's objectives.

15:48

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I welcome this debate. For me, it is a debate about post-

legislative scrutiny, which we have not seen much of in the Parliament. Therefore, I welcome the fact that the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee took the time to do such scrutiny of the 2015 act. I thank the members of the committee and their clerks for putting together the report. I also thank everyone who provided evidence to the committee—many charities and organisations, sometimes small organisations, that work in our communities. I also pay tribute to Mark Griffin for his long-standing campaigning on BSL and to the convener, Karen Adam, for her and the committee's work.

As Pam Gosal mentioned in her opening speech, according to the latest Scottish census, there are just over 117,000 BSL users in Scotland. That is about 2 per cent of our population, so delivering on the 2015 act matters.

In 2015, the Scottish Parliament passed the British Sign Language (Scotland) Bill, which has helped to deliver many improvements. We must acknowledge that; it is fair that we do. The committee has found that the act has increased awareness of BSL as a language, with respondents to the committee's call for views agreeing that the act has increased the visibility and recognition of BSL and that it has helped to raise public awareness. However, for me, as with everything in politics and everything that we do in the Parliament, it is about outcomes. We must challenge ourselves, and the committee report certainly does that.

The committee found that responses were not completely positive. Several responses suggested that there was a lack of enforceability with the act, as has been mentioned in the debate, and some responses mentioned a postcode lottery, which we so often talk about, when it comes to delivering on the act in local government and in our health boards. The committee received mixed responses on the second national plan—I hope that ministers have taken that into account—in relation to not only measurable goals and timelines but clear accountability mechanisms, which need to be improved. One respondent said that there had been

“little in the way of measurable progress across the piece”—[*Official Report, Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, 3 June 2025; c 10.*]

in relation to the plan.

As a member of the Education, Children and Young People Committee, I want to concentrate my comments on education. It is not surprising that education aspects received the most feedback during the committee's consultation. Issues that were raised include early years provision, mainstreaming, support around transitions, qualifications and the fluency of teachers in BSL. The committee recommended

that the Scottish Government consider what action could be taken to increase the number of deaf BSL users being qualified to perform teaching roles, which is really important.

What has struck me is the work of other members during this parliamentary session—for example, Pam Duncan-Glancy's bill on transitions and the key principles behind it. Although the bill has not been taken forward in this session, a lot of the key issues that it covers need to be picked up in the next session on the back of the committee's recommendations.

Martin Whitfield: Is it not becoming apparent over this parliamentary session, in particular, that there are real challenges in Scotland for our young people at transitional stages, not only in their own communities but in the community as a whole? As Miles Briggs said, that will need to be looked at—not by us, sadly, but in the next session.

Miles Briggs: I absolutely agree. Some really good frameworks have been developed, especially for care-experienced young people in our colleges and universities. I do not see why the same principles of care and support provision cannot be extended—some colleges are doing that, and we need that approach to be rolled out. I hope that, in the next parliamentary session, the education committee will take into account the findings in the report.

We will also need to return to the recommendations on teacher-led learning of BSL. In my time as an MSP, I have made a number of visits to schools where children were learning BSL. That has often been because a teacher has had the ability to provide such a lesson, which the kids love, or because there was a deaf child in the classroom and they wanted the child to be included in all lessons. We sometimes overcomplicate frameworks—teachers might already be delivering, and we need to be mindful of that.

Martin Whitfield touched on momentum, and Carol Mochan mentioned the postcode lottery around implementation. It is important that we consider that.

We have limited time, so I want to touch on mental health, because that has been my greatest concern during the time that I have served as an MSP. As we have touched on, there are huge challenges with the delivery of BSL in our health service. We have to be honest about that. I have had many pieces of casework in which individuals trying to access general practitioner services have not been provided with a BSL interpreter.

The ability to deliver BSL interpretation does not seem to have improved in some health board areas. I know from the committee report that there was general consensus among witnesses that

interpreter provision had improved for planned appointments in most health boards, but the situation remained unsatisfactory in most accident and emergency departments. We must do more, and we must consider how that can be delivered. We need to embrace technology more, which was touched on in the report, but health boards often do their own thing in that regard. The national approach to the delivery of some of these outcomes needs to be revisited.

The Scottish Conservatives welcome the progress that has been made in Scotland since the passing of the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015, but we are concerned about the number of issues—especially in relation to education and health—that are making it difficult for deaf people to engage in and be active members of our society and to access services so that they can realise their potential.

I hope that the Scottish Government will take on board the committee's recommendations. I also hope that all the Parliament's committees will learn from the report. We are all members of different committees, and I hope that some of the learning from the inquiry will be applied in the work that the Parliament is doing now and will do in the future.

15:55

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I thank the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee for its work on the inquiry and the report. Some valuable points have been raised, and I look forward to seeing what impact the report has. Miles Briggs was right to say that we need to do more post-legislative scrutiny, because that can have a strong impact by enabling us to make better law in the future.

The Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee has a great deal of responsibility, and its work programme has been very reactive to what is going on and to areas where work is needed. The time that has been given to the inquiry—in taking evidence, working on the report and securing parliamentary time for the debate—demonstrates how seriously the issues that were raised are being taken.

Karen Adam, as convener of the committee and in general, is a very strong advocate for BSL and deaf rights. She always speaks up for them, while ensuring that lived experience is central in the conversation. I have often gone to her to ask questions, including when I had responsibility for equalities as a Government minister. I have learned a lot from her in the past four years, and I am sure that many other members are in the same position. I know that the inquiry meant a lot to her, and I think that that passion and care have come

through in the detail that the committee has presented to Parliament.

I was struck by one issue in particular. Last week, Karen Adam welcomed to Parliament deaf mothers who are survivors of domestic abuse; the Deputy First Minister also attended that event. Deaf women's experiences of domestic abuse are highlighted in the committee's report, and it is notable that the issue has been mentioned in the debate by two other members of the committee. That is not an area of concern that I have heard discussed elsewhere, so it is particularly important that it was given space in the committee's report.

As well as ensuring that domestic abuse survivors are able to engage with the justice system in the first place, the report addresses the concerns that were raised about deaf survivors being lumped in with disabled survivors in statistics, rather than their distinct situation being recognised. That issue deserves the attention that it has been given in the report.

Some of my longest-running and most difficult casework has involved BSL users. That has been the case not because of those constituents or their situation, but because of the scale of the challenges that they face, which is so great that I know that I am limited in trying to get them the change that they need within a parliamentary session. However, they are not usually asking for slight policy changes that might improve things for some people at some point. They are often asking for help or access that would allow them to live their lives on the most basic level—to attend a hospital appointment, arrange social care packages or go to school. In its "Healthcare" section, the committee's report outlines how serious their need can be in a healthcare context. It recommends that work needs to be done on escalation when a caller to emergency services is deaf or when a deaf person needs to access mental health appointments.

The report also highlights the lack of BSL users in services such as audiology. That is a concern across the board. I have heard from people whose education, employment and social lives are on complete hold because they are waiting for care or interpretation services. There are teenagers who are stuck in limbo during their formative years—years that they will never get back. The committee's report goes into great detail on early years intervention and points out that deaf children may not be able to access childcare with BSL provision, which means that they arrive at nursery and primary school without any language.

BSL users with mobility issues, neurodivergence or learning disabilities often find it even harder to make things work for them. The fact that deafblindness is becoming more common, which was outlined in the ALLIANCE's evidence to the

committee, is a particular concern. Older deaf people are experiencing dual sensory loss, which leads to them feeling isolated, especially when they live in rural areas.

As a Highlands and Islands MSP, I am concerned by that pattern and I recognise that any service improvement for deaf people and BSL users must mean improvement for those living anywhere in Scotland, including in rural and island areas, not just towns and cities.

BSL users have explained to me and my office that they have even struggled to take part in consultation exercises that were set up to get the evidence that only they can provide because no deafblind support or tactile BSL was available, because people were expected to be able to read English, which is different from BSL English, or because consultation forms were not made available in accessible formats from the beginning.

Most of those issues come back to the point that we need more interpreters and more people working in public services who have BSL, including deaf BSL users. Acceleration of BSL education will also be needed to meet the demand for interpreters.

Ultimately, the report is a reflection of the need to embed a human rights approach to Scotland's public services. The ability of deaf people to participate fully and to access public services in their first language is a non-negotiable part of a rights-based society.

I want to be very clear to BSL users in the Highlands and Islands that I am here to help, as I have just signed. I am happy to arrange interpreter services for surgeries, to work around the availability of those interpreters and to ensure that my office is as accessible as possible for anyone. Even if it takes a long time, I am here to support BSL users and to make the case for better support and access. I will continue to work with them, with Karen Adam and with others to highlight the areas of greatest concern for BSL users and argue for positive change.

16:01

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am pleased to contribute to this afternoon's debate.

Ten years ago, the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015 became an important step towards promoting British Sign Language in Scotland and improving the lives of all who depend on BSL. I therefore welcome the inquiry into the 2015 act by the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee. I know that BSL users face challenges across many different aspects of society, and it is important that the

British Sign Language national plan delivers on the proposals that came from the 2015 act.

The testimony that was received during the committee's inquiry makes it clear that progress has indeed been made on the issue, and that is to be commended. However, that testimony also made it clear that individuals still face many barriers, for example in relation to access to education, health or employment.

It is unsurprising that education was one of the biggest policy areas that the inquiry looked at, as deaf children still face challenges at every stage of our education system. The committee heard evidence that, although the number of BSL interpreters has increased, they cannot be a replacement for teachers who are native BSL users.

Deaf Links highlighted that there has been "a dearth of appropriately trained Deaf BSL tutors in Scotland"

for the past 30 years. That is having an impact on the development of BSL users. As the ALLIANCE has stated and as many members have highlighted in the debate, that can have a lifelong impact on individuals.

Carol Mochan: Does the member agree that, although that obviously affects individual BSL users, parents and family members also find it stressful that their loved one does not have the ability to communicate in their own language outwith the home?

Alexander Stewart: Yes, it has a knock-on effect within the family unit, and it is vitally important that individuals are given the opportunity. If that opportunity does not exist, there will be a lack of communication and a lack of cohesion in the family unit, and it can sometimes cause disturbance and distraction.

Another issue relates to teachers of the deaf being qualified to BSL level 3. It is vital that we have those qualified teachers working in the classroom.

It is important that the Scottish Government addresses those issues by establishing a pipeline of qualified interpreters, BSL teachers and classroom support services.

However, many of the issues begin long before a child enters formal education. As we have heard, there are also numerous problems when deaf children are progressing through early years education. Deaf children have limited opportunities to learn BSL in their early years, and witnesses highlighted to the committee that some children are beginning nursery without any meaningful language skills. It is tragic that some individuals

are going into that environment without those skills and finding themselves at a disadvantage.

Deaf support workers, including specialist support workers for supported living, play a key part in addressing that challenge. Those workers carry out important work in engaging with deaf children from a very early age, giving them a positive attitude and supporting them on their path.

If the SNP fails to address those challenges in early years education, it will only create further challenges for young deaf people in their experience of education further down the road. As the committee highlighted, we cannot have a situation in which some deaf children are starting nursery or school with next to no knowledge of their native language.

The committee's report also highlights that deaf people face particular challenges in rural settings; we have heard about that today from some members who represent rural communities, where BSL services are harder to access. Rural councils often lack deaf clubs and specialist opportunities, and they may not have the resources to identify and support deaf individuals. The Scottish Government must listen to the committee's recommendations on that issue in order to close the opportunity gap between deaf people in rural communities and those living in the central belt.

While the Scottish Government appears to have accepted the need for positive change, we have to ensure that it remains focused on the recommendations to ensure that there is a shift towards delivering what is required. For example, with regard to the shortage of interpreters, we still have no clear timescales and no workforce strategy that reflects the seriousness of the challenges. As I said, in order to support individuals, we must address isolation and lack of access in rural areas by ensuring access to deaf clubs and improving digital provision.

All those things play a part, and it is vitally important that we look across all the recommendations. We heard from public bodies about how they can be supported to promote BSL effectively. There may be good intentions from the Government, but we need to ensure that what follows is about more than just good will.

In dealing with this issue, one goal should be to ensure that the deaf generation of today does not have to struggle as past deaf generations did. Deaf individuals speak about feeling like second-class citizens, struggling to find meaningful employment and feeling that they are unable to fulfil their true potential. We also heard today about difficulties faced in health services and how deaf people can be affected as a result.

In conclusion, the SNP Government should take the committee's report as an important reminder of

those issues and ensure that the 2015 act can finally live up to its full potential so that individuals are given the respect and the opportunities that they need. They want to see from us a recognition of what they have achieved so far, and of what we should be achieving on their behalf.

16:08

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in the debate as a member of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, and I thank the committee clerks and other members. I was not a member of the committee when it took evidence in its inquiry. However, I was at its meeting on 10 December, which was a reminder of not only why the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015 remains one of the Parliament's most important pieces of equalities legislation, but why the implementation process must continue to be sharpened.

I also thank Karen Adam for her work on the committee, and for—as has been mentioned—her work on the issue over a number of years and her passion for that work.

I start with the fundamentals: BSL is not just a communication tool—it is a language of Scotland, it is recognised in law, and it is part of our national cultural identity. The 2015 act is about language rights, not optional extras, and the rights that it establishes must be lived in practice and not left sitting on paper.

We heard powerful evidence from deaf organisations and BSL users, and their message was consistent. When the 2015 act works, it transforms access, confidence and participation. When it does not work, it is because systems have not shifted fast enough, leadership has not been clear enough, or delivery has been too uneven across public bodies. One of the challenges is ensuring access across all the different parts of Scotland.

That inconsistency is at the heart of the challenge. We have good practice in pockets—for example, public bodies that take their duties seriously, embed BSL into planning and work directly with deaf communities—but we also have areas where progress has been slow, reactive or reliant on one or two committed individuals. Rights cannot depend on the enthusiasm of a few. They need structure, accountability and resource.

I want to highlight three themes that came through strongly in the committee's inquiry, and the first is leadership and accountability. Public bodies have legal duties under the 2015 act, but leadership determines whether those duties become realities. Too often, BSL is treated as an add-on and delivered through communications teams instead of being rooted in strategic

planning. Where senior leaders take responsibility, we see measurable progress. Where they do not, we see drift.

I support the committee's position that future BSL plans must include clear performance indicators—I asked the Deputy First Minister about that issue at committee this week—and that compliance must not be a tick-box exercise. We all have a part to play in ensuring that compliance is embedded. We need mechanisms that will ensure that, if Parliament sets a legal obligation, it will be met. That means early intervention when bodies are falling behind and greater transparency for BSL users on what progress is—and is not—being made.

The second theme that I will talk about is access to essential public services. The evidence that we heard from deaf individuals makes the stakes very clear. If someone cannot access a GP appointment, understand justice processes, communicate with their child's school or engage with social security systems, their rights are compromised. There must not be a postcode lottery of BSL access. Some national health service boards have made real advances, particularly on digital access and interpreter pathways, but others are struggling with inconsistency and workforce pressures. That tells me that the system needs clearer expectations and firmer direction. Deaf communities should not have to navigate the gaps that we know exist.

We also heard concerns about education, especially in relation to BSL in early years and school settings. If we are serious about equality of opportunity, we must treat early access to language and communication as non-negotiable.

The third theme is the BSL workforce. That issue sits behind every other point that is raised. The 2015 act cannot deliver on its promise without a strong, sustainable, well-supported interpreting and translation workforce. The committee heard about long waits, overstretched interpreters and the pressure that is placed on BSL tutors and trainers. We need a workforce pipeline that reflects the scale of the act's ambition. That includes training capacity, career progression, fair pay and national co-ordination. We simply cannot base a rights-based system on precarious labour, and deaf BSL users must be at the centre, shaping what good access looks like.

The committee's job is not to point fingers; it is to ensure that the 2015 act does what this Parliament intended. However, scrutiny requires honesty, and the honest assessment is that progress has been made, but it is too uneven; that rights exist, but too many people still have to fight to have them respected; and that the system has created plans, but plans alone cannot guarantee delivery.

We have a responsibility as a committee and as a Parliament to push the system towards consistency, ambition and accountability. Let us not forget that the 2015 act remains world leading. Scotland was the first nation in the UK to recognise BSL in law. However, leadership means staying ahead and not looking back.

I want Scotland to be a country where BSL users never have to explain, justify or negotiate their right to equal access; where public bodies do not wait for reminders or complaints before acting; and where deaf communities genuinely shape policy, not as consultees but as partners. That was the spirit behind the act, and it must guide the next stage of implementation.

The committee will continue to scrutinise progress closely. Our role is to ensure that the lived experience of BSL users matches the promises that have been made in the chamber because, ultimately, equality is measured not by legislation alone but by the lives that people are able to lead.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): We move to the closing speeches.

16:13

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): The opportunity to speak in this debate is special because we have an opportunity to acknowledge genuine progress and the delivery of support to, and recognition of, a powerful and important community, which is Scotland's deaf and hearing-impaired community.

Like others, I thank the committee and especially all those who contributed evidence for what I genuinely believe to be an important report. I also thank the BSL interpreters who have appeared on screens in the chamber today. I know that they are there all the time when we are broadcasting, but it is very nice to see them on the screens in the chamber so that we non-BSL users can also see the access that is available.

The committee's report highlights some very important areas, and I will touch on a number of them. I will start with my little pet subject of post-legislative scrutiny, which was powerfully mentioned by Miles Briggs. The work that the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee has done on its report is probably the best example of post-legislative scrutiny that I have had the privilege to see this session. It was not required by legislation or demanded by the Parliament. I hope that I do not embarrass the committee convener by saying this, but those who sat on the committee and the power of the convener herself brought about an incredibly powerful piece of post-legislative scrutiny.

Depending on which side of the chamber they sit on, members either fear the concept of returning to legislation—as they see it as Government bashing—or see post-legislative scrutiny as an opportunity to do that. The committee's report represents an incredibly balanced and powerful use of post-legislative scrutiny. As has been picked up in a number of speeches, and as was picked up by the Deputy First Minister in response to my intervention, the committee has presented the Parliament with an opportunity to make things better.

We are not starting the process at stage 1—we are starting a long way into the journey—but it is still a journey. We should take that powerful message from today's debate and from the committee's work—and also from those who contributed to the work of the committee. They have clearly shown where things have worked well. As Paul McLennan said, the act was “world leading” legislation when it came out.

We are talking about a language that we have put on the statute book as a language of Scotland. Those people for whom BSL is a “first language”, to use the convener's proper description, have a right to access their human rights through their first language. We have not just a duty but an obligation to ensure that that can happen.

There have been a number of very powerful speeches from across the chamber. I will pick up first on Pam Gosal's contribution, on Marie McNair's enormously powerful speech and on Emma Roddick's contribution, among others, regarding the evidence that was heard about the risk among the deaf and deaf/hearing community—in that women in particular suffer from the risk of domestic abuse. That was so well articulated by Pam Gosal as well as other members. That is hard to read in a report, but it is right that that appears in the committee's report, so that those who read it and those who choose to make choices on behalf of others realise people's lived experience. That was very powerful.

I will also pick up on the point about education. We have heard an enormous amount of evidence in the debate about the importance of BSL in the journey through childhood and about the challenges—the challenges at transition or at entry to nursery, and the challenge of maintaining ability and sometimes interest, in the case of a young person who cannot access anything that is happening in the classroom. Those challenges should not rest on our BSL communities; they should rest on our educational community and our local authorities, and they should rest on the Parliament and the Scottish Government, which should do better, frankly.

Karen Adam: Absolutely—it is incumbent on all of us to ensure that inclusion. Martin Whitfield has

just mentioned the Parliament, and he spoke earlier about the interpreters who interpret our debates, but I would note that they do not do them all; it is only specific debates that are chosen. My dad came to speak to me about that point. He said, "Actually, I don't get to see things on transport or on the budget. It's always about BSL or disability things." We could do better in the Scottish Parliament, too, and translate everything as standard. The service today is wonderful.

Martin Whitfield: I applaud Karen Adam on that point—or actually her father. People want access to their human rights, and this is their Parliament so they should be able to access everything that happens in here. We recognise Gaelic and BSL. To appallingly misquote a former MP of East Lothian, if we cannot come up with a system whereby the Parliament is accessible to everyone, what we are actually doing is closing the Parliament off to members of the Scottish community, which is wrong. I am very grateful for the member's intervention.

I will turn back to education and the challenge that our BSL and deaf community suffers from. On a number of occasions, we have heard about the challenge—the numbers of teachers who are BSL qualified, or even BSL competent within that, and the support that is available. We have spoken about the need for a pipeline of interpreters and teachers.

I remember the 1+2 foreign language policy and the joy that I heard when Glasgow picked up BSL as one of the languages that it wanted to teach its children. I go back to Miles Briggs's comment about watching children in a classroom learning BSL. The fun of being able to swear at the teacher, particularly a teacher who does not know BSL—even if it is just by using the alphabet—has amused a significant number of children who I had the pleasure of teaching. We have heard about the joy that young people have in discovering something new and being able to communicate with fellow young people, even if, on occasion, that can be quite mischievous.

The committee heard evidence about the increase in numbers and the fact that we need a work plan for how we are going to develop the pipeline of BSL interpreters and teachers. I know that the Scottish Government is starting work on that, and it would be interesting to hear how it sees that process being rolled out, above and beyond the challenge for young people in Scotland to speak other languages. Given that, along with Gaelic, BSL is a language of Scotland, they have a right to speak it. It is a significant community's first language, and we need to address that.

We can deliver for this community, but it will require the Scottish Government to listen to the voices of BSL users, experts and the deaf

community as a whole. It is also an obligation on the Parliament, and I will pick up the challenge that the Deputy First Minister was concerned that I would throw at her. It rests on the Parliament as a whole to create and drive the momentum for change that this community rightly demands—and which, frankly, Scotland deserves—in order to be a better place.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Tess White to close the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives. You have a generous six minutes.

16:22

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): I thank the committee clerks and support staff and the organisations and individuals who gave evidence to the committee. As our convener, Karen Adam, said, we all want to express our sincere gratitude to all those who gave evidence. It was very impactful for me to have Karen Adam as our convener, because she is a role model for the deaf community. She shared with the committee, including in private sessions, information that I did not know, such as about the word "CODA". I watched the film "CODA", which was very impactful. The inquiry raised my interest and understanding of the importance of BSL, so I would like to thank our convener. Her personal life experience made the whole committee experience enriching.

As Martin Whitfield said, it is really important that we have a Parliament that is accessible to everyone, so I am delighted to see people in the gallery who had an important input to our committee. The evidence was powerful and impactful, and it resonated deeply. I also thank the Deputy First Minister, who cares deeply about this subject and the importance of language to communicating, to being understood and to reducing the sense of isolation.

Each MSP who has spoken today recognises that some progress has been made in Scotland. I share the Deputy First Minister's aspiration. I think that she said that Scotland has been a leader. I would say that Scotland definitely will be a leader if all the committee's recommendations are implemented.

Kate Forbes: Will the member take an intervention?

Tess White: Yes, of course.

Kate Forbes: It is not a cheeky intervention. To reflect on the period, let us say, before devolution and over the past few centuries, and as I shared in committee, I am struck by the history of the BSL community in Scotland and how BSL users have pioneered many global solutions over the past 300

years. I am happy not to take any credit, but I still credit Scots as being leaders in the area.

Tess White: I would like to come back on that. It was very interesting to hear the Deputy First Minister share with the committee that Scotland was the world leader for the deaf community centuries ago but it lost its way. I was looking at Mark Griffin's evidence from when he first introduced the bill, and he compared Scotland with Finland to show how Scotland had fallen behind Finland on the number of teachers and tutors for the deaf community.

I hope that the committee report and the way in which the Deputy First Minister has engaged with the issue ensures that that work continues. She said that it is really for the next session of Parliament, too, so I hope that, in her handover, she makes sure that it does.

One issue that has been identified in the debate by several members—Marie McNair raised it very powerfully—is the issue of access to the legal system for deaf women. I thought that women who are deaf were twice as likely to experience domestic abuse, but Marie McNair said that they are two to three times more likely, which is even more alarming.

Dr Pam Gosal highlighted the issue of deaf survivors of domestic abuse, and she cited the evidence from committee that deaf women often assume that domestic abuse is normal behaviour, which is absolutely shocking. When we heard that powerful evidence at committee, we were all taken aback. That issue has not yet been mentioned in any of the speeches in the debate. The national plan has also been silent on the issue. I hope that Government officials will take that away from the debate and that, under the leadership of the Deputy First Minister, we have it in the plan moving forward.

It was harrowing to hear what Dr Gosal said at committee about meeting a survivor who had slurred speech while putting together her Prevention of Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill. Dr Gosal shared with us today that, when the police arrived at the survivor's home, the abuser told authorities that she was drunk, so she was not taken seriously. That is absolutely horrific. When we heard that in committee, it was almost unbelievable. The more we hear about women who experience domestic abuse and the fabric of lies that the domestic abuser makes and shares with the police, the more shocking it is.

Carol Mochan: That is absolutely beyond belief, and I suppose that it does not come to us until we hear it in black and white. Was there any evidence on how Police Scotland or other organisations hope to combat the issue?

Tess White: I know that Dr Gosal met Chief Constable Jo Farrell this week and mentioned her bill, so it is now very firmly and squarely on the table as a result of that committee work. In addition to the issue that Carol Mochan raises, there was powerful input from a deaf advocate and survivor of domestic abuse, who told the committee that finding an interpreter is always at the front of a deaf woman's mind. Can members imagine how bad it is, when someone has been abused and the police are coming to the door, to have to deal with those feelings of isolation, loneliness, threat and fear? That came across very powerfully. Even when there is an interpreter, many deaf survivors feel more comfortable speaking to someone whose first language is British Sign Language.

We have explored in the debate the lack of national oversight, which is an issue that needs to be addressed. I am grateful to the Deputy First Minister for taking my intervention on that and for saying that the issue is very much on the radar.

As Karen Adam said, the Scottish Government's second national plan received mixed responses at committee. However, despite the Deputy First Minister's insistence that the plan is clear and ambitious, in reality it faces a number of issues, particularly with its lack of focus and measurable goals. Alexander Stewart cited Deaflink, which said that there has been a

"dearth of appropriately trained Deaf BSL Tutors in Scotland",

which is having a huge impact on the development of BSL users.

When my committee members asked me whether I was going to raise the issue with the Deputy First Minister, I said, "Too right I am." I asked the DFM and her officials how many deaf BSL teachers there were and whether the position had improved from 10 or even five years ago, but neither the Deputy First Minister nor her officials had the figures to hand, which is a case in point. Data capture is important: we cannot manage what we do not measure. The committee asked the Scottish Government to consider a national BSL centre for excellence.

I realise the time, Presiding Officer, so I will come to my final comments.

Unless there is sufficient national oversight, issues around a shortage of qualified interpreters, deaf BSL teachers, limited resources and a lack of enforceability will not improve. In conclusion, although the 2015 act has brought significant benefits, the committee recognises that there are substantial challenges and that, as our convener said, substantial opportunities still remain.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the Deputy First Minister, Kate Forbes, to close on behalf of the Scottish Government.

16:32

Kate Forbes: I thank colleagues for the debate so far. I will start with the difference that the committee's debate and its report will make and the actions that the Scottish Government will take as a direct result of the points that have been raised by colleagues in the report as well as in the debate.

The first action is our commitment to funding a BSL network to enable listed authorities to share best practice and provide support to improve local BSL plans. I mentioned that in my opening speech, but it is in direct response to the points that have been made about monitoring, reporting and the postcode lottery, which have come through quite clearly in my engagement. Experiences in the heart of Dundee or Edinburgh, for example, differ markedly from experiences in more rural areas, which Carol Mochan referenced. In some areas, there is a need to improve a service that already exists, but other areas may still be looking for the service to exist.

Secondly, we will explore and cost a national BSL tutor course for Scotland in engagement with education and BSL partnerships, to look at how it would fit with the existing provision. I am very interested in that approach. I spoke at committee about the fact that there are a number of different initiatives. That has come across in the debate: Martin Whitfield spoke about tutors and teachers, and we have just heard from Tess White about teachers. I have heard consistently that, although teachers are important in schools, there is also a need for tutors outside the school setting, to enhance young people's learning and attainment, and that we need to look at something that could be provided nationally.

Thirdly, we will explore engaging with education professionals to develop new guidance to support BSL users to become registered teachers. I take squarely on the chin Tess White's point about the number of teachers, but, irrespective of the specific number, I accept that there are not enough teachers. We need far more BSL teachers. There are different routes and a number of different initiatives for someone who wants to become a teacher, so we will ensure that the guidance is as clear as possible, and we will change what BSL stakeholders want to be changed in it.

Martin Whitfield: Does the Deputy First Minister recognise the subjective point of view of friends of mine that the teaching of BSL through online videos is not adequate, particularly when

we are talking about access for young, developing people? Does she agree that face-to-face contact is important in terms of the cultural, spiritual and emotional development of someone's use of a language?

Kate Forbes: Absolutely. At the moment, BSL users can become registered teachers through one of the 46 active initial teacher education courses that currently exist. I am told that support is provided on a case-by-case basis for ITE students using BSL, but that provision needs to be appropriate, and the BSL users need to be able to access the right kind of support if they are going to train to become BSL teachers. That approach needs to be taken forward through careful engagement with all the relevant professionals and organisations, including the General Teaching Council for Scotland, ITE course providers, deans of education, local authorities and Education Scotland.

A point that was made in the committee's report concerned placements for trainee teachers in specialist deaf teaching provision or other places that expose trainee teachers to BSL. That has a lot of merit.

Fourthly, we are promoting Contact Scotland BSL, which supports video-relay interpreting, and the SignPort app, which will address digital exclusion and rural access. A number of colleagues took great interest in the new contract for Contact Scotland BSL. I am pleased that it was successfully relaunched on 1 December. There was extensive work in the run-up to that, to draw awareness to the changes. SignPort sits alongside that, making it easier to book interpreters.

Next, we are undertaking a review of additional support for learning, and we are revising guidance on appropriate qualifications for teachers of the deaf. That is in response to a point that has been made by the committee and others in relation to the provision of teachers who do not have sufficient fluency in BSL. For example, I was told about a maths student who was given an interpreter who had only a level 1 qualification and therefore could not help. Similarly, in primary and secondary schools, a BSL teacher might be trained to only a low level and therefore cannot teach the children at the right level.

Tess White: Does the Deputy First Minister think that having a target for deaf BSL teachers, as we do for GPs, would be the right thing to do?

Kate Forbes: I am open to that. We know how many deaf children there are, so it makes sense to say that we know how many children need access to BSL teachers—that is, every one of those deaf children. However, I would caveat that by saying that there are very understandable requests for BSL education for children who do not need BSL

for themselves but who, if they could use BSL, would be able to communicate with other young people and reduce their isolation and loneliness. Sometimes, when we have a target, we think that we have succeeded when we hit the target, but a general increase in the numbers is also important. However, I will certainly take that point away.

That leads me to the last action that I was going to talk about, which concerns opportunities for pupils to learn BSL within the current programme of curriculum qualifications and assessment.

I realise that I am over time—although I was encouraged to speak for a generous period—but I want to turn to the very serious issues in and around domestic abuse.

Miles Briggs: I want to ask for another action. It has been welcome that the former Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport has also been in the chamber for this debate, but a lot of the points that have been raised around access to health services point towards a lack of help to navigate our health services. Given that the Government has made good progress on the cancer strategy and the single point of contact service to help cancer patients to navigate health services, is the Government looking at designing something similar for those deaf patients who continually tell us that they are not able to access interpreter services within our health services?

Kate Forbes: The short answer is yes. I am sorry for repeating, to an extent, what I said to the committee, but I think that there are two answers to that question. One is a very integrated approach within the health service for deaf BSL users. Staff training is the responsibility of a public sector employer. We expect public sector employers, such as health boards, to undertake their own impact assessments and ensure that they operate in line with their public sector equality duties, so that there is safe, effective, inclusive and high-quality care provision.

Separate to that is the wider question about enabling a BSL user to book an interpreter and have the comfort that that is being done. That is part of the reason for developing SignPort, which is a really easy and simple app that ensures that people can book an interpreter. There are two parts to that: first, ensuring that there are enough interpreters—full stop; secondly, ensuring that all public sector employers take responsibility for that provision.

Mr Briggs mentioned Maree Todd, who is sitting beside me. She formerly had responsibility for BSL, so she brings that experience and background to her new role.

A lot of mention has been made of domestic abuse and the justice system. Marie McNair talked about the fact that deaf women are two to three

times more likely to experience domestic abuse. That comes through in the work of the Sign LOUD programme, whose event, which Karen Adam hosted, I attended last week. I have very much committed to the Sign LOUD team that I will take on board the recommendations that it has put forward, which are specifically about supporting deaf women, reducing domestic abuse and ensuring that there is adequate support.

The point that struck me—these things sometimes stay with us, and I could not get over it—was the overreliance on children to act as interpreters in a case of domestic abuse. We are exposing children to these horrendous experiences because of a lack of adequate interpreters. The obvious impact on the women is shocking, but the idea that a five, six or seven-year-old would be expected to fulfil the role that should otherwise be provided by the state—of acting as an interpreter to recount the experiences that their mothers were subjected to—goes far beyond anything that is remotely acceptable in Scotland in 2025. On that point alone, I committed very firmly to the Sign LOUD team—which comprises researchers from Heriot-Watt University and the University of Edinburgh, as well as various experts on domestic abuse and deaf communities—that I will take on board their recommendations and respond seriously, certainly before the election.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I call Maggie Chapman to wind up the debate on behalf of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee. You have a very generous eight minutes, Ms Chapman.

16:43

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland Green): I am very pleased to have the opportunity to close the debate on behalf of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee. Like the convener, I pay tribute to the work of my colleagues and of our clerks, researchers and engagement professionals, and especially to all those who gave evidence to our committee, either formally or informally.

One of the key strengths of the inquiry was the consensual way in which the committee conducted our work, and it is pleasing to see that positive spirit in the chamber again this afternoon. Although there are clearly some differences in approach and focus, I welcome today's broad consensus on the need to make Scotland the best place in the world for BSL users to live, work, visit and learn.

Given the level of focus on the educational needs and priorities of deaf people, it is fitting that this debate is taking place only a stone's throw

away from the site of the first school for deaf children in Britain, which opened its doors more than 250 years ago in the area now known as Dumbiedykes. Its founder, Thomas Braidwood, was also a pioneer of the development of standardised hand gestures, which evolved over time into the language used today. I pay tribute to all those who have contributed to the development and promotion of the language since then.

I will turn to contributions made by members. We have heard from several members something that the committee heard very clearly: the 2015 act has brought welcome improvements for deaf people in Scotland, including increased visibility of BSL, stronger recognition of their rights and better access to certain public services. The creation of Contact Scotland BSL, as the Deputy First Minister highlighted, is rightly seen as a major step forward, and many local authorities and health boards are working constructively and collaboratively with deaf communities. As the DFM stressed, that engagement was crucial to the ambition of the first national action plan. As Marie McNair said, deaf people must be at the heart of any plans that affect their lives.

Those positives sit alongside some stark and unacceptable gaps. A decade after the 2015 act was passed, far too many BSL users still face daily obstacles in accessing healthcare, education, justice services, employment and much more. Marie McNair, Pam Gosal and Emma Roddick spoke about the importance of ensuring that BSL users have access to justice. They highlighted the specific evidence that we heard of how our criminal justice system does not serve deaf survivors of domestic abuse well at all. Emergency responders are not equipped to support deaf people effectively, interpreters are not available when needed and the systems do not recognise the specific and particular needs of BSL users.

Because of failures in our education system, some deaf people do not have a clear understanding of consent and of their human rights, especially around domestic abuse, or that support might be available to them if they face domestic abuse, which, as we have heard, a disproportionate number of them experience.

Miles Briggs, Alexander Stewart and others summarised the many issues that BSL users face in education—from not having access to their own, and only, language throughout nursery and school, to the lack of support at moments of transition and the lack of structured pathways for deaf people to become BSL teachers, classroom assistants, social workers and many other types of professional. Why should deaf people not have access to as wide a range of skills, training and employment opportunities as hearing people do?

Emma Roddick, Alexander Stewart and others clearly articulated the complexities that BSL users must navigate just to access basic healthcare. The knock-on consequences of that are detrimental to many other aspects of their lives and the lives of those who love them and try to support them.

Separately to this inquiry, our committee has done work on rural inequalities, and there is clearly overlap between that and this inquiry. As Pam Gosal and Emma Roddick highlighted, geography is too often a barrier to participation in society or to accessing vital services such as healthcare.

The barriers that have been discussed this afternoon arise not from individual failings but from structures, systems and choices that leave deaf and deafblind people feeling overlooked and undervalued. Those failings amount to breaches of the basic human rights of deaf and deafblind people.

As Carol Mochan and Miles Briggs indicated, there is concern that although the intent behind the second national plan is welcome, the plan itself is disappointing, with commitments being diluted or removed entirely. Ms Mochan stressed the importance of enforceability and ambition, and that local plans must be key to ensuring that those concerns are addressed effectively so as to avoid deaf and deafblind people facing a postcode lottery.

Paul McLennan spoke of the importance of partnership working and the need to ensure that deaf people themselves are always at the heart of all discussions about strategies that affect them or services that they will use. As I have said, that engagement and partnership working must include deafblind people—not as an afterthought, but as an integral part of national and local planning.

I am grateful to Martin Whitfield and others for recognising the importance of the post-legislative scrutiny that the inquiry included. My thanks also go to our committee convener—and my friend—Karen Adam, for her leadership on the inquiry. Our inquiry has shown that the ambitions of the 2015 act are still absolutely the right ones, but that ambition alone will not break down structural barriers; we must match those ambitions with political will, sustained resourcing, and a human rights approach that centres the lived experience of deaf and deafblind people. Scotland can and must be a country where BSL users can realise their rights and their full potential and live without the obstacles that too many still face today. Perhaps giving BSL parity of esteem with Gaelic and creating a national board, rather than just a network, will help with that.

As we reflect on this inquiry and this afternoon's debate, I want to return to the fundamental human

rights principles that underpinned the 2015 act. The evidence that our committee heard was powerful and often deeply moving. It reaffirmed that BSL is not simply a method of communication; it is a culture, a community and, for many deaf people, their only language. When people are denied access to their own language, they are denied far more than words; they are denied opportunity, wellbeing and the possibility of participating fully in society. That is a profound human rights issue that we must treat with the seriousness that it deserves.

As we come to the end of what has been a very positive debate, I also want to reflect on the positivity of the Deputy First Minister's appearance before the committee earlier this week, in which she responded to the committee's report. However, that positivity must be matched by action. We will be strongly recommending that our successor committee follows up on our inquiry and ensures that that positive narrative is more than just a narrative and turns into genuine action.

There is so much more that I could say, given the wide range of policy areas covered by our report and by this debate. However, as we approach the end of the debate, I will close by thanking committee members once again for their dedicated work on the inquiry and for everybody's contributions and attention this afternoon.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee's inquiry on the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015.

Children (Withdrawal from Religious Education and Amendment of UNCRC Compatibility Duty) (Scotland) Bill: Financial Resolution

16:52

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-20099, in the name of Shona Robison, on a financial resolution for the Children (Withdrawal from Religious Education and Amendment of UNCRC Compatibility Duty) (Scotland) Bill.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Children (Withdrawal from Religious Education and Amendment of UNCRC Compatibility Duty) (Scotland) Bill, agrees to any expenditure of a kind referred to in Rule 9.12.3A of the Parliament's Standing Orders arising in consequence of the Act.—[*Jenny Gilruth*]

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

Motion without Notice

16:53

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.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time be brought forward to 4.53pm.—[Graeme Dey]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

16:53

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S6M-20059, in the name of Karen Adam, on behalf of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, on the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the findings and recommendations in the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee's 4th Report, 2025 (Session 6), *Report on British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015* (SP Paper 872).

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-20099, in the name of Shona Robison, on a financial resolution for the Children (Withdrawal from Religious Education and Amendment of UNCRC Compatibility Duty) (Scotland) Bill, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

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

16:54

Meeting suspended.

16:58

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We come to the vote on motion S6M-20099, in the name of Shona Robison, on a financial resolution for the Children (Withdrawal from Religious Duty and Amendment of UNCRC Compatibility Duty) (Scotland) Bill. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am sorry, but I could not connect. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Whittle. We will ensure that your vote is recorded.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)

Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 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)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (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, Mairi (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Fulton MacGregor]
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley)

(SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-20099, in the name of Shona Robison, on a financial resolution for the Children (Withdrawal from Religious Duty and Amendment of UNCRC Compatibility Duty) (Scotland) Bill, is: For 79, Against 27, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Children (Withdrawal from Religious Education and Amendment of UNCRC Compatibility Duty) (Scotland) Bill, agrees to any expenditure of a kind referred to in Rule 9.12.3A of the Parliament's Standing Orders arising in consequence of the Act.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Meeting closed at 17:01.

Correction

Gillian Martin has identified an error in her contribution and provided the following correction.

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin):

At col 58, paragraph 5—

Original text—

Officials have proposed the publication of an initial statement and a call for evidence early next year to inform future policy statements on the technology.

Corrected text—

Scottish Government will publish a call for evidence in 2026 which will inform a future policy statement on the technology.

This is a draft *Official Report* and is subject to correction between publication and archiving, which will take place no later than 35 working days after the date of the meeting. The most up-to-date version is available here: www.parliament.scot/chamber-and-committees/what-was-said-and-official-reports/official-reports

Members and other meeting participants who wish to suggest corrections to their contributions should contact the Official Report.

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