

# Scottish Parliament

Thursday 22 January 2026

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

## General Question Time

### CMutual Family Protection Plan

**1. Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update regarding its engagement with credit unions in relation to CMutual withdrawing its family protection plan. (S6O-05403)

**The Minister for Business and Employment (Richard Lochhead):** Scottish Government ministers and officials are engaging regularly with representatives of Scottish credit unions that are impacted by the withdrawal of the family protection plan, as well as with the Financial Conduct Authority and CMutual. We understand that the independent coalition of credit unions has now met with Lucy Rigby, who is Economic Secretary to the Treasury, and formally with the FCA. Due to the FCA's regulatory independence from Government, we are unable to intervene in regulatory investigation processes.

**Clare Haughey:** I have been regularly meeting the independent coalition of credit unions, which has been working tirelessly to support policyholders who have been impacted by the withdrawal of the family protection plan. However, we need the FCA and the United Kingdom Treasury to compel CMutual and Maiden Life Försäkrings to discuss mitigating, in the form of financial redress, the harm that is now occurring. According to the coalition, around 20 people who were policyholders have died since financial support from the plan was withdrawn, which shows that we need action from the UK authorities as a matter of urgency. Will the minister outline any discussions that the Scottish Government has had in that regard with UK Government counterparts or the FCA?

**Richard Lochhead:** I thank Clare Haughey for bringing the issue to the chamber. Of course, our thoughts will be with the loved ones of those who have lost their lives. I also pay tribute to Clare Haughey for supporting the members of credit unions.

I can tell Clare Haughey that I have written again this week to Lucy Rigby, the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, to highlight the concerns of some of the Scottish credit unions and to offer to meet her to discuss the issue. In my letter, I set out three issues that require the Treasury's urgent attention. The first is support for families who face funeral costs without adequate cover. The second is a clear determination of whether any kind of misconduct or regulatory breach has occurred in the sale or administration of the policy, including during its closure. The third is consideration of any reforms that are needed to improve consumer protection in relation to closed-book and group insurance products. We continue to engage with stakeholders on that issue.

### Rail Fares (Greenock and Inverclyde)

**2. Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of what savings there have been to Greenock and Inverclyde constituents since the removal of peak rail fares. (S6O-05404)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop):** The removal of ScotRail peak fares for good is currently equivalent to an average saving of 17 per cent across all ticket types for hundreds of thousands of people. Passengers who travel on average three times a week between Greenock and Glasgow have saved nearly £280 between September and Christmas 2025. As living costs rise, the Scottish National Party Government is reducing costs for commuters.

Work is under way to put in place a robust analytical process to evaluate the permanent removal of peak fares. It will take some time to be able to meaningfully analyse the impact of removing peak fares. It is too early to draw firm conclusions without more data, as patronage and revenue are sensitive to things such as weather and sports events. We anticipate that we will be able to share emerging findings after the policy has been in place for at least six months, with further reporting towards the end of the year.

**Stuart McMillan:** In addition to the removal of the peak rail fares, the Wemyss Bay to Glasgow line, which covers part of my constituency, now has two services per hour. I lobbied for that for quite some time. With those two things alone, many of my constituents are benefiting from an increased service. What further plans

does the Scottish Government have to make rail travel more accessible and affordable for passengers in Inverclyde?

**Fiona Hyslop:** I congratulate Stuart McMillan on helping to secure that additional service for his constituents.

The removal for good of peak fares is having a major impact on affordability. ScotRail also has a range of discounts, including flexipasses, season tickets, rail cards, and the kids for a quid and club 50 schemes to make rail travel affordable for passengers while balancing that with the need to generate revenue and to invest in a reliable and sustainable rail network.

Cheaper rail fares for commuters provide them with more choice about where they might want to work and encourage more people to travel into our cities and to spend money in retail and hospitality, as well as tackling the climate emergency by encouraging new or potential passengers to get on the train and leave the car at home.

#### **Town Centres (Abandoned and Derelict Premises)**

**3. Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what more can be done to tackle the problem of abandoned and derelict shops and buildings in town centres. (S6O-05405)

**The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes):** I am aware that that is an issue across many of our towns, which is why we continue to deliver on the long-standing commitment to regeneration with investment of up to £47 million in 2026-27. That includes support for revitalising town centres, encouraging town centre living, addressing the blight caused by vacant and derelict land and supporting community ownership.

**Willie Coffey:** The fact of the matter is that councils such as East Ayrshire and others do not deal with that by serving amenity notices under section 179 of the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997, because they feel that there is little hope of success and that there is a risk that the public purse will have to pick up the bill. The result is the continued deterioration of buildings and empty shops, with the negative impact on everyone who has to look at those blights to our towns every day.

Can the Deputy First Minister say whether any alternative approach, legislative or otherwise, might be pursued to look at that problem afresh and to see whether the Government, councils, building owners and retailers can come together to tackle the issue and to improve the look and feel of our towns, for everyone's benefit?

**Kate Forbes:** As Willie Coffey outlined, local authorities have powers to act. I urge councils to work with communities, including landlords, to agree on town centre plans and priorities. We are looking at further options. Last year, we consulted on permitted development rights and on the reform of compulsory purchase, which are key issues that affect town centre regeneration, and on the reuse of vacant buildings. We are analysing the responses to that consultation to inform the next steps, and that analysis will be published in due course.

We can also learn from examples such as Aberdeen's Our Union Street project, where partnership working by the local council and the business improvement district and additional support from the Scottish Government have helped transform the town centre. That project included work with landlords to revitalise units and shopfronts that had fallen into disrepair.

**Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab):** The regeneration of Aberdeen's Union Street has been hindered by poor planning from the start—an issue compounded by the outsourcing of the work by the Scottish National Party-led Aberdeen City Council. That resulted in the closure of numerous shops and small businesses and caused substantial disruption to the city centre, community and nightlife.

What representations has the Deputy First Minister had from Aberdeen's SNP council leaders about any support that could be offered to them to get that city centre regeneration off the ground?

**Kate Forbes:** The member will be aware of the support that we have provided, including financial support. I am a big believer in empowering local government, and any decisions that are taken by local government are for it, rather than for the Scottish Government.

#### **Local Government Funding**

**4. Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on whether local authorities should increase council tax, reduce public services, or a mixture of both, to meet any gaps in local government funding as a result of the draft budget. (S6O-05406)

*The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.*

**The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison):** The draft Scottish budget provides a real-terms increase in the local government settlement, taking it to almost £15.7 billion in 2026-27. Councils have autonomy in how to utilise the vast majority of that funding, which includes £253 million of fully flexible new money, alongside all locally raised income, to respond to local priorities. That should ensure that councils are able to exercise restraint in setting council tax rates, minimising the impact on local people and on household finances.

**Jamie Halcro Johnston:** This budget fails to deliver and is “a very poor settlement for local government which fails to address the dire financial situation of local government.” Those are not my words but those of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities resource spokesman and Scottish National Party councillor Ricky Bell, in a letter to Shona Robison.

In that letter, Ricky Bell highlighted council leaders’ concerns about the continued deprioritisation of local government and a further real-terms cut in funding over the coming years. I will therefore ask again if, as a result of the latest SNP budget—a budget that fails to deliver—my constituents in Orkney, Shetland, the Western Isles, the Highlands, Moray and Argyll and Bute should expect council tax increases, cuts to their public services or a painful mixture of both?

**Shona Robison:** The key fact is that all commentators agree that the local government settlement is increasing in real terms. There is a 2 per cent real-terms increase compared with the 2025-26 local government settlement—that is all set out in the budget.

The point that I would make to Jamie Halcro Johnston is that, if there were to be £1 billion of unaffordable tax cuts, there would not be a single penny of extra money for local government; instead, there would be a deep cut in local government funding.

I have produced a draft budget, so, if Jamie Halcro Johnston and his colleagues want to suggest a change to it at the next two stages of the Budget (Scotland) (No 5) Bill in order to give more money to local government, they can do so. However, the issue is that they will have to tell us where the money is to come from and how it will be delivered.

**Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con):** Answer the question.

**Shona Robison:** I wait in anticipation for Jamie Halcro Johnston to come forward with that proposal.

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):** I ask members who have not been invited to speak to refrain from doing so.

#### **International Development Fund (Budget 2026-27)**

**5. Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government how the increase in the international development fund that was announced in the draft 2026-27 Scottish budget will be spent. (S6O-05407)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson):** I am proud to confirm that, as the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government set out in her statement to Parliament, while others are choosing to reduce commitments to international development, we in Scotland will increase our international development fund by a quarter to £16 million. We have also reaffirmed our commitment to climate justice, with more than £12 million allocated to support for vulnerable communities in the global south, particularly women and young people.

As the budget is currently in draft, we await final agreement through the parliamentary process before confirming allocations and spending plans for next year that reflect the proposed uplift.

**Meghan Gallacher:** The international development fund will increase by 25 per cent compared with last year. At the same time, the alcohol and drugs budget is being cut by around £1.3 million in real terms, and the health capital budget is being cut by almost £50 million. Our constituents will be wondering why those issues were not as high up the priority list as international development.

Will the Scottish Government simply get on with the priorities of hard-working Scots: building hospitals, improving public services and addressing Scotland’s shameful drug deaths crisis, which remains the worst in Europe?

**Angus Robertson:** As the member knows, there has been a significant financial contribution in relation to those issues, particularly in the health and social care budget. I hope that she also recognises that, at the same time, Scotland’s charities and humanitarian relief organisations have done and continue to do a fantastic job.

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International development has been supported by Scottish Governments for the past 20 years and has enjoyed cross-party support. I assume that I should conclude from the member's question that her party is opposed to international development spending and to that consensus. I am very sorry if that is indeed the case.

**Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD):** Presiding Officer,

"The irony is that those who complain about our waning influence on the world are the same ones who complain about our development budget. Our aid commitments give us soft power. We should aspire to lead the world in aid and development."

Those are not my words—they are not even the words of a Liberal Democrat. They are the words of former Tory Prime Minister David Cameron. Does the cabinet secretary agree with him? I do.

**Angus Robertson:** I agree with Jamie Greene, David Cameron and all the political parties in the chamber that have supported international development over the past 20 years. It is simply very disappointing to see the Conservative Party walking away from that consensus.

### **Social Impact Bonds**

**6. Michael Matheson (Falkirk West) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the economy secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding whether social impact bonds can be used to improve the employment opportunities for young people, including in Falkirk West. (S6O-05408)

**The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes):** There is an opportunity for a more considered and consistent approach to philanthropy in Scotland, which has the potential to add value to the Scottish Government's approach to social justice. The Scottish Government remains constrained in terms of borrowing powers and flexibility for new financing arrangements, but we are committed to improving opportunities for young people, including in Falkirk West.

**Michael Matheson:** The Deputy First Minister will be aware that social impact bonds can leverage significant additional investment to support the expansion and delivery of social enterprise and third sector organisation services. They have been successfully used in England for a number of years, securing millions of pounds of additional investment for those sectors. Will the Scottish Government work with stakeholders such as Social Impact Scotland to look at how we could deploy social impact bonds in Scotland across a range of areas in order to secure that additional investment?

**Kate Forbes:** I have followed with interest the launch of the United Kingdom Government's better futures fund and the office for the impact economy. I see the potential opportunities of a social impact bond model to support a wider policy approach to the third sector and social enterprises.

The short answer to Michael Matheson is yes, we are happy to continue to explore all options to deliver on those commitments to support the people of Scotland and a sustainable third sector.

### **Arts (Young People)**

**7. Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what measures it is putting in place to encourage young people to engage in the arts. (S6O-05409)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson):** The Scottish Government has a long-standing history of supporting young people to engage in the arts through programmes such as the youth music initiative and Sistema Scotland. We are proud that those programmes will receive an uplift in the 2026-27 budget, taking our annual investment in the programmes to £10 million and £2.787 million. Both programmes demonstrate the transformative power of culture, ensuring that young people of all backgrounds have the opportunity to enjoy music and wider arts.

**Liz Smith:** I am sure that the cabinet secretary followed closely the recent evidence that the Finance and Public Administration Committee took from five performing arts companies. At that session, Alex Reedijk of Scottish Opera said:

"It is interesting that we see a trend and increasing evidence that teachers no longer have the skills to deliver elements of the creative part of the curriculum".—[Official Report, Finance and Public Administration Committee, 13 January 2026; c 10.]

What discussions is this cabinet secretary having with the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills to address that serious concern?

**Angus Robertson:** I have been in extensive conversations over the years with our national performing companies, and I acknowledge that teaching and the teaching pipeline—the students who come through from our schools into the likes of the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland—are very important.

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If Ms Smith will allow me to do so, I will write to her with greater detail, because I acknowledge that it is really important that our young people receive investment and support. That is exactly what is happening through the budget process. I gently suggest to Ms Smith that, if she agrees with me that that is important, she votes for the budget.

### **Infrastructure Projects (Finance)**

**8. Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind):** To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on whether, without the use of private finance to enable construction of key infrastructure projects, there is a risk that Scotland could be seen as less attractive for inward investment and as a location for business, compared with other European countries. (S6O-05410)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison):** Scotland remains a highly competitive location for inward investment, consistently delivering jobs and economic benefit. EY data shows that, in 2024, Scotland was the United Kingdom's leading destination outside London for inward investment for the 10th consecutive year and is ranked sixth among the top 10 destinations in Europe for foreign direct investment.

We will continue our work with the Scottish Futures Trust to explore revenue funding options for infrastructure investment. This aims to unlock additional private investment while ensuring value for money for the public purse.

**Fergus Ewing:** An analysis of the capital budget for both this year and next shows that the amount that is devoted to trunk roads is 8 per cent. In fact, only half of that relates to improvement as opposed to maintenance and adaptation. That is a paltry amount. Surely the cabinet secretary must agree that, if we are to see Inverness and Aberdeen connected, to allow those powerhouses for renewables to achieve what they can achieve, they must have dual carriageway links, as must the south of Scotland with regard to the A1 and the A77. How on earth will we achieve all those things unless we change our priorities and find different ways to raise capital for these vital projects?

**Shona Robison:** Of course, Fergus Ewing will be aware that capital funding is constrained. As well as the roads programme, there is the housing investment of £4.9 billion, £4.1 billion of which is public capital money. I assume that Fergus Ewing would support the investment in housing as well as the investment in roads.

The constrained capital position is exactly why we are considering revenue finance options, including all the procurement options that are being looked at for the A96. We will continue to do that to ensure that we can invest in our infrastructure, because we know how important that is to growing our economy.

**The Presiding Officer:** That concludes general question time.

## **First Minister's Question Time**

12:00

### **Queen Elizabeth University Hospital**

**1. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con):** Child cancer patients Milly Main and Molly Cuddihy, adult patients Gail Armstrong and Tony Dynes, and two other children whose names and ages are unknown were all patients at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital, where they contracted infections and died. Dozens more child patients also contracted serious infections. For years, families suspected that the infections were caused by the hospital's water supply, but they were lied to and smeared.

National health service staff who raised concerns were bullied and silenced. The people of Scotland were told that there was no problem, but now, after years of lies and deception, NHS bosses admit that it is likely that some infections were caused by the water supply.

John Swinney has so far refused to release all the information that his Government holds about the scandal. Will he now do so?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** First of all, I express my sympathies to all those who are grieving the loss of a loved one in such circumstances. I recognise the deep pain, the grief and the hurt felt by patients and their families, who have bravely provided testimony throughout all these years on the issues that Russell Findlay raises with me.

The issues emerged in the course of the past few years and, as a consequence of that, the Scottish Government established a public inquiry, led by Lord Brodie, to establish the truth about what has happened.

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I have every confidence that Lord Brodie, in taking the evidence that he has taken, will provide the open scrutiny and the truth that is required by the families and by everybody else.

The Government has shared all relevant evidence that addresses the terms of reference of the inquiry. Nonetheless, if there is anything further related to the business of Government—whether that is Cabinet minutes or ministerial correspondence—that has not been submitted to the inquiry, I am happy to release it, subject to any appropriate redactions, such as personal information and the respecting of legal professional privilege.

**Russell Findlay:** John Swinney's commitment is welcome, but it should not have taken this long and there can be no backsliding. The families will be watching. I pay tribute to those families—I cannot begin to imagine the pain that they have suffered. I am in awe of their determination and their dignity.

It is important for Mr Swinney to hear what they are saying. They have said:

“We were all lied to ... We were all disbelieved ... We were all demeaned and smeared ... We have had our families devastated and our lives traumatised ... We cannot overstate the level of deceit and conniving cowardice”

of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde.

Those families quite rightly expect accountability. They demand a reckoning for the board's leadership. So will John Swinney sack those who are responsible?

**The First Minister:** First, I acknowledge the pain and suffering that the relatives of those affected by these circumstances have suffered. The pain of the loss of their loved ones has been compounded by their having had to make tenacious efforts to ensure that the truth could be established. That is precisely why the Scottish Government took the decision in 2019 to establish a public inquiry, led by Lord Brodie, which, as I said in my first answer, will be determined to get to the truth.

On a variety of issues, we have to await the outcome of the inquiry by Lord Brodie. However, I say to Russell Findlay that, in all circumstances, the Government will take seriously all Lord Brodie's recommendations in taking forward the issues that must be addressed as a consequence of the commissioning of a public inquiry into the issue.

**Russell Findlay:** We would not need to spend hundreds of millions of pounds on public inquiries if public bodies simply told the truth. It is no wonder that those families are so angry. The health board has not been held to account, but neither has anyone in the Scottish Government.

Nicola Sturgeon was First Minister when the hospital began treating patients on 27 April 2015, which was just 10 days before a general election. During the Scottish National Party election campaign, she kept bragging about the new hospital. For years, Nicola Sturgeon dismissed growing concerns about infections being linked to the water supply, but now the NHS has dropped a bombshell. It has told the public inquiry:

“Pressure was applied to open the hospital on time and on budget, and it is now clear that the hospital opened too early. It was not ready.”

Let me ask John Swinney a straight question. Did Nicola Sturgeon, or anyone else in the SNP Government, apply political pressure to open the hospital before it was ready?

**The First Minister:** The direct answer to that question is no.

**Russell Findlay:** If the Scottish Government did not apply pressure, who did, and why did they do so?

This is one of many serious scandals in recent years involving Scotland's public bodies—from Police Scotland to the Crown Office, the NHS and more. The SNP Government presides over a cynical culture that is defined by arrogance, secrecy and cover-up. It is a culture of zero accountability that misuses taxpayers' money to crush victims and silence concerns, and which treats grieving families with utter contempt.

The families of the hospital infection scandal are not going away. This is not over. They say that the hospital is still unsafe for patients and that the management

“cannot be trusted to make it safe.”

They continue:

“The people of Scotland demand it be made safe.”

How does John Swinney intend to protect patients and rebuild public confidence in Scotland's largest hospital?

**The First Minister:** I reject the characterisation of the Government that Russell Findlay puts to me. I cite as an example the fact that the Government commissioned a public inquiry to look at this very issue. I also

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draw on the fact that the Government has established public inquiries to look at other major issues where patients have expressed their concerns—for example, the inquiry in NHS Tayside about the conduct of Mr Sam Eljamel in his surgery practice or the issues relating to the death of Sheku Bayoh. I accept Mr Findlay's fundamental point that it would be better if we did not have to have those public inquiries, but when things happen, we have to be prepared to take the steps to investigate and get to the truth.

Mr Findlay raises with me issues of a current nature about the circumstances in the Queen Elizabeth university hospital in relation to the safety of the water system. Lord Brodie, the chair of the hospital's inquiry, commissioned reports and audits on water and ventilation from Andrew Poplett, the inquiry's expert. Mr Poplett's view is that the Queen Elizabeth university hospital's current procedures for managing the water system are suitable and safe. Providing evidence to the inquiry in September 2025, Mr Poplett observed that, after previously raising concerns, which he did, the Queen Elizabeth university hospital's water system is "currently extremely well managed"

and that

"significant improvement"

had been made. That is independent advice that has been provided to Lord Brodie's inquiry, which I put on the record today to reassure members of the public that safety considerations in the Queen Elizabeth university hospital are uppermost in the thinking and minds of Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS Board. Obviously, the Government wants to have that assurance, and the inquiry report provides exactly that.

The last thing that I would say is that it is vital and absolutely fundamental that the patients and families who are using our hospitals are assured of our determination to ensure that we have a safe clinical environment. Scotland has advanced a lot of work on support for patient safety that has attracted international commendation. Patient safety will be one of the key priorities for the Government so that we can ensure that the public can rely on that in our hospitals around the country.

### **Queen Elizabeth University Hospital**

**2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** Much of John Swinney's answers are simply not credible. This week, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde said of the Queen Elizabeth university hospital that

"Pressure was applied to open the hospital on time and on budget, and it is now clear that the hospital opened too early. It was not ready."

The hospital opened with contaminated water, which infected people and led to the deaths of at least two children. Weeks before the children's hospital opened, an internal report—I have it here—warned of a high risk of infections and, therefore, a high risk to life for immunocompromised patients. The report was ignored, pressure was applied and the hospital opened anyway, with devastating consequences. Who applied the pressure and why?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** I will make two points to Mr Sarwar. First, as he correctly says, the hospital opened in 2015. The first that the Scottish Government was advised by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde of a water contamination problem was on 1 March 2018, which was long after the report that Mr Sarwar has referred to. Secondly, Mr Sarwar has raised a point that is absolutely fundamental to the conduct of the public inquiry, which Lord Brodie is undertaking. I acknowledge the significant public interest in the issue, which is why Lord Brodie must have the opportunity to consider and reflect on the evidence and to set out his conclusions.

**Anas Sarwar:** Again, the answer is not credible. It is either at least negligence or, more likely, criminal incompetence if the Government is suggesting that the internal report was never seen. When the hospital opened, Nicola Sturgeon was the First Minister, John Swinney was the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Economy, so he signed the cheques, and Shona Robison was the Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Sport. They received the internal report that warned of high risks of infection weeks before the hospital opened. They ignored it and opened the hospital anyway, and children died as a result. For seven years, families have been lied to; whistleblowers have been bullied, gaslit and punished; and those who raised concerns were dismissed and patronised. Pressure was applied to open the hospital before it was ready, even though there was contaminated water that risked lives. I ask John Swinney again: who applied the pressure and why?

**The First Minister:** Those issues are the substance of the public inquiry that Lord Brodie must undertake. As I have already indicated, the Government expected the hospital to open and preparations were being made to do that. The operational responsibility for that lay with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde. Mr Sarwar said that the experience of whistleblowers, staff, and patients and their families has been completely

unacceptable. I agree with that whole-heartedly. That is why the Government set up a public inquiry—because we were so concerned about the circumstances, we felt that it was necessary to have a judicially led inquiry to get to the truth and to satisfy the legitimate concerns that exist. That is what Lord Brodie will reflect on in the course of completing his report.

**Anas Sarwar:** If Jeanne Freeman could see a report and stop the opening of a hospital in Edinburgh, why could Nicola Sturgeon, John Swinney and Shona Robison not do that too? That is at the heart of the issue. This is the biggest scandal in the history of the Parliament. I first raised the case seven years ago, when whistleblowers came to me with devastating evidence that children had died due to infections but their parents had never been told the true cause of their deaths.

One of those parents was Kimberly Darroch, the mother of Milly Main. Milly was in remission but died after contracting an infection from the water. She was 10 years old. Milly was forced to fight not only cancer but an unseen danger inside those hospital walls. Every step of the way, the health board and countless SNP ministers closed ranks and denied that there was a problem.

People have died. Their families deserve the truth. A hospital was opened too soon with contaminated water that infected patients and led to deaths. The health board says that “pressure was applied” to open it before it was safe. I therefore ask the First Minister, for the third time, to tell the truth. The health secretary at the time is sitting right next to the First Minister, who was the Deputy First Minister and finance secretary at the time. They could ask Nicola Sturgeon, too. Tell the truth: who applied the pressure and why?

**The First Minister:** I have already answered that question through the answers that I set out to Mr Findlay. [Interruption.]

**Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** No, you did not.

**The Presiding Officer:** Let us hear the First Minister.

**The First Minister:** What I would say to—[Interruption.]

**The Presiding Officer:** Let us hear the First Minister.

**The First Minister:** I would say to Mr Sarwar that, when the Government became aware of those issues, which was when the water contamination incident was raised with it on 1 March 2018, a sequence of events followed that led to the establishment of a public inquiry—

**Stephen Kerr:** Answer the question.

**The First Minister:** —to get to the truth of all the issues.

**The Presiding Officer:** First Minister, I am sorry to interrupt, but I am keen to ensure that everyone in the chamber and the gallery can hear what is being said.

**The First Minister:** Once the circumstances were reported to the Government in March 2018, a sequence of events was put in place that resulted in the establishment of the public inquiry, the substance of which involves consideration of all the evidence. That is what the Government has done to make sure that we face up to the issues that are being raised in the chamber and provide answers to the families of Milly Main and others, who have suffered so significantly as a consequence of those circumstances. That is the commitment that the Government has made and that Lord Brodie will fulfil.

### **Football (Ticket Pricing)**

**3. Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green):** There is often very little that unites football fans. However, in recent weeks, supporters of Celtic, Falkirk and Motherwell have displayed banners backing my calls for a £25 cap on away tickets. Those calls have also been backed by the Scottish supporters collective. Football is meant to be for everyone, but at a time when the cost of living is ever rising, some fans are being priced out of attending. Price caps are in place in England and in many other European countries. We know how important attending games is for people—it reduces loneliness, and that is not to mention the wonderful work that the clubs do for the wider community. Clubs would be nothing without their fans. Will the First Minister join me in making calls to cap away ticket prices?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** I am happy to give consideration to that issue. For all the reasons that Gillian Mackay indicated, it is important that individuals are able to watch their football teams, to enjoy that experience and to appreciate the solidarity of being together with fellow football fans. I will certainly give active consideration to her proposal.

**Gillian Mackay:** Some 120,000 people will attend games over the weekend, but we currently have a system in which, other than at a few clubs, fans struggle to have their voices heard. At a national level, that is even

more difficult. Whether through ticket prices or fan ownership, we need to bring our sport closer to the people who make it what it is. In the months ahead, I plan to host a summit with supporters groups from across the country to discuss how we democratise Scottish football at every level and make it truly for the fans. Will the First Minister join that summit and help to put fans at the heart of our national game?

**The First Minister:** The Government has held discussions on many of those issues, such as fan ownership and fan engagement in football. There are a number of very good examples around the country of fan ownership and leadership of football clubs that have delivered significant results for participation in sport. I am happy for the Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy and Sport to be involved in those discussions. She is actively involved in all those fan engagement matters. If that helps to advance a sense of collective purpose in Scotland, the Government will support that in every way that it can.

#### **Electricity Infrastructure (Scottish Borders)**

**4. Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** To ask the First Minister, regarding the proposed expansion of wind turbines, battery storage facilities and pylons across the Scottish Borders, whether the Scottish Government has carried out an assessment of the potential cumulative impact on the wildlife and the landscape, in light of the importance of tourism to the area. (S6F-04609)

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** I completely understand the concerns of communities regarding the cumulative impact of energy infrastructure. Where new development proposals come forward, they are subject to site-specific assessments, which should take into consideration the cumulative effects of developments alongside potential impacts on communities, nature and cultural heritage.

I appreciate the point that Christine Grahame makes on cumulative impact, and I have asked that work is taken forward to consider what further steps we can take as part of our strategic spatial energy plan. Through the plan, we will work to balance the need to deliver net zero with the need to protect our natural environment, tourism and rural communities.

**Christine Grahame:** I thank the First Minister for his answer, and I hope that there is progress. To give some context, I understand that there are 30 sites in the Borders operating more than 440 turbines, with three more being built and others being applied for. To add to that, the SP Energy Networks project—the cross-border connection—will require, as I understand it, 400 pylons to take Borders-generated energy to England. That will, without a doubt, impact on the beautiful landscape and on communities. That application, like the other applications—notwithstanding what the First Minister has said—seems to me to be taking segmented parts of the impact in isolation, and not considering the cumulative impact. That cannot be fair when communities are certainly left getting absolutely nothing out of this but an industrialised landscape.

**The First Minister:** Issues of cumulative impact are a legitimate consideration in the planning process, and it is important that those issues are reflected in decisions. Indeed, there will have been examples of developments that have not been able to proceed because of the concerns about cumulative impact.

I hope that what I have said in my substantive answer to Christine Grahame gives her the reassurance that the issues at stake can be and should be considered in the planning process, and that the consideration that we are giving to the implications for the strategic spatial energy plan will assist in addressing the point that she has raised with me.

**Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con):** The First Minister says that he understands the concerns of Borders residents, but I do not think that he does. I attended the south of Scotland energy convention on Saturday, where the Scottish Conservatives showed their support for the Highlands and the north-east in calling for urgent action on the uncontrolled spread of energy infrastructure through a unified statement.

Will the First Minister prove that he is supporting Borders communities by backing my amendments to the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill on a moratorium on new energy applications and a cumulative impact assessment on the natural environment?

**The First Minister:** The Government will look at all the issues that come forward in relation to the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill and determine its position, but I simply repeat to Rachael Hamilton what I have said to Christine Grahame. Issues of cumulative impact are material issues to be considered in the planning process, and the steps that we are taking on further analysis in relation to the strategic spatial energy plan will be designed to address the points that Rachael Hamilton puts to me on behalf of her constituents, as we find the sensible balances between the protection of our natural environment and the ability to ensure that Scotland benefits from the abundant renewable energy that we will have to develop to provide energy security in the years to come.

**The Presiding Officer:** Craig Hoy—briefly, please.

*The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.*

**Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con):** Last year, I wrote to the First Minister asking him to support a moratorium on all battery energy storage systems, pylons and solar and wind farms across the south of Scotland. As Rachael Hamilton just said, this weekend, community councils added their voice to that call. Why is the First Minister not listening to rural Scotland?

**The First Minister:** I assure Craig Hoy that I listen to rural Scotland all the time, since I represent a large part of rural Scotland in my constituency representation. We are trying to work with communities and work to ensure that Scotland is able to have access to sustainable energy that will provide us with energy security in the years to come. That lies at the heart of the Government's policy direction.

#### **Teacher Job Shortages (Temporary Contracts)**

**5. Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con):** To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking to address the reported issues with teacher job shortages, caused by temporary teacher contracts. (S6F-04602)

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** The latest data shows that, for the first time in three years, the number of teachers in our schools has increased. We are also seeing encouraging progress in recruitment. More teacher induction scheme probationers are securing a teaching post, permanent or temporary, in the year following their probation.

This Government understands how essential it is to have great teachers in every classroom and that the challenges in recruitment in some subjects and local areas must be addressed. That is why I am pleased to announce that we are launching a national recruitment campaign to encourage more people into secondary teaching, particularly in the subjects and areas where recruitment is most challenging.

**Miles Briggs:** The Government's own analysis shows that most newly qualified teachers in Scotland are no longer getting permanent jobs: 2,294 newly qualified teachers completed their probation, but only 25 per cent of them have secured permanent posts. The Educational Institute of Scotland's general secretary, Andrea Bradley, says that the figures that have been released

"confirm that the Scottish Government has absolutely failed in the delivery of their 2021 manifesto commitment".

After 19 years of this Scottish National Party Government, why have ministers spectacularly failed in their workforce planning and in the pledge that they made to parents, professionals and young people? What does the First Minister say to young, qualified teachers in Scotland who are considering leaving our country because of this Government's disastrous education workforce planning?

**The First Minister:** There has been an increase in post-probation employment in this year compared with last year, which demonstrates the progress that has been made. We also have a lower pupil teacher ratio in Scotland compared with the ratio in other parts of the United Kingdom, and a higher number of teachers per 100,000 pupils in Scotland compared with the number in other parts of the United Kingdom.

The Government recognises the importance of investing in teacher education and in education services. That is why we have increased the budget that is available to local authorities through the Government's budget that was announced last week. We will continue to work with our local authority partners to ensure that we strengthen the recruitment of teachers and to encourage and motivate more individuals to join the teaching profession.

**Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab):** It was this First Minister who, at the beginning of this parliamentary session, promised a focus on recovery from the pandemic in education. He made a pledge that there would be around 3,500 more permanent teachers in this parliamentary session, yet he will fail spectacularly on that pledge.

According to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, that should not be the responsibility of this Government. Rather, it is the fault of teachers themselves. She said that they are

"opting not to travel to jobs",

and that they are

"much more expensive to employ".

Does the First Minister agree with Jenny Gilruth's analysis of the situation? Does he think that underemployed and unemployed teachers across the country should have to uproot their lives and their families because of his Government's failure to competently put together a workforce plan?

**The First Minister:** The Government has had in place for many years incentives to encourage individuals to move to areas of the country where there are shortages of teachers. There are challenges in some of those

locations, which is exactly why the Government has intervened to put in place those incentives, to ensure that that can be achieved.

Mr O’Kane rather skates past the improvements that have been made in Scottish education. As we speak, there are record levels of literacy and numeracy in our schools, with an exam diet that shows the tremendous achievements that have been made by the young people of Scotland. There is tremendous strength in Scottish education and Mr O’Kane should join those of us who are very proud of it.

**Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** When John Swinney was education secretary, he instructed the recruitment of thousands of extra teachers, but he failed to ensure that there were enough permanent jobs for them. The result is that thousands are on precarious zero-hours contracts. Is it not the case that, despite all the fine rhetoric from this Government about workers’ rights, it has the worst workers’ rights record in this Parliament? When are those people going to finally get a job?

**The First Minister:** Teachers in Scotland are the best paid in the United Kingdom, as a consequence of the pay deals put in place—[*Interruption.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** The thing that I find really frustrating is that I know how many members wish to put a question in this session, and every time I have to stop business, another member is deprived of that opportunity. Please let us hear one another.

**The First Minister:** The Government has taken steps to improve teachers’ pay and conditions. As a consequence—I recounted the figures to Mr Sarwar last week—teachers in Scotland are much better paid and have much better take-home pay than teachers in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Scotland has more teachers per head of population than other parts of the United Kingdom, as well as a lower pupil teacher ratio. That is a result of the Government investing to deliver on our commitments on education, and we intend to continue to do so.

#### **Scottish Information Commissioner Ruling**

**6. Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Government will comply with the Scottish Information Commissioner’s ruling that files relating to James Hamilton’s investigation into whether the former First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, broke the ministerial code must be published by 22 January 2026. (S6F-04603)

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** The Scottish Government will comply with the commissioner’s decision, and it will do so as soon as is practically possible. I do not expect that it will take much longer.

The courts have made it clear that those who complained in relation to allegations of sexual assault must have their identities protected, and there are no circumstances in which I will do anything that risks breaking those court orders. I cannot release information that would breach those court orders and amount to a contempt of court.

**Katy Clark:** The Scottish Government has wasted millions of pounds of taxpayers’ money on fighting court cases, with two further appeals relating to the Salmond files coming before the Court of Session later this month.

Will the First Minister ensure full disclosure by releasing all the Salmond files? If he will not commit to that today, will he at least release information that is not being contested through the appeals process? If the Scottish Government loses the appeals, will he commit to not using his veto?

My Freedom of Information Reform (Scotland) Bill would strengthen the powers of the Scottish Information Commissioner, which in turn would prevent the late disclosure of information that happened in this case, introduce proactive disclosure and abolish the First Minister’s veto. Will the First Minister look closely at my bill, which is supported by the current Scottish Information Commissioner and all the previous holders of the role, as it would help to deliver openness, accountability and transparency, which were the founding principles of this Parliament?

**The First Minister:** We will, of course, look at the bill and consider its contents, but it is really important that I am clear with Parliament why the Government is acting in the way that it is acting. The Scottish Government has handled nearly 90—nine zero—freedom of information requests and reviews relating to the James Hamilton investigation. In addition, we are responding to 96 per cent of information requests on time, against a backdrop of rising request numbers.

In relation to the particular case that Katy Clark has raised, the Government will comply with the commissioner’s decision, but I have to be absolutely satisfied that there is no risk that the identities of

individuals who have complained in relation to allegations of sexual assault, which are protected by court orders, would in any way be disclosed as a consequence. I will be clear with Parliament that I will not run that risk. I am very surprised that Katy Clark wants me to release all the information, because, if I did that, I would breach court orders, and I will not do that. The Government is appealing two other cases that we believe would result in our committing contempt of court, and I will not do that.

As I have said, the Government has handled nearly 90 freedom of information requests, but I have a legal responsibility, and a responsibility under the ministerial code, to obey the court orders that are in place. I make it crystal clear to Parliament that I will do nothing to jeopardise that.

**Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind):** But what the First Minister has not said is that, when James Hamilton produced his report, he himself, in public, in an unprecedented move, expressed his severe reservations about the redactions that he was required to make. Moreover, the orders that have been made regarding the release of further information have been made by David Hamilton, who is the Scottish Information Commissioner.

The First Minister will accept that both James Hamilton and David Hamilton are individuals of the highest repute and integrity, and they would not invite him to do anything that was illegal. My question is this: is the First Minister not using the excuse of jigsaw identification as a human shield and as a pretext for declining to release information because the real reason is that it will cause extreme embarrassment to several people who are in the Scottish Government now and previously were in that trusted position?

**The First Minister:** I cannot find it in myself to associate myself with Mr Ewing's words "excuse of jigsaw identification", because that question lies at the very heart of the provision of statute in this country. My duty as First Minister at all times is to obey the law, and Mr Ewing is inviting me to be cavalier with the orders that have been passed by a court in this country. I want to be crystal clear with Parliament that I will do not one bit of it.

**Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** Does the First Minister appreciate what a bad look it is for his Government to be spending a huge sum of taxpayers' money on contesting rulings from the independent Scottish Information Commissioner?

David Hamilton is an experienced and respected professional who has spent his entire career in Scotland's justice system. Does the First Minister really think that he would be asking the Scottish Government to do something unlawful?

**The First Minister:** The Government has made it clear that we believe that the Information Commissioner has erred in law in relation to two of the cases that the Government is appealing.

Mr Fraser is a lawyer. He knows full well the obligations that I carry as First Minister to ensure that the Government at all times complies with the law. Where I believe that there is a risk of jeopardy in that respect, I will ensure that the Government acts within the law, and that is exactly what I am doing.

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

### **Energy Market**

**Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):** Developers have warned that the planned West of Orkney wind farm, which will have the potential to power 2 million homes by the end of the decade, will not be built unless unfair United Kingdom transmission charges are overhauled. Under Westminster control, the UK energy market is broken. Communities do not benefit from hosting development, and developers are penalised for being in Scotland. That is taking a toll on jobs, investment and, ultimately, costs, which leads to higher energy bills. Does the First Minister agree that powers over Scotland's energy should be placed in Scotland's hands?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** Emma Roddick raises significant concerns about the West of Orkney wind farm that have been raised by the developer. It is a development that would bring enormous benefit to the people of Scotland, but it is being put in jeopardy because of the disproportionate transmission charges of the United Kingdom regime. The sooner that we can ensure that control of those issues is in the hands of the people of Scotland, so that we can benefit from the energy wealth of Scotland, the better. That can happen only with independence.

### **Childminding (Tax)**

**Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** The First Minister will be aware of concerns raised by the Scottish Childminding Association about planned changes by HM Revenue and Customs to making tax digital and the long-standing tax-free wear and tear allowance for childminders. The allowance permitted registered

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childminders to claim 10 per cent of their income as tax free, given the evident wear and tear that comes from opening their homes to children.

The tax changes are due to the introduction in England and Wales of childminding in non-domestic premises, which does not apply in Scotland. The changes will require childminders to claim on a case-by-case basis should damage occur in their properties as a result of the occupation, thereby adding admin and complexity to a burgeoning sector.

The childminding workforce in Scotland has declined by 48 per cent since 2016, with an increase in paperwork being cited as the main reason for that decline. Childminders are currently considering whether they can make a decision about their future business model based on that. In light of that situation, what assessment has the Government made of the impact on childcare capacity in Scotland of HMRC's decision? What urgent representations can be made to the UK Government to try to halt it?

**The First Minister:** I am not familiar with the issue that Roz McCall has raised, so I will take that away and explore it. It is an issue that has been advanced by HMRC, which is a United Kingdom organisation, but it will have implications for Scotland. I will consider those points and write to Roz McCall about any steps that the Government can take.

### **Cumbrae Ferries**

**Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):** The forthcoming Scottish budget commits a record £513.4 million in the next financial year for ferry services, but Caledonian MacBrayne proposes swingeing cuts to this summer's timetable to and from Cumbrae. It seeks to reduce the number of sailings from four to three per hour, while introducing a disruptive maintenance schedule that will reduce that number even further. Those proposals will impact connectivity and the island economy, make attending hospital appointments more difficult and reduce CalMac's income. There is zero justification for them other than CalMac's own convenience. Will the First Minister ensure that those damaging service reductions do not happen?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** I understand how significant an issue this is for Mr Gibson and his constituents. The ferry service to Cumbrae is a well-used and busy route, particularly in the summer period. The Cabinet Secretary for Transport will meet CalMac next week to discuss in detail the current proposals on the maintenance of vessels and on loading and unloading activities, alongside other matters. I give Mr Gibson the assurance that the transport secretary will raise with CalMac the issues that he has put to me.

Caledonian MacBrayne is in the process of reviewing options and will continue to work closely with the Cumbrae community to ensure that any proposals are fully discussed before any final decisions are taken or implemented. The transport secretary has heard these exchanges and will take the issues forward with CalMac.

### **Social Care Pay**

**Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** I have been contacted by social care organisations, Unite the Union and the GMB union about a gap in the Scottish Government's budget for social care pay. The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has calculated that there will be a £19 million funding shortfall in meeting the cost of the real living wage for social care staff, on the basis of the use of the wrong baseline. Everyone assumed that that was an accounting mistake, but the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government confirmed yesterday that the funding gap was deliberate.

The First Minister will be aware that services will be cut and that staff, the majority of whom are low-paid female workers, will lose their jobs if that gap is not addressed. Will he support social care, and will he fill the £19 million gap?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** The Government is fulfilling its commitments on social care and is supporting investment in social care through provisions in the budget. I look forward to Jackie Baillie's support for the budget to ensure that it delivers for the social care sector.

### **Robert Burns (Ellisland)**

**Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con):** As those at home and around the world, including in our Parliament, raise a dram this week to the continued social, economic and cultural importance of Robert Burns, the campaign to save the home of "Auld Lang Syne", Ellisland—the Dumfriesshire farm that the poet built and called home—is building momentum. Ellisland is where Burns wrote many of his most famous works. Given that the project to restore that nationally significant site is so important to local residents in Dumfriesshire and Burns fans, will the First Minister reaffirm his Government's full support for it, and will he agree to visit Ellisland to join Scots and visitors from around the world in experiencing for himself what Burns called "sweet poetic ground"?

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**The First Minister (John Swinney):** I have observed a lot of fantastic work that has been done at Ellisland farm to preserve and enhance the facility and to ensure that it can play its role in the celebration of the outstanding and timeless work of Robert Burns. I am happy to reaffirm to Oliver Mundell the Government's support and encouragement for the work that is under way. That work involves attracting funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, South of Scotland Enterprise and Museums Galleries Scotland. I encourage the Robert Burns Ellisland Trust to continue its engagement with Museums Galleries Scotland in taking forward the trust's plans.

I would be delighted to visit Ellisland farm to see at first hand the plans that are being taken forward and to give my active support. It is a daily experience for me to walk past the Nasmyth portrait of Robert Burns that hangs in the drawing room of Bute house, where it should hang as a tribute and commitment to the timeless work of Robert Burns, which we celebrate at this time of year and which underpins the values of our country.

### **Child Poverty**

**Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP):** The head of Scotland for Save the Children has welcomed the Scottish National Party Government's budget plans for a top-up to the Scottish child payment for families with a baby under one. This week, she said:

"This crucial extra support can't come soon enough for families. We hope it receives cross-party support in Parliament."

Will the First Minister join me in calling on Opposition members to listen to Save the Children and back the SNP Scottish budget so that we can deliver such landmark policies to continue our work to eradicate child poverty?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** The point that Paul McLennan makes is an important one. The Scottish Government is underpinning its support for the Scottish child payment, which is helping to keep children out of poverty and to deliver a falling level of child poverty in Scotland. From 2027-28, the Government will boost the Scottish child payment to £40 per week for all children under one, which Save the Children has said will

"sow the seeds of a brighter tomorrow."

I encourage members of all parties to support the Government's budget, which makes provision for those aspirations.

### **Edinburgh Central Mosque (Vandalism)**

**Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Ind):** The First Minister will be aware of the disgraceful vandalism of the Edinburgh central mosque last week. What is the Scottish Government doing to address the intolerance that was displayed by that action? What assurances can he give to all religious communities in Scotland that do not feel safe following such attacks?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** I was deeply troubled to hear of the vandalism at the central mosque in Edinburgh and I associate myself entirely with Mr Balfour's points. Nobody should be on the receiving end of hatred in our society today.

I regularly meet various groups in Scotland, as do the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and the Minister for Equalities, to ensure that we are acting together to tackle hate in our society. There are groupings in our society—it was the Muslim community on this occasion, and on other occasions I have had representations from the Jewish community in Scotland—that are on the receiving end of hate. The Government is supporting communities and investing in the cohesive communities work that we undertake to make sure that Scotland is a country free of hatred, as it should be.

**The Presiding Officer:** That concludes First Minister's question time. There will be a short suspension before the next item of business to allow those who are leaving the chamber and the public gallery to do so.

12:47

*Meeting suspended.*

12:49

*On resuming—*

## **Growing2gether**

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**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** I encourage those who are leaving the chamber and the public gallery to do so as quickly and as quietly as possible.

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-18469, in the name of Emma Roddick, on the Growing2gether programme success. The debate will be concluded without any questions being put.

I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons, and I invite Emma Roddick to open the debate.

*Motion debated,*

That the Parliament congratulates the charity, Growing2Gether, on what it sees as its successful programme aimed at helping young people who face various challenges by pairing young adults with toddlers to mentor; understands that participants and facilitators have reported a significant shift in young people's confidence and gaining of skills, helping to improve wellbeing; acknowledges the reported overall positive and successful work of this charity in partnering with 15 schools in Scotland, including 12 in the Highlands and Islands region; applauds the over 2,000 young people who have been paired with 2,200 toddlers over a seven-year period across the Highlands on their efforts; considers it important to provide opportunities for children and young people who face challenges with poverty, mental health or trauma to develop skills and confidence in themselves, and notes the view that the Scottish Government should consider how it can best support this kind of work moving forward.

12:50

**Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):** I am unusually nervous today, only because I am so incredibly glad to have the opportunity to speak about Growing2gether and to share it with colleagues, the Government and anyone else who is listening, and tell them why engaging with this organisation, among the thousands of meetings that MSPs have, is one of those that I will always remember clearly. Colleagues will know the meetings that I mean; the ones that we remember because they make us feel something.

Growing2gether works with young people who are experiencing or are at risk of poverty, mental health issues and adverse childhood experiences. It intervenes to support those young people to mentor nursery children and take on leadership roles in their communities, consult with community members and develop youth-led initiatives. Right now, it is working in and around the Moray Firth and across Aberdeen.

When Gavin Morgan of Growing2gether reached out to me last year, I could tell that there was something special about what the nursery programme is doing. Gavin is so passionate. There is no other way to say it. He loves what he does, and he loves seeing the results of his work.

When I told him that we had finally secured a debate spot for the motion, I asked him whether there was anything new that he wanted to share with me since we last spoke—he sent me 10 bullet points, two PDFs and a video.

I will circulate that video to colleagues after the debate. The reason that the programme works is the willingness of the young people who take part. Their reflections are so special. I could stand here and quote them all, but you really need to hear it from them, so I will share just one that sums it up for me. They said:

"I finally feel that I am okay as a person. I thought that everyone else was better than me."

Many young people who grow up with trauma or poverty are led to believe that they are not special, that there is nothing more for them in life, that they cannot offer anything to the world but anger and that there is really no point in trying. I know that because I have felt it. It takes a lot of internal work to undo that complex belief system, and a lot of effort from kind adults who want to convince you that it is worth giving it a go.

When I was in school, I was paired with a couple of nursery boys to mentor. I remember being really nervous about that. I did not like boys. I grew up in an all-female household, and to me, boys were mean, they hit you and they cared about Glasgow football teams for some reason. However, answering those wee boys' questions, teaching them about the world of big school and watching them explore everything made me realise what I had learned so far and what I had to give back, and it made me feel more confident and responsible.

That meant that I was already sold on the concept, but I met Gavin online to chat about what he wanted to achieve. He explained that really he only wanted me to tell everybody else about what he was doing.

It was one of those days of back-to-back team meetings, typing up notes and actions for the evening, swapping from my work on rural affairs to healthcare to casework. However, the programme, Gavin and the energy around it stood out, and I had to see it for myself.

I arranged to meet him and some of the young people involved up at Kinmylies primary school. I spoke with a few of the young people, some of whom had left the programme the year before but had taken the

opportunity to come to speak to me and be reunited with their mentees. I was taken aback by that because I was expecting to meet the current cohort. It was a beautiful, sunny day, and those teenagers could have been down the pitches, up at the retail park or just lying in bed playing Fortnite, but instead they had come to Charleston academy to make sure that I knew how good the programme was and to see their old nursery partners.

I was told about how one little girl cried and cried on the last day of the programme because she did not want to say goodbye. I could feel the emotion in the room that day as I heard about them reuniting just before I arrived. Another mentor shared that the parents of his mentee had sought him out and thanked him for whatever it was that he did to make their little girl come out of her shell. The programme leaders explained that one of the quieter girls there would have been too nervous to speak to me before she took part in the programme. She smiled and agreed; she said that it had changed everything. Both age groups bloomed from the belief that the programme leaders had in them and from the knowledge that they can build such relationships, learn from one another and be of value to the world.

What really came across as we sat around the table talking and laughing was that the teachers who helped to lead and organise the programme blended together with the young leaders. They had worked together. There was no top-down instruction; it was a partnership, and I could see that the young people carried themselves differently as a result of that.

At the end of my visit, we posed for a photo, as usual. It was a normal MSP visit photo, with everybody standing with their hands clasped and looking polite. One of the young people then pulled out their phone and took a selfie. That is the photo that I used for my social media post about the visit, because that is the one that captured the energy and joy of the day when they explained to me how special it all is. It shows what a difference it makes when young people do something for themselves.

We know that intergenerational work produces results, and we know that young people with adverse childhood experiences need a push, encouragement and opportunities to discover the amazing things about themselves that the world has told them are not there. We know that Growing2gether's approach works, and it would be a very sensible—and successful—move if the Scottish Government were to seriously consider how it can support, explore and expand Growing2gether's work.

Gavin Morgan is a busy man. He has been down in Westminster sharing his successes, and he is working with even more schools that want to join up and be part of the programme. However, I am sure that he could find some time in his very busy diary to help out the minister and make sure that Scotland leads the way. If we want to tackle the attainment gap, if we want more young people in positive destinations and if we want them to be genuinely involved in their community and feel a responsibility to it, this is not an opportunity that we can ignore.

I will finish with a question that Gavin shared with me. He said:

"We are continuing to see a positive impact in both our Nursery and Community programmes for children and young people and parents, teachers and young people, ask, why is this not in more schools across Scotland?"

12:57

**Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** I thank Emma Roddick for using her members' business debate slot to bring this issue to the chamber. I feel very passionately about it, as she will know, and I appreciate her doing so.

First, I want to categorically say that we thank Growing2gether for the work that it does to support children to overcome trauma and adversity. The fact that it is working with 15 schools and has paired more than 2,000 young people with more than 2,200 toddlers over the past seven years should be applauded, because that is a monumental amount of work.

We have already heard from Emma Roddick what the Growing2gether programme has done for so many young people. This national initiative in Scotland focuses on improving outcomes for babies and infants who are affected by adversity in their earliest years. As I have stated, anyone who has listened to my speeches over the past four years will know just how important the issue is to me.

I am going to go personal. When I adopted my daughters, I was told about the issues surrounding attachment disorder and the necessity of reaching certain milestones in brain development for on-going cognitive growth and physical health throughout life. It was put to me like this: every milestone met is a brick in the wall of life; if you miss one out, every brick laid on top of that gap is unstable and insecure.

If members will forgive me, I will go back a step from the work that Growing2gether does. When a baby is born, it is amazing just how important every developmental milestone is. Everything that seems minor and

insignificant is essential. Something as simple as holding a baby makes a massive difference. A newborn who is not held enough is more likely to have stunted growth, poor weight gain and a weaker immune system. Touch is essential for emotional and physical development. Touch promotes vital brain connections, growth hormones and the ability to make bonds with other people, so a child who grows up without touch in their early years has a significantly harder life than one who grows up with it.

Most newborns are well versed in hearing, because they hear their mother from inside the womb. However, if they are born into an environment in which they are not spoken to, they are more likely to suffer setbacks in language, communication, social and emotional skills and speech delays.

All that makes sense, but I wonder whether members also know that those children are also less likely to be able to form thoughts and that a child who grows up in a home where they are not spoken to softly is more likely to be unable to learn or to retain knowledge than one who grows up being spoken to in that way. So much of the nurturing that happens in early years is essential for a purposeful and productive life.

The reason I mention all of that is that Growing2gether's programme is rooted in the growing body of evidence that the first 1,000 days of a child's life are critical to their development and that any delay or inconsistency in decision making during that period can have long-lasting consequences. Those 1,000 days add up to just two years and nine months. Decisions must be made fast because, with every week that goes by, valuable development is lost.

I am speaking about that because Growing2gether's programme aims to improve early identification of risk for babies and infants, strengthening multi-agency working across health, social work, justice and the children's hearings system. It aims to reduce delay and drift in decision making, particularly in cases involving care and permanence, to ensure that babies' lived experiences and their development needs are properly understood and represented. That is timely.

I cannot argue with a single one of those requests, which are timely because, with the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill going through Parliament, we have an opportunity to advance on those asks. I sincerely ask the minister to ensure that we do that.

I will quote one line from Growing2gether:

"Babies are not simply small children."

We only have two years to get it right for them.

13:01

**Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP):** I congratulate Emma Roddick on bringing the debate to the chamber. I am absolutely delighted to be able to speak today because this is exactly what members' business is for—it allows us to shine a light on work that genuinely changes lives but often does not get the attention that it deserves.

When I first read the information about what Growing2gether actually does in pairing young people with toddlers in nurseries, so that those young people can become mentors, I thought that it was a simple idea, but it is really brilliant. The programme is not about giving young people the kind of help that adults sometimes talk about, when we step in to help them fix themselves by telling them what to do, what is wrong with them and why they cannot make progress. Instead, it is about actually handing responsibility to young people, saying that we trust them and letting them be needed. That is a lot: it is massive, but it is actually genius.

I say a proper, "Well done," to everyone involved in making the programme happen, including the staff of Growing2gether and the facilitators on the ground, as well as the school and nursery staff who make space for the work and keep it going week after week, which I know is not easy when people are already juggling everything that they have to do to look after nursery-age children. I should perhaps declare an interest, because I used to chair a local playgroup, so I have a little bit of insight. Most of all, I say, "Well done," to the young people who have stepped up and given it a go, and to the wee toddlers who have benefited and are at the heart and core of that work.

The motion talks about young people who are dealing with a lot, such as poverty, mental health challenges and trauma, with everything that comes on top of that, including living with the pressures of modern times. None of us can pretend that we do not see that in our own communities. I see it in my Banffshire and Buchan Coast constituency, where we have loads of young folk who have really good hearts and are good kids but are just carrying a bit too much. They may have had a few years of being told what they are doing wrong most of the time. Adults tend to say that we are preparing young folk for the risks that they might face, but we do

that and tell them how they are falling behind, instead of being positive and giving them the opportunity to shine, which is exactly what Growing2gether does. I will certainly take that back to my constituency and talk about it.

I also have a little understanding of mentoring toddlers because I have had six children and know exactly what sort of patience that takes. You have to show up and be kind, and you must be consistent.

That is a lot to learn at a young age, and—believe you me—toddlers will find any loophole that they can. Of course, they are also good fun.

The programme is not just good for the wee ones; it is good for all who are involved. It builds confidence in a true, authentic way—not confidence that is put on in order to mask ourselves or to provide us with a way of showing up in society, but a true, authentic transformation within a person. Gaining that real confidence is revolutionary. It is an issue that is pertinent to everybody in the chamber.

I once again thank Emma Roddick for bringing the issue to Parliament, and I hope that the Scottish Government looks seriously at the programme to see how we can roll it out across the rest of Scotland.

13:05

**Davy Russell (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab):** I thank Emma Roddick for bringing the debate to Parliament. I join colleagues in their praise of the programme and hope that we can see it trialled in Lanarkshire at some point, because I think that it is a really good initiative.

Not to harp back to old-fashioned ideals for the sake of it, but it used to be that giving less-than-well-behaved teenagers their first taste of responsibility would often be the making of them. I think that most of us know someone who that applies to. The trouble is that our public services pathways do not do that. Anything short of a path that goes from high school to university and on to a graduate job is seen as sub-par. That is just wrong. Growing2gether really turns that pyramid on its head. It points a finger at every young person and asks, “What are you going to offer the world? What happens if you are forced to think about the wellbeing of someone who is not you?”

As I mentioned in the chamber last week, we have a problem in our economy, with one in six young people aged between 20 and 24 being out of education, employment or training, so I am pleased to join Emma Roddick in congratulating the Growing2gether programme, and I think that the Scottish Government absolutely should consider how it can do more to expand it in the future.

More than that, the Scottish Government should consider how the entire ethos of the programme can be applied to the education-to-employment pathway. The first question should not be what support someone needs, but what someone can offer their community, economy, family or society. If someone is looking after a toddler, that is tremendous.

We must expand the criteria for what is deemed to be a successful education-to-employment journey. Most importantly, we must fearlessly and unashamedly trust young people with the opportunity to contribute to society. That is what I take away from this debate.

13:08

**The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes):** I thank Ms Roddick for bringing the debate to the chamber and for highlighting the excellent work that is being done in the Growing2gether nursery programme. A lot of what she said resonates with me. I am glad that the programme is helping to eliminate the feeling of not having a place or a purpose, because every child in this country deserves to feel special.

I thank members for their heartfelt contributions in today’s debate. It has been terrific to hear about the unique approach that the programme takes and the clear benefits to young people, as the providers of support rather than the recipients. I convey a heartfelt thanks to everyone involved.

Members have already touched on some of the ways in which Growing2gether has helped to support young people. Those who have been supported through the programme have said that it has led to a surge in their confidence, mental health and respect for others, helping them to find skills and qualities that they did not know that they had. It is heartening to hear that feedback, which shows the growth in self-esteem and resilience that the programme is enabling for our young people.

Programmes such as Growing2gether demonstrate the powerful role that positive, supportive relationships play in shaping children and young people’s behaviour, wellbeing and engagement with learning. By giving young people the opportunity to take on responsibility, build empathy and form nurturing relationships with

younger children, that work helps to deliver the social and emotional skills that underpin positive behaviour in school and beyond.

This strengths-based preventative approach aligns closely with our focus on promoting positive relationships, supporting emotional regulation and addressing the underlying causes of disengagement, rather than responding only when behaviour reaches crisis points. It shows how relational, community-based programmes can complement the work of schools, contribute to calmer, more inclusive learning environments and support our young people to be successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. I am really interested in that point, because—as either someone said, or I read—the programme has been very helpful for young people who were quite disengaged with school, by bringing them back in. That is really important. We talk a lot in the chamber about attainment and ensuring that children are able to attend their school, and I have spoken a lot about the virtual school network, but I am interested in understanding more about approaches that can help over and above that.

We are pleased to have provided more than £800,000 to support the nursery programme through our place-based, community-led regeneration funding over a number of years.

There has been some talk about disadvantaged young people and, before I touch on a couple of other points in the debate, it is important to highlight some of the steps that we are taking to provide wider support to children and young people. We are continuing to invest more than £1 billion every year in 1,140 hours of high-quality funded early learning and childcare for all three and four-year-olds and eligible two-year-olds. In last week's budget, we announced a universal breakfast club offer for primary school children in Scotland, to be delivered by August 2027. We also announced new investment to expand after-school and holiday clubs for primary school children, which will support parents with wraparound care options and provide an important range of activities for children.

I absolutely agree with Ms McCall's points. Sometimes we talk about extremely emotive subjects in this Parliament, and this is one of them. We want to ensure that our youngest children get the support that they need to reach those developmental milestones and that the families get the support that they need to deliver that. We are taking a number of actions through whole-family support, whole-family wellbeing and all the preventative work that I regularly talk about with Ms McCall and any other member who will listen to me.

On top of that, there are a number of other actions. In December, we published our "Early Years Speech, Language and Communication Action Plan", which sets out our preventative, strategic approach—to build on existing strengths, address gaps in support, and place families and communities at the heart of that work.

We are also delivering the game-changing Scottish child payment, which is forecast to support the families of around 330,000 children next year. Since the benefit launched, we have paid out more than £3 billion and, of course, we have just expanded it to £40 for children under one.

In relation to the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill, making provisions to support babies is an absolute priority. There are already provisions for that in the bill, but I am hoping to extend them further at stage 2 and I will meet Ms McCall to discuss some of that very soon.

As I have said, I am very interested in the programme and the points that have been made. I am a big believer in intergenerational work and I believe in it for all age groups. Generally speaking, I think that that work has been done more by pairing younger people with elderly people, so I am interested in it for this age group. To take a slightly personal slant, my two children do not have much access to teens or older children, and I can see how that intergenerational work would benefit even them.

As I said to Ms Roddick earlier in the debate, I would be grateful if she could send me more information on the programme. In looking at the future of the programme, I will certainly take into consideration the points that members have raised.

I will finish by congratulating everyone involved in Growing2gether, which is enabling our children and young people to develop the skills, values and resilience that are needed to build a brighter future. I am sure that Growing2gether will continue to build on the superb work that has been done so far, and I wish the programme every success in the future. Again, I thank Ms Roddick for bringing the debate to the chamber.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** That concludes the debate.

13:15

*Meeting suspended.*

14:00

*On resuming—*

## **Portfolio Question Time**

### **Social Justice and Housing**

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** The first item of business this afternoon is portfolio question time. The first questions are on social justice and housing.

#### **Short-term Lets**

**1. Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it supports local authorities to investigate short-term lets that are operating without planning permission or registration. (S6O-05411)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan):** Planning authorities are responsible for investigating breaches of planning control and deciding whether to take enforcement action. Planning circular 10/2009 sets out guidance on enforcement matters, and all planning authorities publish an enforcement charter setting out their procedures. To support local authorities in fulfilling their responsibilities for enforcement, the Government requires them to publish a public register of licensed accommodation. That, together with information on the Government website, assists neighbours in identifying and reporting unlicensed operators to their council.

**Bob Doris:** Constituents have contacted me regarding issues with securing timely and effective enforcement on short-term lets that are operating either with no licence or with no planning permission—or, sometimes, with neither. It is frustrating that such short-term lets are often advertised on online booking platforms and that the profits from them far outweigh eventual fines. What powers does the Scottish Government have, or what additional powers might it seek in the future, to target and take action against online operators that repeatedly offer platforms for such adverts?

**Màiri McAllan:** Authorities already have a range of enforcement tools at their disposal. It is worth noting that failure to comply with a planning enforcement notice is an offence that can incur strong penalties. It remains the Government's intention to increase the maximum fine for some short-term let licensing-related offences.

We have also worked with online booking platforms, which Bob Doris is quite right to mention. We are currently working with them to promote reporting processes for licensing authorities, to ensure that short-term lets that are confirmed to be operating without a licence can be delisted.

#### **Scottish Child Payment**

**2. Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government how many people in 2024-25 no longer received the Scottish child payment because they moved off benefits. (S6O-05412)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville):** Social Security Scotland does not publish figures on why people stop receiving the Scottish child payment. However, statistics show that the payment continues to provide vital and stable support to low-income families across Scotland. The Scottish Government remains firmly committed to tackling child poverty, and the Scottish child payment provides direct support to families that need it most. Take-up is exceptionally high, at an estimated 94 per cent in 2024-25, and the latest statistics show that the families of more than 322,000 children across Scotland are benefiting from that support.

**Stephen Kerr:** I did not ask about anything in that very long answer. What is clear is that the Government does not know or, if it does know, is not prepared to say.

Yesterday, at the Economy and Fair Work Committee, the Deputy First Minister acknowledged concerns about the cliff-edge nature of the Scottish child payment. There is growing evidence that people are reluctant to take on extra hours, overtime, promotion or better-paid work because doing so can push them over the threshold and lead to them losing their benefits. That reluctance is entirely understandable, but it amounts to a benefits trap.

Given that we know that the most effective route out of poverty is good work, what steps is the Government taking to remove that cliff edge, so that work, progression and higher earnings are incentivised rather than penalised?

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** I am sorry if Mr Kerr is not interested in the number of children who have been lifted out of poverty by the Scottish child payment. In relation to his question, analysis published by the Scottish

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Government in July 2024 concluded that the payment is not negatively affecting labour market outcomes at scale at its current rates. Research by the London School of Economics found that there is no evidence that it creates meaningful work disincentives. Research published by the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion concludes that

“the evidence suggests that concerns that the SCP creates work disincentives are overplayed.”

Many people who receive the Scottish child payment are in work, and the payment is an important way in which we can impact both those who are in work and those who are out of work. I hope that, now that I have detailed the research and evidence, Mr Kerr will accept that and move on.

**Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP):** I welcome the Scottish child payment. I also welcome the boost to the Scottish child payment for families with a baby under one from 2027, which is set out in the 2026-27 Scottish budget. The cabinet secretary will know that UNICEF has said that the Scottish National Party Government’s decision

“recognises how crucial a child’s early years are for their development, life chances and future wellbeing.”

Will the cabinet secretary tell us more about how the additional support that we give to children can contribute to their best possible start in life?

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** Keith Brown raises an important point about the impact of the Scottish child payment and the specific impact that a premium for children under the age of one will have. By April this year, the Scottish child payment will have increased by more than 180 per cent since it was launched. The payment being raised to £40 a week for every eligible child under one during 2027-28 will benefit 12,000 children. Once again, it will provide support when families need it the most.

Scotland is delivering the strongest package of financial support for families anywhere in the United Kingdom. Our budget proposals include wide-ranging action to tackle the root causes of poverty, whether that is through the Scottish child payment or our work on affordable homes.

**Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** As the cabinet secretary recognised, the LSE has carried out a piece of work on the Scottish child payment. Last week, at the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, One Parent Families spoke about the cliff edge of eligibility. It cited the example of a parent who had turned down a promotion at work because it would have meant losing their Scottish child payment. Is the Scottish Government mindful that those kinds of situations can arise, particularly for women? What is being done to support families to make the shift when immediate financial support could be lost but the long-term impact could be an increase in household income?

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** One of the reasons that we have taken forward work in the past few years is to give future Governments the ability to change the statutory and legal footing of the Scottish child payment. To ensure that we delivered the Scottish child payment as fast as we did, we based it on the eligibility for universal credit. That link means that, if people fall off UC, they will also fall off the Scottish child payment. Powers have been introduced to ensure that future Governments can look at the legislative footing of the Scottish child payment should a Government wish to change the way in which the Scottish child payment is delivered.

#### **Housing Emergency (Fife)**

**3. Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to respond to the housing emergency in Fife. (S6O-05413)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan):** Since declaring the housing emergency, the Scottish Government has worked intensively—[*Interruption.*]

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Please resume your seat, cabinet secretary.

Mr Kerr, I have allowed a little latitude in the exchanges that have been going on between you and members on the front bench, but could you please desist?

**Màiri McAllan:** We have been working very closely with Fife Council to address the acute pressures that it is facing. In 2025-26, Fife Council received £4.4m from the national acquisitions programme. The council has a plan to eliminate statutory breaches by June 2026 and to return to sustainable rapid rehousing, which I discuss regularly with it. There is a downward trend in children living in temporary accommodation, and the council is close to launching a revised pilot private sector leasing scheme that we think will provide between 100 and 300 properties. Most recently, my quarterly meeting with Fife Council was on 7 January, and I met representatives of the council at the housing to 2040 strategic board on 14 January, when all those matters were discussed.

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**Annabelle Ewing:** I note the cabinet secretary's contact with Fife Council, which I welcome. I also welcome the Scottish Government's new commitments to increase housing, which it has made in recent weeks. However, I have to say that, in the here and now, my constituents are living in overcrowded houses and unsuitable temporary accommodation. A young couple in Lochgelly whom I was contacted by this week are living in damp and mouldy accommodation such that their one-year-old child now cannot sleep and suffers from constant colds. Can the cabinet secretary say what the Scottish Government will do to show that it is, in fact, on my constituents' side?

**Màiri McAllan:** I recognise Annabelle Ewing's call for action in the here and now while that underlying work is on-going to increase supply, including through the new agency that the First Minister announced this morning, which will be called "More Homes Scotland". In terms of the here and now, I have mentioned the acquisitions fund, which is supporting Fife Council and others to buy homes now to relieve pressure, and, just yesterday, I laid draft secondary legislation in the Parliament that will introduce duties on private and social landlords to investigate reports of damp and mould and to commence any required repairs within a set timescale.

That legislation is named after Awaab Ishak, whose death in Rochdale, in England, was linked to exposure to black mould. Although around 90 per cent of properties in Scotland are substantially free from damp and mould, we are determined that everyone should be protected. I hope that the introduction of Awaab's law, among others, is evidence to Annabelle Ewing's constituents that we are on their side.

**Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** I am keen for new build-to-rent and mid-market rent properties to be built in Fife in order to help with the housing emergency there. However, I am hearing reports that the Government is considering putting in place time limits on the exemptions that were proposed as part of the Housing (Scotland) Bill. That would potentially deter investment, which I am sure the cabinet secretary does not want to happen. What reassurances can she give the housing sector to make sure that damaging time limits are not introduced on build-to-rent and mid-market rent exemptions?

**Màiri McAllan:** The purpose of carving out the exemptions from rent controls for mid-market rent and build-to-rent properties was exactly to provide the right circumstances for investment. As I draft the regulations that will put those exemptions in place, I am mindful of the need to retain that encouragement to invest, including in relation to how we define build-to-rent and mid-market rent in those regulations and the conditions that will be set around that. We are discussing that matter with industry, among others, and I will update the Parliament with the final details on that when I am able to.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer :** Question 4 is in the name of Tim Eagle. Tim Eagle is not online, which is more than disappointing. We would expect an apology and an explanation for that.

#### **Household Food Insecurity**

**5. Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what measures it has taken to address household food insecurity. (S6O-05415)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville):** No one should have to compromise on food or other essentials. That is why Scotland was the first nation in the United Kingdom to publish a cash-first plan to work towards ending the need for food banks. Food insecurity is caused by insecure or insufficient income. Building on the on-going investment of more than £3 billion per year in policies that tackle poverty and the cost of living crisis, in 2026-27 we will continue to offer the most comprehensive cost of living support package in the UK, providing vital support for those who face cost of living pressures and strengthening our public services.

**Maurice Golden:** Although debt is clearly a significant driver of food insecurity, access to affordable, healthy food and the skills to prepare it are also critical factors. Will the cabinet secretary confirm whether local access to nutritious food, levels of food and cooking skills are routinely monitored? If they are not, will she consider putting such monitoring in place, in order to better inform future policy decisions?

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** In a number of our funding streams, an aspect that we look at is how we can support local communities with what they deem to be their priorities. Some of those priorities will relate to access to healthy food or skills for cooking healthy food. Those priorities are best served by the funding streams being open to local community groups and by community groups making bids for funding if they feel that that is the most important way to deal with the issue. The Government is alive to the issue, which is exactly why, alongside the work that is set out in the cash-first plan, we are doing wider work on child poverty that looks at the types of drivers of poverty and what we can do to take away some of those challenges.

**Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP):** I welcome the measures that the cabinet secretary has set out. I am proud that, as food inflation continues to soar under the Labour Party, the SNP Government is expanding the most comprehensive cost of living support package anywhere in the UK. Will the cabinet

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secretary tell us more about the measures that were announced in the Scottish budget and how they are expected to help households to afford the essentials?

**Shirley-Anne Somerville:** There is work in the draft budget that will take forward support. That includes £7.2 billion in social security assistance in 2026-27, which supports around 2 million people—one in three people in Scotland. It shows that the Scottish Government is there to support not just people on low incomes, but disabled people, unpaid carers and young people who are getting their first job, for example. That shows our determination to support people through the cost of living crisis and to ensure that we have that assistance. Social security is but one of the examples in the budget of how we are trying to deliver that for the people of Scotland.

*This early draft has been automatically published. It has not yet been completed or reviewed.*