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

Point of Order

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands)

(Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I reiterate the personal apology that I gave to you yesterday and extend it to other members and to the entire chamber. I accept and acknowledge that, when I refused to leave when asked to do so by you on Tuesday night, my behaviour fell well short of what should be expected of MSPs. I reiterate my sincere apologies to you and to the chamber for my behaviour on Tuesday evening.

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

General Question Time

11:40

Mark Scott Leadership for Life Award Programme (Funding)

1. **Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government for what reason it has reportedly reduced the funding it provides to the Mark Scott leadership for life award programme for 2026-27. (S6O-05563)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): Since 2012, the Scottish Government has provided £1.4 million to the Outward Bound Trust to help to deliver the Mark Scott leadership for life award. Although we recognise the positive impact that the project continues to have, it is one of many that seeks financial support from the Government. Through our safer communities funding for 2026-27, we plan to provide £3.24 million in direct grant funding to 19 partner organisations. The Outward Bound Trust will receive £30,000 from that fund. As in previous years, that funding will help it to leverage support from other funders to enable it to deliver its programme.

Paul O’Kane: That answer is simply not good enough. The Scottish Government has tried this before: it tried to cut funding for that vital work a few years ago, but it was forced into a U-turn by cross-party opposition. I pay tribute to the former First Minister, Humza Yousaf, who personally intervened to ensure that the funding would be reinstated. However, we are back where we started.

The award commemorates the life of a man who was murdered in senseless sectarian violence. It provides opportunities to hundreds of young people every year from Scotland’s most deprived communities to learn and to come together. Niall and Judith Scott, Mark’s parents, have written to the minister and to the First Minister but have received no response. That is outrageous. When will they receive a response? Does the minister not agree that cutting investment in preventative youth work for the sake of saving £45,000 is short-sighted? Will she look again at that decision?

Siobhian Brown: Apologies—I am not aware of any such correspondence that has come in. I have not seen it yet, but I will chase that up today.

Funding pressures across the Scottish Government have meant that difficult decisions have been made and priorities have been identified. We continue to support the Mark Scott leadership for life award and look forward to continuing to work with the Outward Bound Trust. However, the Scottish Government has to align

funding more closely to the vision of justice. That means reprioritising the initiatives that can be supported.

I highlight that the Scottish Government grant also provides part of the funding that is required to run the programme, which does a magnificent job of raising the required funding so that it can run each year. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Let us hear the minister.

Siobhian Brown: We are in discussions with the programme to understand the impact, but we hope that funding can continue to be raised from other sources.

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I wish to add my total dismay at the situation that we find ourselves in. I share Paul O’Kane’s anger on the matter. The Government’s approach is, indeed, very short-sighted. The programme is a unique project that has been hugely beneficial to all the young people who have taken part over the years, from all backgrounds. It has a proven track record of success, and it has ensured that young people can take the better path. I would have thought that that is what the justice team hopes for for future generations. Surely, minister, a small amount of additional funding could be found to ensure that this excellent project can continue.

The Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Siobhian Brown: We are all aware of the great work that has been done by the Mark Scott leadership for life award programme. As I said to Mr O’Kane, we will continue to work with the organisation and see whether funding can be found from other portfolios to support it. We will continue to give it £30,000 in this financial year, which will provide it with levers for further funding avenues.

Motor Neurone Disease (Research)

2. **Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what funding it provides to support research into finding a cure for motor neurone disease. (S6O-05564)

The Minister for Public Health and Women’s Health (Jenni Minto): Within the Scottish Government, the chief scientist office supports health and care research through direct funding and infrastructure support. The chief scientist office is currently funding two fellowships in motor neurone disease, with a total funding commitment of £485,000. Further applications on motor neurone disease to the chief scientist office’s project and fellowship funding schemes are welcomed.

The Scottish Government provides annual funding of £665,000 to the NHS Research Scotland neurodegenerative disease network to support the delivery of clinical trials in Scotland for neurodegenerative conditions, including motor neurone disease.

Mark Griffin: I met my constituent Mark Sommerville and other brave MND sufferers two weeks ago. They were protesting outside the Parliament in the cold and rain because, despite writing to the First Minister on multiple occasions, they had had no response from anyone in the Government.

Mark has a young family and is desperate to see investment in a cure or a treatment that could slow down the progression of MND. He feels—as do the other people who were in the cold and rain that day—that, by failing to meet them, ministers fail to understand the urgency of their situation. Can the minister say why Mark and other people with MND feel ignored by this Government?

Jenni Minto: I thank Mark Griffin for his supplementary question and recognise the importance of conditions such as motor neurone disease. The Scottish Government is firmly committed to increasing access to new and innovative medicines, and I absolutely recognise the key importance of medical and scientific research in finding a cure for MND, which is why more than 350 patients from Scotland have been recruited to the United Kingdom-wide MND smart clinical trial.

I recognise the important work that Mark Sommerville is doing to ensure that more work is done in this area, and I thank Mr Griffin for bringing the issue to the chamber. I will chase up any response to letters.

Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Act 2025

3. **Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service and other relevant criminal justice organisations regarding the implementation of section 34 of the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Act 2025. (S6O-05565)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): The Scottish Government is engaging with justice bodies and stakeholders across the sector on implementation of the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Act 2025, including section 34, following royal assent. That includes discussions with officials from the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service. Implementation of the act is being phased to ensure that operational implications and readiness are duly considered across the system.

We will continue discussions with COPFS and other justice bodies and stakeholders in that regard.

Jamie Greene: For the benefit of the public, I note that section 34 gives all victims the right to be informed of any decision not to prosecute or to discontinue prosecution proceedings. It strengthens the rights of victims in Scotland. I know that the Government did not support the provision, but it was agreed to by the Parliament and is in the 2025 act, whether the Government likes it or not.

Other parts of the 2025 act have been implemented swiftly, such as the removal of the not proven verdict, so, when it suits the Government, it can introduce parts of the act swiftly and act on implementation. Has the cabinet secretary instructed COPFS to implement that change in the law? If so, when will it be implemented in full?

Angela Constance: I know that Mr Greene will appreciate the size and scale of the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Act 2025. He rightly narrates that the first action of implementation was the abolition of the not proven verdict. Further measures have either already been implemented or are in train. I know that Mr Greene has a particular interest in section 55, which requires the Parole Board for Scotland to consider whether a prisoner has revealed information about a victim's remains, and section 56, on measures around the safety of victims.

In relation to section 34 specifically, Mr Greene moved an amendment at stage 3—and, yes, it was agreed to; that was the will of the Parliament. I stated then that the provisions are operationally complex and that careful consideration of them is required. I assure him that we will keep the implementation of the provision under review while we continue our discussions with the Crown Office. It is important that we consider operational implications and readiness.

Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022 (Alignment with Fair Trade)

4. John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): To ask the Scottish Government how it ensures that the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022 aligns with fair trade principles for imported food and drink. (S6O-05566)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): Although the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022 does not reference imported food and drink, the act sets out some principles that are relevant to fair trade principles. In addition, our strategic approach to trade policy is a values-based approach, as is set out in "Scotland's Vision for Trade". Our annual

report on that, which was published in January this year, sets out recent progress on putting those values into practice.

John Mason: Outcome 6B of the good food nation plan refers to

"positive contributions to global food system transformation."

However, there are no indicators for it. I would have thought that that would have an impact on fair trade. Could fair trade be used as part of the indicators?

Mairi Gougeon: I appreciate the concern that John Mason raises. When we were looking at the criteria for the indicators that should be included in the good food nation plan, we were looking for indicators on which information was readily available, understandable and accessible to a wide range of stakeholders. The indicators also need to be sensitive enough for changes to be detected over time, cost-effective to use and have low resource requirements.

I emphasise that, although the good food nation plan does not currently have an indicator in relation to this outcome, it is the first plan. We can only look to build on it, to fill the data gaps where they exist and to find data and evidence so that there are suitable indicators in the future. It is an important point that we need to have indicators and a monitoring framework if we want to make sure that we are making good progress on our good food nation ambitions.

Dyslexia Assessments for Adults (Free Provision Pathway)

5. Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what progress it has made towards the establishment of a pathway for free dyslexia assessments at the point of contact for adults. (S6O-05567)

The Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing (Tom Arthur): As part of building a fairer, more inclusive Scotland, the Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that all children, young people and adults with dyslexia receive the support that they need to reach their full potential. There are clear duties on education authorities to identify, provide for and review the additional support needs of school pupils.

In relation to adults and employment, our fair work approach ensures that disabled people, including those with dyslexia, get the support that they need at work without an adult assessment, including through the access to work scheme and working health services Scotland.

Rona Mackay: Around one in 10 people in Scotland are dyslexic. Without meaningful reform, too many people will be disadvantaged in a

perpetual cycle. Adult assessments and early intervention along with teacher training and school support are key asks of Dyslexia Scotland's manifesto. Can the minister confirm that the Scottish Government will commit to addressing those issues in the next parliamentary session?

Tom Arthur: The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that all children, young people and adults with dyslexia receive appropriate support to reach their full potential. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills asked Janie McManus to conduct a short, sharp review of additional support for learning in schools. That will report before the end of the parliamentary session.

Local authorities spent more than £1.1 billion on additional support for learning in 2024-25, and additional funding was provided in 2025-26 to support the ASN workforce and teacher numbers. That funding will be sustained in 2026-27, following the passing of the Scottish Government's budget.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills and I recently met Dyslexia Scotland to discuss those issues. We will have further engagement.

Walk-in General Practitioner Clinics (Location Criteria)

6. Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what criteria are applied in deciding on the location of the new walk-in GP clinics. (S6O-05568)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): As part of the First Minister's visit to Shetland this week, we were pleased to announce 16 planned centres, with 12 new sites from Stranraer to Shetland being confirmed. That builds on the opening in February of the first walk-in centre, which is in Edinburgh.

The criteria that were used to assess health board proposals were: readiness; workforce feasibility; benefit to patients; estate suitability; integration and coherence; governance; evaluation capacity; funding estimate; and commitment to collaboration. The centres, which will be open from 12 to 8 pm, seven days a week, in accessible locations nationwide, are part of a package of measures to address the 8 am rush that has frustrated so many of us. They will ease GP capacity pressures.

Kenneth Gibson: The three towns of Ardrossan, Saltcoats and Stevenston constitute the second largest conurbation in Scotland not to have a hospital, and they include sizeable levels of deprivation. North Ayrshire has high levels of drug and alcohol misuse, and people lose good health far earlier than the Scottish average. How soon, therefore, can we expect to see a walk-in clinic in

the three towns? Will the cabinet secretary meet me to discuss the issue further?

Neil Gray: I very much recognise the issues that Mr Gibson has raised relating to the demographic profile of his constituency and the services in it. I also understand why it could benefit from a walk-in GP service. I would be more than happy to discuss the matter further in a meeting, which I ask him to contact my office to arrange.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I declare an interest as a practising national health service GP.

The First Minister's announcement of GP walk-in centres at the Scottish National Party conference was simply an election stunt. He announced them without consulting stakeholders; indeed, he probably shocked his own civil servants. His spin doctors clearly loved the title, and now the SNP is scrabbling around to backfill the details. Even the health secretary was unable to answer my previous questions with any detail at all, because there was none.

Will patients exclusively see GPs when they attend a GP walk-in centre? If not, in what percentage of appointments will they see a GP, or has that not been discussed with the SNP campaign team yet?

Neil Gray: The walk-in services will provide appointments with GPs and other practice staff. They are popular with the public because they come alongside the record investment that we are putting into core general practice over the next three years, which I noticed that Mr Gulhane and his colleagues voted against in the budget this week. It is a matter for shame that they not only refused to support but actively voted against our record investment in core general practice services.

We are broadening the front door of our NHS through that record investment. We are making our NHS more flexible through walk-in GP services, and we will continue in that vein to ensure that our NHS is fit for the future.

Orthopaedic Services Waiting Times (NHS Lanarkshire)

7. Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what steps are being taken to reduce orthopaedic services waiting times across NHS Lanarkshire. (S6O-05569)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): We are making undeniable progress in clearing waits of more than a year, with consistent month-on-month improvements. We know that there is still more to do, but our plan is working—indeed, waiting lists have reduced for the eighth month in a row. That has been driven by

the provision of more appointments and the incredible efforts of our staff.

This year, we have allocated more than £135 million of additional funding to health boards to help them to tackle the longest waits, including the targeting of orthopaedic waiting times in NHS Lanarkshire. That includes recruitment to expand the consultant workforce.

NHS Lanarkshire continues to receive additional orthopaedic capacity at the Golden Jubilee national hospital to prioritise long-waiting patients, and, from April, it will have such capacity at NHS Forth Valley.

Collette Stevenson: Workforce statistics show that, since the SNP entered government, thousands more doctors and nurses have been provided in Scotland's hospitals. We have also avoided NHS strikes, unlike other parts of the United Kingdom.

However, I have been contacted by constituents who are concerned about the waiting times for orthopaedic procedures. How will the 2026-27 budget that was approved by Parliament yesterday support NHS reforms and help NHS Lanarkshire to further tackle the waiting lists and deliver more appointments?

Neil Gray: Collette Stevenson is absolutely right. This Government has increased the workforce across the NHS, and Scotland has been the only part of the United Kingdom to have avoided NHS strikes. That is because we have taken an approach with our trade union colleagues that is collaborative and based on compromise, unlike other parts of the UK.

Our budget investment in the coming year includes a record investment of £22.5 billion in our health service and continuing targeted investment in reducing long waits so that the progress that we have made this year can continue without interruption in the coming year, patients can be seen much faster and waiting times will continue to reduce.

City of Edinburgh Council Housing Support

8. Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the recent announcement that the freeze on council housing allocation in Edinburgh will continue until March 2027, what support it is providing to the City of Edinburgh Council to address the housing crisis. (S6O-05570)

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): The Scottish Government is working closely with the City of Edinburgh Council as one of the local authorities that is facing the most significant housing and homelessness pressures. Edinburgh's allocation of £28.7 million from our

£80 million acquisitions fund brings its total capital funding to more than £73 million this year, which is supporting it to acquire properties immediately for affordable housing.

I welcome the council's actions to meet its statutory duties, including directing stock to homeless households. I believe that this, among many other approaches that we are working with the council on, will help to reduce temporary accommodation pressures.

Miles Briggs: Yesterday's budget will result in Edinburgh again receiving the lowest funding per head of population from Scottish ministers, at the same time as it is the local authority that has the smallest amount of social housing stock and a rapidly growing population. Given that the waiting list for social housing in the capital is completely unsustainable, will the Government now commit to an Edinburgh-specific housing fund to address the housing emergency?

Màiri McAllan: As I have said, we are working closely with the City of Edinburgh Council, among many other councils, to help it to tackle the multifaceted issue of homelessness and temporary accommodation pressures.

Miles Briggs spoke about yesterday's budget, which I am delighted to say was passed. It included £926 million for the affordable homes supply programme. That is the largest single allocation for affordable homes on record. I only wish that Miles Briggs could have brought himself to vote for it.

War in Ukraine (Fourth Anniversary)

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

Before we move to First Minister's question time, I invite the First Minister to make some remarks to mark the fourth anniversary of the war against Ukraine.

12:02

The First Minister (John Swinney): Scotland stands for democracy, human rights and the rule of law here, at home, and around the world. That is why this Government will always resolutely condemn Russia's illegal war against Ukraine. Tuesday marked the war's fourth anniversary, and my thoughts go out to everyone from Ukraine who is involved in the conflict and in support of Ukrainians everywhere during this difficult time.

Since the war began, more than 29,000 Ukrainian people have arrived in the United Kingdom, sponsored either by an individual in Scotland or by the Scottish Government. More than 21,000 of those came through our supersponsor scheme. Many have started to rebuild their lives here and are making valuable contributions to our communities.

I continue to call for a properly constituted international peace plan that respects Ukrainian sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, and one that is agreed by Ukraine and restores peace in Europe. Until that time comes, I say to our Ukrainian friends that they have our support for as long as they need it, that Scotland remains their sanctuary and that, if they wish, Scotland remains their home. Slava Ukraini. *[Applause.]*

12:03

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): Four years of war—it is impossible for us to imagine. Four years of fear, misery and death. Four years of civilians listening for the sound of drones overhead, ordinary Ukrainians being trapped in a state of horror and hundreds of thousands of ordinary men being sent to the front, never to return home. There are so many statistics, but the cruellest of all is that more than 700 children have been killed.

This is a war between good and evil, and a war of freedom, decency and democracy against the dark forces of tyranny. For four years, the British people and their military have stood with the people of Ukraine, and our support must remain resolute.

I pray that Putin's war will not reach a fifth bloody anniversary and that, when it ends—as end it

must—he will pay the price for his crimes. *[Applause.]*

12:04

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): It is four years since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. I remember when we first spoke in Parliament, just days after the invasion began, and I believe that, in our hearts, we all hoped that it would end positively for the people of Ukraine within months. However, that tragedy has now continued for four years. Countless lives have been lost and the people of Ukraine are living in absolute horror.

It is clear where the blame lies: with the despotic regime in Russia and with the war criminal Vladimir Putin. I cannot wait for the day when he is put in front of the court in The Hague and made to pay for his horrendous war crimes.

Yesterday, I had the honour of speaking with the consul general of Ukraine and passing on my thoughts and love, not only for his family but for all Ukrainian families, be they here, in Scotland, or back in their homes in Ukraine. I made a commitment—one that I know is shared by everyone in the chamber—that we will always stand by the people of Ukraine, that they have our resolute support, and that we will not rest until they can live in the democracy, peace, justice and freedom that they deserve. *[Applause.]*

12:06

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): Today, we recognise four years of Ukrainians' brave resistance of Russia's illegal and immoral aggression. Putin's war has caused immense suffering and displacement, leaving tens of thousands—if not hundreds of thousands—dead, with civilians paying a heavy price.

From the very beginning, this Parliament and the people of Scotland have stood in solidarity with Ukraine and its people. Families all over our country have opened their hearts and doors, welcoming Ukrainians into their homes and communities. I am hugely proud of the unwavering unity that we have shown and that we must continue to show. Scotland and Europe must continue standing by Ukraine and its people, particularly when the White House is threatening to walk away. *[Applause.]*

12:06

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Over last year's Easter recess, Paul Sweeney and I joined the Mighty Convoy charity in delivering seven ambulances overland to armed forces in Ukraine for immediate use on the front line. What struck us both was the proximity,

because the front line is just three tanks of diesel away from here.

What also struck us was that the country is trying, and succeeding, to live as normal a life as possible. There is no rationing and the burrito shacks are still offering happy hour. However, we were also given an air-attack briefing and we saw the graves. The cemeteries around the Greek Orthodox churches of western Ukraine are swollen with the corpses of the glorious defenders. In central Lviv, a garden not unlike Princes Street gardens is given over for use as a war cemetery, where flags of the glorious defenders fly as far as the eye can see. There were three funerals there on the morning of our arrival.

On this fourth anniversary, I am particularly thinking of our student guide, Sasha, who has since been drafted and is now serving on the eastern front, and of Father Taras, whom we met in Yavoriv army base. An army veteran of 10 years, he has never carried a gun but serves on the front line. As we were approaching holy week, I asked him whether the soldiers came to his services. He said, "No. Mostly, they just want me to hear their confessions, because they think they are going to die."

They are fighting for all of us. Glory to Ukraine. Glory to the heroes. *[Applause.]*

First Minister's Question Time

12:08

Social Security (Cost)

1. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): We are blessed to live in a country that provides its people with the safety net of social security. Any one of us, or our loved ones, might need a helping hand at some point in our lives.

However, we have a duty as politicians to remind ourselves that that is paid for by taxpayers. Already, £1 of every £7 spent by the Scottish National Party Government is spent on benefits. Does John Swinney think that that is fair and affordable?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I do believe that it is fair and affordable. The Government successfully took a budget through Parliament that was passed with the support of members of different persuasions from across Parliament and that puts in place the resources to enable us to provide the type of support that we all designed when the social security legislation was passed unanimously. That legislation ensures that people who require support are treated with dignity, fairness and respect.

Russell Findlay: John Swinney has just said that his benefits spending is fair and affordable. It is neither. Hard-working Scots who are struggling with the cost of living are already forced to pay £1.8 billion more each year in SNP income tax. That is £1.8 billion more than they would pay if they did the same job for the same wage elsewhere in the United Kingdom. That is the only reason why John Swinney can fund his benefits spending, and it is going to get worse.

A new report from the Scottish Fiscal Commission says that 1 million Scots will be in receipt of benefits by the end of the decade. At the same time, 1 million Scots will be paying income tax at the higher rate of 42p or more. Does John Swinney think that that is fair and affordable?

The First Minister: I think that the Government's approach in its budget and in its social security expenditure is fair and affordable. What the Government is doing in relation to cost of living support, for example, has a whole variety of different elements to it. It results in people in Scotland paying lower council tax, on average, than people in other parts of the United Kingdom. It results in the abolition of peak rail fares, which means that, if a person is a commuter between Edinburgh and Glasgow, their travel costs have been halved as a consequence of the Government's action. *[Interruption.]*

I hear a Conservative member talk about rural areas. The Government is piloting a £2 bus fare cap in the Highlands and Islands, and I heard on my visit to Shetland that it is going down fantastically well as a measure to support the cost of living.

Of course, if people live in Scotland, they also have access to the social contract, which means that they do not pay prescription charges, they do not pay for personal care and they do not pay for tuition fees—as we have heard this week, the whole issue of student debt in the United Kingdom is becoming such a significant issue, but people living in Scotland do not pay tuition fees in Scotland.

I think that the Government has got the balance right in asking people on higher incomes to pay slightly more in taxation. Of course, the majority of taxpayers in Scotland pay less in taxation than they would pay if they lived in other parts of the United Kingdom and they get access to the social contract, which protects people from the rises in the cost of living.

Russell Findlay: No one is asked to pay more tax—they are forced to pay more tax. This Government should get people off benefits and into work, because that is how we improve people's lives. Instead, the SNP hammers workers and businesses to pay for its expensive benefits.

It is going to get even more unfair and even more unaffordable. An SNP Government report wants more people to qualify for adult disability payment, which already accounts for more than half of all benefits spending in Scotland. Astonishingly, that report even says that those whose condition is not serious enough to qualify should be paid the benefit. Implementing that report would add another £1 billion to the SNP's already bloated benefits bill. Does John Swinney think that that is fair and affordable?

The First Minister: The Government has not taken any decisions about those particular issues.

What this exchange highlights, once again, is that Russell Findlay has come into this Parliament to go after disabled people in our country and to undermine their quality of life. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, members.

The First Minister: I am very pleased to put on the record that, while Russell Findlay goes after the benefits of disabled people, my Government will stand shoulder to shoulder with disabled people in our society and support them in their journey into employment and into activity. I simply point out—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: I simply point out to Russell Findlay that the Government's budget, which was passed yesterday, contains significant support for employability schemes to enable people to access the labour market. That is what I want people to do to help us to reduce child poverty, which is already falling in our society. Of course, Scotland, under an SNP Government, has significantly lower unemployment than other parts of the United Kingdom do. That is because this Government delivers for the people of our country.

Russell Findlay: The First Minister is doing what he always does—resorting to nonsense smears—because he is in a state of complete and utter denial. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Findlay.

Russell Findlay: This entire place is in a state of denial. The SNP, the Greens, the Lib Dems, Labour and Reform think that they can keep spending more money and giving more benefits while expecting Scottish workers and businesses to keep paying for it. We cannot—we just cannot.

The Scottish Conservatives know that we must reduce the benefits bill so that we can cut taxes to help people pay their bills, yet the SNP's deeply irresponsible budget does absolutely nothing whatsoever to address its benefits time bomb. John Swinney should be honest for a change. He should tell the public which taxes he will raise and which services he will cut to pay for his benefits bill.

The First Minister: If I needed any lessons on how to smear people, I would take them from Russell Findlay, who does it every single week in the chamber.

In the budget yesterday—which, of course Russell Findlay could not support—there was investment for employability schemes to get people off benefits and into employment, which is what he is asking for, but he could not even bring himself to vote for the budget yesterday.

Russell Findlay comes here with empty rhetoric about delivering tax cuts without telling us what services are going to be cut as a consequence. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: To reassure Russell Findlay and the Conservatives about the situation that we find ourselves in, I say that the Government asked the credit rating agencies to assess Scotland's position, and what did they tell us? They told us that we have prudent fiscal management here in Scotland. That is what you get with an SNP Government.

Queen Elizabeth University Hospital

2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): For years, families have been searching for answers to the Queen Elizabeth university hospital scandal. As everyone in the Parliament now knows, the hospital was opened before it was safe and, as a result, children and adults died. John Swinney said that the Government first knew about problems at the hospital in March 2018, but, even after that date, the Government denied the scale of the problem.

Although there has been understandable focus on the lives lost, many others were harmed. Prophylaxis drugs, which are powerful anti-infection drugs, are typically used for short periods, but many children at the hospital were prescribed them for prolonged periods—as long as nine months—with side effects. Patients were told that that was standard treatment and was not connected to the hospital environment. Why were they lied to?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Mr Sarwar has raised an important issue about clinical care for children in the Queen Elizabeth university hospital. The inquiry that the Government set up, under the leadership of Lord Brodie, is designed to provide families with answers on that material issue. I am not a clinician, but I accept that clinical judgments will be made in the care of individuals. The inquiry that the Government established into the Queen Elizabeth university hospital is designed to provide families with the answers that they deserve. That is why the Government set up the inquiry. I want to ensure that Lord Brodie has every opportunity to provide his answers on that question.

Anas Sarwar: There is a group of victims whose story has not been told enough so far. Those families believe that their children have been left with lifelong debilitating conditions as a result of prolonged use of those drugs due to infection risks that were caused by the hospital environment.

I want to share some of those cases today. All of them took place after March 2018. Aneeka's daughter, Eshaal, who is 9, wakes up most mornings screaming and clutching her stomach in pain; Karen's son, Caleb, who is 10, has chronic tummy pains and incontinence issues and struggles to walk; Leann's son, William, who is 13, was so sick on those drugs that he burned all the enamel off his teeth; and Charmaine's daughter, Paige, who is 9, has pain in her limbs and severe stomach issues, so she cannot go to school. Her parents told me that there is a culture of cover-ups and that people were playing God with these children's lives.

I asked the families what they would ask if they were standing here, facing John Swinney. Mark,

whose daughter Charlie, who is 14, has to take regular hormone injections, simply said:

"I would ask John Swinney: how do you sleep at night?"

The First Minister: I cannot give an opinion on the clinical decisions that are offered in individual cases. What I can do is express my sympathy to the families who are involved, recognise their suffering and provide them with the reassurance that the inquiry that the Government has established, under the leadership of Lord Brodie, is designed to capture the evidence and provide answers to those families. Lord Brodie has the remit to do that. The Government has supported Lord Brodie in the provision of information to ensure that he can undertake that task, and that is what we expect Lord Brodie to do.

I will always listen with care to the perspectives and interests of families who have been affected by the national health service, and the circumstances that they face, and I will do all that I can to address their suffering. That is the commitment that I give to those families.

Anas Sarwar: All the families whose tragic stories I have shared are here today in the Parliament. Each and every one of the people who are standing right now has spent years having to stand up for themselves against a system that has misled them and treated them appallingly. There have been cover-ups, secrecy, misdirection and downright deception, with tragic consequences. They all want the truth about what happened to their children, and they want no other family to suffer like they have.

John Swinney has twice referred to the public inquiry, but he knows that the public inquiry is not looking at individual cases and, therefore, cannot give those families the answers that they deserve and are looking for. Will he commit today to setting up a genuinely independent expert panel, not connected to the health board or the Government, to look at each of those cases on an individual basis and to allow each of those families to ask all the questions that they have, so that they can get the answers that they need and, finally, the truth that they deserve?

The First Minister: I want families who have suffered to get the truth. That is why the Government established the inquiry into the Queen Elizabeth university hospital, as it was asked to do by the Parliament, and we have provided the inquiry with all the information that we have done to enable it to undertake its activities.

Today, I will be meeting families who have been affected by the issues at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital. I will also be seeing other families in the next couple of weeks, because I am

absolutely committed to making sure that families get the truth.

Mr Sarwar asked me to put in place a process. In all honesty, I have to reserve my position on that until we get the report from Lord Brodie. The Parliament has asked for a public inquiry to be undertaken and, as First Minister, I cannot prejudge its outcome. That is the rational thing to do. However, I will consider Mr Sarwar's point.

I give candid answers to the Parliament. That is my style as First Minister. That is what I want to do. Having established a public inquiry, we have to enable that inquiry to take its course. That is the approach that the Government will take.

I will consider Mr Sarwar's request, and I will discuss those issues with the families I meet in the next few weeks.

Childcare (West Lothian Council)

3. Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): High-quality, affordable childcare should not be a luxury in Scotland, but the current system is not delivering. This week, West Lothian Council voted to cut all funding for cross-boundary placements, meaning that parents where I live, Falkirk, who use private nurseries in Linlithgow are set to be hit with a huge unexpected bill.

Parents who have applied for places for their children will be denied them from 1 April and will now have to find alternative childcare at terrifyingly short notice. Children who are halfway through their current placement will be forced to move in August. That is an unacceptable level of disruption for young children and families who were promised funded childcare.

Will the First Minister intervene and help the families who will be impacted? Will his Government provide an urgent solution to councils cutting funding for cross-boundary childcare?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I have every sympathy with the issue, which gets to the nub of some of the dilemmas about the delivery of local authority services that the Government has to wrestle with. Statutory guidance is clear that families accessing cross-boundary placements should be treated on the same basis as families accessing local provision.

West Lothian Council—which is, I point out, a Labour-led council—is not following the statutory guidance that is in place. That is a salutary warning to us all about what Labour does when it gets into power.

I want to make sure that people understand the financial circumstances in West Lothian Council. West Lothian Council will receive an additional 7.8 per cent in its budget compared with its funding for 2025-26, and the Government is fully funding

1,140 hours of high-quality early learning and childcare.

The Government is limited in what it can do, because local authorities are self-governing organisations. I simply point out to members that it would be helpful if West Lothian Council could deliver on the commitment, which we are all signed up to, to provide affordable childcare to individuals in Scotland, so that it does not put the difficulties that Gillian Mackay raised in front of families in West Lothian and Falkirk.

Gillian Mackay: The Scottish Greens want to deliver free places for every child in Scotland from six months up, but the Scottish Government is not delivering the current commitment on funded childcare once a child turns three, which is an issue that we raised with the First Minister ahead of this year's budget.

Thanks to Scottish Green councillors, Glasgow City Council is now the only local authority left that offers funded childcare to all children starting the week after a child turns three. Many families elsewhere have to pay thousands of pounds out of their own pockets while they wait for the start of the next school term.

The Scottish Government promised free childcare at three, but it has not funded it. I appreciate the issues with councils not passing on the funding, but councils are trying to plug the gap. When will the First Minister come good on his party's promise and make sure that childcare in Scotland really is free at three?

The First Minister: Since 2021, the Government has put in place about £1 billion a year to provide 1,140 hours of funded early learning and childcare for all three and four-year-olds. That is the Government's commitment. We have set out in the budget proposals other provisions that relate to extending some early learning and childcare. The Government will have more to say in the coming weeks in relation to other measures that we are able to take to tackle child poverty.

Adequate funding has been put into the local government settlement to deliver on the Government's commitment. This is supposed to be a partnership endeavour, but it does not help when local authorities do not work collaboratively with the Government to deliver the Parliament's aspirations.

Transmission Charges (Wind Farms)

4. Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what assessment the Scottish Government has made of warnings from industry leaders that high transmission charges are making wind farms in the north of Scotland uncompetitive, including any implications for its

work to grow the renewable energy sector. (S6F-04717)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The current system of transmission charging is wholly unfit for purpose and unfairly penalises Scottish generators, putting them at a commercial disadvantage and reducing their viability. The levers to effect change are reserved to the United Kingdom Government, and we have repeatedly called on it and Ofgem to set out equitable long-term solutions as well as immediate measures to protect Scottish generators from unfair, high and volatile charges. Furthermore, we have been clear that the views of Scotland's renewables sector must be at the heart of any reforms.

Michelle Thomson: The First Minister will have noticed that, this week, Scottish Renewables published a report setting out the damage that the Labour UK Government's transmission charging regime is doing to Scottish generators. Westminster's charging regime is fundamentally unfair and hinders renewables projects in Scotland, and that is happening while Labour's tax on Scotland's energy is destroying around 1,000 jobs a month.

Will the First Minister join me in calling on the UK Government to end the discriminatory transmission charging regime for existing projects right now? Does he agree that Scotland needs full control over our energy sector, which, of course, only Scottish independence can bring?

The First Minister: I very much agree that the transition charging regime is hindering renewables projects in Scotland. It is wholly unfit for purpose and it unfairly penalises Scottish generators. Vast amounts of renewable energy are being produced in Scotland, and there are many more prospective projects. However, under the current United Kingdom arrangements, people in Scotland will not get the benefit of the renewable energy that is being generated. I agree with Michelle Thomson that if Scotland wants to have lower energy costs for households and businesses, its energy wealth must work for the people of Scotland. That will come only when Scotland becomes independent.

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): Does the First Minister agree with his Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy's comment that, if people do not want pylons, battery storage or other destructive infrastructure in rural Scotland, they are on the far right? If he does not agree with her, will he apologise for her disgraceful remark?

The Presiding Officer: First Minister, please answer in relation to the substantive question.

The First Minister: I am interested in Tess White's comment. Members of the public are free

to express their views on all questions. We all live in a democracy, and we are all free to express the points of view that we hold. It is important that all opportunities for engagement on any issues in relation to renewables projects are available to all members of the public through the planning process. That will always remain so.

Lord Advocate's Role (Separation of Functions)

5. Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests in that I hold a practising certificate as a solicitor.

To ask the First Minister, in light of reported renewed calls over the weekend to end the Lord Advocate's dual role, when the Scottish Government will publish its proposals and begin a consultation on separating the prosecution function from the role of providing legal advice to the Scottish ministers. (S6F-04705)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The law officers operate with integrity and entirely independently of any other person as they undertake their prosecutorial and investigation of deaths functions and provide legal advice to ministers. Separating the functions would require legislation by the United Kingdom Parliament. A draft research paper on the law officers' roles and functions, which set out factual information, context and analysis, was produced by the former chief executive of the Scottish Law Commission, Malcolm McMillan. The paper was subsequently peer reviewed and will be published before the end of the parliamentary session. Although the Scottish Government is exploring whether any change might be desirable, it considers that the current position is appropriate.

Liam Kerr: I am pleased that we finally have a publication date for the research, but it is extraordinarily late, given that Malcolm McMillan's appointment to do it was more than three years ago. For the sake of the system's integrity, for public confidence and to achieve a clear separation of powers, the Lord Advocate's dual role must be split, which the Scottish National Party promised to do in its 2021 manifesto. The First Minister will be pleased to note that Conservative MP John Cooper has tabled a bill in the UK Parliament that would enable such a split. Will the First Minister instruct Stephen Flynn and the SNP's MPs to support Mr Cooper's bill? If the bill should pass, will the First Minister immediately take the steps required to split the Lord Advocate's role?

The First Minister: There are a number of hypothetical elements to that question. However, for me to be able to fulfil what Mr Kerr has asked of me, I will first have to win the forthcoming

election and ensure that I lead the Government after it. I am glad that Liam Kerr believes that that is exactly what I am going to be doing.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD): I hope that I say on behalf of the whole chamber that any language that is used, by anyone in the Parliament or elsewhere, that suggests for a second that the Lord Advocate is in any way corrupt does a huge disservice to the person who holds that role and to the independence of the judiciary. We have to put that on the record as MSPs.

Mr Kerr makes a valid point. The issue has been rumbling along for many years. It has been four years since Mr McMillan was tasked with finding a solution to the conundrum. I have always believed that the dual role puts the Lord Advocate in an impossible position and that it should have been taken away many years ago. If the report is published in the coming weeks, is it likely that we will see some action and resolution to the issue before the Scottish Parliament election, or is there a risk that the issue could be kicked into the long grass of the next parliamentary session? I do not think that that would benefit anyone.

The First Minister: The first thing to say is that I very much welcome Mr Greene's comments about the language that must be used in Parliament. As I indicated in my original answer, the law officers operate with integrity and entirely independently of any other person. That is what I believe, and, as I put on the record to Parliament last week, the Lord Advocate—and, for completeness, the Solicitor General—carry my complete confidence in being able to exercise those functions on the basis that has been set out.

I noticed yesterday that not all Conservative members support the kind of language that their leader used in Parliament last week. That is both encouraging and depressing: it is encouraging that members of the Conservative Party do not agree with their leader and the smears that he was putting out last week, and it is depressing that the leader of the Conservative Party repeated the contemptible rubbish that he said in Parliament last week.

On the substantive point that Mr Greene put to me, the issue is about the publication of the research paper. I have committed that that will be undertaken. Mr Greene knows that parliamentary time is limited between now and the election. The next session of Parliament will have to consider that issue, but it will be able to do so with the benefit of the dispassionate research evidence that Malcolm McMillan has produced, which will be available to inform debate.

There has to be thorough and substantial debate on the issue, because it raises significant constitutional questions. The issue must be

carefully considered by Parliament before it acts. Further, as I highlighted in response to Mr Kerr's question, interaction with the United Kingdom Parliament would obviously be required, because this Parliament does not have the power to amend the Scotland Act in the fashion that Mr Greene's proposal would require it to do.

University of Aberdeen (Proposed Strike Action)

6. Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to the outcome of the University of Aberdeen UCU ballot, which resulted in 83 per cent of those voting in support of strike action and 90 per cent in favour of action short of a strike. (S6F-04709)

The First Minister (John Swinney): Although ministers cannot intervene directly, I encourage the University and College Union and the University of Aberdeen to work constructively to seek a resolution to the dispute. I am keen that all parties work together to minimise the risk of disruption for students.

My clear expectation is that staff and trade unions are consulted meaningfully on the potential impact of any measures that would have an effect on the university's workforce, in line with the fair work principles that are taken forward by the Government.

Mercedes Villalba: Just two years after strike action was averted, thanks to trade union negotiation, UCU members at the University of Aberdeen have voted overwhelmingly in support of industrial action. They voted in defence of their jobs, their workplace and their students' learning conditions, because, over the past two years, more than 440 jobs at the university have been lost.

Elsewhere, the University of Dundee has seen more than 500 job losses since July 2024. Strike ballots have been held at Heriot-Watt University, the University of Strathclyde and the University of Stirling, and a new ballot opened today in Edinburgh. UCU members are having to fight the same battle, again and again, up and down the country.

I am pleased to hear the First Minister urging university principals across the country to meet campus unions. They must listen to their workforce, but what is his Government doing to address the financial crisis in our higher education sector?

The First Minister: I reiterate the points that I made earlier to Mercedes Villalba. I want to make sure that there is good dialogue between the university leadership and the trade unions to resolve these issues.

On the financing of universities, the Government has increased the resources that are available to the university sector through the Scottish budget. We have also increased the budget that is available for colleges.

I welcome the launch of the framework for sustainability and success of Scottish universities, which will explore options for securing a successful and sustainable future for the world-leading university sector that we benefit from in Scotland. The Government is fully engaged in that activity.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I share the First Minister's keenness for all parties to get round the table to resolve the dispute, so that the impact on students in Aberdeen is minimised.

Universities received a record sum of funding from the Scottish Government in the budget yesterday—a budget that, of course, Labour did not vote for—and students in Scotland receive a much more comprehensive package of support, including paying no tuition fees, than students in England do.

Can the First Minister confirm that the University of Aberdeen should be supporting students? Can he further set out how students in Scotland are benefiting under the Scottish National Party?

The Presiding Officer: Please answer on the points that relate to the original question, First Minister.

The First Minister: As I indicated in my answers to Mercedes Villalba, I encourage dialogue to resolve this dispute. The budget demonstrates that the Scottish Government remains firmly committed to the principle that access to higher education should be based on the ability to learn and not the ability to pay.

The Government's commitment to free tuition ensures that Scottish students studying in Scotland do not accrue the additional tuition fee debt of potentially more than £28,000 over three years that is owed by their peers in other parts of the United Kingdom. Any of us observing the debate in the rest of the United Kingdom can see the punishing burden of tuition fee debt that has been carried by individuals in our society. I am glad that the leadership and commitment of the SNP Scottish Government have ensured that students in Scotland are not carrying that burden.

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

Sexual Crime Statistics

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): Crime statistics that were released on Tuesday show that sexual crime is up by 10 per cent, rape and

attempted rape are up by 12 per cent and domestic abuse is up by a shocking 25 per cent. Those figures are a national humiliation and the result of 19 years of the SNP Government and its soft-touch approach to justice. Last month, the First Minister refused to support my Prevention of Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill. If he thinks that my bill was unnecessary, what plans does he have to tackle those despicable statistics?

The First Minister (John Swinney): It is important that I put some context around the points that Pam Gosal has made. Scotland is a safer place since this Government came to office. Recorded crime is down by 38 per cent since the Government came to office in 2006-07, and it has halved since its peak in 1991. This country is a safer country but, within that data, there is a rise in a number of elements of sexual crimes and domestic violence. Some of that is to do with the approach that has been taken, as I set out to Parliament last week, by the Lord Advocate in making sure that significant progress is made on bringing crimes of violence against women and girls to the courts with confidence and effective prosecutorial strength, to make sure that more and more of those cases are prosecuted. I pay tribute to the Lord Advocate for what she has done in that respect.

With regard to what Ms Gosal said about a soft touch, there are more people serving longer sentences in Scotland because of the decisions of the Lord Advocate to prosecute and secure convictions on those cases.

Lastly, I am absolutely committed—and I give leadership on this across Government—to make sure that violence against women and girls is tackled in our country, and that will always be at the heart of my Government's steps.

Cervical Cancer Screening (Uptake)

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Colleagues may have read the article in *The Herald* this week that gave figures from Public Health Scotland showing that fewer women are attending cervical cancer checks in Scotland. According to Cancer Research UK, mortality rates for cervical and uterine cancer in the UK are 47 per cent higher in the most deprived quintile, compared with the least deprived. Percentages and phrases such as "deprived quintile" seem a bit dehumanising.

What will the Scottish Government do to urgently ensure that all women's health services are accessible to women with the most economic and social challenges? Will the First Minister join me in amplifying the important message that, even when you have had the vaccination for human papillomavirus—HPV—you must attend screenings when you are invited to them?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Let me begin by saying that Ruth Maguire has, not for the first time, given very powerful advice to Parliament and to members of the public and women in our society about the steps that we have to take. I unequivocally reiterate the message that Ruth Maguire has set out to Parliament and I urge every woman, whether vaccinated or not, to attend their cervical cancer screening.

The uptake of screening is not where we want it to be—let me be open about that with members. There are complex reasons for that, but we must take steps to deliver services differently to make sure that we improve those rates of performance. One of the measures, which will begin this March, is the offering of the first self-sampling tests, which will be focused on some of the most deprived areas of Scotland.

We have also recently provided funding to three health boards for patient navigators to directly encourage underscreened individuals to attend screening. We continue to commit £1 million annually to tackle cancer screening inequalities.

We will be resolute in taking forward those measures. I am grateful to Ruth Maguire for so powerfully putting this issue on the parliamentary agenda, and I give her the assurance of my commitment and the commitment of the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care and the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health to ensuring that the progress that Ruth Maguire demands is delivered in the period to come.

Poverty-related Attainment Gap

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): More than a decade ago, a former Scottish National Party First Minister promised to close the poverty-related attainment gap, and, five years ago, the current First Minister promised a parliamentary session that was focused on Covid recovery in our schools. This week's attainment and initial leaver destination statistics show that he and his Government have failed in that task. The gap between those from the most and least deprived backgrounds who go on to positive destinations widened compared with the previous year. The gap in relation to those leaving school with five or more passes at Scottish credit and qualifications framework level 4 and level 6 also increased compared with both last year and 2018-19. At all levels, the gap in relation to those leaving with one national, higher or advanced higher qualification has widened since 2018-19.

Does the First Minister agree that that widening gap does not represent a strong recovery, as his cabinet secretary appeared to claim? Does he also accept that, after 19 years in charge, his party is nowhere near close to closing the poverty-related attainment gap?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I recognise that the statistics this week demonstrate that there is further work to be done. However, what Mr O'Kane puts on the record—not for the first time—is not a complete demonstration of the picture. Attainment levels are at record highs in literacy and numeracy in Scotland's schools. The poverty-related attainment gap across primary and secondary literacy and numeracy is at a record low in our country. That is a consequence of the Scottish Government's commitment to invest in education. In addition to all that, there were reduced gaps in each of last summer's national 5, higher and advanced higher results, as a consequence of the Government's interventions.

I simply say to Mr O'Kane that, as part of its agenda in the aftermath of Covid, which has been a hugely disruptive period of our lives in Scotland, the Government is focused on making sure that we support families. We do that by reducing child poverty, which we, in Scotland, are doing, unlike the rest of the United Kingdom. We are also putting the resources in the budget to support the closure of the attainment gap.

Yesterday, Mr O'Kane could not bring himself to vote for the Government's budget and to invest in all those public services. We will not be deflected by the empty rhetoric of Mr O'Kane and his Labour colleagues.

Energy Bills

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): Despite the fanfare from the United Kingdom Government, the latest energy price cap from the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets will see average energy bills from April that are almost £400 higher than what the Labour Party promised voters. On the Labour Party's watch, energy bills in energy-rich Scotland have soared. That is an inescapable disgrace. Does the First Minister agree that it is Scotland's energy, and that only through a fresh start with independence can we build a wealthier, fairer Scotland where our natural resources mean lower bills for our people?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I do not know whether I heard them properly, but I think that, in response to Mr McLennan's question, members of the Labour Party said from a sedentary position that what Mr McLennan was saying was not the case. Let me prove them wrong. The Labour Government pledged to cut bills by £300, but even with the price cap from April, bills will be £73 higher than at the time of the election. As I frequently have to do in the Parliament, I will provide members with an elementary lesson in arithmetic: £300 and £73 makes £373, which is rounded up to £400. The Labour Party has failed to deliver on its commitment to reduce energy bills for the people

of Scotland, and it will not be forgiven for any of that.

Paramedic Training

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries)

(Con): Ambulance technicians in Dumfries and Galloway have been left without meaningful career progression since the move to a university-only paramedic route, despite warnings that removing internal pathways would harm recruitment, retention and morale. All paramedic training now requires attendance at one of a small number of universities, meaning that rural technicians travel long distances—often several hours—to reach the nearest campus. The requirement to physically attend a university leaves technicians in rural areas at a significant disadvantage, worsening the challenges that rural and remote ambulance stations already face. Will the First Minister commit to reinstating a supported internal progression route that includes blended or apprentice-style training, so that experienced technicians can progress while remaining in employment and rural services are no longer left at a disadvantage? When will you fix that?

The Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

The First Minister (John Swinney): Mr Carson makes a reasonable point. No individual, regardless of their geography in the country, should be prevented from developing career progression. If that is happening as a consequence of the changes, I will look into it carefully with the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care.

Let us take the model of the University of the Highlands and Islands as an example. I saw personally how it allows members of the public to remain in the communities in which they and their families live while accessing initial teacher education in the UHI learning environment. Such models can work, and we have to look at them for paramedics.

I will take that point away so that the health secretary and I can consider it, and the health secretary will write to Mr Carson about what steps we can take.

Social Care Funding

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): The Accounts Commission has reported a £450 million gap in funding for social care in 2014. Fast forward a year, and the gap is a staggering £562 million. That is simply not sustainable, and it has a devastating effect on vulnerable people and their families. Overnight support is being removed from disabled people, respite care is being slashed and care packages for older people are simply not available, leading to a spike in delayed discharge.

The First Minister said earlier that he stood with disabled people. Does he not think that that is the height of hypocrisy, when it is his Government that is slashing their care packages?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I find that a very odd point for Jackie Baillie to advance, because her party tried to remove the voices of disabled people from integrated joint boards when their inclusion was a policy commitment of the Scottish Government. The Government is putting increased resources into the health service and local authorities. As a consequence, social care should be effectively funded. Jackie Baillie could not bring herself to vote for the Government's budget yesterday, so this is just more posturing, more empty rhetoric and more of the same from the Labour Party, which lets the people of Scotland down, including people with disabilities.

GP Walk-in Centres

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): This week, the First Minister set out plans for a further 15 general practitioner walk-in centres across Scotland, in both rural and urban areas, including in my region, in Stranraer. Meanwhile, waiting times have fallen for eight months in a row, as we start to see our national health service turn a corner. For some unknown reason, the Labour Party opposes GP walk-in centres and wants to rip up the GP contract, with Anas Sarwar's half-baked plans being referred to as

"flailing election hopes on life support".

Does the First Minister agree that the Labour Party's opposition to GP walk-in centres shows that it has no ambition for our NHS and is completely out of ideas?

The Presiding Officer: I ask members to remember that questions should be on matters of devolved responsibility. [*Interruption.*] Mr Stephen Kerr, I had not asked you to contribute to this discussion, so please resist the temptation to do so.

The First Minister (John Swinney): Speaking in relation to my responsibilities, I am very pleased that we have announced plans for 16 walk-in GP centres, and there are more to come. When I was in Shetland on Tuesday, there was a very warm welcome for the proposals that I have put in place. The announcement in Wester Hailes a few weeks ago was also warmly welcomed. The only people who seem to be disappointed about the Scottish Government tackling the 8 am rush are members of the Labour Party, because the Government is offering solutions where the Labour Party offers absolutely nothing.

Alongside that, I am very pleased that, as I promised the people of Scotland, long waits continue to fall, and they have done so for eight

months in a row. The public can be assured that the NHS is safe in the Scottish National Party's hands and that the SNP is delivering for the national health service in Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time. Our next item of business is a members' business debate in the name of Roz McCall. There will be a short suspension to allow people to leave the chamber and the public gallery.

12:54

Meeting suspended.

12:56

On resuming—

Childcare Support for Parents

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-20786, in the name of Roz McCall, on improved childcare support for parents. The debate will be concluded without any questions being put. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak button. I remind members that we will resume business at 2 pm and that we must allow sufficient time for staff to come and clear the chamber. Therefore, I expect members to stick to the speaking time that they have signed up to.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament believes that providing childcare support to parents not only supports the family unit but also helps to grow Scotland's economy by encouraging more parents back into the workforce; understands that families in Mid Scotland and Fife, and across the country, still struggle to find affordable, flexible and accessible childcare; praises the work of organisations such as Pregnant Then Screwed, which have campaigned to improve childcare provision across the UK; notes that its 2024 State of the Nation Survey concluded that around four in five parents (83.7%) found that childcare costs are the same as or more than their income, and that 71% of mothers and 50% of fathers say that it does not make financial sense for them to work; understands that its 2026 survey is due to conclude, with findings to be published in due course; further understands that the Scottish Government's Early Learning and Childcare expansion programme evaluation strategy has assessed the impact of the expansion of provision covering the period 2018–25, and that it expects to publish its findings in early 2026, and notes the view that the Parliament should have the opportunity to scrutinise this important review before the end of the current parliamentary session.

12:56

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank members from across the chamber for supporting my motion to allow this debate to take place. It is on a really important issue, and I am delighted that we have a chance to debate it in the final few weeks of the parliamentary session.

The motion speaks to two connected truths with which we can all agree: childcare strengthens families, which strengthens Scotland's economy. Providing childcare is not simply a social policy; it is an economic lever. When parents are able to access affordable, flexible and accessible childcare, they are better able to return to work, increase their hours or pursue training and career progression, which supports household income, reduces financial pressures and contributes to national productivity.

Every parent who is able to re-enter employment because childcare is available represents greater economic participation and greater financial stability for their family, but families in Mid Scotland and Fife and across the country continue to tell us that affordable and flexible childcare can be difficult to find. Availability does not always align with working patterns, provision does not always match demand and costs remain a significant barrier.

That is why the work of organisations such as Pregnant Then Screwed deserves our recognition. Through campaigning and evidence gathering, Pregnant Then Screwed has ensured that the lived experience of parents is heard in policy debates across the UK. Its 2026 state-of-the-nation survey produced sobering findings. Two thirds of mothers said that childcare costs are the same as or more than their income, and more than half of mothers stated that, after paying for childcare, it does not make financial sense for them to work. Those are shocking statistics.

Too many families need both parents working to ensure that they have a roof over their head, heat in their homes and food on their table. Working simply to afford the childcare that allows them to return to work does not provide that security. When the majority of mothers say that employment does not pay once childcare is factored in, we must ask ourselves whether the system is truly delivering for families. With 50 per cent of fathers expressing the same concern, we see that it is a widespread societal issue and not a gender-based one.

It is in that context that I will be clear about where we stand. The Scottish Conservatives are committed to building a country that supports working families from the very start. We believe that no parent should be forced to choose between financial stability and staying at home simply because affordable childcare is out of reach. When parents tell us that it does not make financial sense for them to work, that is a signal that the system is not functioning as it should. Work should provide security, independence and opportunity, not place families under greater strain.

That is why we have proposed the introduction of means-tested childcare from the age of nine months. The purpose is straightforward: to support parents, to ensure that every child has the best possible start in life and to unlock workforce potential in order to reduce poverty. Many young children respond and develop well when nurtured at home by their parents, but whether to do that is a choice that families should be able to make if they can afford to do so. Too many families are forced into a different position and put under financial pressure, because it is not possible for them to balance the cost of childcare with returning to work. By targeting support to those who need it

most, we can ease the financial pressures on families, support parents who wish to return to employment and strengthen Scotland's economy at the same time.

Another issue lies in the inflexibility of the system. It is pointless to offer state-paid childcare if parents cannot access it at the hours that work for them. Being told by the local authority that the hours offered are, to all intents and purposes, a take-it-or-leave-it situation makes it completely unmanageable. That is why we propose to change the payment delivery system to ensure that money actually follows the child. Our system would ensure that parents can directly select the childcare offering in their area that best suits their needs, timings and availability. That might be a private nursery or a childminder but, in many cases, it could still be the local authority nursery. That would allow real choice for parents.

The motion notes that Pregnant Then Screwed's 2026 survey has just concluded, with its findings to be published. Those findings are important. They will provide updated evidence on whether families think that progress has been made or whether pressures persist. At the same time, the Scottish Government's early learning and childcare expansion programme evaluation strategy has been assessing the impact of expanded provision, covering the period from 2018 to 2025. We are still waiting for the findings from that—I believe that they are coming out in early 2026, but we are rapidly running out of time.

That evaluation represents a significant opportunity. The expansion of early learning and childcare has been one of the most substantial public policy commitments in recent years, and it is right that we examine the outcome carefully. Has it reduced the cost burden on families? Has it improved flexibility? Has it supported workforce participation as intended? Has it delivered consistency across the regions and communities? I would say that it has not.

The Parliament should have the opportunity to scrutinise that important review before the end of the current parliamentary session. That is not about scoring points; it is about accountability and improvement. If childcare support is to fulfil its dual role to support the family unit and strengthen Scotland's economy, we must ensure that policy is grounded in evidence and open to examination.

Families in Mid Scotland and Fife, and across Scotland, deserve a childcare system that works for modern working lives. They deserve transparency about the impact of public investment and a Parliament that is willing to engage seriously with the data. The motion asks simply that we recognise both the economic and social importance of childcare, acknowledge the

concerns raised by parents and commit to doing something about it.

15:03

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I thank Roz McCall for securing this debate. It is important to see how the ELC system is working and how it can be improved.

It is worth remarking in passing that, in Scotland, ELC is free to all parents and carers of three to four-year-olds, whereas in England it is means tested. The basic test is whether parents and carers take up the extra hours of funded ELC—I know that there are some practical difficulties; I do not have time to get into them, but I agree that there are some, across various councils—and what improvement that contributes to the wellbeing and development of the children, to the family and to the economy. The policy also saves parents and carers about £6,000 per child annually.

The 2022 ELC parents survey found that 74 per cent of parents of three to five-year-olds mentioned that it had enabled them to work or look for work, and 71 per cent said that they were able “to think about what they may do in the future”.

Overall, take-up of funded ELC among three and four-year-olds was 97 per cent in 2023. I understand from the Scottish Parliament information centre that, to date, it is about 100,000 per cent—I do not mean 100,000 per cent; I mean 100 per cent. What was I thinking?

However, in 2025, the estimated uptake for two-year-olds was 55 per cent, which represented a small decrease on previous years. The 2022 ELC parents survey found that two-year-olds were less likely to access the full 1,140 hours than older children. Access for two-year-olds is means tested—parents require to receive certain benefits, such as income support or universal credit. There appears to be an issue with parents’ awareness of the availability of that provision, which I hope that the minister will address when she sums up the debate. Currently, the Scottish Government provides about £1 billion per year in funding for ELC.

The Covid-19 pandemic had a profound impact on the lives of families in Scotland, and there is growing evidence from a range of research studies that suggests—unsurprisingly—that many young children and their families have been negatively affected. The benefits that are provided by ELC are extra; they do not come on their own. We cannot assess the benefits of ELC on their own. There are other interventions, such as the Scottish child payment, which helps low-income families

with children under 16. Each child under 16 gets £27.15 per week, which will rise to £28.20 from 1 April. There is no limit on the number of children in a family who can get that payment. The Scottish child payment also helps families and carers. In fact, it supports 5,785 children in the Borders and 6,320 children in Midlothian.

Roz McCall: I recognise what the member is saying, but that is not helping parents right now. How can we support parents to access that childcare?

Christine Grahame: The point that I am making is that three and four-year-olds do not benefit only from free nursery education. There are lots of other supports for children, especially for those of families that face economic pressures. In this short debate, I do not have time to address the practicalities that I have encountered, such as Edinburgh nurseries charging people from Midlothian. The member was quite right to raise that issue, and the First Minister addressed that.

We have other new funding. There is the national breakfast club provision and the expansion of after-school clubs. There is also the best start funding. In the Borders, 6,130 families have received best start grants and food payments. That is worth more than £3.4 million.

I say to Roz McCall that it is right that we assess the benefits of ELC, but it is difficult to disaggregate the benefits of ELC from those of the other support that is available to families. I would like to know how we might do that. There are pressures on how ELC is delivered—that is a separate issue, which relates to competing pressures in councils. It is difficult to disaggregate the wellbeing benefits of ELC from the benefits of other support. In this short debate, I have been able only to take a glance at the issue.

13:07

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): I declare an interest: I sit on the advisory board of Pregnant Then Screwed.

I come to this debate not as a member of the Parliament but as a parent. Last year, my daughter began her 1,140 hours of funded childcare. Like many parents, I was grateful for that support. If it works, it makes a difference. It can ease the burden, and it may allow families to breathe a little bit easier when it comes to their finances.

However, I have also experienced the first-hand reality behind the policy headline, which comes down to the fact that, every month, parents face the dreaded calculation about whether they can afford to have children and be in employment at the same time. I have done my own sums for my daughter. If she happened to be at nursery full

time, the costs would be just short of £1,000 per month. That is nearly £12,000 a year for just one child. That is not a small household bill; it is the equivalent of a second mortgage payment every month.

Even once the 1,140 hours are available, the challenge for parents does not disappear, because, on its own, the availability of funded hours does not guarantee flexibility or choice, as my colleague Roz McCall rightly highlighted. Like many parents, my husband and I have sat round the kitchen table researching nurseries and childminders and asking the same questions. Does it open early enough? Does it cover school holidays? What happens if our work meetings run late? What happens if we do not finish work until after 6 o'clock at night? Can we juggle more than one care setting? Who will fill in for the drop-offs and the pick-ups?

That is the practical reality of modern life for working parents. Across Scotland, parents are juggling shift patterns, commuting times and the part-time roles that have been stitched together just to make ends meet. They are also making complex spreadsheets to work out whether, financially, they can stay in employment. That is why we are seeing many parents reducing their hours—it is not because they want to; it is because childcare structures leave them with no alternative.

The work of *Pregnant Then Screwed* has consistently shown that childcare costs are pushing parents, particularly women, out of the labour market. Some are delaying having children, and others are deciding against growing their family entirely because the numbers simply do not stack up. There is too much month left at the end of the money.

Christine Grahame: I am trying to be helpful. Does the member think that remote working, which is not available to everybody, has helped to build in some flexibility for parents?

Meghan Gallacher: I remember that, during the gender recognition reform debate, I broke my maternity leave because it was important to me to vote on the issue. I had Charlotte in one arm and I was trying to vote with the other hand. It can work, but not in all circumstances, although I take Christine Grahame's point.

Pregnant Then Screwed has announced its latest state-of-the-nation report, which is important to what comes next in terms of our childcare settings. It says that 66.1 per cent of childcare costs are the same or more than the parents' income, and 34.5 per cent of those who responded found themselves agreeing with the statement "I often find myself choosing between paying for childcare and household essentials". That shows that something is broken in the system.

We need to reflect on the policies that we have spoken about in this chamber. In 2023, the Scottish National Party made a commitment to expand funded childcare from nine months onwards. That never materialised and we do not know what happened to the pilot programmes. That lack of ambition has prevented us from pushing forward.

We need to be honest about delivery. My experience shows that choice and flexibility matter for parents. That is why we need to look at the private, voluntary and independent sector and at what is not working right now.

Presiding Officer, I know that I need to finish, but this is not a niche policy area for me. Parents sit at the kitchen table, working out affordability, every single week. They tour nurseries, asking about hours and flexibility. They worry about job stability and providing for their children. We owe it to them to do better than broken promises, better than half-hearted ambition and better than a system in which going to work leaves families barely breaking even.

Childcare will be an election priority for parents in May—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Gallacher, you are over your time. I move on to Davy Russell. I indicated to members that we are under time constraints today. Please speak to your allotted time.

13:12

Davy Russell (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab): I thank Roz McCall for bringing the debate to the chamber.

Childcare is a matter dear to my heart. I am a grandpa, and my grandson is lucky that, as well as mum and dad, he has grannies and grandpas—and great-grannies and great-grandpas—to fill the gap from time to time. It is also a matter that comes up regularly in our caseloads.

The question at the heart of the motion is whether funded childcare can be a net contributor to the Scottish economy. Nobody questions whether free public education for all is a valuable or necessary step for our economy, and if that level of provision was adopted in early years childcare policy, perhaps we would not question that either. The career benefit to parents is hard to calculate, but, depending on the number of children that someone chooses to have, the lack of childcare provision in Scotland could cost them four, five or six years of their salary over their career, not to mention the detrimental effect on promotions and pension contributions.

We must be cognisant that the burden falls primarily on women now and in later life. There are long-term impacts of having a parent leave work. It is harder to save on one income, and as has been said people have to make conscious decisions when they are paying for kids. There is a strong correlation between someone, as a child, having a parent who was not in work and that person growing up and not being at work.

Expanding funded childcare—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Russell, I am sorry to interrupt you, but could you please move your microphone up? Thank you.

Davy Russell: I am sorry. Where were we?

There is a long-term impact when a parent has to leave work. It is harder to save on one income and non-working parents pay rent or mortgage interest for far longer than they would have done if they were working.

Childcare makes a big difference to ending generational poverty. I have a few cases from new mums in my inbox at present. Some can choose to go back to work, but if someone does not earn enough, they do not have a choice, because they just cannot afford childcare. They feel that the Government is playing a game of chicken with them. Sometimes they blink and pay the childcare costs themselves; sometimes they do not blink and leave their jobs for three, four or five years, which means that the Government loses the income tax that they would otherwise have paid during that time. According to *Pregnant Then Screwed*, the Scottish economy loses out 71 per cent of the time for mums and 51 per cent of the time for dads.

There is much more to say on the matter, including about the cognitive development of toddlers, who benefit from professional enrichment and from mixing with others. It is obvious that the most common response from parents is not to swallow the cost of childcare themselves or to decide not to work, but to choose not to have children. Scotland's fertility rate should be 2.1, but it is 1.2 at the moment, which does not bode well for the future. We are stacking up problems and will be looking to fewer people to sustain an ever more costly welfare system in the future.

Many Governments are choosing to act on the issue, but Scotland is not one of them, which is an unfortunate and sad state of affairs.

13:16

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): I thank Roz McCall for her motion and for this debate.

We have heard from parents up and down the country not only about how expensive childcare is

but about how difficult it is to find a place and how inflexible the hours are. At the heart of the issue must be a recognition that the world has changed since those of us here were little. The days of being able to survive, let alone thrive, on one income are gone and parents must go to work to provide. We also often live further from family members and the so-called village feels distant from many young families. The constant pull between providing for wee ones and being there and present for them is exhausting.

We have heard much from families about how difficult it can be to find a place. We recently experienced with our son Callan how much of a rush there is to find any childcare, let alone the right childcare. We are extremely lucky to have a wonderful childminder lined up to look after him, but trying to find a place was pretty wild. As first-time parents living outside a major city, we thought, perhaps naively, that getting a place would be relatively easy, but several nurseries had no spaces and childminders had long waiting lists.

We must ensure that the mix of childcare across the sector meets the demands of parents and children across Scotland and that places are of high quality and deliver learning opportunities that allow children to flourish. There must be high-quality jobs that value the expertise of those who work in the sector, and we must provide further development opportunities as we look to expand funded hours.

Childcare is an investment in the next generation, but it also supports women back into the workplace. I have friends who have two small children and have spaced them in age so that they will have some funded hours for their older child by the time their second maternity leave ends. Despite that, they will still pay the best part of £2,000 in childcare. No one should be paying so much and funded hours should not be serving as a family planning mechanism.

Scottish Greens want to establish a simple, universal and free childcare guarantee so that all children in Scotland have access to funded childcare hours from the age of six months and until they start school. We want to extend the 1,140 hours of funded childcare to all two-year-olds in Scotland as soon as possible, with provision starting from the Monday after their second birthday. That should be a priority during the first half of the next session of Parliament. Following that, we want to expand funded childcare for all children aged six months to two years, with the aim of providing a universal 570 hours of funded childcare by the end of the next session of Parliament. That will be accompanied by capital funding to expand the number of places available to meet that increased demand, and there will be

significant investment in the workforce to ensure that we have well-trained staff.

We will also ensure that the increase in funded hours enables greater flexibility in childcare provision so that parents can access the childcare that they are entitled to. That includes delivering more wraparound care to suit existing work and school patterns, increasing flexibility in council-run nurseries—in particular, to accommodate shift workers—and reviewing and expanding childcare models. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member will shortly conclude her speech.

Gillian Mackay: Other things that we need to resolve include the issue that I raised at First Minister's question time on cross-boundary placements. It is not an easy picture, but I hope that, given the consensus across the chamber, we can make progress on the issue in the next session. I again thank Roz McCall for securing the debate.

13:21

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I, too, congratulate Roz McCall on securing the debate. It is interesting to hear, from across the chamber, about situations that I found myself in years ago. I am lucky in having three children, the youngest of whom is now 10, so the immediate, early years of childcare have gone; I am now just a waiter to my youngest, who, as he watches TV in the morning, looks at me and asks what sort of continental breakfast I will provide. *[Laughter.]* That is what he wants. However, I remember those early days.

I do not think that my wife and I really thought about it. We decided to have children, looked out a pram, a cot and everything else, then suddenly thought, "Hang on a minute, what do we do with this child when we go to work?" That child needed us. They do not need me so much any more, but they were following me to the toilet every day—to wherever I went. Suddenly, we needed to know, "Where am I going with this child?" I had not thought about it.

It might have been naivety on the part of my wife and me, but not until that point did we realise—suddenly—the importance of childcare. That is why I agree with a lot of the points that were made by Gillian Mackay, Meghan Gallacher and Davy Russell. Childcare is so important. We no longer live in an age in which one parent can stay at home all the time. By the way, it is important that, if a family wants to do that, the Government should try to facilitate it, because looking after children is incredibly important. However, childcare is incredibly important, too.

I was privileged to chair the children and young people's services committee in Moray Council when the early learning and childcare extension came in. I give credit to the Government for that, because it was a really good thing to do. We in Moray Council tried our best to make sure that local authority providers as well as private providers had the capacity to deliver across the area.

Unfortunately, however, it did not work. Although great stuff is now going on in Moray, there are pockets across most of our communities—particularly in the most remote rural patches—where provision is not happening. That causes complexities and leads to significant financial difficulties, on which Meghan Gallacher touched at length.

I remember that one of my first conversations with Roz McCall was on this subject, and we have had several conversations since then. I am not an expert. I have been to events that were organised by Pregnant Then Screwed, which is doing fantastic work. If I am lucky enough to come back after the election, I will continue to support everything that it does, everything that Roz McCall does and everything that anybody else does on this.

All that I wanted to say today, and the reason that I wanted to speak, is that I have lived and breathed the subject myself. We still live and breathe it, even though my children are older. My wife and I are still battling with part-time and full-time hours to work out who is at home when the children get home from school, for example.

The subject should be absolutely at the forefront of the mind of the next Government, whoever its members are.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise, Natalie Don-Innes, to respond to the debate for up to seven minutes.

13:23

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes): Seven minutes is not enough time in which to deal with all the points that have been raised, but I am more than happy to follow up with members after the debate. I thank members from across parties for taking part in it and Roz McCall for bringing it to the chamber.

I, too, recognise the hard work and dedication of our partners in delivering high-quality childcare across Scotland. The Government remains absolutely committed to developing an accessible and affordable childcare system that meets

families' needs and supports our mission to eradicate child poverty.

We have already come a long way. Our commitment to supporting children and families is evident in our continued investment of £1 billion per year to deliver 1,140 funded hours of high-quality ELC for all three and four-year-olds, eligible two-year-olds and five-year-olds who have deferred. We remain the only part of the UK to provide that offer regardless of the working status of parents.

That offer is saving parents £6,000 a year, so for Meghan Gallacher to say that it is a half-hearted ambition does not do justice to the system that we have at the moment. However, I do not overlook the fact that the system does not work for everyone, and I want to get to a place where it does.

Meghan Gallacher: To clarify, my point was not about the funding that the Government has put in. In 2023, the Government promised to expand childcare from the age of nine months, but nothing has materialised. That is the half-hearted ambition.

Natalie Don-Innes: I will come on to that point, but it is not the case that nothing has materialised; a lot has materialised.

I know that families are still facing challenges. Last year, I met Pregnant Then Screwed to discuss the impacts that a lack of childcare can have on parents, who want the flexibility that increased childcare can offer. The Government is sensitive to those challenges.

Alongside our funded 1,140 offer, we are exploring ways to expand the provision of childcare through our early adopter communities programme. We are also delivering wraparound school-age childcare services to families who are most at risk of living in poverty.

We recognise that one of the most effective ways of tackling poverty is to enable parents and carers to enter sustainable work. Through our no one left behind approach, parents receive parental employability support from a dedicated key worker, which includes one-to-one tailored support to help to reduce barriers to employment. Since April 2020, more than 99,000 people have started to receive that support, of whom more than 30,000 were parents.

In addition, our investments to deliver funded wraparound school-age childcare in some of Scotland's most deprived communities demonstrate the ability of expanded access to childcare to support the Government's priorities of tackling child poverty and achieving economic growth.

More than 7,000 children and families who are most at risk of living in poverty are benefiting from funded or subsidised school-age childcare activities and related services through our investment in the early adopter communities programme, the extra time programme and the access to childcare fund. We are seeing positive outcomes from those programmes.

Improved outcomes for children are also being reported from people being able to access a range of activities that support physical and mental health. In 2026-27, we will continue to invest more than £5.5 million in our extra time programme. We will also invest an extra £2.5 million to test the delivery of a wider after-school activities offer for primary school children.

Roz McCall: I whole-heartedly accept all the points that the minister is making about where the Government has spent money. However, will she accept that, if that spending was working, two thirds of parents would not be questioning why they are working just to earn enough to put their children through childcare?

Natalie Don-Innes: I understand that things are not working for everybody, but the point of the investment is to improve things. As I have laid out, increased investment year on year is leading to improvements for parents, although I appreciate that we have further to go.

Several issues came up in the debate, and I will try to address them in turn. I whole-heartedly understand the point that Gillian Mackay raised about early start dates. I will set out a bit of information and then give members an indication of where I think that we should go next.

Arrangements for when children become eligible for funded ELC are set out in the Provision of Early Learning and Childcare (Specified Children) (Scotland) Order 2014. Those arrangements are intended to enable small groups of children to start at phased points, which makes the system more manageable, and many local authorities are going above and beyond that. However, it is extremely disappointing that decisions are being made to reduce local flexibility, and the Government will need to consider that in the next parliamentary session.

That sits alongside some of the issues that were raised earlier about cross-boundary provision. Statutory guidance sets out that, where possible, children who receive their funded hours in a setting that is outside the local authority in which they reside should be treated on the same basis as those who access provision in their own local authority area. However, there is not a specific statutory duty to make ELC available to children who reside in different authority areas.

I want all families across Scotland to benefit from the ambition that we have jointly set out with our local government partners in guidance on the funding follows the child approach. As I said, it is extremely concerning to hear of local decisions that are reported to reduce flexibility, choice and provider sustainability, and that will need to be considered in the next parliamentary session.

I hear what members are saying about affordability and, again, I hope that what I have set out today shows that the Government is trying to improve that. One issue around affordability that concerns me greatly is that, as we know, many families find it incredibly difficult to access the childcare benefit support that they need and to which they are currently entitled. We know, for example, that the uptake of universal childcare benefit in Scotland is very low, which means that many families who could have up to 85 per cent of their childcare costs covered are not currently accessing that support. Statistics show that those benefits are being taken up in only around 11 per cent of universal credit households. The same goes for tax-free childcare; it looks as if that is taken up by around 21 per cent of the total population requiring childcare. There is money available that is not being utilised, and I encourage members on all sides of the chamber to encourage local parents to take up those benefits.

I am sorry, Deputy Presiding Officer—I am aware that I am over time, so I will bring my remarks to a close.

As I set out at the beginning of my speech, I am happy to discuss further with members individually the points that they have raised. The Government is clear that we will go further in supporting families and children. I mentioned the fact that we are delivering more funded after-school and holiday activities, which, together with our free new national breakfast club offer, takes us closer to providing families with the wraparound school-age childcare that they need. We are currently focusing our efforts on the families who need it the most, recognising the importance of accessible, flexible, free childcare.

Once again, I thank all members for their contributions and for their commitment to improving childcare for all families across Scotland.

13:31

Meeting suspended.

14:00

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Climate Action and Energy, and Transport

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon. The next item of business is portfolio question time, and the portfolios this afternoon are climate action and energy, and transport.

Wave Energy Scotland (Funding)

1. Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Ind): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of any impact that withdrawing funding for Wave Energy Scotland from March 2026 will have on Scotland's ability to leverage investment, including through horizon Europe, and on confidence in the marine energy sector. (S6O-05571)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): We are working closely with Wave Energy Scotland, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and other partners to sustain operations in 2026-27 while alternative sources of future funding are identified. That will give WES the opportunity to explore longer-term funding solutions while enabling on-going project work to continue.

The Scottish Government has invested more than £70 million in Wave Energy Scotland since 2014, which demonstrates a clear commitment to the marine energy sector. However, as the sector moves to its next phase, the main levers to enable the commercialisation of these emerging technologies lie with the United Kingdom Government, and I urge it to take immediate action to bring down the barriers to that commercialisation.

Ash Regan: I do not think that we can credibly speak of a just transition while confidence in our existing oil and gas sector is eroded by policy uncertainty and while emerging technologies, including those that are supported by Wave Energy Scotland, are denied the stable investment and the time required for them to become established and scale up.

Withdrawal of the funding might force WES to withdraw from EuropeWave, which would risk project collapse, legal exposure, financial penalties and reputational damage with European Union partners. Does the cabinet secretary accept that the decision to defund WES after 11 years threatens jobs, future investment and Scotland's

international reputation and competitive advantage in marine energy?

Gillian Martin: I very much welcome Ash Regan's new-found enthusiasm for renewable energy.

Our support for Wave Energy Scotland is designed to give it the opportunity to transition to a more sustainable financial footing, and WES is putting plans in place and working with us on how to do that. It has not been defunded. I have agreed that the Scottish Government will provide it with business-as-usual funding for the next year, subject to its providing a credible plan, including provision for its payment obligations to the EuropeWave and Mocean Energy projects. That will give WES the opportunity to explore longer-term funding solutions while enabling the projects and programmes that it is currently supporting to continue.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): What is happening to the employees of Wave Energy Scotland? They are distressed and worried that they will be made redundant. We absolutely need to save WES. Does the cabinet secretary agree that defunding it when we possess an estimated 10 per cent of Europe's wave potential is absolutely the wrong way to go?

Gillian Martin: As I said, we have put £70 million into Wave Energy Scotland since 2014. The obligations to other companies that it has put in place as a result of the grant funding that we have given it are a matter for WES.

On Sarah Boyack's main point, which was about those who work for Wave Energy Scotland, that is why I am working with it and why we are funding it for the next year. There are other funders out there, including Great British Energy, which I have written to, because it is supposed to support nascent technologies, too. I am helping and reaching out to other funders. I am also looking at other ways in which WES can be supported in kind in the future to allow it to have more diverse funding. However, as Sarah Boyack will appreciate, the Scottish Government has faced a very difficult fiscal landscape this year.

Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Ind): How many jobs will be lost throughout Scotland, in both the short term and the long term, as a result of the withdrawal of funding for Wave Energy Scotland from March 2026?

Gillian Martin: As I have said, support for WES will be in place for the next year. I believe that 10 people work for WES, and we are looking to secure their jobs by helping it to source alternative funding to keep it as a going concern.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): In a statement to the press, the Scottish Government said that it is

"working closely with Wave Energy Scotland, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and other partners to sustain operations while future alternative sources of funding are identified."

However, workers at Wave Energy Scotland have been unable to secure a meeting with the cabinet secretary to highlight their concerns about the withdrawal of funding, despite attempting to do so three times.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question.

Mercedes Villalba: Will the cabinet secretary meet workers and their union—the Public and Commercial Services Union—to hear their concerns?

Gillian Martin: My officials are having almost daily discussions on how WES can be best supported in the future. I am well aware of the concerns and of the very difficult decisions that I had to make as part of the budget process. I am looking at ways to secure money to help WES during the next year, and, with the help of my officials, I am considering how we can secure money from other funding sources in the future. WES should be a going concern and should be helped to secure funding, but, given the strained fiscal environment, sadly, we cannot commit to reliance on Scottish Government money year after year.

Local Transport Franchising (Strathclyde Partnership for Transport)

2. **Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with Strathclyde Partnership for Transport regarding its plans to deliver a franchising framework assessment to support the potential introduction of local franchising, as required under the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019. (S6O-05572)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): Strathclyde Partnership for Transport has commenced work on its franchising proposals to enhance bus provision in the wider Strathclyde area. My officials remain in close contact with SPT on that work. Most recently, they met on 26 January to discuss SPT's feedback on the draft franchising guidance, which will inform the development of SPT's franchising framework and assessment.

As part of the process, SPT is expected to undertake early engagement on its proposals with various stakeholders, such as local authorities and operators, including those in Mr Doris's constituency.

Bob Doris: I welcome SPT progressing plans for bus franchising, which I support. There will be a phased delivery of the franchising framework assessment, with a full business case anticipated for 2030, so we have time. A robust business case is crucial, but, whatever form that takes, substantial additional investment will be required. Given that there is likely to be a need for a strong partnership funding model if we are to deliver on bus franchising, will the Scottish Government continue its dialogue with SPT on potential funding models?

Jim Fairlie: Bob Doris is right that it is a partnership arrangement, so my officials will remain in close contact with SPT as it proceeds with the franchising process.

In a climate of increasing fiscal pressure, it is important that the business case for improving bus services is made robustly and in an evidenced way. That will support future considerations and decision making on funding, including the provision of funding in future years.

I am pleased that, as part of the Scottish budget, we are investing £4 million to support local transport authorities to build business cases for bus improvement through franchising. We will develop appropriate governance arrangements and details on administering the fund in consultation with stakeholders, including the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and regional transport partnerships such as SPT.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): It seems incredible that Scotland's Highlands and Islands region, which has a population of fewer than half a million people, has been awarded £10 million for a flat fare trial, which has already been tested for years in England with great success, while SPT, which covers a population of more than 2 million people, now has to compete with other regional transport authorities for a pot of just £4 million to support the development of a business case for bus franchising. That is despite the fact that SPT has clearly stated that it will need between £6 million and £6.5 million to follow the complex development processes that are set out in the 2019 act. That is not good enough.

Does the minister agree that bus franchising in greater Glasgow has been delayed for far too long, and will he promise to commit the full £6.5 million that SPT has said it needs to develop the business case? It should have been happening six years ago.

Jim Fairlie: Yet again, what we hear from Mr Sweeney is that everything is bad. No, it is not. We have given powers to local authorities, and we have put in place funding to allow people to make a business case.

It is absolutely appalling for a Labour politician to slight people in the Highlands and Islands by suggesting that a bus project in their community is not warranted.

SPT and the Scottish Government are working together to develop bus franchising proposals, and we will continue to do so.

Energy Infrastructure (Impact on the Natural Environment)

3. Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how people who are concerned with the impact on the natural environment of energy infrastructure can make their concerns known. (S6O-05573)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): The public have opportunities to raise concerns during the development of policies and plans that set national or local priorities for energy infrastructure and the natural environment. Our planning and consenting systems ensure that local communities can have their voices heard on potential developments.

In addition, I have tasked officials with taking forward plans to establish a forum to hear directly from communities on issues that matter to them across the energy landscape. The Scottish Government is committed to protecting our natural environment and achieving our net zero targets through careful, balanced decision making.

Sharon Dowey: My inbox is flooded with emails from constituents raising concerns about the lack of transparency during the consultation process for energy projects, with little to no consideration given to the needs of local residents. That situation has only been exacerbated by the decision to remove the right to object to the energy consents unit by email. I am informed by constituents that there are several issues with the new portal, which is making it harder for elderly residents, in particular, to make their voices heard.

Will the cabinet secretary commit to improving transparency in the consenting process, and will she guarantee that, in the future, energy projects will proceed only with the express consent of local communities?

Gillian Martin: I would be very interested to get direct feedback on the specific issues that Sharon Dowey raised about individuals having difficulty with the portal, because, if there is a technical or accessibility issue with it, I imagine that that can be fixed. The portal, which is quite new, is there to make it easier for people to put forward their opinions—indeed, they can submit up to 20 pages of material.

We have also made it easier for communities to participate in planning and consenting systems. In

the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025, the United Kingdom Government has afforded the Scottish ministers new powers to make regulations that mandate developers to engage with local communities and stakeholders at the pre-application stage for large-scale energy proposals. The national planning hub has provided additional grant funding to Planning Aid Scotland for training on renewable energy community engagement and place-based planning.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): Moving towards net zero, electrification and the upgrading of energy infrastructure are essential. Can the cabinet secretary say any more about the Scottish Government's work to strike that balance for communities?

Gillian Martin: As I said, we have put in place a number of things as a result of having more powers associated with us. Just this morning, I had a meeting on the refresh of the good practice principles. We are refreshing the principles, which are seen as leading in the UK and, indeed, in Europe, particularly in relation to community benefit and engagement.

However, the principles are not mandatory. I am pleased that the current UK Government is working with me on a consultation to make a lot of the principles mandatory; the previous UK Government was not interested in doing so.

A96 (Inverness to Aberdeen)

4. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government when the transport secretary, acting in her ministerial capacity, last travelled on the A96 between Inverness and Aberdeen. (S6O-05574)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): Ministerial journeys are published quarterly in the proactive release. Routes taken by drivers are the most appropriate for the journey and are not captured in detail. I have travelled the A96 on many occasions, both in a ministerial and a personal capacity, and I have heard directly from those who rely on that vital route, including at the Nairn bypass event that I attended and at numerous other north and north-east engagements that I have attended in Inverness and Aberdeen. I am fully aware of the challenges and the reality of living with a trunk road such as the A96 cutting through the heart of towns such as Nairn, Elgin and Keith.

Douglas Ross: The Nairn bypass event was almost two years ago. If that is the last time that the cabinet secretary travelled on the A96 in her ministerial capacity, it is shameful and shocking, because that road is getting worse. More people are dying, more accidents are occurring, and the

entire length between Inverness and Aberdeen needs to be fully dualled.

We heard again in the answer about the Nairn bypass and other parts. We very rarely hear about Moray, although the minister mentioned Elgin and Keith. When will the Moray sections of the A96 be fully dualled, and when will the road be completed to dual standard, as was promised by the Scottish National Party?

Fiona Hyslop: It is important that I reference the Nairn event, because one of the requests there was to advance the Nairn bypass as one of the early and stand-alone sections. That was done in direct response to requests that were made.

There will be funding in the budget for the ground works for Inshes to Smithton and the Nairn bypass next year. Funding will also be provided for construction on those two sections—Inshes to Smithton for 2028-29 and the Nairn bypass for 2029-30.

It is clear that the Government's commitment is to improve the wider A96, and that commitment is unwavering. We want to see the A96 dualled, but the next steps—it is moving in the right direction—are to continue to progress improvements eastwards, including taking forward an Elgin bypass, which will include further route development and preparatory considerations. Douglas Ross will be aware that there are different views on the best approach, although work has been done to date.

The Elgin bypass is most definitely on the agenda, but we are doing things in a progressive way and when funding is available. The member will know that, after 14 years of austerity and continued fiscal challenges, securing funding for the A96 from the budget and the comprehensive spending review has been one of my achievements, on top of securing other funding for major roads, such as the A9 dualling.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Public Transport Workers (Safety from Assault)

6. Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I refer members to my voluntary register of trade union interests.

To ask the Scottish Government what action it takes to ensure that public transport workers can go to work without the fear of assault. (S6O-05576)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): The safety of public transport workers is a priority for the Scottish Government. The rail enforcement powers working group has published its report, which aims to improve safety for passengers and staff, and I recently accepted all

its recommendations. We are already progressing several of those recommendations. Subject to parliamentary approval, secondary legislation will seek to increase the level of antisocial behaviour fixed penalty notices and widen the scope of offences covered to include the offence of threatening or abusive behaviour.

I recently met National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers general secretary Eddie Dempsey, who was very positive about our approach and expressed a wish to see similar progress across the United Kingdom.

Legislation to enable the suspension of access to the national concessionary travel scheme for those who behave inappropriately on buses is also advancing, supported by bus operators, who view that as an important step to improve driver and passenger safety.

I have also raised funding concerns directly with the British Transport Police, and my officials are exploring options to support greater visibility and safety of policing across Scotland's railway.

Richard Leonard: I thank the cabinet secretary for that comprehensive answer. Let us turn to the facts. There has been a 43 per cent annual increase in assaults on workers on Scotland's railways. Two thirds of rail workers have experienced workplace violence, 90 per cent of them multiple times.

Securing stronger legal protections for public transport workers through the creation of a stand-alone offence is essential, but rail workers are telling me that what we also need is an end to driver-only operated trains, an end to the practice of lone working, a reversal of the cuts to staffing at ticket offices and in stations and a reversal of the cuts to British Transport Police. Will the cabinet secretary restore funding, restore staffing and back the demand of RMT's action against assaults campaign for a stand-alone offence to be a priority for the next Scottish Government?

Fiona Hyslop: Richard Leonard will know from his membership of the RMT that issues around driver-only trains particularly apply to the rest of the UK and that we have a policy in place with ScotRail.

On the funding of British Transport Police, the member is best to direct his attention to the UK Labour Government and, as I have done, to the British Transport Police board, whose decisions have not been positive for Scotland. They are the ones who have closed the offices, and, along with my colleagues and the rail operators, I am trying to see what we can do to rectify what I think is the wrong decision.

Rail safety teams are expanding, as is the use of body-worn cameras. The 11 measures

recommended by the working group, including exploring the potential for primary legislation to create a railway banning order, the work on antisocial behaviour orders and the work on fixed-penalty notices will provide greater protection. However, I agree with the member that the central issue is that the public must not treat our public sector workers—including our railway workers, as he has set out—in a way that causes them harm, either through assault or through criminal behaviour. We need British Transport Police to take action, and we need proper funding.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): Figures that were released last year revealed that there were up to nine incidents of antisocial behaviour on Lothian Buses in Edinburgh a day, with smashed windows and assaults on drivers the most predominant incidents.

In addition to the suspension of concessionary bus travel, which the cabinet secretary mentioned in her original response, can you outline how you and the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs are working with Police Scotland and the bus companies to ensure that such incidents are quickly responded to and that offenders feel the full force of the law?

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

Fiona Hyslop: The member will appreciate the difference between antisocial behaviour and criminal behaviour. Those are operational matters for the police, who work closely with our bus companies. I know that the Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity also engages on the wider issue.

Bus operators can operate conditions of carriage. We already operate the travel safe initiative in our train stations, and there is interest in whether that could be applied to buses or bus stations. Buses are set up differently, on a deregulated basis, which means that the approach needs to be more co-operative, particularly with the bus companies. However, if there is criminal behaviour, that needs to involve the police.

Wull Muir Wind Farm (Court of Session Ruling)

7. Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how the recent Court of Session ruling on the Wull Muir scheme in the Borders will impact on its energy policy and strategy. (S6O-05577)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): The Scottish Government notes the opinion of the Court of Session, which was delivered on 17 February. It would not be appropriate to comment further, as it is a live case and could be subject to further legal proceedings.

Alexander Burnett: I note my entry in the members' register of interests regarding renewables.

It has not been a good week for the cabinet secretary, who has called people who do not want their communities destroyed by pylons "far right" and has deliberately misled constituents by trying to blame Westminster when she has confirmed in writing to me that the final decision lies with the Scottish Government. Will the cabinet secretary confirm that it is misleading for developers to exclude grid connection details and associated infrastructure when making applications? Will she support a moratorium until honesty is restored in the consenting process and the Scottish National Party's overdue energy strategy reflects that?

Gillian Martin: This is the second time that a Conservative MSP has made misleading comments about my article in *The National* this week, in which I was responding to the anti-net zero rhetoric that has been weaponised. Indeed, I was referring to Reform UK, which said that it would dismantle the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero. Frankly, it is desperate for the Tories to misrepresent my words and claim that they refer to constituents who have legitimate concerns about the siting of developments, which I completely and utterly understand.

On the ways in which constituents can get in touch about energy developments, as I said in my previous answers, we are trying to make it easier for people to get in touch and put forward their views. Training is available on that. I have mentioned the work of the planning hub and the new powers that are available to us through the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025. We are doing all that we can, but developers are best placed to engage with communities, as they should be respecting the views of communities when they put their plans forward.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Gillian Martin attended the first quarter of the rural Scotland convention on major energy infrastructure on Tuesday, so she will know that communities are concerned that the SNP is not listening to their concerns about the energy industrialisation of communities across Scotland. Can the Government tell us how community participation will be strengthened while it simultaneously removes the automatic trigger for a local public inquiry?

Gillian Martin: There has been no removal of a public inquiry option; that has not been relayed by the Government at all. I have outlined the new powers that have been given to the Government in order to strengthen community engagement. I am keen to strengthen good-practice principles around engagement and community benefits, so

that communities can have more say and so that more communities can benefit from the revenues that come from energy projects.

I listen to the views of communities all the time. In the energy consents unit, all statutory consultees can raise their opinions, and anyone can raise any opinions on any development. I go back to my initial point, which is that it is incumbent on developers to engage with communities early and meaningfully. That is the best way for them to introduce plans for consent that are reflective of the views of communities.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Parliamentary business meant that the minister could spend only 30 minutes with rural campaigners in Parliament this week, but is she aware that the south of Scotland convention will potentially be hosting two meetings in April, one most likely in Moffat? I extend an invitation to her to attend a meeting and speak to those community representatives, and I will issue a personal invitation to that effect.

Gillian Martin: Those meetings will be held during the purdah period, I believe. This week, I met the convention of community councils, and we are establishing a forum for communities across Scotland to put forward their views on reforms that can take place.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 8 has had to be withdrawn, which means that we have concluded portfolio business. There will be a brief pause to allow front-bench members to change over.

Cost-effectiveness of Scottish Public Inquiries

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-20893, in the name of Kenneth Gibson, on behalf of the Finance and Public Administration Committee, on the cost-effectiveness of Scottish public inquiries. I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak button.

I call Kenneth Gibson, on behalf of the Finance and Public Administration Committee, to speak to and move the motion. You have a generous eight minutes, Mr Gibson.

14:26

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I thank you, Presiding Officer, and members of the Conveners Group, for helping to enable this debate to take place.

I am delighted to open the debate on behalf of the Finance and Public Administration Committee. In the short time that is available, I can but touch on what is an in-depth and detailed 73-page report, which I recommend to all members.

Our scrutiny, which was completed over nine months last year, marked the first time that a Scottish Parliament committee has examined statutory public inquiries in depth. We sought to bring greater understanding of the current position of public inquiries in Scotland, looking at their purpose, terms of reference, timescales and costs, as well as their recommendations and their cost-effectiveness more generally. The merits or recommendations of individual public inquiries were not considered as part of our scrutiny.

In addition to written evidence, we held 10 oral evidence sessions and two informal engagement sessions, hearing from stakeholders and academics from elsewhere in the United Kingdom, Sweden, Australia and New Zealand, from people with lived experience of public inquiries and from civil servants and public inquiry staff. We again thank all those who provided evidence to help to shape our conclusions and recommendations. I also thank my committee colleagues and our hard-working, dedicated and effective clerking team for their sterling efforts throughout this process.

Statutory public inquiries are a powerful and important mechanism of accountability. They investigate issues of major public concern, which are often triggered by disasters, systemic failures or circumstances that can erode public trust. They have the power to compel evidence.

In the past 18 years, Scottish ministers have commissioned 11 statutory public inquiries, with six continuing. Another was announced only yesterday, albeit with no apparent budget or timescale. Of the on-going inquiries, four have been running for more than four years. Indeed, the Scottish child abuse inquiry has been on-going for more than a decade. The cost to Scotland's public purse has been more than £258 million since 2007. Across the UK, the figure is six times that much.

Our scrutiny found that public inquiries remain an essential mechanism for holding public bodies to account, reviewing past wrongs, identifying solutions and recommending policy changes. Nevertheless, the current system is overstretched and poorly defined. Inquiries often lack a core objective, whether that is in forensic investigation, policy reform or truth telling. Instead, they often attempt to perform all those functions with ever-expanding timescales, costs and expectations.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): The member suggested that we should be learning lessons, but if an inquiry such as the Edinburgh trams inquiry takes nine years, it is too late for those lessons to be learned, is it not?

Kenneth Gibson: John Mason makes an important point. That is one of the reasons why we are looking to have public inquiries on shorter timescales and with defined budgets. As I will go on to say, that happens in other countries.

We have asked the Scottish Government for clear guidance to set out the core purpose, scope and limitations of public inquiries and to inform defined timescales and budgets at the point of establishment. Ministers have limited ability to control expenditure and limit spiralling costs once an inquiry is up and running. Indeed, it appears to be the only area of public expenditure in which costs and timescales are of little importance.

International examples show that that does not have to be the case. In Sweden, since 1982, public inquiries have been expected to conclude within two years and within a set budget. That includes very detailed inquiries—not least, for example, the inquiry into the MS Estonia ferry disaster, in which 852 lives were lost, and, of course, Sweden's own Covid inquiry.

We therefore asked the Scottish Government to amend the Inquiries (Scotland) Rules 2007 to require defined budgets and timescales for inquiries, and for Parliament to be notified, with justification, of any extensions that are provided. In the longer term, we have asked Scottish ministers to work with the UK Government to update the Inquiries Act 2005, to make that a primary legislative requirement. It is disappointing that our recommendation has not been accepted. Instead,

ministers will continue to consider on a case-by-case, ad hoc basis whether terms of reference need to be explicit on anticipated timescales.

The Scottish Government's response suggests that there is a statutory duty for the chair to avoid unnecessary costs and to ensure that the running of the inquiry is adequate. Our evidence is clear that current rules are insufficient to contain spiralling inquiry costs. We ask for better information and greater transparency around the running of public inquiries and the decision-making processes that lead to their establishment, including a clear framework that requires alternatives to be considered first.

The committee is also concerned that the current practice of appointing serving judges to chair public inquiries places significant strain on Scotland's civil and criminal courts. If three or four of our 36 judges are taken out of circulation to preside over inquiries, 10 per cent of criminal cases are likely to face delays. When one considers that a judge handles, on average, 34 criminal cases a year, that is a substantial number of cases that will not be heard when they should be. Therefore, greater consideration of an inquiry's opportunity costs is essential, and I will touch on that again shortly.

Evidence has shown that trusted policy experts have successfully chaired inquiries in the UK and internationally. We therefore recommend that the Scottish Government strengthen its guidance to ensure that all options—legal chairs, expert chairs and expert panels—are considered when launching an inquiry.

Although we welcome the Deputy First Minister's openness to appointing inquiry chairs who are not serving members of the judiciary, that has not been the practice of the Scottish Government to date. We ask that, when establishing future inquiries, ministers clearly set out the reasoning behind their choice of chair and the criteria and alternatives considered, which should reflect the purpose of the inquiry and the skill set that is required.

We further ask for enhanced guidance on drafting terms of reference and better support for chairs once they are appointed. Chairs sometimes reinvent the wheel, so there is a clear need for proper induction and training, adoption of best practice and adequate support for both inquiry teams and the public bodies that are impacted by public inquiries. The Scottish Government's response is positive on reviewing guidance and on improving transparency, but it does not commit to making the specific changes that we seek. That includes carrying out a short research project on drafting and amending terms of reference in advance of the next parliamentary session.

Redirecting funds to inquiries can impact on public service delivery. The Scottish Government should establish a central budget for public inquiries to avoid further strain on specific public services. For example, the Scottish Police Federation was very clear in evidence about the impact that inquiries can have on front-line policing, so we disagree with the Scottish Government's position that the administration of public inquiries should be funded via the sponsoring ministerial portfolio, and we do not accept that moving to a central budget arrangement would risk reducing incentives for public bodies to manage costs and be the most efficient manager, as the Government suggests. Where is the evidence for that?

Finally, but importantly, we are concerned about the serious lack of transparency in how public inquiry recommendations are implemented, if at all. We urge the Scottish Government to establish a robust, transparent system for tracking and public reporting on the implementation of inquiry recommendations. Members can learn more about the Scottish Government's response when the deputy convener winds up for the committee.

Our findings and recommendations were designed to strike a balance between allowing flexibility to meet the unique circumstances of individual public inquiries while strengthening financial control and promoting fiscal sustainability. I welcome the Scottish Government's generally positive reception to our report, but I am disappointed that it has fallen short of accepting many of the concrete, practical and evidenced actions that our committee recommended.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the findings and recommendations in the Finance and Public Administration Committee's 14th Report, 2025 (Session 6), Report on the Cost-effectiveness of Scottish Public Inquiries (SP Paper 943).

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Kate Forbes, the Deputy First Minister. You have a generous seven minutes.

14:34

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): I begin by thanking the committee for its detailed scrutiny of this important issue and for the considered set of conclusions and recommendations that it delivered in its report. There is a lot in the report that the Scottish Government agrees with, and I hope that, in the course of today's debate, all parties across the chamber will be able to find common ground on

how to improve the cost effectiveness of the public inquiry system in Scotland.

I hear what the convener says about the areas where he is disappointed that more recommendations have not been accepted or have been only partially accepted. I will address aspects of those in my comments, but I want to set out that there is a much longer-term opportunity to implement some of those recommendations, particularly in the light of the fact that there will be a new parliamentary session and, indeed, a new Government after the election—albeit, I hope, a Parliament with the same representatives.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): It would be interesting for the committee to know where the report was considered. Did the Cabinet discuss the strategic impact of public inquiries on public services, and were the recommendations considered in full by the Cabinet?

Kate Forbes: Generally, when a committee writes to a cabinet secretary, the cabinet secretary takes responsibility for the response. It will be carefully considered by officials, and we then compile the response. I never think that the initial response is the end of the matter. There is always quite a lot in my response that identifies how we will explore or consider things further. My hope is that we will be able to provide an update on the recommendations that are being taken forward.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I understand what the Deputy First Minister is saying, but Mr Marra has asked an important question. If there is to be radical change, as the committee has suggested and as the Deputy First Minister talked about in her evidence, decisions must be taken pretty soon—not least because of the fiscal implications, which I know the Scottish Government has concerns about. Does she agree with that?

Kate Forbes: It is a general, long-standing protocol that ministers should not disclose their conversations at Cabinet, so I am trying to recognise that. I can reassure members that I have had conversations with my colleagues on these matters. However, what is discussed at Cabinet remains within the minutes of Cabinet until it is disclosed 15 years later, as a general rule.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): I cannot wait. *[Laughter.]*

Kate Forbes: I was going to say at the outset, before the interventions, that I want to put on record that my written response to the committee and my contribution today do not signal any change to the terms of reference or operational arrangements for any current Scottish public inquiry. I hope that that will avoid any misunderstanding about our absolute commitment

to the completion of those extremely important inquiries and to their operational independence, which, as inquiry chairs frequently remind ministers, is paramount.

John Mason: Will the Deputy First Minister give way?

Kate Forbes: I will, because I love a good debate.

John Mason: The Deputy First Minister says that she does not want to interfere in existing public inquiries—which is fair enough—but we started a new one yesterday, and I asked whether a timescale and a budget could not be placed on it. Basically, the answer was no. Why could we not have done that for new inquiries?

Kate Forbes: I think that Jenny Gilruth might have alluded to this yesterday—if she did not, I hope that this is not breaking news—but we want to ensure that any new inquiries are extremely focused and are able to take into account the points that the committee has identified on timescales and budget. That has certainly been a matter of discussion.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): *[Made a request to intervene.]*

Kate Forbes: Why not? I will give way to Michelle Thomson.

Michelle Thomson: I think that I just beat Craig Hoy to it in making an intervention. John Mason has made a valid comment. In addition to having a tightly drawn scope, which I think is what she is alluding to, would the Deputy First Minister be prepared to take on some of our other recommendations, principally on the publication of all costs and moneys paid to individual lawyers, so that the public can see how much money they are making from these inquiries?

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

Kate Forbes: I have some sympathy with the point about maximum transparency in the publication of costs. There will be some areas that are more sensitive than others in that regard, which is why, in our response, we identified that point. However, my commitment is to look at where we can go further on transparency, even if some areas are slightly more complex than others.

Would Craig Hoy still like to make an intervention?

Craig Hoy: The minister had moved on from it slightly, but I will go back to the issue of costs, and specifically to the case that we heard about from the Scottish Police Federation. The new public inquiry that was announced yesterday will put additional strain on police resources. Does the

minister accept that the police perhaps have a special case to plead, because they seem to be drawn into almost all public inquiries? If the Government will not look at the sponsor framework arrangement, will it perhaps look at a specific budget line for Police Scotland to be able to deal with the significant costs of dealing with public inquiries?

Kate Forbes: Those issues certainly need to be taken into account in the annual budget debates, and there should also be a recognition of the costs that the police face. It is worth repeating what I said at committee: for the past few months, the Parliament has been relatively united in pushing the Government to hold another public inquiry. When I put that to the committee, Michael Marra said that it is ultimately for the Government to take responsibility for the decisions that it makes. That is fair, but it also bears repeating that the Parliament should take responsibility, on all budget matters, for what it calls for and how that is to be funded.

I am probably out of time, having not really commenced my speech at all—

Kenneth Gibson: Will the minister take an intervention?

Kate Forbes: I hate to let the convener down, but I probably need to make some progress. I will do that first, and then if the Presiding Officer is feeling generous—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I reassure you, Deputy First Minister, that we have adequate time in hand, so you can take another intervention, if you are so minded.

Kate Forbes: In that case, I would love to take another intervention from the convener.

Kenneth Gibson: My understanding is that, for some three years, the English inquiry has been focused for on completing its findings and that it has a £65 million budget. It is dipping its toe in the water of timescale and budget limitations. We should surely do the same.

Kate Forbes: I will come to the committee's recommendations, because I am aware of the committee's call on that time-limited aspect. There are good examples that demonstrate that that is not always the best idea, such as the one that I provided in committee: I absolutely support the fact that the Scottish child abuse inquiry has taken longer than three years. When it was first established, it probably did not envisage the scale of the evidence that would come forward. It was vital that the inquiry was allowed to run its course and to take all the evidence that it did. Few among us would not be horrified by what has been uncovered in that regard.

Kenneth Gibson: I thank the minister for taking a record number of interventions, but one of the points that the committee has made is that the Government can set an initial budget and timescale and, if necessary, can always come back to the Parliament to explain why additional funding or a longer timescale is required. Would that not be a better methodology than letting the inquiry last as long as it wants and letting it cost as much as it wants to spend?

Kate Forbes: The example that I gave of the Scottish child abuse inquiry entirely meets those criteria. Members might recall that there was a relatively fixed timescale at the outset, which was then extended. My officials have provided me with other examples in which ministers have sought to specify, in an inquiry's terms of reference, a fixed date by which it must report, but then the time limit has then had to be extended, as happened with the Vale of Leven hospital inquiry. We are conscious that that can be done currently.

The legislative basis on which the system is founded is the Inquiries Act 2005, which is intended to provide a comprehensive statutory framework for inquiries to be set up. As the committee notes, that is a UK-wide act, which confers powers not only on the Scottish ministers but on their UK, Northern Irish and Welsh counterparts. If it is considered necessary or desirable, the Scottish Parliament can legislate to amend the current statutory framework for public inquiries on devolved matters in Scotland.

The committee called for information to be made clear and accessible to the public. That is absolutely right, especially when it comes to managing public expectations around the purpose of inquiries. Some of the committee's recommendations are very easy to accept, such as having a dedicated web page that brings together published information on public inquiries and on conflicts of interest. Ministers and civil servants must comply with existing codes of conduct, but we will review the guidance to ensure that risks are clearly identified and well managed.

I agree that ministerial statements establishing a public inquiry should set out the rationale clearly, and I can confirm that any relevant ministerial interest will be declared.

On the appointment of chairs, we are very open to candidates who come from both judicial and non-judicial backgrounds.

I note that we have already discussed the comments on reporting timescales. We think that it is absolutely right that, on some occasions, there should be a clearer approach to requiring explicit anticipated timescales. Where the terms of reference are set, it is up to the chair to consider how an inquiry fulfils its terms of reference. There

is a balance in ensuring that the inquiry chair is free to follow the evidence wherever it leads; where a timescale has been indicated and the chair then feels that they do not need to use the full amount of time, or that they need to extend it, a discussion with ministers is needed.

Interim reports can be invaluable—those in the Scottish child abuse inquiry have certainly been invaluable—instead of waiting until the final module for the full report.

We will come back to the Finance and Public Administration Committee on any other ways in which we can strengthen the point around timescales, because I can see the argument on that.

There was a recommendation to establish a central public inquiries unit. That requires careful consideration, given the unpredictable nature of inquiry work, but we will consider where we can streamline to a greater extent the support from across Government that is given to inquiries.

Public accountability in this area is essential. Although inquiry independence prevents us from reporting on performance, I accept the need for clearer reporting on expenditure, as Michelle Thomson just outlined, and on progress in implementing any recommendations from a public inquiry. In response to Michelle Thomson and the committee, I say that we will explore more options for a public-facing resource that outlines what the costs are. That will be subject to some of the sensitivities, but we will set that out.

That was my speech, given at record speed, Presiding Officer. I hope that that indicates that we are open, transparent and accessible to the scrutiny of the Parliament.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: It also confirmed that your interpretation of generosity was closer to matching mine than Mr Gibson's was. With that, I call Liz Smith to speak for around six minutes.

14:47

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I declare an interest in that I am a witness to the Eljamel public inquiry, which began in 2025.

The Finance and Public Administration Committee's report makes it very clear in paragraph 77 that

"Public inquiries are an essential mechanism for holding public bodies to account",

because they are designed to get to the truth about certain harms and failures to support victims, and because they make valuable recommendations about future policy.

The convener has rightly outlined that there is a particular concern about the spiralling costs of public inquiries and the burden that that is placing on the taxpayer. It is not just about the direct costs but, as the convener said, the opportunity costs. My colleague Craig Hoy mentioned the concern that, for some inquiries, there is so much work being done by Police Scotland in the backroom that that is taking officers away from preventing crime and catching offenders.

We know that the spiralling cost of inquiries is becoming excessive, with inquiries having cost nearly £260 million since 2007. My perspective on the whole debate has always been that it is important to try to understand why the number of public inquiries has increased and why the accompanying costs have increased to such a degree, especially in recent cases.

I was very taken by the evidence that was given to us in relation to all that by John Sturrock KC. He said that he felt that there were basically four reasons for the increasing demand for public inquiries: an increasing "culture of blame" among the public; diminishing trust in public institutions; a lack of understanding about the role of public inquiries; and an increasing tendency for the Government to think that such inquiries might be the best way to address a complex problem. He offered the view that, in principle, inquiries engender a high degree of trust among the public, most especially those that are judge led. They are often regarded as one of the only means of holding a Government to account when there have been serious breaches of trust.

John Mason: Will Liz Smith take an intervention?

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Will the member give way?

Liz Smith: If I am allowed to take both interventions, I will take Mr Mason's first.

John Mason: Thank you.

Liz Smith makes the reasonable point that there is a lot of trust in public inquiries. Would she say that there is a risk that, if there are too many and they take too long, such trust might be lost?

Liz Smith: I agree entirely. I will come on to the point about why we are in danger of losing trust because of the increasing number of public inquiries, but I will turn to Mr Whitfield first.

Martin Whitfield: My intervention is almost a follow-on: Liz Smith talked about the confidence that the public have in judge-led inquiries. There is very little evidence of access in Scotland to non-judge-led inquiries. One challenge is that the public seek judges to lead inquiries because of their independence from the Government, the

Parliament and society. How do we square that circle?

Liz Smith: That is an excellent point. It gets to the nub of the issue that we face, which is that a lot of the reason why we have seen an increase in the number of public inquiries comes down to failing trust in public institutions—not only in the Government, but in the agencies that operate on its behalf. That means that those people who are victims or the families of victims see the only way forward as being to have a judge-led public inquiry—which, in some instances, might not be the best thing to do. Martin Whitfield is spot on with that comment.

With your indulgence, Presiding Officer, I refer again to my initial statement that I am a witness in the Eljamel inquiry. The points that John Sturrock made are relevant to the situation that we find ourselves in. He mentioned the increasing culture of blame among the public and the diminishing trust in public institutions. I am firmly of the view that one of the biggest factors is—sadly—the belief among many members of the public that the Government and its agencies are failing to provide victims with the answers that they need. No doubt, that is the reason why another public inquiry into grooming gangs was announced yesterday.

I am not able to comment on what I have submitted in my witness statement to the Eljamel inquiry. However, I will say what I have repeated many times in the chamber and to the media: a decade on from when I became involved in the inquiry, and after literally hundreds of letters, emails, meetings and engagements with the Government and its agencies—including no fewer than five health secretaries, three First Ministers and a health board that has had seven different chief executives in that time—I was not able to provide answers to key questions that the patients had asked me. From listening to recent exchanges in the chamber about the Queen Elizabeth university hospital issue, I think that that is happening in that situation, too.

That lack of transparency within the Government and public bodies is one reason why there is increasing demand for public inquiries. Alongside that, and just as importantly, there is the time factor. It is little wonder that, when you attend a public inquiry—as I have done twice—the audience is replete with lawyers, with their expenses running up, on the clock. As the convener made clear, there is a concern that, too often, we see the reinvention of the wheel when it comes to background support. If we could do something to ration that, it would be immensely helpful in trying to reduce costs.

The other issue that John Sturrock mentioned is just as concerning: namely, that some public

inquiries can be seen by the Government, for whatever reason, as a convenient excuse to get difficult and complex issues off its desk in order to buy time. The Deputy First Minister and I had an exchange on that issue in committee—she is aware of that situation and I hope that she will take on board the concern.

This is an important issue and we have to decide what we are going to do about it. Obviously, it will be the next Parliament that will decide how to reform the system—assuming that that is what it will do. It is important to reflect on the changes that could be made closer to home, to stem the need for public inquiries and to reduce their timescales and costs—including looking at other jurisdictions, as the convener mentioned. As I said at the start, public inquiries are an essential part of our democracy because of the way in which they hold the Government to account. However, it is clear that, before the leviathan gets completely out of control, reforms are necessary so that victims can get the truth that they deserve.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Martin Whitfield. You have a generous five minutes, Mr Whitfield.

14:54

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): On behalf of Scottish Labour, I am pleased to open this afternoon's debate in support of the Finance and Public Administration Committee's excellent report. I thank the committee and all those who contributed to the inquiry.

It is right that we begin where this Parliament always begins—with the people who sit at the heart of such inquiries. Public inquiries matter because they give victims, families and communities a voice when the system has failed them. As I mentioned in my intervention, public inquiries are potentially on the cusp of losing the confidence of communities because, at the moment, many individuals see them as a last resort for getting an answer when a system appears to have closed its doors to them.

Liz Smith: Martin Whitfield knows that I entirely agree with that point. Does he feel, as I do, that, because the Government and other agencies, such as—this was true in the case that I described—health boards, have dragged their feet, that problem has been exacerbated, as it has meant that we have not been able to get the answers in the timescales that were promised?

Martin Whitfield: I absolutely agree. Wearing a different hat, I heard the Scottish Information Commissioner give evidence this morning, in which he talked about the need for people to come to him just to get an answer to their problem. They come to him not in the interests of freedom of

information or to find out about the process; they simply want to get, for example, a planning certificate, but they have been unable to do so. They see the whole system as being closed against them, and the situation becomes increasingly infuriating. That leads to what we have all witnessed—a growth in the anger that people feel when they cannot get answers.

Showing victims respect demands that inquiries are effective, timely and credible. It demands—as we have already heard—that lessons are learned before the harm is repeated. It demands that public money, which could otherwise be spent on health, policing or local services, is used responsibly.

Michelle Thomson: Martin Whitfield says that inquiries must allow solutions to be found—I am paraphrasing—before the harms are repeated, but does he recognise that some inquiries have taken years and years, and that, as a result, by the time they have come to their conclusions, events have moved on and the situation has changed significantly? How does he propose that we address that point?

Martin Whitfield: That was a valuable intervention. As we have heard, some inquiries have taken upwards of a decade to solve a problem that would, one would have hoped, already have been solved. However, I suggest that particularly lengthy inquiries talk to the existence of a culture that may not have changed. That culture tends to be one of silence and one in which evidence has gone missing. We all hope that that culture will have changed since the events that occasioned the inquiry, but experience tells us that, unfortunately, in many cases, it will not have done. That brings us back to the confidence that the public have in the Government and the Parliament in that respect, which is being seriously questioned.

Kate Forbes: Does the member agree that inquiries all have very different purposes? The Covid inquiry has a very different purpose from the Scottish child abuse inquiry, which is seeking to deliver justice, and the Eljamel inquiry.

Martin Whitfield: I thank the Deputy First Minister for that intervention, because it goes to the crux of why we find ourselves here today. In its report, the committee made the very strong suggestion that careful consideration be given to what an inquiry is for. We have had inquiries that have developed as the leader of the inquiry has followed the evidence down various paths. There have also been some highly successful inquiries that have had the tight remit of trying to get to the facts of a specific problem or responsibility. Such inquiries are incredibly valuable, not just for the individuals who have been victims of the situations that led to those inquiries, but for the learning

experience that Michelle Thomson talked about in relation to how we can improve things. Such inquiries tell us what to look for when things are going wrong.

Craig Hoy: I fully accept that there are many different types of inquiries and that, therefore, a one-size-fits-all approach will not work. For example, a death in police custody is very different from a public procurement exercise that has gone wrong. However, one thing that should be common to them all is that the inquiry's recommendations are implemented. Where does the member think that we should go in creating a statutory legal framework for the implementation of statutory inquiry recommendations?

Martin Whitfield: Craig Hoy's intervention speaks to the committee's recognition that we cannot design one inquiry for everything, but we can set in place blueprints—a shared or centralised resource—to feed out the responsibility for setting the costs and inquiry definitions early on, and sticking to them.

On the application of inquiry considerations and thoughts, it is dangerous for a Government, Parliament or society to ignore recommendations—that point will allow me to drift back into my speech. They do so at their peril, because huge investments in time and emotional commitment are made to inquiries. It is universal across inquiries that the recommendations that they make come from the evidence that they have heard. They are evidence led, and the recommendations are strong suggestions about how to avoid or prevent a repetition of the problem.

I am desperately conscious of the time. I had many fascinating and interesting things to say, but I want to pick up on one point that I hope the Deputy First Minister will return to, which is about addressing conflict of interest. That is a prescient part of the committee's report, to which the Government's response was basically to fall back on existing codes and responsibilities. I accept that codes matter, but there is a chance to strengthen confidence through clear and comprehensive guidance. If the Government is to seek to rely on the codes but the codes have already been questioned, simply restating the status quo is not good enough, and it is an opportunity. I echo the committee's calls for much more guidance, particularly on funding, terms of reference and conflicts of interest.

I once again thank the committee for a genuinely excellent piece of work that we should recognise the value of encompassing as we go forward, because that would help a great deal to renew confidence in the organisations and systems that act for the public, and to do so in the right way.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now come to the open debate. We still have a fair amount of time in hand, and I call Michelle Thomson, who has around four minutes.

15:02

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I wanted to begin my remarks, but my laptop has just flipped to show something else entirely. Please give me a second, Presiding Officer.

Martin Whitfield: Will the member take an intervention?

Michelle Thomson: I would be very happy to do so.

Martin Whitfield: I refer back to the member's intervention on me about the length of public inquiries and the learning opportunities that go by the wayside. Does she agree that the use of interim reports, as we have seen in a number of significant inquiries—

Liz Smith: Will the member take an intervention?

Martin Whitfield: I am not sure that I can take an intervention in an intervention. Does Michelle Thomson feel that one of the roles of interim reporting may be to assist with learning?

Michelle Thomson: Absolutely, and I thank Mr Whitfield for his kind intervention. I am not going to touch my laptop, because it has gone into what I would describe as a technical fankle. I am just going to play it safe.

I start by noting how valuable I considered the inquiry to be. Indeed, I contend that it was one of the most valuable inquiries in this parliamentary session. Its incredible importance is backed up by the number of members who are in the chamber today, because it talks to who we are as an institution.

We have already had some excellent comments about the need for inquiries to occur in the public realm and how we choose to deal with them. I will go on to make comments about the cost-effectiveness of public inquiries, which is the title of the debate, and we have heard some interesting reflections on how important they are to our public realm. It is a dry topic for some, but certainly not for me.

My first comment is that we set out clearly the scope of our inquiry and said that we would not comment on the relative merits of individual public inquiries. That seemed to be misunderstood and I felt that there were, at times, attempts to deflect legitimate parliamentary criticism. We cannot accept that. We had a job to do and I believe that we fulfilled it in good faith.

My next comment is about conflicts of interest. I strongly agree with the comment that it cannot be good enough just to refer to the ministerial code and to say that ministers should follow that when we have clear evidence that the code has been breached. Something more must be done, because, if nothing is done, it is a zero-sum game for us all.

Kate Forbes: I was going to make this point at the end, but in response to Martin Whitfield and Michelle Thomson, I will say that we will come back to the committee before the pre-election period to indicate how we will strengthen that.

Michelle Thomson: It is heartening to hear that, with regard to not only conflicts of interest but our additional comment about declaring personal or professional relationships. That is utterly fundamental because it speaks to the issue of trust, which was a recurring theme throughout the inquiry.

Our point about transparency is related to that. Recommendation 82 says that

“statements to Parliament announcing the setting up of a public inquiry should fully explain Ministers' decisions and the reasoning for launching a public inquiry”

but I did not feel that we got to that point yesterday, although my colleague John Mason asked some questions about it. We absolutely need to see that explanation and I hope that the Deputy First Minister will not mind my expressing disappointment that, in the face of our report, that did not happen yesterday, when doing so would have shown rapid change.

I do not know how much time I have left.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: My generosity is not yet close to being exhausted.

Michelle Thomson: There we go. Let the excitement commence!

We also talked a lot about budgets. I consider it to be absolutely fair that budget lines are phased and are signed off throughout a public inquiry. However, during our inquiry, several of us commented on the fact that there is no other area of public life where there seem to be unlimited budgets and no cost control. That is absolutely outrageous. I am sympathetic to what lawyers say about following the evidence, and it is correct to do that, but it seems to me that we have thrown up our hands and said that it is too difficult and that we do not want to upset some lawyers by introducing controls. There is no other walk of life where we would accept that. Budgets are utterly fundamental and I have been heartened by what the Deputy First Minister said.

We must also be able to publish costs. Let us be clear: some law firms have made millions and

millions of pounds from the public purse and we do not know about that. That cannot be acceptable. In recommendation 223,

“we ask that public inquiries record and publish costs in a consistent manner”

and that those costs are itemised.

I am sorry for not having expended your generosity, Presiding Officer, as I now come to my final comment. The point is important because I am aware that the Deputy First Minister will not be in her current role after this session—indeed nor will I, nor Liz Smith, while the future for many other members remains to be seen. Recommendation 278

“asks the Parliament to consider adding oversight of public inquiries to an existing parliamentary committee’s remit”.

I consider that to be important. My personal judgment is that adding the public administration remit to that of the finance committee has been a great success and should continue. The cost-effectiveness of public inquiries, along with their transparency and governance, are vital, so I consider it imperative that that should happen.

15:09

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate on the cost-effectiveness of Scottish public inquiries. I thank the Finance and Public Administration Committee for its report. The speeches that we have heard so far have been valuable and a credit to the Parliament. I am glad to contribute to this debate, which builds on the groundbreaking report that the committee published last year. I think that this is the first time that Holyrood has delved deeply into the issue, but it is appropriate that we have done so to ensure that justice and accountability do not come at an unsustainable cost to the Scottish taxpayer. There is obviously a balance to be struck in securing justice, and that is the key thing for me.

I affirm the vital role of public inquiries, which are not luxuries but essential tools for uncovering the truth, delivering justice to victims and preventing future tragedies. I note the issue of trust in public inquiries and what they deliver, which Liz Smith mentioned. The Penrose inquiry into contaminated blood exposed systemic failures and brought closure to affected families. The on-going Scottish child abuse inquiry is giving voice to survivors after decades of silence. The Sheku Bayoh inquiry is seeking answers for a grieving family and communities. As the Deputy First Minister said, the Scottish Covid-19 inquiry is helping us to learn lessons from a pandemic that touched every life in Scotland.

Such inquiries can restore public confidence, and we should not underestimate the importance of that. When we consider our political discourse and the extent to which people trust politicians more generally, we can see that the role of public inquiries is incredibly important. They can also promote reconciliation and drive real change. Without them, we would risk repeating history’s mistakes.

However, we must be honest that public inquiries come at a staggering cost. Since 2007, Scotland has spent about £230 million on public inquiries, adjusted to today’s prices. The Edinburgh tram inquiry alone cost £13.1 million and took nine years. I know people who were involved in that inquiry and they were incredibly frustrated about how long it took.

The cost of the four major current inquiries—the Scottish child abuse inquiry, the hospitals inquiry, the Sheku Bayoh inquiry and the Covid-19 inquiry—has already reached £200 million, with more costs to come. As Michelle Thomson said, legal fees often dominate, sometimes accounting for more than a third of the costs, while indirect costs to public bodies such as Police Scotland add millions more. That can sometimes mean funds being diverted from front-line services, which is why she points that Michelle Thomson and the Deputy First Minister made about the publication of costs are incredibly important. That is not to say that companies are overemphasising the costs, but it is important that they are transparent.

Martin Whitfield: Does Paul McLennan agree that the Deputy First Minister was right to point to certain elements of the costs that are sensitive? Does he also agree that the costs of advocates who represent groups and individuals cannot fall into that category and that the public have a right to know what the advocacy costs are?

Paul McLennan: I agree with Martin Whitfield on that. I note that the committee raises that point, too.

The figures are not abstract; they are equivalent to the annual budget of a small local authority or to the cost of the regional growth deals for a year. At a time of tight finances, we owe it to Scots to ask whether we are getting value for money. The Inquiries Act 2005 urges chairs

“to avoid any unnecessary cost”

but, without mandated budgets or timescales, overruns are inevitable.

One of the key points for me is that effectiveness is hard to measure. Recommendations are only as good as their implementation, yet there is no standard monitoring. There is a risk of sermonising without taking action. Trust in actions is key, and that is why the committee’s recommendations are

so important. They call on the Scottish ministers to set defined timescales and fixed budgets for every inquiry from the outset. The Deputy First Minister talked about that as well. However, there will have to be some flexibility on that, because every inquiry is slightly different, so we cannot force timescales. Some inquiries will take as long as they take.

There are a couple of options that we can look at. We could amend the Inquiries (Scotland) Rules 2007 to make the proposals mandatory, with any extensions having to be justified before Parliament. Alternatively, we could collaborate with the UK Government in the longer term to embed the proposals in the 2005 act. It is about boosting transparency in decision making, supporting inquiry teams better and strengthening oversight, perhaps through the Finance and Public Administration Committee.

The Deputy First Minister has engaged with the committee and she mentioned coming back before to the Parliament on the matter before dissolution. It is about emphasising fiscal sustainability alongside justice. Alternatives such as non-statutory reviews can be quicker and cheaper for suitable cases, but where statutory powers are needed, let us make them efficient.

Public inquiries must deliver truth without bankrupting trust in our institutions. By adopting the proposed reforms, we can balance accountability with prudence and ensure that every single pound that is spent serves the people of Scotland. I urge members to support the motion and drive this change forward.

15:14

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): I am keen to speak in today's debate because I feel strongly that something is far wrong with the present public inquiries system.

As I have said, I agree with other speakers that public inquiries might be necessary at times. However, the committee got the impression that sometimes the facts of a case, what went wrong and why are all well known. Therefore, there is little need for a public inquiry, but because the victims or their families want to pursue things further and are looking for heads to roll, they push for a public inquiry, so politicians—both Government and Opposition—consider it easier to give in rather than refuse the request.

Liz Smith: I thank the member for taking an intervention. He knows that I agree with some of the comments that he has made, but does he accept that, sometimes, when we are genuinely trying to get to the truth we cannot, because we keep getting told, "We cannot answer that question", and the inquiry goes round in circles for a long time, which delays the process?

John Mason: There is a problem on both sides. On the one hand, there is a lack of transparency and openness, and we need to improve on that across the board. On the other hand, the committee met in private session with some of the victims who have pushed for public inquiries, and I am afraid that I came to the conclusion that nothing would have satisfied some of them. That does not apply in every case, but certainly in a few cases, it does not matter what happens—people will not be satisfied. I do not think that a public inquiry adds very much in a case of that sort.

There seems to be an increase in demand for public inquiries in recent years, as Liz Smith and others have said. Some colleagues have suggested that that is because more things are going wrong these days. However, I suggest that it is perhaps also because people are less willing to accept that human beings make mistakes and more ready to challenge the authorities than they used to be, and there is an increased desire to find somebody to blame.

We all know that the Scottish Government, local authorities, health boards and the rest of the public sector are tight for money.

Michelle Thomson: It is very kind of the member to take an intervention. He has moved on slightly, but to go back to his previous point, does he also consider that there is a risk that campaign lawyers could stumble on the fact that a public inquiry is a potential good revenue generator and use it for that purpose? Does he consider the possibility that some campaign lawyers might choose to use that as a mechanism because it gives them a clear line of sight to funds?

John Mason: It is a combination of things. There has to be some kind of case to start with, and then the lawyers jump on board. We all know phrases such as "ambulance chasers", but just because I am an accountant does not mean that I am totally against lawyers.

We know that the Scottish Government, local authorities, health boards and the rest of the public sector are tight for money, so we have to keep tight control of costs across the sector, and that includes the costs of public inquiries.

As others have said, when it comes to public inquiries, what do we get? We get no timescales and, in effect, no cost control. Who else operates like that? The Deputy First Minister and I have experience of being auditors. Auditors have to complete complex audits of organisations such as banks within a very limited number of days of the year end. Cleaners have to get their work done in a certain amount of time. Normally in the Parliament—although perhaps not today—we have very tight time limits on our speeches. Public inquiries can go on for as long as they want and

run up almost any cost that they want—all because, allegedly, they must be independent. Inquiries should be independent, but lots of people are independent and still work to fixed budgets and tight timescales. The Auditor General does that, and as does His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland, to mention only a couple of examples.

Here are examples of costs from recent or current inquiries: £45 million for the Covid inquiry, £26 million for the Sheku Bayoh inquiry and £102 million for the child abuse inquiry. Those are not even the full costs, because police time is added on.

As has already been mentioned, the Edinburgh trams inquiry took more nine years. What use is that if we are trying to learn lessons? If I remember correctly, the second line went ahead before the inquiry had even finished.

We also need to remember that the Scottish Government has a relatively fixed budget, so £50 million on an inquiry is £50 million less for front-line services such as nurses, social workers or the police. However, when I suggested to Lord Hardie that we might have a public inquiry with the remit of doing the best that it could in 24 months, he was clearly horrified and said that he just would not do it.

For once, there has been a glimmer of light coming from the direction of Westminster. As the convener said, Westminster is going ahead with a public inquiry on group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation—please let us not use the term “grooming gangs”—and it has been given a time limit of three years and an indicative budget of £65 million. That is a good precedent for setting up an inquiry with a defined budget and timescale. That is the committee's key recommendation, in my opinion.

Another angle is whether there could be a halfway house between an all-singing, all-dancing, gold-plated, judge-led public inquiry on the one hand and nothing at all on the other. We heard that other countries, such as Sweden, are able to conduct similar types of inquiries but do them much more quickly and cheaply, and it seems that they also have broad public acceptance, which is, presumably, one of our aims.

The committee also heard that there is a knock-on effect on the judicial system if the chair is a senior judge. We have only 36 senior judges in Scotland and every time we appoint one as chair of an inquiry, we slow down the whole judicial system. Therefore, we need to consider expert chairs or panels, in appropriate circumstances. The Government broadly agrees, which is welcome.

In conclusion, this is one of the most worthwhile pieces of work that the committee has carried out, and I trust that future public inquiries will take less time and cost less money.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): We turn to closing speeches. Rhoda Grant will close on behalf of Scottish Labour. Ms Grant is joining us remotely and has up to four minutes.

15:21

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I thank the committee for carrying out its inquiry. Public inquiries are necessary, and especially so when someone is harmed by a public body, either directly or by omission. Demand for inquiries is increasing, because of a lack of trust in public bodies. That point was made by Liz Smith, who quoted John Sturrock KC, but I would suggest that it may also be due to a lack of candour on the part of public bodies. All MSPs will have had casework in which someone cannot gain closure, simply because they are not being told what happened or whether there were mistakes, or, if there were mistakes, receiving a meaningful apology. If that was provided, many calls for public inquiries might not be so great. If people knew what happened to their loved ones, they might be satisfied. For the most part, that is all that people want to hear, but it does not happen. As Martin Whitfield said, public inquiries give families and communities the answers that they need.

The committee is concerned that the Scottish Government has not accepted all its recommendations, although the Deputy First Minister seemed to hint that this is not the Government's last word on the issue. I hope that the Government will consider the other recommendations and see where improvements can be made. However, we should never lose sight of the fact that public inquiries are there to serve the people we represent.

The committee talked about receiving more timely responses from the Government to the findings of public inquiries. That is necessary. Even when it is a long and complex public inquiry, surely the Government could provide interim responses to the issues, while taking more time to address the more complex issues that have been highlighted by the recommendations of the inquiry.

Other members talked about having a clear remit for public inquiries—the Government appears to concede that. I would suggest that that clear remit needs to be devised alongside those who have been impacted and seek answers, so that they have confidence in the process. It would also allow the inquiry to come back to the Government to expand the remit, if the inquiry

feels that that is necessary, for example if the evidence takes it into a previously unforeseen area.

Many members talked about the costs of public inquiries. It seems to me that if we had uncovered other options—for instance a duty of candour—that would have been better than standing the cost to the public purse.

The length of time taken by public inquiries delays people getting closure, because they are waiting for answers. One of the speakers—I think that it was John Mason—talked about feeling that nobody would have ever accepted the answers that they were given, but that is because of the time that is taken. If you have not been given a timely response, sometimes you cannot get over that, and you are stuck. That is why a duty of candour would do much to meet the needs of people who are seeking answers.

Martin Whitfield said that having timely answers and faster responses from public inquiries would mean that those answers would be put in place and mistakes would not recur. He also talked about the culture of secrecy that often runs through the necessity of having those inquiries and about people having to fight to get to the truth of the matter. I think that that has been lost in this debate, because some people have to really push for inquiries because they need answers for closure.

One of the issues that is in the report but has not been touched on today is the delay in giving people a right to reply if they are identified in an inquiry as having been in some way culpable or if they attract criticism from the inquiry. I agree that that can be used to slow the process down, especially when people do not want to hear the outcome of the inquiry, but they still need a right to reply, albeit they would need to have a time constraint on how long it would take them to do that.

Many people spoke about budgets and mentioned huge amounts of money. I would welcome constraints to the budget, but again with the caveat that, if the inquiry needed to go in an unforeseen direction, it could come back and expand that budget.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Grant, will you please conclude?

Rhoda Grant: I will conclude.

I will finish by thanking the committee for its report on public inquiries and reminding us all that we must have cognisance of the people who need those inquiries to hear what happened to themselves or their loved ones so that they can get closure. That must remain at the heart of our deliberations.

15:27

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): I will let the convener into a secret: when I heard that the Finance and Public Administration Committee was going to hold an inquiry into public inquiries, I was mildly disheartened, because the cynic in me questioned the need for doing so. I am reminded of a quote from Sir Humphrey Appleby, who said:

“Minister, two basic rules of government: never look into anything you do not have to, and never set up an inquiry unless you know in advance what its findings will be.”

So, I questioned, off the back of a House of Lords inquiry into public inquiries, whether that would be the best use of the committee’s time. However, my cynicism was not well placed, because the report is very strong and the nine months were very well utilised to get to the heart of an issue of public administration that has perhaps been overlooked for too long.

I hope that the cabinet secretary—we have heard further concessions today—as well as those outside Parliament, the broader Government machine, campaign groups and the legal fraternity take seriously the committee’s recommendations. As a former journalist, I believe that public inquiries have their place, as do royal commissions, although I note that, for some reason, royal commissions—perhaps Sir Humphrey Appleby had some influence on this—which were a creature of the 1970s and early 1980s, seem to have gone out of fashion.

This is the opportunity and the time to look back and forward and assess whether the one-size-fits-all judicial model is effective and fit for purpose in modern Scotland. I believe that the committee’s report has identified many of the critical issues that need to be addressed so that, in future, public inquiries are efficient for the Government and the public purse and maintain the trust that they presently enjoy. I believe that they are presently the gold standard and the go-to when there is a disaster, scandal or public procurement problem.

We need to address three areas in future, and I hope that the Government will look at them. The budget for public inquiries needs to be fixed. Terms of reference can change over time, but I think that the Parliament and the Government must have a say if that happens, because otherwise we see the mission creep that other members have identified.

The committee had some concerns about the role of lawyers in directing the length and scope of inquiries. Over the course of recent months, I have put my views on that on the public record in the media, even though not all lawyers welcome my position. By common consent, I think that we need to look at the scope of inquires and the length of time that they can take.

I do not often argue for new bodies or quangos to be created, but I think that there is a compelling case for a centralised unit and, possibly, centralised accommodation to house inquiry secretariats. None of us can forget the image of Lord Hardie crawling around on the floor and installing new duct tape so that he could get an internet connection before the trams inquiry could commence its deliberations. I believe that that needs to be assessed in the interests of the public purse.

The committee was clear that there needs to be some form of sunset clause so that the public, and families in particular, who, in many cases, are going through a period of trauma, know how long they will have to wait in order to get answers.

Martin Whitfield: We have talked about the role of the judiciary. However, criminal and civil trials stick very well to set times. The skill of knowing how long something should take does not elude the experts in the field.

Craig Hoy: I do not think that we would let defence or prosecuting lawyers dictate the pace of a trial. Judges would come down on them rather quickly if they sensed that there was any attempt to do so.

Ultimately, it is about ensuring that those who call for a public inquiry have trust in the recommendations as well as in the Government or any other bodies to implement the recommendations. My fear is that, if we focus too much on the process and not on what happens after an inquiry has reported, we will end up improving the process, efficiency and operation of inquiries but leaving it to the Government of the day to act on the recommendations. I hate to say it, and I go back to Sir Humphrey Appleby, but there is still a desire for Government ministers to get problems off their desk and hope that they stay off their desk for as long as possible, or at least until after the next election or when they leave office.

I close with an appeal for all those who the report touches to take its recommendations seriously, for the Government to implement the recommendations expeditiously, whichever party is in post after the election, and for future Governments and other bodies to implement the recommendations from public inquiries. Only then will public confidence be enjoyed and trust maintained.

15:32

Kate Forbes: In relation to the opening comments about the breadth and scale of the Government's response, I reiterate that, although members might be disappointed that we were perhaps not more forthright, anyone who reads our

response will see that we are positive about most of the committee's recommendations. Sometimes, the need to respond quickly means that further work needs to be done after the response is provided, but I think that there are routes to implementing all the committee's recommendations.

I am struck that the committee's inquiry and this debate have taken place during a period in which members have been active in calling for another public inquiry. It is easier to talk about the general principles of inquiries than it is to directly allow those points to shape the Parliament's asks and the Government's responses.

On the points that have been made about budgets and timescales, it is worth reiterating that, when we provided a clear steer on the timescales in relation to the Scottish child abuse inquiry, for example, we were still confronted with a choice to make. Clearly, that inquiry had to last longer than the initial four years, and the Government had to decide whether to accept or reject that. John Swinney accepted that and said that the inquiry should report as soon as is reasonably practical.

John Mason: The Deputy First Minister made the point that people in the Parliament were calling for an inquiry. However, the same thing happened with commissioners—people in the Parliament on all sides were calling for commissioners, but the Parliament then decided that that was not a good idea.

Kate Forbes: I am not going to get drawn into a conversation on that subject, much as I would very much like to, because it will inevitably be taken as a comment on the most recent public inquiry that has been announced. A lot could be said about that process, and I would love to comment, but I will not.

The point here is that, taking into account survivors' views, their confidence and the appetite of politicians for another public inquiry, it is easier to say that such an inquiry should not take place than it is, in the moment, to respond in the way that we are all hypothetically asking for in this debate.

Kenneth Gibson: I think that there is an element of frustration among people who seek public inquiries not about the budget but about the timescale. A lot of people who are looking for public inquiries, given the answers that they seek, do not realise just how long they are likely to take. That leads to frustration, because they want inquiries to be concluded much more expeditiously than appears to be the case.

Kate Forbes: I understand that.

In the three minutes that I have left, I will rapidly go through the recommendations in the report and the calls that have been made in the debate.

On the recommendation that the Scottish Government should reflect the core purpose, the scope and the limitations of public inquiries, I agree. We have said that we appreciate the point. We will need to give a little thought to precisely how we will do that, and we will come back to members on that. The live public inquiry that has just been announced will enable us to give effect to that approach.

On the call for the development of guidance to provide a clear framework for decision making and to bring much-needed transparency and consistency to the process, again, I agree.

On the call for there to be a clear requirement for a statutory public inquiry to be considered only when all alternatives have been exhausted, there is a strong, firm yes from the Government on that.

On the point about reporting all aspects of potential conflicts of interest, I have given a commitment to Michelle Thomson that we will look at how we strengthen that process. It goes without saying that all ministers are personally responsible for ensuring that no conflict arises or could be perceived to arise. We can strengthen the guidance and the process in that regard, and we will look at doing that. However, ultimately, it is the responsibility of each of us to know in our hearts not just when there is a conflict of interest but when there might be the perception of a conflict of interest, and to make sure that that is acknowledged straight away.

On the need to strengthen the guidance to ensure that all options for chairs are considered, as I said to the committee, we are 100 per cent open to the appointment of inquiry chairs who are not serving members of the judiciary. Having engaged with the Lord President on that matter, I acknowledge that that is a shared position across the board, because of the impact on judicial resources.

On the call for the Scottish Government to align its guidance and terms of reference more closely to a public inquiry's core purpose, we will look at what further we can do in that regard.

The call to ensure that the Scottish Government sets a defined timescale based on an inquiry's core purpose has come through loud and clear. There is precedent for that, but I also agree with the point that was made about having the option to extend the timescale that has been set out if the need arises. Having a timescale that is too concrete is a problem if, for example, in the process of inquiry, the chair discovers that it is absolutely important that the timescale be extended. I do not think that we can be closed off to that point.

I acknowledge the time, Presiding Officer.

On the need for defined budgets and timescales, I noted the Inquiries (Scotland) Rules 2007 in relation to ministers' powers to make rules. We can certainly consider whether further rules regarding procedural timescales are required.

It would be possible to make provision by primary legislation in respect of budgets for public inquiries relating to devolved matters. We obviously do not have time in the next five weeks for such legislation—it would be for a future Administration—but we can certainly commit to doing some of the work that is required in the pre-election period.

I am now clean out of time, but I state that there is a spirit of willingness on the part of the Government to implement the committee's recommendations and to provide further information in advance of the election.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Michael Marra to close the debate on behalf of the Finance and Public Administration Committee.

15:39

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I am pleased to do so. I declare an interest as a witness to the Eljamel public inquiry, in common with my colleague Liz Smith. I pay tribute to the FPA Committee clerks, who are outstanding, and to my colleagues on the committee for all their contributions to the inquiry and the work that we have done over recent years. I pay particular tribute to our convener, who has led the committee in exemplary fashion during my time on the committee. I cannot comment on his behaviour before that.

The question of why so many inquiries are taking place was perhaps not covered by our inquiry's terms of reference, but it became a key consideration in the way in which all members addressed the issue. It is a question that should animate the Government, hence my intervention on the Deputy First Minister in her opening speech, because it is about the performance and culture of the Government and, frankly, trust in our democracy, which is a very profound question at the moment.

In relation to the balance of considerations that the Deputy First Minister pointed to in her thoughtful closing speech, the tension between the Government and the Parliament in making the decision on whether to have an inquiry is a core issue. Without an inquiry, people are denied justice and access to information and transparency, and parliamentarians can ask whether the Government is satisfied and can stand in front of the people and make that justification. Frankly, I think that we came to the correct conclusions in that regard.

Kate Forbes: One of the recommendations was for a future parliamentary committee to take a particular responsibility for inquiries. Obviously, that would be a decision for the Parliament. What does Michael Marra think about that recommendation for the next parliamentary session?

Michael Marra: I think that it is a very strong and important recommendation. It is correct for the Parliament, as one of the core organisations that will have made demands that the Government will have responded to, to have oversight of the process, but that flows from the other recommendations about ensuring better control of time, remit and costs. The Deputy First Minister and I had an exchange on that, and the question of responsibility between the Government and the Parliament is absolutely clear.

In the debate, issues of transparency have come to the fore. Michelle Thomson touched on issues related to people making declarations, and we would all welcome the Deputy First Minister's response in that regard.

We need a full explanation of why the Government has taken the decision to grant a public inquiry. I echo Michelle Thomson's comments. I do not think that, in the most recent announcement yesterday, we had the fullest explanation that we could have had. That is critical to the setting of the terms of reference and the remit that flows from the parliamentary process and the Government's decision, but it also relates to issues of transparency and a declaration of why we might have got to that position in the first place. That is critical.

It is also critical that we understand why an inquiry is needed, because they are not cost free. We have talked about the cash cost to the public purse and taxpayers as a result of an inquiry. However, the impact on the judicial system, which came through loud and clear in our inquiry, is really important and was, frankly, unknown to me prior to our inquiry. It is a really significant issue at a time of particular challenge for our justice system. The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs is nodding, because she knows those issues acutely.

I am very conscious of the issues pertaining to public service delivery and the amount of pressure that public inquiries put on public services. One of the key considerations relating to the Eljamel inquiry, which I mentioned, is the pressure that it puts on NHS Tayside, which gives care to the people whom I represent. When considering those issues, we are displacing resource, time, management and strategy. I am a strong supporter of that inquiry, but we must recognise the trade-offs in that regard.

Liz Smith, Rhoda Grant, John Mason and Paul McLennan touched on the frequency with which we hold public inquiries, but there are also the issues of urgency, which Martin Whitfield covered. As he said, there is a demand for remedy before the harm is repeated. I have concerns that we are not seeing that urgency.

Covid inquiries provided one of the most striking comparisons. The Covid inquiry in Australia was completed within a matter of months after the end of the pandemic. Here we are, in Scotland, years on, still awaiting the final modules and recommendations, when we know that another pandemic could happen at any time.

The issues must be dealt with timeously, including for the victims. Victims die as a result of the actions that we are investigating. Again, I think about issues that pertain to the hospital inquiry, which we have talked about at length in the Parliament, and rightly so, and to the Eljamel inquiry.

I will use my remaining few seconds to touch on the speech that the clerks prepared for me. The committee considers it essential for transparency and accountability that the relevant public bodies respond promptly to public inquiries, and there is a question of timeframes in that regard.

We also recommended the establishment of a central public inquiries unit. I would like to see, perhaps in correspondence to the committee, a more in-depth response to that recommendation, because there is a glaring inefficiency in the process. Lord Hardie—a former Lord Advocate—trying to get an internet connection feels like one of the most inefficient and ridiculous uses possible of public inquiry time. There should be a standard operating procedure that can be followed so that we can get things moving and so that people can receive the justice that they are hungry for. The committee heard that message loudly and clearly across those nine months.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the cost-effectiveness of Scottish public inquiries, on behalf of the Finance and Public Administration Committee.

Substance Misuse in Prisons

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-20875, in the name of Audrey Nicoll, on behalf of the Criminal Justice Committee, on its substance misuse in prisons inquiry. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons. I call Audrey Nicoll on behalf of the Criminal Justice Committee.

15:47

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I am very proud to open the debate on the Criminal Justice Committee's report into the harm caused by substance misuse in Scotland's prisons. I thank our excellent clerking team, particularly Lucy Miller, and Scottish Parliament information centre and participation and communities team colleagues for their support during the inquiry.

The inquiry began with accumulation: rising drug-related deaths in custody, escalating use of synthetic substances, repeated warnings from oversight bodies and persistent concern from families and staff that the system is not reducing harm in the way that it should. Over months of evidence taking, prison visits and private engagement sessions, we examined what drives substance use in custody, how effectively it is prevented and treated, and what must change.

The first and most consistent message that we heard was that substance misuse in prisons cannot be understood in isolation from the wider public health challenges in Scotland. The report sets out clearly that people who enter custody are disproportionately affected by poverty, trauma, adverse childhood experiences, unstable housing and poor physical and mental health. Prison does not create those inequalities, but the evidence suggests that it can intensify them.

We heard about the changing nature of drug supply: synthetic cannabinoids, which now dominate seized samples, increasingly potent substances arriving via drones and contaminated items, and the constant adaptation of organised crime networks. We heard that drug-trend testing shows high levels of drug positivity on admission, meaning that many people who arrive in custody are already living with addiction.

Witnesses repeatedly told us that boredom, long hours locked in cells, inconsistent access to purposeful activity and gaps in mental health provision all drive substance use in prison. Where distress is unaddressed, substances can fill the void.

We were struck, in particular, by the evidence around dual diagnoses. Mental ill health and substance dependency are frequently intertwined, yet services are not always integrated in practice.

We also heard directly from people who have experienced addiction in custody. They spoke about withdrawal following arrival, self-medicating anxiety and the difference that it makes when a member of staff treats them as a person rather than a problem. Those contributions were among the most powerful evidence that we received. They shaped our recommendations on trauma-informed care, recovery-focused regimes and continuity of supply on release. I put on record my personal thanks to all those who spoke to us.

Evidence shows that 63 per cent of people in prison have an alcohol use disorder and that 40 per cent report being drunk at the time of their offence. However, specialist alcohol referrals remain strikingly low in comparison to need. Alcohol may be less visible in custody than synthetic drugs, but its role in offending, harm and post-release mortality is significant.

We recognise the exceptional strain on the prison estate. Overcrowding, high turnover and workforce pressures were repeatedly cited as barriers to effective prevention and early intervention. Without protected time for purposeful activity, therapeutic work and consistent staff engagement, progress will always be fragile.

I welcome the Scottish Government and the Scottish Prison Service's joint initial assessment of our recommendations and the commitment of the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs to continued engagement on the issue. The response highlights important work that is under way, such as the target operating model for prison healthcare, the alignment of the SPS alcohol and drug recovery strategy with the mental health strategy, the implementation of medication assisted treatment standards, recovery cafes, the operational regime and roster review, and action to manage population pressures—all of which is extremely important work.

Those are significant steps, but our inquiry requires us to ask whether the frameworks that exist are delivering consistently across the estate. For example, the Government's response emphasises that prison healthcare "must be equivalent to" community standards, yet witnesses described variability between health boards in staffing levels, access to therapies and clinical capacity.

On early intervention, the Government notes alignment between strategies. However, our report recommends a custody-focused prevention and early intervention framework that explicitly integrates mental health and substance use

services from admission right through to release. Integration is essential.

On accountability, the Government indicates that existing reporting structures will provide updates. The committee's position is that the Parliament must be able to track measurable outcomes, reductions in drug-related deaths, improved access to treatment and increased engagement in recovery work.

One of the strongest areas of consensus during the inquiry was that substance misuse in prisons is fundamentally a public health issue with criminal justice consequences. If we treat it as a security problem, we will chase supply endlessly. If we treat it as an individual failing, we will ignore structural drivers. However, if we treat it as a health issue that is embedded in a justice context, we have a chance to reduce harm meaningfully.

The committee's report contains 50 practical, evidence based and cross-party recommendations across six themes. They acknowledge the dedication of staff and recognise financial and operational constraints while being clear that incremental change will not be enough.

Today's debate is not just about highlighting gaps and shortcomings but about ensuring that custody does not deepen addiction and that release does not mark the beginning of a renewed crisis. The measure of our justice system is not only how securely it confines people but whether it reduces harm, improves health and strengthens community safety in the long term. That is the standard that the committee's report sets, and I commend it to the Parliament.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the findings and recommendations in the Criminal Justice Committee's 1st Report, 2026 (Session 6), Inquiry into the harm caused by substance misuse in Scottish Prisons (SP Paper 956).

15:54

Angela Constance (Almond Valley) (SNP): I give my thanks to Audrey Nicoll in her capacity as convener of the Criminal Justice Committee. I will start by echoing the committee's conclusion that a public health approach is desirable. We see it as a public health approach but with justice consequences. It is absolutely imperative that we interrupt the supply of drugs, but we also need to continue our work to reduce the demand for drugs through prevention, treatment, recovery and tackling stigma. That applies in the community, and it should also apply in our prison establishments.

I very much welcome the Criminal Justice Committee's inquiry into the harm that is caused by substance misuse in our prisons, its report and

the opportunity to debate the key issues and reflect on the impact that they have on those living and working in prisons. Ms Todd and I were very pleased to be able to attend the committee last year to support the inquiry in its evidence gathering and consideration.

I thank all who participated in the inquiry, and I note the committee's appreciation of the informal, private engagement of people with lived and living experience of substance misuse in prison and of family members affected by imprisonment. Such insights are hugely valuable and help to shape meaningful improvements. I also acknowledge and show my appreciation for the briefings that were provided by the Prison Officers Association Scotland and Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems. I say to both of those organisations that the issues that they raised will continue to be a feature in my endeavours and in the discussions that I have with the Scottish Prison Service leadership.

As Ms Nicoll said, the Scottish Government and the Scottish Prison Service have provided a joint initial response to the committee's recommendations. I hope that it is helpful to members. I recognise the importance of the areas that have been identified by the committee, including ensuring that prevention and early intervention are as fully integrated as possible into approaches in custody and that the support that people receive is equitable with the support that is received in the community.

As the Parliament is aware, and as the committee has recognised, we have a high and increasingly complex prison population. Preventing supply, keeping people safe and managing the impact of substance use in prisons places a significant demand on the Prison Service, our national health service colleagues and other partners. I am grateful for the hard work and dedication of all those staff in all those organisations to keep people in our care and their colleagues safe.

In 2026-27, we are investing just over £1 billion in our prisons to support front-line staff and progress improvements in the prison estate. That includes an uplift of nearly £21 million in the resource budget of the Scottish Prison Service, bringing the total resource budget to more than £509 million. That will help to meet costs that are linked to the change in prison population and enable the Prison Service to continue to deliver a safe and secure system.

The SPS is working to make the best use of capacity. Reducing the risks that lead people to develop new drug dependencies in prison is a priority. The introduction of the regime and roster operational review will protect purposeful activity

and time out of cell by ensuring that staff are available at peak times.

I have kept the Parliament updated on critical issues in relation to the prison population and the actions that have been taken and pursued that have been or are essential to ensure the safe running of the estate for those in custody and our hard-working staff. I have set out to the Parliament the Government's initial response to the sentencing and penal policy commission's report, which was published earlier this month. The commission has provided an opportunity for the Parliament to make bold, evidence-based changes across the justice system, with a renewed focus on prevention and reducing reoffending, leading to better outcomes for individuals, communities and our justice system as a whole.

People in prison often face significant disadvantage, including complex health needs, and we are committed, with the NHS, the SPS and others, to ensuring that prison healthcare is at least equivalent to the healthcare that is available in the community, as I have said. The committee rightly highlights the importance of mental health services, alcohol services and healthcare more generally, and we support that position.

The importance of rehabilitation and supported transitions from custody is also highlighted, which is why we are investing £5.3 million each year in Upside, which is a voluntary throughcare service to support short-term offenders or those on remand who leave prison. We greatly value the role of third sector providers in prison and in the community.

There is an increasing shared understanding of the harmful and evolving nature of illegal drug supply in prisons, including concerns about the rise in use and strength of synthetic drugs, their impact on people in custody and on staff, and the importance of access to effective rehabilitation and support. I have discussed those issues with the chief executive of the Prison Service, which is managing that highly complex environment.

I welcome the committee's report, which will help to inform further action to support people in SPS's care, keep staff safe and improve those crucial transitions. All that will sit within the Prison Service's 10-year alcohol and drug recovery strategy, which was published in 2024 and which provides a framework for improving outcomes.

I am encouraged by the level of cross-party support on the issues. The work to reduce harm from substance use in prisons and in the community will need on-going cross-party support and a continued focus in the new session of Parliament.

16:00

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): Scotland's prison estate does not need to seek its troubles. Inmate numbers are at record levels, staff are reporting unprecedented challenges and prisoners are leaving without rehabilitation, going out into a world for which they are completely unprepared. What is worse, the estate itself is in deep trouble: promised new jails for Glasgow and the Highlands are years late and ludicrously over budget.

This debate focuses on yet another challenge, which is one that Scottish Government has failed miserably to address: the issue of substance misuse, which creates chaos inside prisons and places unbearable stress and pressure on hard-working prison officers.

The crisis damages the prospects of inmates, too. For many, incarceration is supposed to serve as a punishment for what they have done and to act as a deterrent from repeating that behaviour. It is also supposed to provide rehabilitation: they should have new skills, a new attitude and perhaps even an enthusiasm for a future in which they will be a well-functioning, contributing member of society. Yet the drug-taking culture in prisons is stopping much of that from happening.

The public—rightly—expect jails to be secure facilities where the only things that get in and out are approved people and products. Perhaps small errors could be accepted, but the scale of drugs and alcohol inside is eye watering. Those criminals who successfully get the contraband in seem constantly to be a step ahead of the authorities. They use drones and drug-soaked mail—essentially, they use any trick that they can to do that.

Scotland's drug deaths crisis is well documented, but the one place where people should be absolutely free of its clutches is in a secure state facility. Many inmates turn up to prison addicted to drugs or alcohol, and their addiction probably contributed to their crime. However, one of the most worrying statistics that I heard during the inquiry is that many prisoners report developing addiction for the first time while in jail. Some surveys indicate that, on leaving prison, between one quarter and one third of them have illegal substances in their body.

How have we got to this shocking situation? Scotland's high prison population is one reason. Bursting at the seams, the inadequate estate is staffed by fatigued and stressed-out prison officers, which creates an environment that is more likely to descend into chaos. Those pressures leave staff with less time to work on intelligence and investigate where the drugs are getting in and who is taking them. Underinvestment in activities

means that prisoners are bored and driven to revisiting previous substance abuse habits.

Much of the focus is on drugs, but we should not overlook the issue of alcohol. It is thought that around a third of prisoners are alcohol dependent. They are not only offered insufficient help in jail to beat that addiction; it is too easy for them to access illicit alcohol while they are serving their sentence.

Nobody is pretending that there are easy answers to that. As the Prison Officers Association states, the system is under “pressure like never before.” The blend of prisoners—foreigners, organised criminals and ageing offenders serving sentences for historical crime—creates a nightmare.

However, there is so much more that the Scottish National Party Government could have done. Numerous solutions from a wide variety of sources are being put forward. The Scottish Prison Service is clearly understaffed and underresourced. One of the main reasons that prisoners have appointments for substance misuse issues cancelled is a lack of staff cover. There is also an inconsistent approach to things such as peer groups, which have been shown to work in various other support services. Those things will never improve unless funding improves.

Staff representatives have also come forward with ideas such as anti-drone fences around jails, which would stop a major carrier of contraband. Perhaps the SNP Government could break the habit of a lifetime and start working with the United Kingdom Government to seek nationwide solutions to the problems. The Prison Officers Association has been clear that many of these things are not being pursued “because of funding constraints.”

The Scottish Government has not listened to the people who know best, and its attitude has been lax and complacent. That is why we are where we are today. The Government must urgently restore control in Scotland’s prisons or the whole of society will continue to pay a heavy price.

16:05

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): The committee launched its inquiry because repeated investigations, powerful testimony from families and staff, and the findings of the people’s panel all showed that Scotland’s prisons are facing systematic failure in responding to substance misuse. Witnesses told the committee that,

“in their view, prisons have become de facto holding environments for people whose core needs in relation to substance addictions are more clinical than criminal.”

The committee concluded that, without an acknowledgment of

“the underlying health-system shortcomings, efforts to reduce drug-related harm in custody will continue to fall short.”

The nature of the problem is complex, but it begins with Scotland’s prisons being severely overcrowded and understaffed. Low staffing levels increase the risk of incidents and limit the time for meaningful engagement with prisoners. The unpredictable behaviour associated with synthetic drug intoxication also means that officers are often the first responders to emergencies.

I was struck by our sessions with prisoners, who spoke candidly about drug use in prisons and their other experiences. One ex-prisoner had been given a seven-year sentence but had served 19 years because he was unable to cope without using drugs. Others in the group said that the trauma that they felt after reflecting on their crimes led them to taking drugs when they were in prison although they previously had not. The lack of meaningful activity is definitely also a factor. As one prison officer put it,

“At Glenochil and other prisons there is little to stimulate or engage prisoners—no wonder they take drugs.”

Police Scotland also provided a major clue to the nature of the problem when it

“emphasised that many of the same networks control both community and prison drug markets, using prisons to maintain influence and collect debts”,

which is a point that the convener made in her opening speech.

The public often wonder how drugs still reach our prisons, and that is probably one of the reasons why the committee delved into that question a bit further. As we have heard today, the reality is that there are many ways to bring drugs into prisons, including the increasing use of drones and small, impregnated parcels being brought in through various means, including by visitors.

During our visit to HMP Edinburgh, we viewed the grids that had been installed to prevent drones passing through or near windows, but, as one prisoner pointed out, there are some very clever people in jail and it is only a matter of time before they find a way round that. There are serious concerns about the use of drones, up to and including concerns about their capability to carry weapons.

The Scottish Prison Service and other witnesses frequently told the committee that synthetic cannabinoids known as spice are the most serious and current threat to safety and wellbeing in the prison estate. A recent survey cited by the Prison Officers Association found that

“40–75% reported a drug problem or tested positive for illegal substances on entering prison.”

One officer noted that the physical risks to officers

caused by drug taking, especially drugs such as spice. Drugs are affecting prisoners psychologically, causing them to attack officers.

Drugs are a real and live issue in Scottish prisons. It comes as no surprise that those who are on the front line of the current situation—prison officers—are reporting low morale. It is vital that we turn the situation around. One of the committee's recommendations is that there should be

"a national standard for pre-release healthcare planning should be introduced".

Successive committees have acknowledged that, unless a Government plans for support for prisoners who have drug addiction and other related health problems when they are released from prison, they will continue to reoffend. It is about time that there was a Government that was able to take that on. Is it any wonder that our reoffending rates are sky high? This has to be a priority for whoever forms the next Government.

I thank the clerks for their support for this important work, and I hope that the report will be useful for the next Parliament.

16:10

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I begin by thanking the Criminal Justice Committee for its work on this inquiry. The evidence that it heard and included in the report is sobering, urgent and, frankly, politically and morally challenging.

Let us begin with the reality: almost two thirds of people in our prisons have alcohol use disorder, and around 40 per cent were drunk at the time of their offence, yet referrals to specialist alcohol services remain vanishingly small compared with the scale of need. That is not simply a service gap—it is a political choice.

The committee's report makes it clear that substance misuse in prison is not an isolated problem. It is the predictable outcome of trauma, poverty, inequality and a system that too often warehouses distress rather than responding to it. If we are serious about justice, we must be serious about public health. Prisons are being asked to manage what are fundamentally health crises.

Overcrowding, extended lock-up, lack of purposeful activity and fractured mental health provision create conditions in which substances become coping mechanisms. When alcohol is less available, we see substitution with synthetic drugs, which are often more dangerous, unpredictable and harmful, and prison officers are left to pick up the pieces, whether or not they have had the appropriate training or have the correct personal protective equipment.

This is not about individual moral failure but about systemic neglect. The Scottish Greens support the committee's recommendations on consistent assessment, closing the treatment gap, strengthening pre-release planning and improving continuity of care. We must, however, also be honest that implementing the recommendations remains at the current scale of imprisonment will only ever be a sticking plaster.

Scotland imprisons too many people. Many of them are there for short sentences that are linked to poverty, addiction or low-level offending. We know that short custodial sentences are ineffective, destabilising and criminogenic, yet we continue to rely on them. If 63 per cent of the prison population has alcohol use disorder, that is not a prison problem but a public health emergency that is playing out behind bars.

We should therefore be dramatically expanding community-based disposals with robust treatment requirements. We should be embedding trauma-informed care across the justice system. We should be piloting prison-based overdose prevention centres. We should ensure that medication assisted treatment is universally and proactively available, not just for opioids but for alcohol dependence.

We must guarantee that no one leaves custody without housing; healthcare registration; a prescription, if required; and a live appointment in the community. The weeks after release are the most dangerous and we cannot continue to discharge people into homelessness and expect recovery to follow.

We should go further. We must confront the uncomfortable truth that incarceration itself can deepen harm. When women who are leaving prison are nine times more likely to die from alcohol-related causes than the general population, that demands more than incremental reform—it demands transformation. Justice must mean healing, restoration and addressing the root causes of harm rather than simply punishing its symptoms.

The committee's report gives us a road map, but the question for Parliament is whether we are brave enough to follow it, not just by tweaking services but by reimagining what justice looks like in Scotland. The Scottish Greens stand ready to support action that treats substance use as a health issue, reduces our reliance on imprisonment and centres dignity, compassion and evidence. If we truly believe that people can change, our system must also change.

16:14

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I welcome the Criminal Justice

Committee's report on substance use in Scotland's prisons and thank the committee members for their care in ensuring that lived and living experience are at the heart of that report.

The evidence that the committee heard was consistent and compelling: substance use in custody is a public health issue with justice consequences. Drug and alcohol use in prison does not begin at the prison gates but reflects trauma, poverty, inequality and untreated mental distress that long predate imprisonment. If we fail to address those drivers, prisons will continue absorbing unmet health and social needs that they were never designed to manage.

The committee is clear that enforcement is necessary but not sufficient. Order and safety matter and we must commend the sustained professionalism of prison officers, healthcare staff and police officers who work in extremely challenging circumstances, facing the consequences of organised crime and drug-related emergencies every day, especially, as we have heard, in relation to the circulation of potent drugs such as spice and synthetic opioids.

However, punishment does not deliver recovery. Overcrowding is a fundamental barrier to progress and high population levels in prison restrict access to purposeful activity, reduce therapeutic space, compress staff time and disrupt the continuity of care. If we are serious about prevention and early intervention, we must recognise that sustainable reform depends on reducing the pressures created by an overcrowded prison estate and that community justice is not soft justice but smart justice.

The committee recommends a custody-focused prevention and early intervention framework that embeds trauma-informed care, properly links mental health and substance use services and supports recovery right through from admission to release. Crucially, the same standards must apply in custody as in the community, and treatment should neither stop when someone enters prison nor collapse when they leave. We have already heard that point highlighted.

Parity of mental health provision is essential. Addiction must never be a barrier to accessing mental health care and people in custody should have timely assessment, access to talking therapies, trauma-specific intervention, peer recovery groups and integrated treatment for co-occurring conditions.

The report also calls for strengthened, rights-based information and advocacy and for consistent family contact, including digital access and phone calls. That is really important and is not a soft thing either, because contact with family on the outside is vital to wellbeing. There is also a

need for expanded anti-stigma training for staff and a guaranteed baseline of purposeful activity across the estate, and Parliament must be able to monitor progress through clear and regular reporting.

On the issues of supply and security, the committee accepts that total interdiction is unrealistic in an era of synthetic drugs. Technology absolutely has a role but must complement, not replace, relationship-based security and investment in staff. Organised crime groups exploit vulnerability within prisons and that must be tackled as part of wider national strategies. However, we cannot measure success by seizures alone. We must reduce harm and demand, including by continuing to ensure that testing of seized substances helps to reduce harm in an ever-evolving market.

Disciplinary responses must also be proportionate because there is a clear distinction between organised criminal supply and personal use that is rooted in dependency, with the latter requiring a health-led response and not simply further punishment.

As we have heard, alcohol abuse is a crisis that is all too often forgotten in our justice system. We heard from the convener and from Maggie Chapman that only around 1.1 per cent of those in the prison population have been referred to specialist alcohol services. That is a stark treatment gap. Although withdrawal management on admission is generally effective, support during the remainder of prison time is inconsistent, continuity of care on release is variable and the consequences are grave. The risk of death from alcohol-related causes is three times higher for men who have been in prison and, as we have heard, nine times higher for women compared to the general population. The weeks and months following release are a period of acute vulnerability. Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems supports the committee's recommendations and calls for a national service specification with clear standards for alcohol treatment in justice settings. I agree; without clear national standards, inequality and inconsistency will persist.

The committee's overarching conclusion is simple but profound: substance-related harm in Scotland's prisons reflects wider systemic failures. If policy is truly to align with the principle that substance use is a public health issue with justice consequences, then health, prevention and recovery must be embedded in every aspect of prison life, from healthcare and security to purposeful activity, recovery-focused opportunities and reintegration.

I welcome all the work that is under way to bring that to reality. I take a moment to acknowledge all the organisations that go into our prisons daily to facilitate recovery opportunities. We owe the likes of Minds Of Recovery and Recovery Enterprises Scotland in Ayrshire, which go into HMP Kilmarnock offering connection and hope, a debt of gratitude and all our support.

Audrey Nicoll: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that the member is concluding.

Elena Whitham: If we want safer communities, fewer deaths and lower reoffending, we must ensure that our prisons are places where recovery is supported, dignity is upheld and reintegration is real.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind all members who wish to speak in the debate to ensure that they have, in fact, pressed their request-to-speak button.

16:20

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): It is clear from reading the findings of the Criminal Justice Committee's inquiry into the harm caused by substance misuse in Scottish prisons that the issue is not just a justice problem but also a public health issue with far-reaching consequences for individuals, families and communities. Substance misuse in prison reflects deeper issues such as poverty, trauma, inequality and untreated mental health needs. Those needs often begin long before imprisonment and are made worse by the prison environment. Those points have been made by multiple speakers in this afternoon's debate. Overcrowding, limited access to mental health services and a lack of purposeful activity create conditions that amplify harm in Scottish prisons.

When I visited Barlinnie a number of years ago, the then governor told me that the prison had, in his words, the biggest methadone queue in Europe. I spoke to some of the men in custody and a lot of them told me the same thing—that they did not take drugs or methadone before prison. They told me that life in prison with no access to courses or meaningful training due to overcrowding or because they were on remand and did not get access meant that they spent the vast majority of the time in a cell, completely bored, and they felt that the best or the only option for them was to take drugs and pass out in order to pass the time. That speaks to a justice system almost forcing people on to drugs just to pass the time.

Audrey Nicoll: The point about purposeful activity has been raised by, probably, all speakers

in the debate. Over the years, I have had the privilege of visiting HMP Grampian fairly regularly, and it provides some absolutely wonderful purposeful activity. One of the issues and challenges that it faces is access to third sector funding, given that many of the organisations that are involved are external organisations that come in. I put on the record that it is not just the issues around overcrowding and suchlike that are a challenge around purposeful activity.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will give you the time back for the intervention, Mr Griffin.

Mark Griffin: Thank you. I appreciate the points that Audrey Nicoll has made. However, the point that prison management made to me was that those issues were down to overcrowding, to those who were on remand not qualifying for the purposeful activity courses, and to the numbers of prisoners on remand exacerbating the overcrowding issues. The remand figures cause real problems.

The committee's report highlights that enforcement measures alone will not solve the crisis. Security measures such as body scanners and anti-drone technology are clearly important, and we need to tackle supply, but that has to be matched with prevention, treatment and recovery services. We need that whole-system approach.

Mental health care clearly needs improvement, too. Many individuals in custody struggle with mental health and substance use disorders but, as Elena Whitham pointed out, their access to treatment becomes inconsistent. The disparity between the treatment that they received outside prison in community healthcare and what they receive in prison starts to exacerbate the mental health issues that they have.

The transition from custody to community is a period of heightened risk for overdose, relapse and reoffending. Every person leaving prison should have a comprehensive release plan that includes housing, healthcare and support services, including those on remand, who sometimes do not go through a planned release programme, as I mentioned. Without that, the cycle of addiction, reoffending and imprisonment will carry on.

Many other members have mentioned the importance of involving lived experience in shaping policy. The afternoon that I spent in Barlinnie, when I walked around the prison and talked to so many people about their experience of how they ended up there, what life was like and what was causing them to come back over and over, was crucial for gathering evidence and making policy.

Addressing substance misuse in Scottish prisons requires systemic reform. We need to break down barriers between the justice system and the health system, invest in prevention and treatment and ensure that prisons become places of rehabilitation rather than a revolving door.

16:26

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): The Criminal Justice Committee's inquiry into substance abuse in prisons was at times harrowing, often emotional when the committee met affected prisoners and, ultimately, extremely concerning on many levels.

It is a fact that our prisons, along with those in the rest of the UK, are overcrowded and that substance abuse is rife in them. Unsurprisingly, that has an impact on prisoners, overworked staff and the families of offenders. Our inquiry highlighted the need for early intervention and an emphasis on tackling the wider societal issues around the root cause of substance misuse before imprisonment.

Substance use leads to severe health risks, including overdoses and mental health deterioration. In the prison environment—a setting in which people are forced to live together 24 hours a day with multiple mental health and trauma issues—it can be catastrophic. Boredom and trauma are significant factors that drive substance use in prisons. The current overcrowding means that structured activities such as education and exercise, which help to reduce boredom, are unable to take place. Many prisoners report limited access to those activities and are unable to leave their cells for hours due to a lack of programming or staff who are available to supervise.

Questions must be asked about the number of short-term sentences that are being issued and, in fact, about the whole purpose of prison. Serious offenders who are at risk to others should, of course, be incarcerated, but too many people, including women who are suffering from trauma and health issues or who are victims of domestic abuse, are being locked up for minor offences. That must stop.

Prison wrecks families, blights children's lives and rarely acts as a deterrent to offending. The excellent organisation Families Outside is a godsend to families who are trying to cope with the multiple effects of imprisonment. Families face emotional and financial strain due to a loved one's substance use and imprisonment. Lack of information and often lack of communication from the prison exacerbates family distress and complicates relationships.

The committee also learned about the drug supply and the entry of drugs into prisons.

Synthetic cannabinoids and benzodiazepines are the most detected substances, and they can be fatal due to the inability to gauge their quality or strength. Psychoactive drugs cause terror among staff and inmates due to the aggression and erratic behaviour that they cause.

As we have heard, during our prison visits, we saw a variety of items that are used to smuggle drugs into prisons. The use of drones is becoming increasingly common. Technology is struggling to keep pace with the inventive ways in which criminals are getting access to drugs.

Despite the extreme challenge that is being faced by prison and healthcare staff, work is being done to help prisoners to battle addiction. Recovery hubs and peer-led activities are emerging in prisons, but availability can vary due to staffing and operational pressures. The fact is, however, that the stigma that surrounds substance use and imprisonment can create barriers to seeking support. Peer-led support is essential for fostering a recovery culture in prisons. Harm reduction measures, including education and naloxone provision, are also essential for public health in prisons.

However, the implementation of the MAT standards can be inconsistent across prisons. As the convener of the Criminal Justice Committee mentioned, dual diagnosis of addiction and mental health issues needs to be addressed. Funding and resources are critical for effective adherence to MAT standards. A lack of clarity on how they apply in prison settings can complicate their implementation. Quick access to medication, especially opioid substitution therapy, is vital on admission to prison. It has been linked to reduced drug-related deaths post-release, emphasising its importance in treatment.

I conclude by stressing the support that is needed after release from prison. The first few weeks are critical. Many individuals face homelessness, which increases the risk of relapse. Effective throughcare planning is essential to ensure successful reintegration into the community. The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that that happens and to constantly monitoring the issue of drug misuse in prisons.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches. I call Maggie Chapman to close on behalf of the Scottish Greens.

16:30

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): The debate has reinforced something that many of us already knew: substance misuse in prison is not incidental; it is endemic and, as Elena Whitham highlighted, it reflects deeper

failures long before someone reaches the prison gate. We have heard about the treatment gap—hundreds enter custody with alcohol dependence each year, yet only a fraction receive specialist support. We have heard about substitution with synthetic drugs. We have heard about the spike in deaths after release. Behind every statistic is a person—often someone who has experienced trauma, violence, poverty or being in care. Too many are criminalised for behaviours that are rooted in unmet need.

The committee report sets out clear and practical recommendations: validated assessment tools, scaling up specialist services, strengthening pre-release planning, improving continuity of care and expanding treatment conditions in community disposals. Those must be implemented in full and without delay. However, we should not mistake implementation for completion. If prisons remain overcrowded, remand continues to be overused and short sentences persist for low-level offending, we will continue to recycle people through systems that exacerbate instability, harm and ill health. As Elena Whitham said, such punishment cannot support recovery.

The Scottish Greens believe that we must reduce the prison population as a matter of urgency—not recklessly, but responsibly and in a way that is evidence led. We must stop locking up people—especially women, as Rona Mackay highlighted—who do not pose a risk to others. Instead, we must invest in community justice, housing first, and mental health and addiction services that people can access without entering the justice system at all.

Those who are incarcerated need the staff who support them to have the support, training and equipment that they need. As Pauline McNeill and others have recognised, staff should not have their own health and safety compromised as a consequence of incidents involving substance misuse.

We should also be bold on harm reduction through universal access to medication-assisted treatment; consideration of supervised consumption models in custodial settings; naloxone provision that is opt-out rather than opt-in; and peer-led recovery communities that are embedded in every establishment. Incarceration should not be a barrier to healthcare, whether that is medical or psychological support that is needed and then provided.

Above all, we must guarantee that liberation from prison does not mean abandonment by the state. No one should leave custody to homelessness. No one should leave without healthcare continuity. As Mark Griffin and others have highlighted, no one should leave without a

plan. Justice that ends at the prison gate is not justice—it is abdication.

I place on record my thanks for the work of the Prison Officers Association on this important issue and for its briefing for the debate. I am grateful, too, for the information that Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems provided.

The committee's report shines a light on a crisis that has been hidden for too long. The real test now is political will. Will we treat substance use as the health issue that it is? Will we invest upstream rather than paying downstream? Will we choose restoration over retribution? The Scottish Greens will continue to push for a justice system that is rooted in compassion, accountability and care—one that understands that healing communities requires healing people—because, if we want safer communities, we must build healthier and more equal ones.

16:30

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests: I am a former deputy director of the Leverhulme research centre for forensic science at the University of Dundee, which submitted evidence to the inquiry and is represented in the report.

I pay tribute to the work of my former colleagues. Since 2019, they have worked with the Scottish Prison Service to help us to understand the nature of the substances that are being consumed in our prison estate and some of the methods of delivery. In working with those members of staff—I certainly do not have the chemical expertise to do the analysis myself—I was always struck by the ingenuity of some of the prison population in getting those materials into the prison estate, and we have heard about that from various members in the debate.

Pauline McNeill raised a good point when she said that the public struggle to understand how it is possible to have drugs and alcohol at such levels in the prison estate. The report does us a service in beginning to build that public and policy understanding about how to deal with those issues.

The prison estate is no panopticon, as theorised by Michel Foucault—the cruel and ingenious cage of an idealised prison that presents and creates docile beings. The prison estate is a world away from that. The policing of the prison estate involves continuous conflict with the people in it who are trying to access substances—it is a constant battle. Elena Whitham made the point very well that any technological approach must sit alongside a relationship-based stewardship of our prison estate. We cannot just solve these problems, even

though, as Mark Griffin highlighted, there are technologies that can be put in place. We must recognise that there will be a duality to the approach, which is absolutely key.

I was struck by some of the responses about purposeful activity. It is clear that the conditions of imprisonment are what people are attempting to escape from, in the less literal sense. They are trying to absent themselves from the mental drudgery and torture in their daily lives. People—typically, it is young men—who are in prison want to learn skills. Many of them want to learn to be joiners or brickies and think that they might have a better life for themselves and their family outside the prison door.

Audrey Nicoll talked about third sector organisations. I gently say to her that we are at a time when integration joint boards are being gutted by the Government—absolutely gutted. The third sector relies on our integration joint boards across Scotland, but we should recognise the severe cuts across the north-east, and particularly in Dundee.

Sharon Dowey and Mark Griffin touched on the issue of first-time addicts in the prison estate. The thought that people are going into prison and becoming addicts is horrific to the public, but we know that that happens, for the reasons that I have set out. We also know that, as a result, when people exit the prison gate, they are far more at risk of overdose because of the potency and availability of drugs in the outside world. We must make sure that, in dealing with our national drug deaths crisis, which is a source of huge shame and regret for the country and for the Government, we deal with those things directly and appropriately.

That touches on the issue of dual diagnosis and how our public services deal with mental health and addiction issues. In the conclusions of the Dundee drugs commission, which I was involved with, the issue of dual diagnosis was presented. That was many years ago, but it remains a massive problem in our locality in relation to how professionals recognise that people have dual issues and which services they need to access.

All those problems are exacerbated by a prison policy that has descended into chaos under this Government.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Sue Webber to close on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives.

16:39

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): Thank you, Presiding Officer—I thought that you had forgotten about me.

Under the SNP, Scotland's prisons have become warehouses for addiction. The committee's inquiry lays bare a system that is overcrowded, understaffed and completely out of control. Drugs are rife, alcohol dependency is ignored, and lives are being lost behind bars at an alarming rate.

Angela Constance: Will Ms Webber give way?

Sue Webber: If Ms Constance does not mind, I will not. I am a last-minute addition to the speakers list. Perhaps I will give way as I get through my speech; I am only four lines into it.

Let us be clear: prison should be a place of punishment, but it must also be a place of recovery. Right now, it is neither. The facts are damning. More than a third of prisoners now admit to using illegal drugs in custody. One in four say that their drug use started or increased inside prison, and the number of drone drops has exploded, rising from just six incidents to more than 70 in three years. Nearly 15,000 drug recoveries have been recorded. That is not harm reduction; it is institutional failure.

That breeding ground, in combination with a lack of vital rehabilitation services, means that prisoners are not set up properly for release and are not given the best chance at kickstarting their new life. Instead, they are more likely to relapse and reoffend as the right support is not available.

Alcohol misuse is being treated as an afterthought. Around 5,000 people enter custody every year with an alcohol dependency yet, last year, only 167 were referred for treatment. That is not a gap in provision; it is a collapse in basic care. Is it any wonder that deaths in custody are soaring? There have been 64 deaths in Scottish prisons in a single year, which is a 60 per cent increase. Researchers have identified repeated, preventable failures, such as missed cell checks, health concerns being dismissed as drug seeking, and mental health crises being ignored until it is far too late.

It is not just about drugs; it is about control. Overcrowding and staff shortages have allowed the prison drugs market to adapt faster than the system that is meant to stop it. Potent synthetic drugs such as spice are driving violence, psychosis and medical emergencies, which is putting prisoners and staff at serious risk. While the chaos unfolds, SNP ministers talk about compassion but deliver complacency. They fund programmes but do not track outcomes. They announce pathways to rehab but cannot say whether people recover. Since 2022, just 48 people have completed a 12-week residential rehab placement through the prison to rehab protocol. That is not a solution; it is tokenism.

The Government is obsessed with managing addiction, not ending it. We see that in our communities, and now we see it in our prisons. Instead of expanding access to meaningful, structured rehabilitation, the SNP has allowed prisons to become holding pens for people with complex addictions, releasing them back into society no safer, no healthier and no more hopeful than they were when they entered. That is failing victims; it is failing communities; and it is failing prisoners.

The Scottish Conservatives believe in something different. We believe that recovery, not just survival, must be the goal. We will continue to argue for the right to recovery, including access to residential rehabilitation for those who need it who are in custody and on release. Without treatment, stability and proper support, the cycle of addiction, crime and custody will never be broken. The committee's inquiry should be a wake-up call. Ministers must stop pretending that the crisis is under control. They must restore order in prisons, properly resource staff, clamp down on supply and, crucially, guarantee access to treatment that actually works. Prisons should not be places where addiction festers; they should be places where lives turn around. Until the Government understands that, the drugs crisis inside and outside prison walls will continue on its watch. Enough excuses—the Government must start delivering recovery.

16:43

Maree Todd (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): Tapadh leibh, Oifigeir Riaghlaidh. I thank all committee members for their contributions to the debate. Drug and alcohol use in prison is a public health challenge as well as a justice challenge, and it is pleasing to hear so many members reflect that in their speeches. It is clear that members have given a lot of considered thought to the issue.

In the main, the recommendations in the committee's report continue to take us in the direction in which we are travelling. There are others, though, that will require an incoming Administration to take them forward.

As the cabinet secretary said, we both welcomed the opportunity to provide evidence to the committee last September. That provided us with the opportunity to make the committee aware of some of the great work that has been carried out by the Scottish Prison Service and health staff to support those with drug or alcohol use issues, and I am pleased that the committee recognises those efforts. As I told the committee, although the number of people in prison who lose their lives from drug misuse is relatively small, two fifths of

those in prison self-reported problematic drug use prior to imprisonment.

Many of the contributions have recognised the scale of alcohol-related need in prison. I am grateful for the briefing that came from SHAAP, and I look forward to meeting it to discuss the issues further before Parliament dissolves.

Prison should be somewhere where those issues are dealt with sensitively and effectively. As the Scottish Prison Service's alcohol and drug strategy outlines, we need to treat substance use as a public health issue and ensure that the care that is provided in prison is, at the very minimum, equivalent to the care that is provided in the community.

We are driving improvement work for prison healthcare through a target operating model that includes improvements in actions for alcohol and drug services. The Public Health Scotland-based MAT implementation support team is also continuing to work to deliver a programme of support for justice and custodial settings. The standards reinforce a rights-based approach to the treatment that people should expect, regardless of the circumstances that they are in or where they are.

On recovery work, we are continuing to provide funding to the third sector to embed a person-centred, recovery-focused approach that benefits prisoners, families and staff. That continues into the transition and resettlement back into the community. Recovery initiatives are now in place across all prisons in Scotland, and I am pleased that the committee has recognised the importance of that work.

The committee has also recognised the importance of harm-reduction measures. In naloxone, we have a treatment that can reverse the effects of opiate overdose. We have expanded access to all prisons, and we are funding the Scottish Drugs Forum to deliver peer-to-peer naloxone supply for prisoners in the estate. We have also made national mission funding available to develop residential rehabilitation services and the associated aftercare that allows access to residential rehabilitation immediately on release from prison. It is for individual prisoners to consider whether that is a path that they want to follow, but, if it is one that they choose, we will fund that pathway.

As the national mission comes to an end, we remain committed to reducing harm and improving lives. We have been working closely with stakeholders, including people with lived and living experience, to develop a new alcohol and drugs strategy to follow the mission. The strategy will be published in the coming weeks, but I can say that our commitment in that area will be evident.

In closing, I repeat my thanks to the committee for its diligence in producing this considered and thoughtful report. I am pleased that it saw evidence from those who are directly affected, and that it visited establishments. It is clear from the tone of the report and from its recommendations that it strengthens our evidence base and drives work forward in this important area.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I call Liam Kerr to wind up the debate on behalf of the Criminal Justice Committee.

16:49

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): A key function of the committee system in a unicameral Parliament is to be independent of Government and party. At the outset, it is important to put on record that, in producing the report, the committee has largely fulfilled that objective, to its great credit. On that, it is important to thank the clerks and the advisers to the committee for facilitating and assisting with such a detailed and comprehensive inquiry, as well as all those who gave evidence, facilitated visits and candidly opened up about their experiences and challenges. The inquiry was detailed and cross party and, as Rona Mackay said, it was, at times, pretty difficult and harrowing. It examined evidence from the Government, the Scottish Prison Service, NHS representatives, third sector organisations, prison officers and those who have experienced addiction while in custody.

In many ways, we start from a common position. Scotland's prisons are at capacity. They are overcrowded and face considerable challenges, which, as many members have pointed out today, have consequences. The parties mentioned in the report and, indeed, the members who are speaking in the chamber today will have very different perspectives on why that is the case and what the response should be, but I think that we are united in our conclusions that Scotland's prisons face a public health emergency—one that is driven by trauma, inequality, mental health deficits and evolving drug markets.

Our report found that drug use in prisons was widespread and that substance misuse in Scotland's prisons is entwined with overcrowding, workforce pressures, mental ill health, organised crime and regime instability. The figures underline that reality. Between 2012 and 2023, 50 drug misuse deaths occurred in custody. Sue Webber said that, in 2024 alone, 64 people died in prison. That is a 60 per cent increase on the previous year. The Prison Officers Association Scotland—POAS—told the committee that, since 2015, drug recoveries have increased by 80 per cent and weapon finds by 181 per cent. The evidence that it supplied for the debate shows that nearly 40 per

cent of prisoners report using illegal drugs while in custody. Those are not isolated statistics, and they describe a custodial environment under sustained strain.

The committee heard about synthetic drugs, which Elena Whitham mentioned, creating volatility and unpredictability. We heard about organised crime adapting supply routes, including through drones, which the governor of Perth prison recently described as “public enemy number one”.

We heard about the operational consequences of episodes related to the management of offender at risk due to any substance—MORS—policy and hospital transfers. The POAS survey has some significant input in that regard, which we should all be aware of.

We agree that access to treatment and support is unsatisfactory, as are the levels of continuity of care for people leaving prison. Specifically, our report explored the long waiting times that offenders experience for mental health assessments, shortages of specialist staff and frequent disruption to services, all of which limit the provision of effective care.

We also heard from prison officers, who raised concerns about exposure to drug fumes, the practical operation of the MORS policy, training, and the physical and psychological demands placed on staff—and, of course, the fact is that these are the people who have to deal with deaths in custody. Their evidence must be taken really seriously, and their calls for action on PPE, investment and staffing levels need to be acted on.

I am pleased that the committee's report does not frame the issue solely as a security or criminal problem, nor does it frame it solely as a public health problem. It is both, as the convener succinctly set out. We made many important recommendations, including on the need for improved national leadership and co-ordination, and on the implementation of medication assisted treatment standards across the prison estate. That is why I welcome much of the Scottish Government's initial response, which acknowledges many of the pressures identified in the report. The response sets out work that is under way, including implementation of the target operating model, recovery initiatives, regime reviews and work around purposeful activity and family contact. It includes commitments to publish the alcohol and drugs strategic plan in March 2026, to develop and publish national standards for throughcare support over the next two years and to continue the roll-out and implementation of the MAT standards across the secure estate.

That activity is noted, but I speak for the committee when I say that what is key—and is absolutely the committee's focus—is the

outcomes of those interventions. A future Parliament must see deaths in custody reduce, drug-related hospital transfers decrease and access to treatment that is consistently proportionate to need. Further, purposeful activity must be protected in practice, not only in principle. Importantly, staff safety concerns, particularly around exposure and implementation of the MORS policy, must be understood and formally reviewed, and maximum protections must be put in place. On all those issues and more, the committee's position is that our Parliament in the future must be able to assess measurable change, with full, honest transparency that enables scrutiny of impact, not only process.

Members across the chamber have rightly spoken about trauma, inequality and mental health. The report addresses those drivers directly and demands firm, concrete action, but it also recognises that recovery cannot take root in an environment of instability. Prevention cannot succeed where regimes are repeatedly disrupted, and staff cannot deliver safe, effective custody if they feel unprotected.

As a committee, we have made 50 recommendations across six themes. They are practical and evidence based and they reflect consensus that has been reached after extensive evidence gathering. Our report is comprehensive and coherent.

Today's debate is important, but what matters far more is what follows it. When members in the next session of Parliament consider the issues, they must look for evidence that harm has reduced, that safety has improved and that custody in Scotland is delivering the rehabilitation that we need to see in practice. That is the standard that the committee has set and it is the standard to which the Parliament must be held.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the substance misuse in prisons inquiry, on behalf of the Criminal Justice Committee. I will allow a moment or two for members on the front benches to organise themselves.

Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2026

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-20733, in the name of Ivan McKee, on the Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2026. I would be grateful if members who wish to speak in the debate could press their request-to-speak button now.

16:57

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): The motion for today's debate on the Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2026 seeks the Parliament's approval of the guaranteed allocations of revenue funding to individual local authorities for 2026-27. It also seeks agreement to the allocation of additional funding for 2025-26, which has been identified since the equivalent order in 2025 was approved on 27 February 2025.

For context, the average real-terms increase in the resource block grant is only 0.5 per cent per annum across the spending review period, which falls far short of what is required in the current fiscal landscape. The capital block grant reduces in real terms by 0.3 per cent by 2029-30. That is simply not enough to change the difficult fiscal position that we face, which means that tough choices on transformation and efficiencies are required to balance demands for public spending within our funding constraints.

The 2026-27 Scottish budget that the Parliament passed yesterday is a budget that delivers opportunity for Scotland by investing in families, public services and the economy while continuing to build a fairer, greener and more prosperous future.

The Scottish budget delivers record funding of £15.7 billion to councils in 2026-27, by providing revenue funding of more than £15 billion and almost £0.7 billion of support for capital expenditure. The 2026-27 local government finance settlement provides a real-terms increase compared with the position in 2025-26, as the Accounts Commission and the Scottish Parliament information centre have confirmed.

Over the longer term, the total local government finance settlement has increased by £5.4 billion, or 52 per cent, between 2016-17 and 2026-27. That is a real-terms increase of almost 10 per cent, despite UK Government austerity measures.

The outcome of the Scottish budget provides clear evidence of our commitment to the fiscal framework between the Scottish Government and local government. More frequent and meaningful

budget engagement has been fundamental in making the decisions that underpin the budget, including providing full flexibility for council tax. The budget also baselined a further £773 million of funding, which takes the total funding that has been consolidated into the core general revenue grant since the Verity house agreement was signed in 2023 to almost £2.3 billion.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): What does the cabinet secretary say to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, which argues that many of the baselined funds still come with clear requirements to deliver on specific national priorities of the Scottish Government?

Shona Robison: Many of those specific national priorities are exactly the things that we, as ministers, are asked about in the chamber by Craig Hoy, his colleagues and others. That conundrum has members coming here to demand local government flexibility but then asking us about, and holding us to account on, delivery in areas that are the responsibility of local government. However, the direction of travel is towards further baselining of funding, so we jointly published the fiscal framework in October 2025. We continue to work with COSLA to develop the assurance and accountability framework—that goes some way to answering Craig Hoy’s point; it is about assurance but also accountability for delivery, which is critical for further substantive baselining of funding.

It is important to note that the total funding package for local government is already finalised, since the Budget (Scotland) (No 5) Bill was passed yesterday. Today’s debate simply seeks the Parliament’s approval for the distribution of that agreed total funding to individual local authorities.

The Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2026 will ensure that funding for local government will increase by 3.4 per cent compared with the equivalent order last year. Those figures are, of course, different from the ones that were outlined in the budget statement, not only as a consequence of the additional £20 million that I confirmed at stage 1 of this year’s budget bill process but due to the additional funding for employer national insurance contributions that was added during the equivalent process last year.

It is important that comparisons of budgets are made on a like-for-like basis. The order for 2026-27 will provide a real-terms increase in the local government finance settlement of 1.1 per cent compared with the position on the order for 2025-26—I am comparing order with order, and not budget with budget, just in case Craig Hoy is not following the detail.

The order that is before the Parliament seeks approval for the distribution and payment of £14.7

billion of the revenue total of £15 billion, with the balance made up mainly of specific grant funding, which is administered separately. That £14.7 billion is the combination of the general revenue grant, which amounts to more than £11.2 billion, and the distributable amount of non-domestic rates income, which has been set at almost £3.5 billion.

A further £104 million of revenue funding remains, which local authorities will be notified about once the distribution has been discussed and agreed with COSLA and included for approval in the local government finance order in 2027. That figure includes the £20 million of additional funding that was announced at stage 1 of this year’s budget bill process. Specific revenue funding of almost £222 million is also paid directly by the relevant policy areas, under separate legislation.

The Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2026 also seeks approval for more than £365 million of changes to funding allocations for 2025-26, and the full list of changes can be found in the report on the 2026 order.

I turn to council tax, which is set and administered by individual local authorities. We have provided full flexibility in setting rates for 2026-27, as all political leaders in COSLA had asked us to do. We have also provided an additional £253 million of general revenue grant to ensure that restraint on rates setting is affordable, and our means-tested council tax reduction scheme continues to protect household budgets from the impact of the council tax rises.

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

Shona Robison: I would be delighted to take an intervention if I could get the time back.

The Presiding Officer: You can.

Craig Hoy: I am sorry—I did not mean to press the button.

Shona Robison: Oh, that is such a shame. I was hoping that there would be an intervention.

I should also stress that council tax is lower in Scotland than everywhere else. Although there are differences between Scotland and England in how council tax works, I note that the average council tax bill in Scotland in 2025-26 was £344 less than the average bill in England.

Craig Hoy: If, as the cabinet secretary says, this is a reasonable settlement, why did Scottish National Party-run North Ayrshire Council yesterday propose a 12 per cent increase in council tax?

Shona Robison: To be accurate, the council tax that the council then set was 8.5 per cent.

I am really glad that Craig Hoy intervened, because it gives me the opportunity to draw attention to something. It is of course up to individual local authorities to set council tax, but I note that the only councils so far to set a council tax rate in double figures are—guess what?—Tory-led Aberdeenshire Council and Tory-led Moray Council. Those are the only councils that are in double figures. The Tories come here demanding tax cuts, but some of the highest tax rises happen where they are in power and have responsibility.

Craig Hoy: They are rural areas.

Shona Robison: There are other rural authorities that do not have double-figure increases.

I must move on. The Government recognises the financial challenges that local authorities in Scotland—indeed, the whole public sector—are facing. We accept those. The fiscal constraints that we share emphasise the urgent need to focus on improving the delivery of public services that are designed around the needs and interests of the people and communities of Scotland. The budget bill that the Parliament passed yesterday ensures that the total funding from the Scottish Government to local government next year will be increased both in cash terms and in real terms. The order confirms the distribution to individual councils, and the proposals reflect the crucial role that local authorities and their employees continue to play in our communities.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2026 [draft] be approved.

17:07

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): As I rise to speak to this year's local government finance order, I cannot but reflect on the parlous position that this SNP Government has put councils of all political persuasions in by the decisions that it has taken. Right across Scotland, the financial position that councils face is dire and set to worsen. Red lights are flashing on risk registers right across the country.

The order allocates funding to Scotland's 32 councils and sets the financial limits within which council services must operate. Unfortunately, given the severity of the financial position that local government faces, we cannot support the order this evening.

Shona Robison: I want to ensure that Craig Hoy understands that, if the order were not to go through—as per the Tories voting against it and,

presumably, wanting everyone else to vote against it, too—councils would, as a consequence, be deprived of additional funding in this financial year and the next. Does Craig Hoy really support that position?

Craig Hoy: I suspect that Shona Robison's new-found friends in the Liberal Democrats and Labour will agree to the order, which is why we will abstain on a point of principle.

In the budget that was agreed to yesterday, the Government is yet again putting money in the wrong place. Councils are operating under sustained pressure following a decade of SNP underfunding, ring fencing and a centralised direction from the Scottish Government. Right across Scotland, demand continues to rise across core services while costs remain elevated, particularly in relation to social care, where even the late adjustments to the budget will not go anywhere near meeting the requirements as set out by COSLA.

The gap between what councils are expected to deliver and the resources that are available to them is becoming increasingly difficult to manage, and that will continue in the future. Let us make sure that it is on the record that it is the SNP Government's political choice to spend more on benefits and to starve local authorities of the resources that they require. Even if, in certain years, there are real-terms increases, the scale of the challenges and the costs that councils face exceed any above-inflation increases, which only rarely occur.

That is why, across Scotland, councils are grappling with the challenge of balancing their books. Take Dumfries and Galloway Council, for example, which has already been forced to make £130 million in savings in the past 15 years and now faces a further £35 million gap over the next three years. That is why, today, that SNP council made a proposal for an 8.5 per cent council tax increase, which was only voted down a matter of a few minutes ago. It is why, in Dumfries and Galloway, an SNP council proposed to remove the entire funding from its citizens advice bureau and remove Alzheimer Scotland's care services for those with dementia. It is why, in that SNP council's final draft proposal, there were cuts that would remove funding for campus cops, close small rural nurseries, reduce the number of deputy headteachers and scrap the pool of permanent supply teachers. That is the reality of the effects of SNP Government decisions on an SNP-run council.

The picture is no better elsewhere. For years, councils have been asked by the Government to do more with less. As I said earlier, yesterday, the SNP-run North Ayrshire Council would have

passed a budget forcing a 12 per cent increase in council tax, had numerous councillors not intervened. To go back to the cabinet secretary's earlier point about why certain rural councils—Conservative and otherwise—are having to look at double-digit increases, it is because the funding formula works against rural local authorities, particularly in relation to social care, and particularly those rural authorities in areas that do not vote for the SNP. In future years, future finance secretaries need to look seriously at not only the funding formula for rural local authorities but the national resource allocation committee—NRAC—formula for funding rural healthcare.

It is not only me who is critical of the Government's decisions. Professor David Bell has warned that the position of local government in Scotland is severe and will become critical. The Accounts Commission has reached similar conclusions: its recent report projects a combined funding gap of around £1 billion across Scotland's councils by 2027. That means significantly higher council tax increases in future years or more severe cuts in areas where core services and statutory functions have already been cut to the bone.

Let us not forget that local government's share of the Scottish Government budget is projected to reduce from 26.4 per cent to 24.8 per cent. That is a continuation of a decades-long trend in which council funding has been sacrificed for SNP Government priorities elsewhere. That is why we will not support this local government finance order.

Ultimately, the budget is about choices. We have said all the way through that we believe that the SNP Government has made the wrong choices. Now, and in the past, it is not living up to the obligations that it put into the Verity house agreement. I recognise that there will be more funds for certain councils in this package, but the package singularly fails to meet the challenges and the costs that councils will face. The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government delivers services that people across Scotland rely on every day. However, none of this funding will go near touching the sides once all those costs—particularly the labour costs—are met. That is why the Scottish Conservatives will not back this deeply deficient local government settlement. We encourage the Government to finally focus on rewarding local authorities and giving them the fair funding that they deserve and the Scottish Government's guarantee—which we will put in our manifesto—to deliver in future years.

17:13

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): The Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2026

may be presented by the Scottish Government as a success, but the reality for local authorities is far more troubling. Yes, the 2026-27 budget offers a modest real-terms uplift, but, in the context of the pressures that councils face after more than a decade of cuts, and financial trouble in the year ahead, the settlement does not meet the challenge that local government faces.

We will support the order tonight in order to make sure that funds reach councils, but COSLA leaders

"agreed that this year's settlement is a very poor settlement for local government".

Those are not my words but the words of SNP councillor Ricky Bell. If the SNP Government cannot persuade SNP councillors that this is a good deal for local government, I am not sure why we should believe it either.

COSLA projects a £392 million gap in 2025-26, rising cumulatively to £780 million by 2026-27. The Accounts Commission forecasts a further £528 million budget pressure in 2026-27. Those are structural gaps that threaten the sustainability of essential services. Health and social care partnerships are under severe strain, with funding gaps up 187 per cent since 2022-23. Despite repeated commitments, the Government has not fully funded its own real living wage policy in social care and in early years education. Workforce pressures are compounding the problem. A 1 per cent pay increase for local government costs £132 million, which means that a 3.5 per cent uplift exceeds the entire uncommitted funding in the budget. Councils cannot resolve recruitment challenges, invest in prevention or provide stability for staff under those conditions.

When those pressures are not met, councils are left with no choice but to raise council tax and charges simply to stand still. This is not reform—it is passing risk downwards to local taxpayers, while expecting services to deliver more with less.

The longer-term outlook is equally concerning. As Craig Hoy pointed out, local government's share of the Scottish budget will fall, from 26.4 per cent to 24.8 per cent, continuing an over-a-decade-long trend of squeezing local council budgets in real terms and deprioritising the services that they provide. The Institute for Fiscal Studies reports an average real-terms reduction of 2.1 per cent per year, which will amount to £472 million in total over the term of the spending review. Flat-cash projections place core services at risk and do not offer the credible assurances for the future that are needed for local government.

The consequences are already visible. If the SNP Government thinks that it is having trouble persuading SNP councillors, it should hear what people are saying on the doorstep right now about

the cuts to councils. Continued cuts to non-statutory services, particularly culture and leisure, undermine high-impact investment in health and wellbeing. The housing emergency and rising costs of temporary accommodation add further pressure. That impact is being felt by the most vulnerable—the people who rely on those local services every day—and by communities that see facilities being closed, ignored and abandoned, their roads deteriorate, their parks fall away and their libraries closed. They are talking about that on the doorstep just now when they are considering their vote.

This settlement does not empower local government—it leaves it exposed. Councils need proper investment in social care, workforce funding that matches pay commitments, sustainable capital support and a spending review that recognises local government as an equal partner in delivering national priorities and not as an area to squeeze every year. Until that happens, local government will continue to be asked to do the impossible—to protect front-line services while absorbing cuts. Scotland's communities deserve much better than managed decline.

17:18

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): The order may look technical, but it goes to the heart of whether councils can keep schools open, social care running, bins collected and community facilities functioning. Independent scrutiny has been clear that, even with the £15 billion of support and higher income from council tax and charges, councils face substantial and widening budget gaps. They are increasingly relying on reserves and one-off savings that cannot be repeated. Senior local government figures question whether the current model is sustainable.

The order provides the legal authority to distribute the general revenue grant and non-domestic rates, and it reflects some welcome progress, a modest real-terms uplift, more baseline funding and slightly less rigid ring fencing. However, it does not resolve the long-term pressures or the structural weaknesses of the system.

Two principles are central for the Scottish Greens—a genuine real-terms increase in flexible core funding, not managed decline, and far greater fiscal autonomy with a wider range of locally controlled taxes and charges to empower communities and sustain climate and nature spending. We recognise positive steps such as the visitor levy and higher council tax on second and holiday homes, which raise revenue and ease housing pressures from tourism and in rural areas but, taken together, they remain a patchwork of

add-ons and not the coherent and modern local tax system that Scotland requires.

The deeper problem is the heavy dependence on the central block grant. We describe councils as local government but, fiscally, they operate as delivery arms for decisions that are taken elsewhere. Our vision is for councils that raise more of their own income, shape the local economy and environmental outcomes and are clearly accountable to voters for their tax and spending choices.

That requires confronting the outdated council tax. Based on early 1990s valuations, the tax is widely recognised as being unfair. We need revaluation and a transition to a replacement that better reflects property values and, over time, land values, so that unearned gains feed back into the public services that make communities liveable.

We also need to have an honest debate about non-domestic rates. Although they are branded as a local tax, they are largely controlled nationally. If councils are to lead on a greener and more resilient economy, they must have the fiscal levers to reward low-carbon investment, deter pollution and support community enterprise.

These issues are not abstract. Decisions that are made in council chambers mean shorter library hours, reduced leisure and cultural provision, fewer youth workers and more stretched social care, yet all those services tackle inequality and underpin climate and nature action. Councils are told to transform simply to remain viable, but they cannot plan and invest properly on insecure year-to-year settlements.

The budget offers a small real-terms increase and some extra flexibility, but the warning is clear that, without structural reform, councils will remain under strain and struggle to invest in decarbonising buildings, modernising transport and reorganising and restoring our local environments. Approving the order will keep the system running for another year but will not fix it.

We will support the measures that protect the core grant, reduce unnecessary ring fencing and expand local revenue powers, but we will continue to press for deeper change, a fairer and greener replacement for council tax, genuine local control over business rates and a fiscal framework that moves Scotland closer to the European norm of empowered, largely self-financing local government.

Our constituents deserve councils that can plan beyond the next budget cycle, invest in prevention and lead on climate and nature, not institutions that are forced to manage decline. What must change is not the fabric of local services but the outdated way in which we fund them.

17:23

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD): I am going to stick to facts and figures today rather than some of the politics of local government funding, and I say that as a member of the Public Audit Committee. Last month, the Accounts Commission produced a report on wider local government financing that identified a £500 million budget gap in 2024. Essentially, that is the gap between what councils are spending and the funding settlement—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry—there is quite a lot of noise in the chamber; I wonder whether members would mind.

By 2025, that gap had risen to £640 million, and by 2027, it is expected to reach more than £1 billion. I suspect that the prospect looks even worse further down the road. The reduction in capital funding has led to many councils filling the gap through borrowing. It costs money to keep things running and to repair roads and buildings, and if the cash is not there, things will fall apart. Councils have therefore been using the powers that are available to them, which has led to an increase in debt of more than £2.5 billion in a single year alone. The current debt is more than £25 billion.

The problem is that councils are spending more than £1 billion a year simply to service the debt, when we would surely all agree that that money could be better spent on delivering front-line services. I mention that because Audit Scotland is clear in warning that councils risk becoming financially unsustainable, and we, in Parliament, should take that warning seriously, because that problem cannot be fixed in a single-year budget cycle.

Four things are true: councils' debts are increasing, their reserves are dwindling, costs are spiralling and demand is also rising. There are only three logical ways out of that mess. One is for central Government to rise to the challenge. We heard from the front bench that the Government is adamant that it is doing that, to the tune of more than £15 billion in the new financial year. That is claimed to be a 2 per cent real-terms increase, but COSLA has argued otherwise. I would like to see more information, but I am not in charge of the country's finances.

The second way to deal with the situation is that demand might fall, but that seems impossible. Some councils that are seeing depopulation have reasonably healthy working families and have businesses that pay business rates, but many councils are seeing soaring rises in complex care needs and growing demand from elderly populations, and that is particularly true of rural and island communities, where the cost of maintaining services is far higher

The third way to solve the problem is the unholy of holies, which is to increase council tax. I will mention something that is an important part of the wider context: the £144 million that was given to councils in the 2024 budget to meet the council tax freeze was a one-off, but that followed 10 years of council tax freezes. That was a central Government policy. There was, in effect, a political decision to have a giveaway—members can call it whatever they like. The Government sold it as a huge tax break and something that many families would benefit from, as I am sure many did, but COSLA and others sold it as a massive funding cut. Councils are still paying the price for that lengthy freeze, which is why huge council tax hikes that none of us wanted have occurred in recent years.

In the short time that I have, I will address the bigger problem that we must grapple with. We must be honest in saying that the council tax system is broken. Everybody knows it, but no one has had the guts to fix it, because there will be winners and losers if we move on from the 1991 valuations. Reform was promised two decades ago, not two years ago, but which Government in its right mind would tax people out of voting for it? Margaret Thatcher learned that the hard way in Scotland.

Funding for local government is not nice to have—it is a must have. When councils cut things, people feel that in their communities. Such cuts lead to a feeling of decline and to failure, because cuts equal anger and anger leads to apathy. Most folk that we meet on the doorstep do not really care about the budget macroeconomics that we debate, and they do not care who funds which service. They just want things to work, and, when things do not work, they turn towards angry politics.

The antidote to that is the proper funding of local services. If we do not support the motion, councils will be forced to manage their budgets based on last year's settlement, which I think would be irresponsible of us, but there is a long-term problem that needs to be fixed and that will need a grown-up conversation in the next session of Parliament. The question is whether the next Parliament will be up to that challenge. Only time will tell.

The Presiding Officer: I call the minister to wind up the debate.

17:28

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): The Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2026, which is before us for parliamentary approval today, means that, next year, the Scottish Government will provide local authorities with a total funding package that is

worth more than £15.7 billion, delivering a real-terms increase despite the challenging circumstances that were outlined in the cabinet secretary's opening statement.

There is also further Scottish Government support of more than £795 million outwith the local government finance settlement. That figure includes the attainment Scotland fund, the schools for the future programme, area-based schemes, regeneration programmes and city deal funds that are paid to local authorities, which bring the Scottish Government's total investment to almost £16.5 billion.

SPICe articulated that very clearly. It said that the 2026-27 local government revenue settlement "sees a real terms increase of ... 2.9%".

Likewise, the Accounts Commission said that the revenue funding of around £15 billion represents a real-terms increase of 3 per cent.

The Scottish Government has listened to the requests made by COSLA and others and has acknowledged that a council's decision on tax provides important financial and administrative accountability to the local electorate. As well as accounting for local needs, we expect councils to consider the impact of council tax rises on local people and their household finances.

We heard some interesting contributions to the debate. From Ariane Burgess and Jamie Greene, we heard some considered thinking about the challenges that we face and what the future might hold in addressing them. The Government certainly recognises the fiscal constraints and will continue to work with COSLA and others to implement our public service reform strategy, focusing on a shift to prevention and integration of service delivery at a local level while driving further efficiency.

However, we heard Craig Hoy clutching at straws and calling for changes to the funding formula, which is, of course, agreed with COSLA on behalf of all 32 local authorities. The Scottish Government is always open to proposals to change the formula, but they must come through COSLA first.

Bearing in mind that the overall quantum was confirmed when the Budget (Scotland) (No 5) Bill was passed by Parliament, Opposition members should note that, as the cabinet secretary pointed out, failure to approve the order would result in Scotland's local authorities and, as a consequence, all our local communities being deprived of additional funding in this financial year and next year. Conservative members should bear that in mind when they decide how to vote this evening.

I encourage the Parliament to unanimously support the Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2026.

Point of Order

17:31

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. You will be aware that I wrote to you to advise you of this point of order at 16:49. I appreciate that that was short notice.

The issue at hand concerns the vote on the Scottish Parliament (Recall of Members) Bill at decision time on Tuesday this week. Members who were here will recall that I appeared on screen at 18:35:26 to advise that my app had frozen my phone, and I raised a point of order to advise that I wished to vote no on the bill. Having listened back, I note that my voice was loud and clear, and you advised that my vote would be recorded.

I was then surprised to be approached by the SNP whip to be asked why I had voted yes. I explained the position and confirmed my actions, and I wrote to the Presiding Officer mailbox at 21:22 the same day, setting out the position. Until 17:05 this evening, I had not had a response. The very late response that I received makes an apology, which I fully accept. However, it claims that I voted yes. Presiding Officer, that is categorically not true. I was unable to access the app.

I want to make it clear that I have been known—it is fair to say this—to break my party whip, but I hope that all members know that, should I do so, I will fully own that fact and be entirely honest with them. I fear that this situation has called my integrity into question, which is why I am raising this point of order. I am also concerned that this could happen to any member and that, where a vote is on a knife edge, which this one was not, it could have a material impact on our democracy.

Presiding Officer, I ask that the relevant authorities look into the matter with urgency. Please take this as my setting the record straight in terms of my reputation. Thank you.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Thank you, Ms Thomson. I will certainly make sure that the relevant officials are in contact with you and that the matter is thoroughly investigated.

Decision Time

17:34

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S6M-20893, in the name of Kenneth Gibson, on behalf of the Finance and Public Administration Committee, on the cost-effectiveness of Scottish public inquiries, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the findings and recommendations in the Finance and Public Administration Committee's 14th Report, 2025 (Session 6), Report on the Cost-effectiveness of Scottish Public Inquiries (SP Paper 943).

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-20875, in the name of Audrey Nicoll, on behalf of the Criminal Justice Committee, on the substance misuse in prisons inquiry, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the findings and recommendations in the Criminal Justice Committee's 1st Report, 2026 (Session 6), Inquiry into the harm caused by substance misuse in Scottish Prisons (SP Paper 956).

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-20733, in the name of Ivan McKee, on the draft Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2026, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

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

17:35

Meeting suspended.

17:37

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We come to the vote on motion S6M-20733, in the name of Ivan McKee, on the draft Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2026. Members should cast their votes now.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)

Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Ind)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Ind)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)

Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Abstentions

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

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-20733, in the name of Ivan McKee, on the draft Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2026, is: For 87, Against 0, Abstentions 25.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2026 [draft] be approved.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Meeting closed at 17:39.

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