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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 16 January 2025

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

General Question Time

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

Changing Places Toilet Fund

1. **Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the development of the changing places toilet fund. (S6O-04201)

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): I provided an update to Parliament on the changing places toilet fund during Jeremy Balfour’s members’ business debate on the subject on 11 December. I also provided answers on 6 January to five written parliamentary questions that were submitted by Mr O’Kane on the issue. As I have said previously, I will provide a further update once arrangements have been finalised, and subject to parliamentary approval of the Scottish Government’s budget bill.

Paul O’Kane: I thank the minister for that answer and the previous answers to which she refers.

According to PAMIS—Promoting a More Inclusive Society—when the funding was initially announced in 2021, the average cost of equipment for a changing places toilet ranged from £12,000 to £17,000. The minister will be aware that significant rises in construction costs and the costs of equipment over many years have vastly increased the overall cost of building a changing places toilet.

The Government has caused delays. There has been repeated reprofiling of the fund, which has caused exasperation for disabled people, as the minister has heard and well knows, and it is clear that projects across the country now cost more money and that the fund has been devalued.

Has the Government done any analysis of how many projects it would expect £10 million to fund? How many fewer projects might there be as a result of the delays around the issue?

Maree Todd: We have done a great deal of work on the issue over a number of years, and I am absolutely delighted to have seen such good progress in Scotland. The number of changing places toilets in Scotland has risen from 25 to 269,

which means that Scotland has the highest number of changing places toilets per head in the United Kingdom. That is an increase of almost 30 per cent compared to 2019, when the Scottish Government introduced the new Scottish building regulations, so it is not the case that we have made no progress in relation to that funding.

The member will be aware that we are operating in an extremely challenging financial context. We had to make difficult decisions collectively and flex to respond to changing circumstances. However, on 11 December, I was pleased to be able to confirm that work is on-going to establish the number of projects that we have and how the fund will be distributed and profiled, and the funding will be in place next year.

Ministers’ support for the investment has been solid and steadfast. The best thing that the member can do to ensure that that investment becomes a reality is to vote for the budget.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): Changing places toilets make a real difference to disabled people and their families, and we would all like to see further provision of them. Will the minister outline a wee bit more about how the Scottish Government will ensure that the CPT fund is designed to meet the needs of those who need it most?

Maree Todd: I recognise the level of cross-party interest and support for changing places toilets. During the debate on 11 December, members from every party, including Stephen Kerr, Stuart McMillan and Paul O’Kane, all committed their support for more provision of the facilities.

We are working closely with PAMIS to develop the fund so that it takes account of users’ needs. PAMIS has significant technical expertise and experience of supporting local projects across Scotland. I updated the cross-party group on changing places toilets on 14 November, when I sought initial views on the fund criteria. I would like to continue that engagement and to learn lessons from similar funding schemes. We are able to learn a great deal from what has happened in England. It is clear that the fund will need to be flexible enough to take account of different local circumstances across Scotland.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): What meetings has the minister had with third sector organisations other than PAMIS in the past six months regarding the setting up of the changing places toilet fund?

Maree Todd: I am afraid that I do not have that information to hand. I can certainly write to the member and let him know what engagement the Government has had on the fund over the past six months.

Child Poverty

2. Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP):

To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update regarding the steps that it is taking to tackle child poverty. (S6O-04202)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Eradicating child poverty remains the top priority for the Scottish Government. By the end of June, we will publish an annual progress report detailing action taken across 2024-25. The Scottish budget for 2025-26 outlines how we will continue to drive progress, including through continued investment in our Scottish child payment, early learning and childcare, free bus travel, and the expansion of free school meals. We have also committed to spending £3 million to develop the systems to effectively scrap the impact of the two-child cap in 2026, which the Child Poverty Action Group estimates could lift 15,000 children out of poverty.

Jackie Dunbar: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer. It is clear that the Scottish Government is throwing the full weight of the Scottish budget behind its priority mission to eradicate child poverty. However, in spite of the remarkable work that is under way, it is also evident that, under devolution, Scotland has one hand tied behind its back, while Westminster's priorities lie elsewhere.

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): Absolute rubbish.

Jackie Dunbar: Can the cabinet secretary outline how much of its devolved budget the Scottish Government anticipates it will have to commit to mitigating regressive United Kingdom Government policies in 2025-26 in relation to tackling child poverty, despite Labour's promise of change?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I had difficulty hearing some of Jackie Dunbar's supplementary question, due to a combination of laughter and groans from Labour members—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Members!

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Let me explain the details in the Scottish Government budget. I say to Richard Leonard that, under devolution, we plan to spend more than £210 million mitigating regressive UK Labour Government policies—an increase of £56 million since the Conservatives were in power. We are continuing to invest in the Scottish welfare fund and are committing more than £99 million for discretionary housing payments, mitigating the bedroom tax and the benefit cap. Despite Labour's promise of change, it has delivered deeper austerity, so the Scottish Government will go further: we will mitigate the UK Labour Government's winter fuel payment cut and

deliver the systems to mitigate the Labour two-child cap.

Swimming (Children and Young People)

3. **Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what estimate it has made of the number of children and young people leaving school unable to swim. (S6O-04203)

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): The Scottish Government believes that every child should be given the opportunity to learn to swim. It is a life skill that can save lives. Swimming lessons are not delivered nationally as part of the school curriculum and there is currently no requirement to report a child's swimming ability, either locally or nationally. As a result, we are unable to provide an estimate of the number of pupils who leave school unable to swim. However, we will continue to work with sportscotland, Scottish Swimming and various local and national partners to develop interventions and approaches to provide opportunities for children to become confident, safer and competent swimmers.

Neil Bibby: Community access to swimming has been massively reduced through pool closures and cuts to opening hours. Costs are rising for families, too. Not every school has a pool and it is getting harder to go swimming outwith school.

We know from Scottish Swimming that, some time ago, up to 40 per cent of primary school-aged children left school unable to swim. That should be a serious concern for us all, including the Scottish Government. Next week, the Parliament will consider Scottish Swimming's petition concerning the proposed closure of school pools, including five in Dundee.

Does the minister accept that that all makes it more difficult to ensure that primary school-aged children have the opportunity to learn how to swim and the basics of water safety? What is the Government's plan to make sure that they can do so?

Maree Todd: I absolutely recognise the challenges that Neil Bibby has described. I remind members that I live in the Highlands, where children often attend school at a very long distance from their local pool. However, Highland Council is dedicated to ensuring that children can learn to swim at school.

Neil Bibby asked about leisure facilities. We understand the challenging financial circumstances that local authorities are facing in relation to maintaining and operating sports and leisure facilities. That is due, in part, to rising energy costs. We have repeatedly called on the United Kingdom Government to use all the powers

at its disposal to tackle the cost of living crisis and to provide appropriate energy bill relief to leisure facilities. Swimming is a very energy-dense activity. It is vital that all avenues are explored to ensure that, where possible, local clubs and communities have access to sport and leisure facilities.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills and I will continue to work on a cross-portfolio basis to ensure that we maximise the opportunity for children to learn to swim at school.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Swimming is a life skill. This is a safety issue. Swimming is a positive health activity at a time when children's physical and mental health is worse than it has ever been. If someone cannot swim, they are excluded from participation, which exacerbates inequalities.

As I have continually said, we need to increase opportunities to be active. All primary schools should have access to free swimming lessons. Why does the Scottish Government keep digging its heels in? Surely, it must be running out of excuses by now?

Maree Todd: Brian Whittle and I are very aligned on the issues around the value of sport and exercise for both physical and mental health. He alluded to the opportunities that arise from swimming for children with disabilities to be included. It is a superb sport for people to get involved in. That is why the Government is so committed to ensuring that opportunities are available for children in schools. As I said, we will continue to work with sportscotland, Scottish Swimming and local authorities, and on a cross-portfolio basis across the Government in order to ensure that we maximise those opportunities.

Budget 2025-26 (Drug and Alcohol Services)

4. Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how its draft budget 2025-26 will support the delivery of drug and alcohol services across Scotland. (S6O-04204)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): The total funding proposed for alcohol and drug services, including health board baseline funding, is over £150 million in 2025-26. That includes maintaining £112 million of funding for alcohol and drug partnerships; continuing to fund grass-roots organisations through £13 million of funding via the Corra Foundation; supporting a wide range of activity, including residential rehabilitation; and making £2.3 million available to support the Thistle centre, the safer drug consumption facility.

That adds to our significant investment over the past four years and means that I am confident that

we will meet the national mission's commitment to £250 million of additional funding over five years.

Audrey Nicoll: During recent engagement with general practitioner practices, tackling alcohol harm was raised as an unrelenting health challenge. They expressed strong support for minimum unit pricing and other measures to tackle alcohol harm. However, they also expressed some concern about a potential shift in the balance away from tackling alcohol harm—a point highlighted in the recent Audit Scotland review of alcohol and drug services. That is not to diminish the urgency of the work to reduce drug harm.

In addition to previously announced efforts, such as a review of the evidence on alcohol marketing, increasing MUP and developing a service specification for alcohol and drug services, what assurance can the cabinet secretary give that the draft Scottish budget will support the action necessary to reduce the level of alcohol-related health and social harms and reduce the number of people who die as a result of alcohol?

Neil Gray: I want to reassure Audrey Nicoll and other colleagues across the Parliament that we remain committed to and focused on tackling both issues. We remain committed to tackling alcohol-related harm on an equal footing with harm caused by drugs. Our forecast spend in 2025-26 of more than £150 million is for both alcohol and drug services, and our substantial investment supports services that are often delivered in tandem at the front line.

In addition, national mission initiatives have made improvements in treatment for alcohol as well as drugs. For example, our substantial investment in residential rehabilitation is benefiting people with both alcohol and drug dependency. Moreover, the forthcoming alcohol treatment guidelines will provide support for alcohol treatment that is similar to the medication-assisted treatment standard for drugs.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): The Audit Scotland report that was published towards the end of last year states, in its findings, that the

"Government's increased focus on drug harm through its National Mission programme is shifting the balance of attention from, and effort on, tackling alcohol harm."

The Government has said that this is a twin public health emergency, and we accept that. However, sometimes the Government tends to set out a semi-complete list of disjointed actions relating to alcohol harm prevention. We need clearer actions and more urgency. Through its 2025-26 budget, is the Scottish Government considering ring fencing funding for improving access to alcohol treatment services?

Neil Gray: I will continue to work with alcohol and drug partnerships to ensure that, as Carol

Mochan asks, the services are available to provide support for addressing both alcohol and drug use.

We are also taking action this year with Public Health Scotland to provide an evidence-based picture of what further preventative actions we can take on alcohol advertising. When the report comes back from Public Health Scotland, we will consider what further preventative measures we can take on that.

Through the interventions that we are making with alcohol and drug partnerships, the work that we are doing on minimum unit pricing and the work that we are doing to reduce the impact that alcohol advertising has, we are taking as many steps as possible. If Carol Mochan wishes to suggest further work, I am more than happy to engage with her on that.

NHS Dumfries and Galloway (Delayed Discharge)

5. Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government when it last discussed plans to reduce delayed discharge with NHS Dumfries and Galloway. (S6O-04205)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): The collaborative response and assurance group that I chair jointly with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has met weekly with leaders from across the health and social care system, including from Dumfries and Galloway, since last June. Our most recent meeting was on Monday. We have been working to understand the challenges faced by areas with high levels of delay, including Dumfries and Galloway, and to support them to deliver the changes that will improve people's journey from hospital to home or the care setting that is right for them.

Our planned budget for 2025-26 will invest a further £200 million to reduce waiting list backlogs, improve capacity and remove the barriers that keep some patients in hospital longer than is necessary.

Colin Smyth: A decade ago, the Scottish Government promised to eradicate delayed discharges. Since then, 193,000 bed days have been lost to delayed discharge in NHS Dumfries and Galloway, and the latest figures show that that number is rising yet again. It is no wonder that, today, the Royal College of Nursing published devastating testimony of nurses who are having to care for patients on trolleys because there are no spare hospital beds. When will the Government finally deliver on its promise to eradicate delayed discharge, or is that just another broken Scottish National Party health promise?

Neil Gray: I will address two elements of that situation.

First, the intervention that we seek to take in the budget is intended directly to address the issues that we face with scheduled care or waiting lists and to address the flow through the system by providing capacity in social care and primary care in order to reduce hospital occupancy and length of stay. Where we have worked with local systems in the health service and social care to reduce length of stay and hospital occupancy and to address pre-delay discharge from hospital, that has been successful, and that is the basis on which we will continue to intervene. I encourage Colin Smyth to support the finance that is being provided to ensure that that can happen through the budget interventions.

Of course, I regret the situation that was raised in the Royal College of Nursing's report. I addressed that on "Good Morning Scotland" this morning. We obviously wish to avoid that situation, not only for patients but for staff, and to ensure that we have a system that meets the needs of both groups.

Bovaer

6. Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on farmers giving the methane-reducing feed additive Bovaer to their cattle. (S6O-04206)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): Bovaer is a methane-suppressing feed product that has undergone a safety assessment by the Food Standards Agency and Food Standards Scotland as a feed additive for all ruminants involved in milk production and reproduction. It was authorised for use in Scotland in December 2023. Parallel regulations authorise Bovaer across Great Britain. That approval means that farmers in Scotland can use the additive if they choose to do so.

Kenneth Gibson: As the minister is aware, Bovaer is manufactured at DSM-Firmenich's plant, near my Dalry constituency office. Despite more than 58 studies on the product and its having been evaluated as being completely safe to use, Bovaer has been the focus of significant online misinformation. Studies also show no safety concerns for workers who handle the additive.

Does the minister agree that science, not social media, should govern our approach to food safety and that Bovaer, which is now routinely used across Europe, Australia and North America, has an important role to play in combating climate change?

Jim Fairlie: I agree with that understanding of our climate change. Kenneth Gibson makes an important point. Social media has been great for many things but, occasionally, it throws up misinformation that overtakes the reality of the

conversations and reasoned discussions that we need to have about the measures that we will take to tackle the challenges that we face. Research suggests that the appropriate use of methane-suppressing feed products—or MSFPs—such as Bovaer in livestock diets more generally plays an important role in helping us to reduce emissions from livestock production.

The Presiding Officer: I regret that we will not be able to take any further questions in this item. I remind members of the expectations regarding the length of questions and responses, because more concise questions and responses enable more members to participate.

That concludes general questions.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Royal College of Nursing Report

1. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): Today, Scotland's nurses have spoken. A damning report from the Royal College of Nursing lays bare our broken national health service. First-hand accounts from more than 500 Scottish nurses reveal a lack of dignity and privacy for patients who are stuck in corridors and side rooms. They describe scenes of chaos, patient safety being compromised due to a shortage of beds and a dangerous lack of medication and oxygen. It is page after page of shocking and desperate testimony.

One nurse said:

"It is degrading, undignified, and at times unsafe for patients who are already angry due to the long waits, sometimes waiting in"

emergency departments

"for over 35 hours to go to a ward, just to be put in the corridor. The system is broken."

Does John Swinney agree with Scotland's nurses that Scotland's NHS is broken?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The first thing that I want to do is to apologise to any individual who has had an unsatisfactory experience with the care that they have received and with the congestion in hospitals.

I commend, as I did last week, NHS staff for their unremitting commitment to ensuring that the system is able to deliver as best it can in the face of unprecedented demand. I recounted to the Parliament last week the enormity of the increase in flu cases that have been wrestled with in the NHS over the past few weeks.

The Government is entirely focused on ensuring that we meet the needs of patients and that we support staff in undertaking the essential work that they do, given the enormous increase in demand that we have faced in recent weeks.

Russell Findlay: Although apologies are welcome, as is commending staff, change is required. The report confirms that hospital overcrowding is at dangerous levels, with one nurse saying:

"I work in what is supposed to be a 32 bed ... assessment unit, recently we have had ... between 60-70 patients at any one time."

We know the root cause of that: it is due to record levels of delayed discharge, which the Scottish National Party Government promised to eradicate 10 years ago.

However, SNP ministers now do not even seem to accept reality. This morning, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care denied that patients were regularly treated in corridors. In response, Colin Poolman of the Royal College of Nursing Scotland disagreed, saying that that has now been “normalised”. Who is right—Scotland’s nurses or the SNP health secretary?

The First Minister: The health secretary and I are fully aware of the prevailing circumstances in our hospital system just now. The health secretary has seen it with his own eyes during the visits that he has undertaken, and I saw it when I spent the evening of 4 January in the emergency department of Edinburgh royal infirmary, where I observed the enormous commitment of staff in the face of unprecedented demand.

I remind the Parliament that the level of flu cases that we have been experiencing and the level of hospital admissions are the highest that they have been since records began in 2010; they are formidably higher than the demand that we faced last winter. There is unprecedented demand in the system, and I commend health service staff for managing through these difficult experiences.

The measures that the Government has put in place to tackle delayed discharge, to ensure that we have better flow navigation in our hospitals and to ensure that same-day treatment services are available are some of the actions that the health secretary has taken to address the situation.

Russell Findlay: The fact that the health secretary has seen it with his own eyes but continues to deny it is absolutely damning. It illustrates a stark disconnect between what SNP politicians think about the NHS and the reality of what nurses are saying.

Here is a reality check. Some nurses are being forced to quit in desperation and disgust. A nurse with 10 years’ service said:

“People are dying as a result of ambulances being held at hospitals”.

Another said:

“It’s disgusting and we are on our knees but nothing seems to be getting done.”

Another said:

“It breaks my heart at the pathetic care that we are able to give.”

The situation cannot continue. It is absolutely heartbreaking. When will the Government bring forward a serious plan to fix Scotland’s NHS?

The First Minister: I assure the Parliament that, despite the enormous increase in flu cases that we have seen, with that figure increasing to the highest level on record, a reduction in the number of flu cases is now prevailing in the NHS.

I also want to assure patients of the steps that the Government has taken to ensure that we have the support in place to address the demand that exists, which, as I said in my earlier answer, comes from the same-day emergency care services, the provision of flow navigation centres, the provision of frailty units in hospitals and the development of the hospital at home system, which has significantly enhanced our ability to care for patients and to ensure that individuals are supported in the right context and in the right circumstances.

Mr Findlay asked me about reforms. Reforms were undertaken in the redesign of urgent care programme in December 2020. The independent evaluation of that programme has demonstrated that the patient experience is that the redesign of urgent care has resulted in shorter waits for many patients, as a consequence of the expansion of emergency care that we have put in place—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Members.

The First Minister: —and the expansion of NHS 24 services, which was a key recommendation of the redesign of urgent care programme.

What has helped us in this incredibly difficult period has been the fact that members of the public have followed the advice that the Government has issued, which is to secure the right care in the right place. That has reduced the level of demand that is prevalent in some emergency settings and has enabled us to provide the support that individuals require. That is what we have to do to navigate through periods of increased demand, such as the one that we have just experienced.

Russell Findlay: I really do not know where to begin with that answer. To say that what is in the RCN report is to do with the fact that it covers a period in which we faced a flu epidemic, rather than inaction, is absolutely preposterous.

Patients expect and deserve dignity and decency from the NHS, but nurses say that they cannot provide the treatment that is needed. I would like the First Minister to please listen to what nurses are saying. I have read the report, and I encourage him to do so. One nurse describes being

“disgusted and ashamed that this was the best we could offer a 91 year old lady.”

Another describes being “embarrassed and ashamed” at leaving a 100-year-old woman on a trolley in discomfort.

Another said:

“We are putting Scottish Government targets before patients and it needs to stop.”

What does John Swinney have to say to the nurses who are being let down and to the patients who are having to suffer such disgusting and degrading treatment?

The First Minister: I cited the flu rates because they were at their peak during the period in which the RCN survey was undertaken, which put the greatest burden on emergency care in the national health service. The evidence that I have put to the Parliament is directly related to the questions that Mr Findlay has put to me.

I accept and acknowledge the enormity of the pressure on the NHS. I have been completely candid with the Parliament about that over a number of weeks. As a consequence, we have been leading a process of supporting our territorial boards and the Scottish Ambulance Service. I know from the review call that I chaired last night that there has been a significant improvement in the delivery of healthcare in emergency situations as a consequence of the reduction in the number of flu cases that I have mentioned. I am grateful to members of the public for their co-operation in ensuring that they secure the right care in the right place, and I am profoundly grateful to staff for working so hard during an incredibly difficult and demanding period.

Mr Findlay asks what the public can expect of the Government. What the public can expect from me, as First Minister, is my unrelenting focus, working with the health secretary, on ensuring that we deliver the improvements and developments that will ensure that patients get the care that they require and that they are supported in receiving the care that is necessary to address their health circumstances at all times.

Royal College of Nursing Report

2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): Last week, I raised the case of Robert, a retired policeman from Lanarkshire, who spent five and a half hours on the floor in accident and emergency before being given morphine and a bed. The First Minister apologised but, as usual, he then used hard-working national health service staff as his political shield.

Today, the Royal College of Nursing has published a damning report that lays bare the impact that the crisis has on NHS patients and staff. One nurse said:

“I deliver care in inappropriate settings every single day all day. It deprives the patient of privacy and dignity, it forces us to go against our codes and training.”

That is shameful. Last week, John Swinney apologised to patients, and he has just done that again today. Will he now apologise to the NHS staff that he and his Scottish National Party Government are failing every day?

The First Minister (John Swinney): One key point that I have tried to stress in all my answers to Parliament on this question is the importance of ensuring that I address as they are the circumstances that we face in our hospital system. That is one reason why I went to the emergency department at Edinburgh royal infirmary on 4 January to see with my own eyes the pressure that was being recounted to me by health service leaders over a number of weeks when I was engaged in trying to address the situation.

I think that, throughout the United Kingdom, ministers all accept the pressures that are on the national health service because of winter circumstances. I have recounted to Parliament the enormous increase in flu cases and I will put those numbers on the parliamentary record. Hospital admissions almost doubled from 708 in the week ending 15 December to 1,382 in the week ending 22 December, and they increased further to 1,596 in the week ending 29 December, which is when the RCN survey was undertaken.

I acknowledge the reality of the pressures—the intense pressures—on the national health service. We have increased staff and consultant numbers and have expanded the capacity of NHS 24, as a review of urgent care called on us to do back in 2020. The Government will continue taking all the necessary steps to ensure that our staff are as well supported as they can be in dealing with the intense pressures that prevail within the national health service in winter.

Anas Sarwar: John Swinney wants to pretend that we have only a winter crisis in the NHS; the reality is that we have a permanent crisis in the NHS on John Swinney’s watch.

The RCN report details the human cost of John Swinney and Neil Gray’s incompetence. Nurses are delivering care in overcrowded or unsuitable places such as corridors, cupboards and even car parks every day. Staff are caring for multiple patients in a single corridor, where they are unable to access oxygen, cardiac monitors and other life-saving equipment. Patients are going into cardiac arrest while in corridors, incontinent patients are left with no privacy and almost 90 per cent of nurses say that patient safety is being compromised. Nurses describe flu patients waiting in corridors next to vulnerable patients and having to discuss miscarriages with couples in overcrowded corridors.

One nurse said:

"I worked throughout Covid-19 and although was a horrendous experience this lack of care in the broken system is worse."

Is that not the deadly reality of the NHS on John Swinney and the SNP's watch?

The First Minister: No, it is not. What we are doing is focusing, within the resources available to us, on maximising the effectiveness of patient care for individuals.

What has the Government done in recent years? The Government has, for example, increased NHS staffing by 26.6 per cent during the period in which we have been in office. Regarding the central point in Mr Sarwar's last question, the Government has increased staffing numbers. We have increased consultant numbers, particularly in emergency care, and we have also increased the capacity of NHS 24. We have introduced innovations, such as hospital at home, to ensure that more patients are treated in the circumstances that best meet their needs.

The Government will continue to innovate and reform to address the public's needs, but there is a harsh reality about the increased demand that we are facing as a consequence of the upsurge in flu cases and the implications of Covid, which has left the population facing more acute health circumstances than pre-Covid. The Government is prioritising the national health service by ensuring that we are investing the largest sum of money ever in it. I look forward to the Government's budget passing to enable us to secure that investment for the people of this country.

Anas Sarwar: The RCN in Scotland said this morning that this is

"a wake-up call for the Scottish Government",

but it is clear from John Swinney's answers that he is asleep at the wheel, which is why we need a change of direction in this country. He denies reality, so will he listen to what Scottish nurses are saying? One said:

"It is demoralising, frustrating and embarrassing. It feels like patients are a number not a patient."

Another Scottish nurse said:

"It's degrading and unsafe as these locations are not designed or intended for patient care and offer little or no privacy."

Another Scottish nurse said:

"I have had to give IV antibiotics on a chair beside the nurses station to someone septic."

Another Scottish nurse said:

"I am now in the process of leaving the NHS ... it is fraying at the seams and has left me with mental health problems and trauma."

That is the damning and sad reality of our NHS under the SNP. Is it not a clear sign that John Swinney and this SNP Government cannot fix the mess that they made, and that we need a new direction in our country?

The First Minister: I hear the slogan from Anas Sarwar every week, but I point out to Parliament that there was not a single word of substance to back up his rhetoric about a new direction. The last word that Anas Sarwar used was "change". He has argued that a Labour Government in London would change the circumstances for people in this country. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members, let us hear one another.

The First Minister: A Labour Government did not change the circumstances for the WASPI women—women against state pension inequality—in this country, who have been betrayed by the Labour Party in the United Kingdom. When the Secretary of State for Scotland was in Parliament yesterday, he told us that the people could not cope with the honesty of the Labour Government. I think that, on the basis of the past few months, people in Scotland are waking up to the fundamental dishonesty of the Labour Party, and Mr Sarwar epitomises it.

Climate Action

3. **Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green):** Presiding Officer—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Lorna Slater.

Lorna Slater: Presiding Officer, 2024 was the hottest year on record. We are seeing the climate break down in front of our eyes in devastating floods and raging wildfires. This is just the start now that planet earth has crossed the threshold of 1.5°C of global heating. The promises that were made in the Paris agreement have proven worthless, and global leaders have failed to protect our planet. Is Scotland's First Minister prepared to take serious action on land use change; on reducing traffic by introducing road charges and cutting the cost of public transport; and on making homes warmer, greener and cheaper to heat, so that we can get back on track to meet our climate targets?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am certainly committed to ensuring that we take action on the climate. I want to make sure that we fulfil the obligations that Parliament has put into statute, and that we take the practical actions to ensure that that can be the case.

The Government has a number of policy measures in place that will assist us in that work, and Parliament knows and understands what they

are. Some of them involve investment that is tied up with the Government's budget, which involves, for example, £300 million for the heat in buildings programme and investment of nearly £200 million in a range of active and sustainable transport measures.

The Government is committed to the policy agenda of taking action on the climate, in addition to the steps that we are taking on renewable energy. We are also taking the practical financial steps to ensure that that programme is in place to support those policy interventions.

Lorna Slater: We have a duty to future generations not to let global heating spiral out of control. Existing oil and gas production must wind down as we transition to renewable energy, and new oil and gas exploration is not compatible with Scotland's climate commitments.

The last time that the First Minister was asked about Scotland's energy strategy, he said that the reason for further delay was recent court decisions blocking oil and gas projects on environmental grounds. However, those decisions would worry him only if he intended to support new oil and gas projects in Scotland. Will he confirm the presumption against new oil and gas in Scotland?

The First Minister: The Government has obligations to ensure that all our policy interventions are well evidenced and to take into account all the circumstances that we face. The court cases that I cited are relevant because they fundamentally affect decision making and policy approaches in relation to consent to any oil and gas developments. It is important that the Government takes time to understand all those issues and engage with the UK Government, which is the decision-making body on those questions.

I say to Parliament that the Government is absolutely committed to our agenda on climate action. We have binding statutory targets, and I want Scotland to achieve those targets, because I want us to play our part in protecting the planet. I accept fundamentally the point that Lorna Slater put to me, which is that those issues are in jeopardy because of the temperature of the planet last year. I want to ensure that Scotland plays its part in addressing that.

Copenhagen Infrastructure Partners

4. Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what assessment the Scottish Government has made of the potential economic impact of Copenhagen Infrastructure Partners' reported £800 million investment in battery energy storage sites in Scotland. (S6F-03720)

The First Minister (John Swinney): I welcome investment in the construction of the two largest battery storage systems in Europe, in South Lanarkshire and in Fife. The construction and long-term maintenance of those projects will bring jobs and economic value locally and to wider Scotland. Copenhagen Infrastructure Partners has stated that there will be 150 staff working at Coalburn 1 during peak construction. That investment and show of confidence in Scotland will also contribute indirectly to local employment. It is a landmark announcement for our economic and net zero prospects.

Jackie Dunbar: Given recent reports about energy storage and security, the development of the Coalburn battery energy storage site will be a vital addition to our national energy security mix, as well as a welcome investment in the growth of Scotland's energy transition infrastructure. It is also essential that the local community benefits from that significant investment. It is unfortunate that the Labour Government in the United Kingdom has failed to keep its promise to bring bills down. Can the First Minister say any more about how the development will boost the region, such as through job creation, including in the renewable supply chain?

The First Minister: It is a significant investment, and it demonstrates Scotland's openness to attracting international investment as part of our journey to net zero. The battery storage facilities will create local employment. They will also be integral to delivering a sustainable power network for Scotland and will enable us to withstand some of the changes in demand in the power network.

When fully functional, the two sites will provide an incredible 1.5GW of power, which is sufficient to cover the energy needs of more than 4.5 million households for a two-hour period. That demonstrates the scale and capacity of the investment that has been made in Scotland as a result of the Government's policy approach.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I welcome the investment at Coalburn in South Lanarkshire, but in the light of the announcement yesterday by the National Energy System Operator of a pause in the applications process for new entrants to the connections queue—because there are far more of them than there is demand—does the First Minister agree that there should be a national strategy for energy storage in Scotland that matches approval by the Scottish Government's energy consents unit for battery storage sites with actual demand and with where there is community buy-in?

The First Minister: Mr Simpson raises some interesting points, but we have to be mindful of the economic opportunities that arise out of energy production.

Energy production will be a significant economic asset for Scotland in the years to come, in just the same way that energy production has been a significant economic asset for Scotland until now. The difference, looking forward, is that I want to make sure that Scotland benefits from that energy strategy and policy. We did not benefit from the previous energy opportunity that we had in Scotland; I want to make sure that we benefit from the next one.

Bowel Screening Programme (Extension)

5. Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the First Minister, in light of the rise in the number of people under 50 being diagnosed with bowel cancer, what proposals the Scottish Government has to extend the national bowel screening programme to those under 50 years old. (S6F-03699)

The First Minister (John Swinney): I thank Edward Mountain for raising this important issue and for the commendable commitment and leadership that he has shown on the issue inside and outside Parliament.

The Scottish Government, along with the rest of the United Kingdom, follows advice about screening programmes from the United Kingdom National Screening Committee, which is an independent expert advisory group. Scotland has fully adopted the National Screening Committee's recommendation to invite everyone aged between 50 and 74 for bowel screening every two years. The recommendation was based on a thorough assessment of the risks and benefits of screening people at different ages. I assure Parliament that if the National Screening Committee recommended a lower age range, we would explore, as a matter of urgency, how that could be taken forward in Scotland.

Edward Mountain: I am proud that our national health service in Scotland and this Government have led the way in bowel screening since 2017. I am personally grateful for that. However, it is clear that, with the increasing number of young people getting bowel cancer, we need to do more work. One of the most cost-effective ways to do that is not necessarily to increase screening. Rather, it is to ensure that GPs are aware of the problem and refer people for further tests at the first sign that they may have bowel cancer. I probably agree with the First Minister on that.

Where I disagree, and where Bowel Cancer disagrees, relates to greater sensitivity in our screening programme. I have been pushing for that, but I have been told that there is a lack of capacity in colonoscopies to allow it to happen. The result is that that ignores the real costs of bowel cancer treatment, which could include radiotherapy, chemotherapy and surgery, all of

which have a huge cost. Will the Government commit to carrying out a cost benefit analysis of increasing the sensitivity of bowel screening, in line with the National Screening Committee's recommendation, to ensure that Scotland continues to lead the way in bowel cancer screening, as we should?

The First Minister: First, I thank Mr Mountain for his commendation of the steps that the Government is taking on bowel screening. The bowel screening programme is an excellent programme. It is very convenient for members of the public and it is very efficient. It is also very important for the management of individuals' health. I am grateful for Mr Mountain's comments in that respect.

I will consider all the points that Mr Mountain has put to me about the bowel screening programme and will ask the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care to advise me on those points. It is important that we take all practical steps to act in accordance with the clinical advice that is available to us. Mr Mountain and I are probably in the same place on respecting that clinical advice, but if there are specific mechanisms that we can deploy that will make a difference, I will be happy to consider them.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): It is welcome that, a number of years ago, Scotland—ahead of parts of the UK—fully adopted the UK National Screening Committee's recommendation to screen all individuals between the ages of 50 and 74. Will the First Minister advise how the Scottish Government will continue to invest in screening services, alongside endoscopy and urology services, to support patients across Scotland?

The First Minister: That is principally taken forward through our endoscopy and urology diagnostic recovery and renewal plan, which is supported by £70 million-worth of investment. It is focused on bolstering endoscopy capacity through the recruitment of additional endoscopists. We have established a network of hubs to support us in that rapid access to diagnostic services. The points that Mr Torrance raises are important in enhancing the effectiveness of the services that we have available to us.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): This week is less survivable cancers awareness week. Sixty-one per cent of people in Scotland who are diagnosed with less survivable cancers—that is, lung, liver, brain, oesophagus, pancreatic and stomach cancers—will die from their disease within one year. In common with bowel cancer cases, early diagnosis and treatment are key to improving survival rates for such patients. Although the cancer strategy is welcome, we need action to be taken more quickly if we are to save

lives. What more will the First Minister do to improve early diagnosis of the cancers that I have mentioned, and to drive better outcomes for patients?

The First Minister: Jackie Baillie has raised an important issue. I reassure her that the Government is absolutely committed to that endeavour. We are treating more cancer patients on time, within both standards, than we did 10 years ago: 12 per cent more within the 31-day standard and 6 per cent more within the 62-day standard. The median wait for treatment within the 31-day standard is just four days. Ms Baillie's point about rapidity is absolutely well made, and the Government is working hard to deliver that aim.

My principal answer to Jackie Baillie is that our focus is on developing rapid cancer diagnostic services, which are critical to ensuring that the earliest possible action and intervention happen to address the circumstances that she has put to me. That will remain the focus of the Government's intervention in that area of policy.

Sexual Assault (Hospitals)

6. Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the First Minister how the Scottish Government is responding to reports that 182 sexual assaults, including rapes, have taken place in hospitals in the last five years. (S6F-03721)

The First Minister (John Swinney): Assaults on patients or staff are absolutely abhorrent and cannot be tolerated. Everyone has the right to access healthcare or their place of work without fear of verbal or physical abuse. All instances of violent behaviour, including sexual assaults, are against the law and should be immediately reported to the police and dealt with by the justice system appropriately.

The NHS Scotland charter of patient rights and responsibilities makes clear to patients that they

“may face legal action if”

they are

“abusive, violent or aggressive towards NHS staff”

or members of the public

“when using NHS services.”

The NHS Scotland bullying and harassment workforce policy provides a means of addressing unresolved, significant or persistent sexual harassment and misconduct.

Claire Baker: The figures are shocking. Hospital patients are often vulnerable and exposed, and they and their families must be confident that they are safe. As the First Minister has said, the perpetrators of sexual assault and rape must be held to account. However, there are

serious questions about how the national health service responds to such crimes and about its safeguarding procedures to prevent opportunities for them to occur.

The situation that is described in this morning's report from the Royal College of Nursing, which mentions patients having to be treated in corridors, is not only a symptom of the NHS being overstretched; it leaves people in vulnerable situations. How does the Scottish Government ensure that robust safeguarding is in place, that the NHS takes sexual assaults in hospitals seriously, and that patients will be safe when they are in hospital?

The First Minister: On whether such issues are taken seriously, I hope that what I have said already reassures Claire Baker that, in all circumstances and in all aspects of our public services, any question of sexual assault or any form of sexual misconduct must be addressed by public authorities. They have statutory and legal obligations to do so, and I expect them to do that. We will reinforce that message in light of the point that Claire Baker has put to me.

As part of our approach to the patient safety programme, we must ensure that patients are safe at all times when they are in the care of the NHS. That includes ensuring that appropriate safeguarding is in place in all circumstances. It is the duty of all health boards to ensure that that is the case, and we will remind them of that obligation.

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): In the past five years, seven sexual assaults and two rapes have taken place at Carseview psychiatric unit in Dundee. Given the level of underreporting, those may be just the tip of the iceberg. I have heard horrendous accounts about how frightening it is to be a female patient at Carseview. The facilities there are often terrifying for patients, who are at their most vulnerable, especially as they include mixed-sex wards. That is not just me saying so; the Strang report agrees. Will the First Minister instruct his Government to stop the use of such wards in NHS hospitals and secure psychiatric settings, starting with those at Carseview?

The First Minister: As Tess White will know, work is under way to strengthen the approach to patient care at Carseview. As she has cited, that work was identified and taken forward by David Strang in his report. It has been pursued by NHS Tayside, and the effectiveness of that is being assessed regularly.

In relation to the question of single-sex wards, the NHS estate has to be managed carefully to make sure that appropriate safety is in place for individuals at all times. That principle should be

applied to the care of patients at Carseview and in any other hospital setting.

The Presiding Officer: We move to constituency and general supplementaries.

Scottish National Investment Bank (XLCC)

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Yesterday, the Scottish National Investment Bank announced a welcome £20 million investment into XLCC, the company that is developing the United Kingdom's first high-voltage direct current cable manufacturing facility, at Hunterston in my constituency. That £1.4 billion-plus project will create 900 highly skilled jobs and will position Scotland as a global leader in HVDC technology. Does the First Minister agree that that is a first-class opportunity for Scotland to help to drive net zero innovation? What will his Government do to ensure that that project and similar projects secure the support needed to thrive?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I very much welcome the announcement that has been made by XLCC in relation to the facility at Hunterston. That is an example of exactly what we envisaged with the Scottish National Investment Bank—that it would provide the opportunity for investment through that mechanism to support private sector investment and leverage much more significant volumes of private sector investment into the Scottish economy. The funding model is working, which helps us in taking forward our net zero ambitions.

I am delighted that Mr Gibson's constituency has benefited in the way that he has recounted to Parliament. It is important from the Government's point of view that the Scottish National Investment Bank is actively engaged in supporting investments as part of our transition to net zero.

Urgent Cancer Referrals (Timeframes)

Sharon Dowe (South Scotland) (Con): I was contacted this week by a constituent in Prestwick. He attended an appointment with his general practitioner on 30 December with a lesion on his back suspected to be skin cancer. His GP made an urgent referral to dermatology. Having twice been diagnosed with skin cancer, he knows that it demands urgent attention. Despite that, he was told that it would be

"over 12 months before he could be seen at hospital, despite the referral being marked urgent."

For someone with suspected cancer, 12 months could be the difference between life and death. Does the First Minister think that that is an acceptable timescale? What action will the Scottish Government take to ensure that urgent

cancer referrals such as that are seen within appropriate and safe timeframes?

The First Minister (John Swinney): If a clinician believes that a case is urgent, that priority should be reflected in the national health service. I do not know the details of the case that Sharon Dowe puts to me, but if she cares to provide us with the details, we will investigate the issues that she raises.

As I said in my answer to Jackie Baillie, urgent intervention on cancer-related cases is absolutely critical to ensuring that individuals have the best outcomes possible. If Sharon Dowe would care to provide me with the details, I will have those looked into today.

Diabetes Technology (Guidelines)

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): Last week, I led a members' business debate on diabetes technology, in which I highlighted that Scottish intercollegiate guidelines network guideline 170, which gives people with type 1 diabetes a choice in technology to manage their condition, is not being fully followed in all health boards. In her speech, the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health stated that children are being given a choice, but she failed to mention adults. Does the First Minister agree that health guidelines should be followed, including for adults with type 1 diabetes?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The guidelines are there for a purpose, which is to provide advice to clinicians and assurance to patients about how individuals should be treated. There will, of course, be challenges in the delivery of those services within the resources that we have available to us, but the SIGN guidelines are there for a purpose, and I encourage health boards to follow those in all circumstances.

Department for Work and Pensions (Data)

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): Yesterday, the Secretary of State for Scotland, Ian Murray, claimed that the Scottish National Party Government had not yet asked for Department for Work and Pensions data to end the two-child cap. However, the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice wrote to the DWP and the Secretary of State for Scotland on the issue last month. Can the First Minister offer the Secretary of State for Scotland any advice on how to keep up with his inbox and support tackling child poverty in Scotland?

The Presiding Officer: The First Minister should address matters for which he has general responsibility.

The First Minister (John Swinney): It is important that accurate information is given to the public about the measures that are being taken

forward on the Government's policy agenda. On 16 December, the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice wrote to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, copying in the Secretary of State for Scotland, to specify the data sharing requirements. Those included:

“• Data for all children attached to the Universal Credit claim, including date of birth.

• Data for which children on the Universal Credit claim are included in the UC payment.

• Data for all children who are paid under the Universal Credit exemptions rules including the exemption reason.

• Central Payment System benefit code.

• All data already shared by DWP for the purposes of administering Scottish Child Payment but expanded to include children up to age 19 years old ...

• Data on the UC payment cycles for the claims.”

I was assured by the Prime Minister, face to face, that the DWP would work collaboratively with us to take forward the policy. It is not helpful, and it is not representative, for the Secretary of State for Scotland to make the comments that he made yesterday. If we are going to have an improved climate of relations between the Scottish and the United Kingdom Governments, the UK Government better keep its side of the bargain.

Lloyds Banking Group Dunfermline (Closure)

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am sure that the First Minister is aware of the surprise announcement by Lloyds Banking Group concerning the closure in 2026 of its base in Dunfermline, which currently employs 1,500 people. Although I am relieved to hear that the intention is that there will be limited job losses, with workers either relocating to Edinburgh or working remotely, the impact of the announcement on the local community has been vast, and the potential extra costs for staff members remain deeply concerning. What engagement has the Scottish Government had with Lloyds Banking Group on its surprise decision? Will the First Minister work to ensure that any impact of the move will be minimal for employees and people who live in the area?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Those are matters for Lloyds Banking Group to determine. The Government engages actively with it, and I suspect that the issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the financial services growth and development board, which is co-chaired by the Scottish Government. We will certainly do all that we can to ensure that there is no loss of employment and that the individuals who are affected are not inconvenienced as a consequence of the decision that Lloyds Banking Group has taken.

Exploration of Oil and Gas

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP):

Thirty million United Kingdom homes are heated by gas, and half of the gas that we need is imported. The less gas we produce here, the more we will rely on the USA for fracked gas. Does the First Minister agree that, like Norway, and as Russell Borthwick of the Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce has urged, we must resume exploration of oil and gas, otherwise we will only be providing a further boost to the fracking industry that is so beloved of the President-elect, Donald Trump?

The First Minister (John Swinney): It is important that we undertake the transition to net zero that society must undertake, because, as we have already discussed in the Parliament, all the evidence is that there will be catastrophic circumstances if we do not address the use of fossil fuels within our economy. The Government has a managed approach to that policy objective, which is about ensuring that we have a just transition and invest in our renewable energy technology. I am confident that Scotland will have the energy generation capacity that we need to meet the challenges of the future. We must work with the industry on a just transition strategy, which is what the Government is doing.

Foot-and-mouth Disease

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): My constituency was one of the areas most severely hit in the 2001 foot-and-mouth disease outbreak. My brother and I were directly affected because our farm was only a stone's throw away from one of the first farms in Scotland that was affected, and it came under movement restrictions for months.

The economic cost was not the only long-term legacy; emotional scars are still deeply felt across the rural communities that I represent. I vividly remember the heart-wrenching calls from friends and neighbours who had received the news that their beloved stock had to be destroyed. For weeks on end, the acrid smoke from the pyres invaded houses and touched every life, whether it was directly connected to our farming community or not.

Will the First Minister set out what discussions the Scottish Government has had with its UK counterparts and NFU Scotland to ensure that everything is done to prevent the disease once again wreaking havoc in Scotland?

I draw particular attention to concerns that the Republic of Ireland could become the back door through which the disease might return via our port in Cairnryan.

The First Minister (John Swinney): Active discussions on those questions are held constantly between the Scottish and United Kingdom Governments. A case of foot-and-mouth disease has emerged in Germany, so the issue is live and topical.

The Scottish Government will take all necessary steps to ensure that we are properly engaged in the process, and we will engage stakeholders to ensure that the terrible circumstances that Mr Carson reminds us of, which took place 24 years ago, are not repeated. The chief veterinary officer of the Scottish Government is actively involved in those issues, as are ministers.

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

12:46

Meeting suspended.

12:47

On resuming—

Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Highlands and Islands)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-15705, in the name of Rhoda Grant, on the Scottish Human Rights Commission's spotlight report, "Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in the Highlands and Islands". The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes the Scottish Human Rights Commission's spotlight project into Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in the Highlands and Islands; understands that it was commissioned in April 2023 and undertook a targeted programme of work to assess the realisation of economic, social and cultural rights for people living across the Highlands and Islands, which concluded in early 2024 and published its report, *Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in the Highlands and Islands*, in November 2024; believes that this report has been widely welcomed by community groups, charities and organisations across the Highlands and Islands; is concerned, in particular, by the Commission's urgent calls to tackle the rooflessness, hunger and access to health issues across the Highlands and Islands; is further concerned that, according to the report, across all rights examined, there is not a single human right that meets all the conditions of adequacy under international law, and notes the calls on the Scottish Government to act on this report and review its current policies to address the concerns raised by this report.

12:48

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I thank members who signed my motion and allowed this important debate to take place. I also pay tribute to the Scottish Human Rights Commission for its spotlight report, "Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in the Highlands and Islands".

In the past decade or so, our human rights have been eroded: we need food banks, there is a housing crisis and our national health service is at breaking point. Nowhere has that been felt more keenly than in the Highlands and Islands. Centralisation of services has led to poorer outcomes, even fewer houses being built and greater difficulty in accessing health services. All of that leads to depopulation. Citizens know that, so the Scottish Human Rights Commission findings were not a surprise. However, to be consulted and have their concerns validated is a significant step forward for my constituents. It was also striking to see all those findings in one report.

Across all the rights that the report examined, “there is not a single human right that meets all the conditions of adequacy under international law. This means that there are significant failures in how policies and services are being designed and ... delivered.”

Too often, service design focuses on urban areas and fails to address the unique needs of rural communities. However, when services are designed to meet the needs of rural areas, they work effectively in all settings, regardless of whether they are in an urban area or a rural area.

The commission recommends that the Government should use a human rights-based budgeting approach to ensure that all citizens are provided with services that meet their needs, regardless of where they live. The report references cases in Argyll and Bute in which women who have been sexually assaulted need to travel long distances to access forensic examinations. They need to do that in the same clothes that they wore when they were assaulted. That is a common situation throughout the Highlands and Islands. The reason given for that inhumane treatment was that it would cost more to bring services to those women. A human rights-based approach would have come to a different conclusion, resulting in a process based on upholding the rights of the person who had been attacked.

Our human rights are just that: they are our rights. However, in Scots law, there is no redress if someone does not have access to their human rights. The proposed Scottish human rights bill was anticipated to address that but, unfortunately, it has been shelved. As a result, I still hope to pursue a right to food bill to enshrine the human right to food in Scots law. Everyone has the right to food so that they can feed themselves and their families. Emergency food should be required only in dire circumstances such as war and famine, but the report highlighted that access to food is a significant problem in the Highlands and Islands. It pointed out that, in some areas, food supplies could be at risk due to ferry failures and blocked roads disrupting supplies.

Food also costs much more in sparsely populated rural areas. Independent shops cannot make economies of scale, which means that the food that they sell is more expensive. There are also barriers to accessing emergency food in rural areas, because of issues around privacy and confidentiality. It is hard enough to access a food bank in an urban area because of stigma, so imagine doing that when the whole community will know. I know that food banks go to extraordinary lengths to disguise their interventions, but confidentiality is still a concern that stops many people accessing that support.

The report talks about choices being made between heating and eating. In rural areas, people also need to factor in the cost of running a car, because public transport is inadequate or non-existent. Therefore, they require fuel not only for heat but in order to access work, education, food and healthcare.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): I am sure that Rhoda Grant will join me in acknowledging just how many people in the Highlands and Islands are in fuel poverty—I believe that the figure in the Western Isles is about 40 per cent and that 100,000 pensioners will receive a universal payment next year but will not receive one over this winter. The fuel rebate scheme for cars and vehicles is also critical in the wider context in relation to things such as the just transition, given that, at the end of the day, people in the Highlands and Islands are more dependent on vehicles.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back for the intervention, Ms Grant.

Rhoda Grant: I agree with the cabinet secretary—people in the area are dependent on vehicles, and I note that some of the measures that are used to pinpoint poverty take the view that someone who owns a car is not living in poverty, but the very opposite is true in many rural areas, where a car is a necessity.

The report finds that the lack of affordable housing is also a main concern of young people, many of whom are not able to remain in their local areas or to return to live there after leaving. We know that many people in the Highlands and Islands leave to access education with the full intention of returning but are often unable to do so. That fuels depopulation and the loss of the Gaelic language and is adding to an increasing age demographic.

Second homes and holiday homes bring tension, because they take away homes from local people, but, on the other hand, they bring tourism. Therefore, there needs to be a balance between family homes and the holiday rental sector.

The cost of building small numbers of affordable houses in a community is expensive due to the lack of economies of scale so, when we add the cost of materials and labour, it is little wonder that rural housing money is being spent on the outskirts of cities. That is why we must protect local housing, especially homes that are built at public expense.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Rhoda Grant is making a very powerful speech on the report. Perhaps she might reflect on the power of co-operatives and their potential further development in rural settings, which might improve economic

justice in areas such as housing, retail and food production.

Rhoda Grant: Indeed. Co-operatives are already used in rural areas. Crofting, which is the agricultural system in place in rural areas, is based on co-operative working. Many people know that they need to work co-operatively in rural areas simply in order to exist.

The report also highlights access to health and social care. There are many campaigns in the Highlands and Islands regarding access to health care, from the Caithness Health Action Team and the keep MUM—maternity unit for Moray—campaign, which fights for local maternity services, to the Hopeman and Burghead groups that campaign for local general practice surgeries. Those groups are not surprised by the commission's report, but they are appreciative of it highlighting issues that they have been campaigning on for years.

Mental health services in the region are poor, especially for young people. The waiting list for child and adolescent mental health services in NHS Highland is stubbornly high, and services are provided centrally, which means that young people need to take more time away from school and make long journeys to access them. The costs of travel and accommodation are also barriers to accessing healthcare. We desperately need a review of the outdated patient travelling expenses scheme for reimbursements.

Many other issues are addressed by the Scottish Human Rights Commission report—more than I can do credit to today. I thank it for carrying out that important work. We, in the Parliament, owe it to the commission to act on its findings. We wish it well in presenting its findings to the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights next month.

I brought forward this debate to highlight the report's findings and to ask the Scottish Government to respond to it and say whether it will use human rights-based budgeting to protect all our human rights, including the human rights of people in the Highlands and Islands, in the future.

12:57

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): First, I thank Rhoda Grant for securing this important debate. I was glad to support her motion. Secondly, I thank the Scottish Human Rights Commission for undertaking the work.

Although I strongly believe that organisations that seek to represent the views of all Scotland must come to the Highlands and Islands, that is not usually what happens, so it was very welcome

to see such thorough and interested engagement across the region ahead of the debate.

It is right that the resulting report gets aired in the Parliament and that we get a chance to hear the Government's response to the many issues that it raises. The report covers issues that the people who are contributing to the debate regularly raise in the Parliament. I recognise much of what is described in the report—I could have perhaps written 12 different speeches on it—and I know how valuable the evidence on access and transport to healthcare, availability of food and general quality of life is.

I will focus largely on what I think is the most severe human rights issue that the report explores. Although homelessness exists across Scotland, it does so differently in different communities. In Skye, we are more likely to see young people being homeless at home, whereas, in Inverness, people might be stuck for long periods in unsuitable accommodation. If people in rural and island communities know that no social housing is available anywhere near them, they might not register as homeless, because they believe that there is no point.

All that hidden homelessness deserves full attention. It is important to note that the SHRC's accurate description of the issue—from sofa surfing to living in temporary caravans—demonstrates to everyone that, although the issue might be hidden, it is not invisible and it is possible for us to see and react to it.

I have always tried to be very careful about how I speak about homelessness and to promote a reduction in stigma, because that stigma is real, unfair and pervasive. Having been in that situation in the Highlands, I know the dangers that come alongside it. It is not only about not having the security of going to sleep with a roof over your head, walls around you and a lock on the door; housing insecurity opens you up to a very dangerous underground culture. That is not because people who are homeless are naturally likely to break laws or drink too much; it is because they are vulnerable, even if they do not feel like they are. Bad actors see the opportunity to take advantage, sell drugs, assault and rape.

When I was homeless, I was frequently offered drugs and money. I did not take up those offers—or, more accurately, traps—but I often spent my cash-in-hand pay from temporary work on bottles of alcohol, in an effort to fast forward to my next shift, because I did not want to deal with, or look at, my own life. I completely understood why others around me opted for different substances to skip through their own living nightmares, and why young people end up stuck in a vicious cycle of being the middleman between out-of-area dealers and their next victims.

The fact that the report highlights rights holders raising their inability to access support services, such as addictions services, tells me that people are living that nightmare right now. Professionals in Orkney noted to the SHRC that a lack of availability of cannabis and support services has led to an increase in the use of harder drugs.

Services such as Addictions Counselling Inverness—a charity for which I have immense respect—do so much for the people who need help most. ACI is run by people who totally get the reality that their service users are living. It needs all the support that we can give, and such services should be available to everyone, no matter where they live.

Scotland is growing up in its approach to addiction, but something is still missing for those who need help today in the Highlands and Islands. Housing is a huge part of the picture. We cannot expect people to live stable and responsible lives when they have been left out in the cold. We must put at least as much energy into supporting them—giving them what they, individually, need to be safe—as those who prey on the vulnerable put into recruiting them.

13:01

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I thank Rhoda Grant for bringing this debate to the chamber. Along with debates this afternoon on the A9 dualling and on rural healthcare, it begins a very welcome focus to the Parliament today on issues that impact on the Highlands and Islands region—the focus on those issues is welcome because they are being discussed, rather than because of the underlying reasons why they are being discussed and the failure to deliver rural and island services.

This evening, I will speak in my colleague Tim Eagle's debate on rural healthcare, so I will not focus on that now, other than to say that the impact of pressure on our health services is often felt more acutely in our more remote rural and island communities. Distance to care, and the impact of healthcare services being further away from those who use them, is a real and growing concern. When that pressure includes the downgrading of maternity services and a lack of social care, it challenges the sustainability of many of our communities.

The deterioration of health services is far from being the only challenge. After 18 years of this Government, we have a housing emergency in Scotland—a crisis that the Scottish National Party responded to by cutting the housing budget by nearly £200 million. Added to that, the dedicated rural and islands housing funds were not fully utilised, with millions of pounds left in Government

coffers in Edinburgh despite the schemes being extended and there being a clear and desperate need for more affordable housing in our communities.

Transport connectivity was also highlighted in the commission's report, and the crisis faced by our ferry-reliant communities has been raised in Parliament on too many occasions to mention. It is not only islanders who suffer; residents and businesses that are reliant on the ageing and unreliable ferries that serve the Corran Narrows route in Lochaber have been extremely vocal on just how great a threat the lack of a reliable service is to the sustainability of their communities. When I visited that area as part of my summer tour, many people were quite clear that, without action—soon—they would be forced to move away from the area that they call home.

Many Highland roads are not much better. Last year, I dealt with the case of a household who were stuck in their property because the condition of their road left them isolated in their home. There were potholes so large that the local delivery drivers refused to deliver to them. Thankfully, after a letter to the council on their behalf, work was done on the road and they can enjoy their home again, but also leave when they want to.

That issue of enjoying one's home leads me on to another issue that I would like to raise, although it is not included in the report. People across my region are faced with the prospect of increased industrialisation of their communities, but they see little or no gain from it, and they feel powerless to have their say on it. New pylons, substations and other energy infrastructure are being forced on communities across the Highlands and Islands without their permission, and too often with only the most token amount of consultation—consultation that many see as almost a fait accompli. That is a clear democratic and moral deficit.

That leads me to my last point, which is about how decisions are made and their impact. Island residents have seen the introduction of legislation on island proofing to allow the consideration of unique island needs, although many are understandably sceptical about whether it is anything more than a tick-box exercise. However, rural communities are not afforded the same protections, despite many being as remote as—and, in some cases, more remote than—some of our island communities.

The report is interesting but, for many of us who live in the Highlands and Islands, it tells us little that we do not already know. There is a lack of affordable housing. Healthcare services are becoming more distant for some and inaccessible for too many. There is fuel poverty in communities that are circled by machines that heat the homes

of others many miles away. Many people in the Highlands and Islands feel a long way from the decisions that are made here in Edinburgh but those decisions impact greatly on their lives. Although the Highlands and Islands are still a great place in which to live, work and be brought up, it is getting harder for many people to do that.

13:06

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I thank Rhoda Grant for initiating this critical debate and the Scottish Human Rights Commission for having the courage to carry this inquiry out and publish its findings in full.

In her excellent foreword, Angela O'Hagan calls for

"all duty bearers to evaluate their own work and reflect on how to improve people's human rights."

She also calls for the Scottish Parliament

"to take serious and careful consideration"

of the report, so why does it take an Opposition MSP, in members' business time, to force the report to the debating chamber of the Parliament? Are not the Government and the Parliament duty bearers? Should not the Government set aside parliamentary time to debate a report into the human rights of the people of the Highlands and Islands?

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Jamie Hepburn): Of course, if Mr Leonard's business manager cares to raise that matter with me, I would be more than willing to give consideration to scheduling such a debate.

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

Richard Leonard: Thank you.

I hope that the Minister for Parliamentary Business will propose that at a future meeting of the business bureau. However, I will tell members why it perhaps has not come up so far. Perhaps it is because the key words in the report are "failure", "regression" and "deterioration".

"Across all rights examined,"

the commission concludes,

"there is not a single human right that meets all the conditions of adequacy under international law"—

not one. Minimum core obligations such as access to food and housing are not being met. The rights to health, social care, education and culture are not getting better; they are getting worse.

These are not abstract or theoretical findings. These rights are about ensuring that everyone can live a dignified life, free from fear and want, but what this report finds is that there is hunger,

deprivation and malnutrition. I made some inquiries recently, only to discover that Public Health Scotland does not routinely collect data on malnutrition. However, it should do, because we know from the British Association for Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition that the number of patients who are admitted to hospital diagnosed with malnutrition has doubled to more than 44 per cent in the past decade.

When I was with Rhoda Grant in Shetland, we met the workers at the Sullom Voe terminal, a northerly centre for the United Kingdom oil and gas industry for more than four decades. We sat down and spoke with representatives of the very impressive Shetland Fishermen's Federation. They told us that their members net one sixth of the catch for the whole of the UK, yet we know that a third of the inhabitants of Shetland are living in fuel poverty. It reminded me of Aneurin Bevan's observation:

"This island is made mainly of coal and surrounded by fish. Only an organising genius could produce a shortage of coal and fish at the same time."

In other words, what is wrong is the way in which our society and economy are organised; what is wrong is the way in which power and wealth are distributed. Even among small Highlands and Islands communities that are blighted by hunger, rooflessness and fuel poverty, there exists great affluence. From Anders Holch Povlsen, the richest man in Scotland, to the old aristocracy, including the Earl of Seafield, Earl Granville, the Earl of Sutherland, the Camerons of Lochiel and the Duke of Westminster—all with massive land ownership and vast wealth.

The report is right to determine the equality gap in fundamental human rights between rural and urban Scotland. It is right to point to the acute levels of homelessness in our Highlands and Islands, as well as to the access that is denied to basic public services and fundamental human rights such as food and clothing.

However, we have to understand the colossal wealth gap that exists in the Highlands and Islands. We have to recognise the pernicious division of class. We have to comprehend that, unless we tackle this obscene and rising inequality—the division in income, wealth and power—we will never address the fundamental breaches of human rights that are highlighted in this very serious, important and ground-breaking report.

13:11

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I thank the Scottish Human Rights Commission for producing its frank and hard-

hitting report, and I thank Rhoda Grant for raising it in the chamber.

Although Highlands and Islands MSPs are all too aware of the challenges that the communities that we represent face, I trust that the report catalyses urgent action. As we have heard from members across the chamber, the report covers a range of core obligations that must be addressed. I will focus on two areas in which Scotland is not meeting minimum essential human rights requirements: housing and food.

It is shameful that our people's survival and dignity are being threatened by Government inaction. Since being elected, my priorities have been to maintain and sustain rural and island populations, to support communities to adapt to the impacts of climate change and to help them to participate in restoring nature. Food and housing are key to those aims, yet a lack of Government priority and action means that Scotland is failing to meet even its most basic international obligations.

On food, the report says that high prices and poverty are depriving a significant number of people of sufficient food. Even physically accessing affordable nutrition is a challenge, with bad weather, creaking infrastructure and overtourism depriving entire communities of fresh food. Basically, people are being left to fend for themselves, with little to no support from the Government.

However, solutions to those problems exist. I have seen how effective community-led growing initiatives have been in providing nutritious food to communities. Taghsa Uibhist in the Western Isles runs market gardens that not only diversify food supply chains but support people to access a wider variety of foods. Such projects must be better funded, and I secured the passing of an amendment to the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024 that aims to open new support pathways for such projects. I urge the Government to provide that support swiftly to guarantee food to our Highland and Island communities.

The report highlights the dire housing situation across the region. I frequently hear from constituents who are unable to access affordable homes in their communities. The report has rightly identified that that is a major driver of depopulation. Although the Government has recognised the issue to some extent, its housing targets are not on track to reduce homelessness. We heard earlier from Emma Roddick what that can bring about in people's lives.

Of Scotland's population, 17 per cent is rural, yet the Government's target aims to build only 10 per cent of affordable homes in rural areas. The report shows that there are not enough small,

cheap-to-run properties as it is and, judging by current activity, the situation will not improve any time soon.

We must see more support for capacity-building organisations so that communities have support to meet their own housing needs; we must see councils adopting facilitation and supportive approaches to help communities to meet those needs; and we must see the Scottish Government provide the right level of funding to ensure that we exceed the 10 per cent target.

Although construction is important, it must go hand in hand with turning existing empty properties into homes. We can make three restored empty properties for the price of one new build. Let us become a retrofit nation and solve this crisis.

As an MSP, I consistently raise those vital issues and offer solutions. I hope that the damning findings of the SHRC's report focus hearts and minds at all levels of government. As Professor Angela O'Hagan says in the report, while some communities may be remote,

"their access to human rights should not be."

13:15

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I thank Rhoda Grant for bringing this important debate to the chamber. The Scottish Human Rights Commission's report "Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in the Highlands and Islands" fills an identified gap in evidence on economic, social and cultural rights in rural Scotland, and I extend my thanks to all the researchers and participants who were involved in the project.

The report demonstrates many long-standing and interconnected issues that I have previously raised in the chamber. Its findings are familiar to those of us with experience of life in rural and island Scotland. The report confirms that much of the housing stock in the region is old, poorly insulated and prone to damp, mould and expensive heating costs. That rings true for Shetland, which has among the highest rates of fuel poverty in the country. The irony that the islands are in the centre of the country's energy production area is not lost on those of us who live there.

The fact that building costs are higher than in other areas of Scotland is an evident barrier to house building in Shetland. There has been a slowdown in construction as a result of the pandemic and Brexit, which, along with the increased cost of construction materials, has resulted in insufficient available stock and building capacity.

The report found that, in some areas, a lack of housing is the single biggest factor that is contributing to depopulation. That can lead to people leaving the region, but it can also—as is happening in Shetland—result in people moving from islands and rural areas to towns.

The lack of affordable and available housing is cited as the biggest barrier to filling key worker and professional roles. Another significant barrier to participation in employment is poor digital access, which also exacerbates social isolation. The Scottish Government is already well aware that parts of the Highlands and Islands suffer from digital exclusion, and it must do more to enact targeted and comprehensive solutions to bridge that digital divide.

Regarding barriers to the right to health, the report notes that there is particular concern about the provision of maternity and gynaecology services in Caithness and Sutherland, which is an issue that my MP colleague Jamie Stone has long been campaigning on. Since maternity provision in Wick was downgraded, more than 14,000 patients a year have had to travel to Inverness, and no risk assessments on patient safety are carried out. Women who were surveyed reported feeling unsafe and terrified by the journey and by the possibility of giving birth en route. Due to delays in accessing the hospital in emergencies, some women have been left with loss of fertility. The situation is unsustainable and is putting patients at risk. I urge the Scottish Government to review the maternity model for the north of Scotland.

Patients across the Highlands and Islands incur substantial costs in accessing healthcare. As the report states, reimbursement

“rarely covers the actual costs of travel and ... accommodation.”

I am not surprised that the report found that some people choose not to access healthcare due to travel costs. For Shetland patients, attending an appointment on the Scottish mainland often involves spending multiple nights away because of transport schedules, which increases the cost. I have pressed the Scottish Government for action on its promised review of the patient travel scheme. It must prioritise that as a matter of urgency.

Scotland's islands and rural areas are home to resourceful and supportive communities, but those communities should not be left to fill the gaps that are highlighted in the report. The Scottish Government should take seriously people's reported feelings of despair and of being neglected. It is not too much to ask for people who live in the Highlands and Islands not to be disadvantaged simply because of where they live. I ask the Government to review its policies to

address the concerns that are raised in the report. It is time for the Government to be serious about supporting rural and island Scotland.

13:19

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I congratulate Rhoda Grant on bringing this important debate to the chamber, and I join her and other rural MSPs in welcoming the Scottish Human Rights Commission's spotlight report.

Although the project's findings are specific to the Highlands and Islands, they resonate deeply with us in Dumfries and Galloway. The report, which has been widely praised by community groups, charities and organisations, highlights the pervasive issues of rooflessness, hunger and limited access to healthcare—issues that we in Galloway are all too familiar with.

With rooflessness and homelessness remaining a pressing concern, many individuals and families continue to struggle with inadequate housing. That impacts not only on their physical safety but on their mental and emotional wellbeing. In rural Galloway, we have seen the devastating effects of rooflessness on our communities, so it is imperative that we take concrete steps to provide safe and affordable housing for all our residents. Sadly, the current target for house building in rural Scotland is an arbitrary figure that does not address the unique challenges that we face, and that is another factor that drives depopulation.

The issue of hunger is equally critical across Scotland. Given that we are a country that is rich in agricultural resources, it is unbelievable that food insecurity remains a reality for many. The report's findings serve as a stark reminder that we must do more to ensure that everyone has access to nutritious and affordable food. That is a matter not just of survival but of dignity and equality.

The report highlights access to healthcare as another significant challenge. In Dumfries and Galloway, just as in the Highlands, there are long waiting times and limited availability of services, which are barriers to the care that our residents need. That is not only a violation of their rights but a threat to their health and wellbeing. We need increased investment in healthcare infrastructure to ensure that everyone, regardless of their location, can access the medical care that they require.

The report's finding that

“not a single human right”

that was examined

“meets all the conditions of adequacy under international law”

is deeply concerning. That highlights the urgent need for policy reforms and renewed efforts to uphold and protect those fundamental rights. The Scottish Government must act on the report and review its current policies to address the deficiencies that have been identified.

Dr Gordon Baird, who is a retired GP and an influential medical expert, commented to me on the SHRC's findings of

"inaccessible health care services that fail to meet minimum core obligations"

and, more worryingly, of

"a lack of a cohesive or coherent strategy to fulfil these obligations",

as well as

"policies that should be adaptable to the specific needs of remote and rural areas".

In west Galloway, the main town of Stranraer is 75 miles west of the administrative hub of Dumfries and 85 miles south-west of Glasgow, which is where the closest tertiary medical centre is located. In 1999, the editor of the *BMJ* reported that

"Dumfries looks on Stranraer as a 'wild west' town that makes much too much fuss and won't accept that it's a rural backwater".

It seems to me that that attitude towards rural residents persists across rural areas, with health board managers often dismissing areas as out west—such as in my case—or as a problem. The situation is now worse than ever, with the main issues being maternity care, cancer, step-down care and cottage hospital facilities. Deprivation compounds the effects, too.

The report identifies that

"Some of the most critical issues ... are the apparent failure to meet the most basic international obligations"

and finds that

"Another area of concern is the apparent regression or deterioration of rights",

which is being

"exacerbated by decisions on budget reductions or indeed the complete elimination of previously existing services, without sufficient mitigating measures."

Across rural Scotland, we can draw valuable lessons from the spotlight project. By acknowledging the shared challenges, we can work together to find solutions that can benefit all.

We commend the Scottish Human Rights Commission's spotlight project for its critical insight, but our response must extend beyond recognition—we must commit to taking tangible actions on all the issues that it has identified. The Scottish Government must review and revise its policies to ensure the realisation of economic,

social and cultural rights for all the residents of all of rural Scotland, not just the Highlands and Islands. It must not wait for the commission to look into the same issues in the south of Scotland. Across the chamber, we must strive to build a more just and equitable Scotland, where everybody's individual rights are respected.

13:24

The Minister for Parliamentary Business

(Jamie Hepburn): I, too, thank Rhoda Grant for bringing the motion to Parliament. Like her, I thank the Scottish Human Rights Commission for the report that is at the centre of the debate, and I very much echo the sentiments that have been expressed on the detail and breadth of the report. I commend the commission's programme of work to hear directly from rights holders across 20 of our Highlands and Islands communities, as has been mentioned in contributions today.

Contrary to Mr Leonard's concern that the Scottish Government has not allocated time for these matters to be explored, during last month's human rights day debate, the report rightly generated significant interest and welcome challenge on advancing human rights realisation for people in our Highlands and Islands.

The report is wide ranging—

Richard Leonard: Will the minister take an intervention?

Jamie Hepburn: Of course.

Richard Leonard: For clarity, does that mean that you will schedule Government time to debate the report?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will not. I ask the minister to respond.

Jamie Hepburn: Of course, your perspective on these matters is always welcome, Presiding Officer.

I go back to my earlier point that I am more than willing to consider these matters. I remind Mr Leonard that his party regularly has time to bring forward its own debates, and I am sure that he will speak to his business manager about allocating a debate in Labour Party time. I will, of course, give consideration to using Scottish Government time as well.

As I was saying, the report is wide ranging and the rights that are described in it touch on virtually every area of life in the Highlands and Islands. Many of the challenges that are described are interconnected. I recognise that the report rightly poses challenges to the Scottish Government. We are considering the report and we will come back, in due course, on how we intend to respond to it.

Although some of the issues that are raised apply beyond the Highlands and Islands, as Mr Carson has reminded us, we need to make sure that our actions reflect the specific needs of the communities that are directly referred to in the report, in order to advance the realisation of all of their human rights.

Before turning to members' contributions in detail, I briefly acknowledge the approach that the commission has taken in the report. In particular, I welcome its efforts to pilot a new model of human rights monitoring that brings together the lived experiences of our Highlands and Islands communities with other qualitative and quantitative data that assesses that evidence against international human rights standards. I am aware that the commission plans to expand that model over the coming years to build a baseline picture of economic, social and cultural rights realisation across the breadth of Scotland. In some senses, the report is a trailblazer and its methodology will be applicable beyond the Highlands and Islands.

I am grateful to members for their contributions. The report is wide ranging and touches on work across all portfolios. Emma Roddick made some inference to that when she said that she could have delivered 12 speeches on the subject. I will not be able to respond to the full breadth of matters in detail, but I assure members that the Government is considering the report carefully.

The Government continues to take action that is geared towards improving service delivery and design, to meet the specific needs of communities in the Highlands and Islands. That includes action to address some of the issues that are outlined in the commission's report on housing, transport and depopulation, for example.

Rhoda Grant: One proposal in the report that the Government could implement now is human rights-based budgeting. Will that be considered? That would address an awful lot of the concerns that were raised in the report.

Jamie Hepburn: I have already made the point that the Government will give full consideration to everything in the report—as it should, because it is a thorough and diligent piece of work—and that is one of the areas that will be considered.

On investment and support for the Highlands and Islands, I was about to mention some of the activity that we are undertaking in the here and now. Since 2021-22, our islands programme capital funding scheme has distributed more than £15 million of support for 71 infrastructure projects across 51 different islands. Beatrice Wishart mentioned digital connectivity, and I know that some of the greatest challenges in this country in that regard are in the Highlands and Islands. We have provided investment of more than £600

million in our reaching 100 per cent programme, which is expected to connect more than 113,000 premises across Scotland. Our forthcoming delivery plan and the new national islands plan will set out how we will deliver for our mainland, rural and island communities.

Turning to food insecurity and the right to food, which have been touched on, I note that Rhoda Grant, in particular, has continued to champion issues of hunger and food insecurity. It should go without saying—I will say it anyway—that no one should have to compromise on food or other essentials. Food insecurity is driven by insufficient and insecure household income. That is one reason why we continue to call on the UK Government to deliver an essentials guarantee—for which the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has also called, estimating that, this year, that could lift 140,000 people in Scotland out of poverty.

The point was made about some people having to choose between heating and eating, and the Deputy First Minister made the point that nearly 40 per cent of the population of the Western Isles are in fuel poverty. Beatrice Wishart also mentioned the issue—I do not have the specific numbers, but it is a challenge in Shetland as well. Of course, we know that that is an issue.

Jamie Halcro Johnston spoke about some of the challenges of infrastructure and the irony that those areas in which the energy is generated do not benefit directly from it. I reflect on the fact that the energy market is regulated from Westminster rather than by the Scottish Government, but we are aware of those challenges.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: The point that was being made is that a lot of the planning decisions on energy infrastructure are being passed by the Scottish Government.

You said that—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Speak through the chair.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: My apologies. The minister said that the Government would give due consideration to the report and would come back in due course. When it comes to timescales, "due course" means nothing. When does the minister expect to come back with the Government's response?

Jamie Hepburn: It would be remiss of me to provide an exact timescale, and I do not have one before me just now. However, the commitment is to come back as soon as possible.

The report was published in November, which is not that long ago. Nonetheless, I remind Richard Leonard that we were able to have a debate on human rights just a month afterwards, in which some of the issues were reflected.

My point on fuel poverty and the choice between heating and eating is that we should welcome the fact that Scottish Government initiatives, including the Scottish child payment, are keeping tens of thousands of children out of poverty. From next year, we will implement our winter heating payment, which will reverse the removal of the winter fuel payment for 100,000 people across the Highlands and Islands. Again, that was referred to by the Deputy First Minister.

To return to the issue of the right to food, the Government agrees with Rhoda Grant that such a right should be brought into Scots law. The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice has met Rhoda Grant to discuss those matters and will continue to give them consideration.

Presiding Officer, I think that I am well over my time.

There is much more that I could say, which reflects my earlier point that this is a wide-ranging report to which we will give consideration. I have been unable to touch on many of the issues that I had hoped to touch on—for example, in relation to housing, including our on-going investment in social housing. That is a challenge across the country, particularly in the Highlands and Islands. I reassure Ariane Burgess that the commitment to building social housing—affordable housing, rather—in rural and island communities involves at least 10 per cent of the houses that we will build being in such communities. I emphasise the point that it will be at least 10 per cent.

I thank members for their contributions and I give an assurance to the Parliament that I will consider the report's contents and come back in due course.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate, and I suspend this meeting of Parliament until 2 o'clock.

13:33

Meeting suspended.

14:00

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Net Zero and Energy, and Transport

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is portfolio question time and the portfolio is net zero and energy, and transport.

Rail Services (Trains Between Fife and Edinburgh)

1. **Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government when it estimates that ScotRail will end the use of short-formed trains that run on rail services between Fife and Edinburgh. (S6O-04209)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): ScotRail has taken a number of steps to improve the service for rail passengers travelling to and from Fife. Diesel trains newly released from some of the intercity routes are now serving Fife, thereby increasing fleet resilience, and additional stops will continue to be made at Dalmeny and Burntisland to reduce pressure on the busy morning and evening Leven services.

I acknowledge that there was a challenging autumn, with disruptions being significantly higher than they were in the previous year. Despite that, ScotRail achieved a strong recovery, and available seat capacity for Fife during the four weeks covering the festive period was 92.9 per cent, which was higher than the 90.3 per cent that was recorded in the same period the previous year.

We want that recovery in performance to continue and I have asked for close monitoring of the Fife service in order to continue to improve capacity where possible and to end the use of short-formed trains.

Murdo Fraser: As the cabinet secretary knows, I have been raising that issue for years and have been promised for years that it is going to get better, but it does not. Even in the past few weeks, two-carriage trains have pulled into Inverkeithing station already packed, with passengers standing. Those trains are therefore not able to take on any more passengers and people who are waiting to get to Edinburgh are left stranded on the platform and are late for work. That happens time and again, so can we please have a timescale for bringing the practice to an end?

Fiona Hyslop: I appreciate the concerns that are being raised. The Deputy Presiding Officer frequently raises those concerns in her correspondence to me. I absolutely sympathise with the situation, which is not acceptable for

passengers. I remember regularly being on short-formed trains prior to electrification of the Glasgow-Edinburgh line. However, the timescale will depend on fleet replacement. I will, of course, update members from Fife, and members more widely, when that occurs.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary agree that ScotRail must retain the operational independence that is necessary for it when responding to emerging situations, such as in relation to the availability of drivers and trains, and keeping trains running? Can she set out the importance of links between Fife and Edinburgh and how the Scottish National Party Government is committed to maintaining and improving them?

Fiona Hyslop: ScotRail, as the train operator, has the necessary level of expertise to allocate its resources to meet passenger demand as suits it best. The link between Edinburgh and Fife is very important, particularly for Fife passengers commuting or travelling for education or leisure.

Electrification work that is under way between Edinburgh and Dalmeny is the first step towards electrification of the Fife route. A rolling programme of decarbonisation and new-fleet procurement strategies will reduce the need for diesel trains across the network, and will bring in new trains with improved reliability. In addition, we are investing £35 million in a new feeder station at Thornton in Fife to facilitate the future electrification of Fife services.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): In November, the cabinet secretary said in a letter that she had made it clear to ScotRail that the situation in Fife must improve as quickly as possible, but figures from ScotRail show that, in November, the 07:16 service from Perth to Edinburgh was short-formed on more than half of its timetabled journeys, which left passengers unable to board. The use of short-formed services is not reflected within the public performance measure, so do the Scottish Government and ScotRail take those services into account when assessing and improving service delivery for passengers?

Fiona Hyslop: I am clear that improvement is needed. It is an issue that I constantly raise with ScotRail. I have asked for regular reports on the number of trains that are booked and on seat availability, and I have received them. That is why I can relay that there have been improvements in seat-availability performance, particularly over the past four weeks. However, I acknowledged in my first answer the situation in November. As I said, there were significant disruptions, during the period, due to a variety of factors, including infrastructure.

Road Improvements

2. Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how it will work with local authorities to address road improvements. (S6O-04210)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): We all recognise that it is important for there to be a safe and resilient road network throughout Scotland. However, as local roads are the responsibility of local authorities, it is for individual councils to allocate resources based on their local needs. The Scottish Government will provide over £15 billion in the 2025-26 local government settlement, increasing the resources that are available to local government by £1 billion, which represents a real-terms increase of 4.7 per cent. At the same time, in the budget for 2025-26, we propose to increase expenditure on trunk road maintenance to £714 million.

Roz McCall: Since 2022, there have been more than 26,000 reported potholes on Fife's roads, including 224 on the six roads that lead in and out of the village of Saline in west Fife alone. The cost of fixing the backlog of repairs in Fife has increased by more than £23 million and now sits at £100 million. Despite the slight uplift in councils' budgets this year, which the minister mentioned, they have been struggling with underfunding for almost two decades, and the higher bills for repairs mean simply that they have less resources for other priorities.

Does the minister accept that the money that local authorities spend on filling the thousands of road defects would be better spent on long-term road surface improvements? How will the Scottish Government work with local authorities to establish a fairer funding process that will allow our councils to fix the backlog?

Jim Fairlie: As I said in my previous answer, the Scottish Government is increasing local authority funding by more than £1 billion. I fully accept the frustration that Roz McCall expresses, but decisions about how local authorities are going to repair the roads are really for them to take.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): From 1 January to 12 November last year, North Ayrshire motorists endured 2,457 days of closed roads. The minister will understand the frustration of many road users about the duration of the closures, especially when no visible work is being carried out or there is no one on site. What more can the Scottish Government do to work with local authorities and, indeed, on its own network, to diminish the negative impacts of lengthy closures and minimise their occurrence?

Jim Fairlie: I absolutely understand the frustration about road closures in the same way as I understand the frustration about potholes,

especially when sites appear to be empty. However, there are, generally, good engineering and safety reasons for closures. They are used only when they are unavoidable, and they are implemented to protect either Scotland's road workers or the public.

Local authorities have powers to direct that unreasonably prolonged works be completed by a given date and they have inspectorate powers in relation to utilities works. When I and the Cabinet Secretary for Transport met the Scottish Road Works Commissioner recently, we raised the issue of co-ordination of works. Since April 2024, the commissioner has also had inspectorate powers, use of which will be reported on in the next annual report. I and the cabinet secretary emphasised to him that the frustration is causing real concern.

Borders Railway (Extension)

3. Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what discussions it has had with the United Kingdom Government transport secretary regarding the £5 million contribution that the previous Administration made towards a feasibility study into the extension of the Borders railway. (S6O-04211)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): I last raised concerns with the UK Government transport ministers in October, and I was assured that overall growth deal funding commitments in Scotland would continue, which was reflected in their budget. The Scottish Government has agreed in principle to the proposal for a project manager to oversee the business case for the extension of the Borders railway. Similar approval is still awaited from the UK Government. I have requested a meeting with the new Secretary of State for Transport and I intend to raise the matter then.

Christine Grahame: As this is a pressing matter, I hope that we will shortly have from the UK Government a timeline for delivery of its half share of the £10 million for the feasibility study on the extension. The cabinet secretary mentioned the proposed senior project manager, and I note that Scottish Borders Council has agreed to appoint one from April. Although it is prepared to fund the post from that time if it has to, I do not think that that would be fair to the council. I hope that the cabinet secretary will impress that on the UK Government.

Fiona Hyslop: Indeed, I will impress that on the UK Government. It has to be recognised that the borderlands inclusive growth deal is a cross-border arrangement. It is important that the Scottish Government does not bypass the governance of that deals or others. The

arrangement requires project proposals to be approved by both Governments. Scottish Borders Council is keen to progress the study, as am I, so I will raise with the UK Government the point that I do not think that it is fair that Scottish Borders Council has been left for such a length of time. Obviously, the council is carrying some risk, if it wants to appoint a project manager in April.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I agree completely with what the cabinet secretary said. There is a risk that Scottish Borders Council will be bankrolling that funding for a feasibility study project manager. Would it be helpful for us to work in a cross-party manner so that we can put pressure on the Labour Government to release the £5 million in funding that has already been promised in the budget?

Fiona Hyslop: Members will continue to do that, cross-party. As Rachael Hamilton is aware, I visited Galashiels and met the campaign group there. However, I have a role as Cabinet Secretary for Transport, so I have raised not only that matter, but funding support for general growth deals. In October, during my first meeting with the Secretary of State for Scotland, we considered other issues—for example, the union connectivity fund and what was going to happen with it. I will carry out my responsibilities when I get an opportunity to meet the Secretary of State for Transport. If members from all parties help by supporting the case, that would be very helpful.

Service Quality Inspection Regime Data (ScotRail Ticket Offices)

4. Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to ScotRail ticket offices scoring one out of five in the most recent service quality inspection regime data. (S6O-04212)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): Those scores are disappointing, and I expect to see facilities provided that meet the needs of passengers. However, those scores demonstrate that SQUIRE is one of the most rigorous regimes of its kind. Many of the target levels are set at 90 per cent or higher. It audits 362 stations and 250 trains in every four-week period. That rigorous approach to inspection by the Scottish Government helps ScotRail to achieve consistently higher passenger satisfaction scores when compared with other rail operators in Great Britain, and most recently, ScotRail scored 90 per cent for overall passenger satisfaction.

The failures that the member mentioned are linked to ticket offices when staff are not present to open the office when expected, and therefore, to provide access to facilities. ScotRail has advised us that the opening times for ticket offices will become more reliable once the revised opening

times have been agreed and all necessary arrangements to implement the changes have been put in place.

Foyso Choudhury: I thank the cabinet secretary for that response. Transport Scotland stated that the low scores for ticket offices were due to the pending outcome of the station opening hours staff consultation, but the issue is long standing: ticket offices scored one out of five in almost every inspection since 2023. What action has the Scottish Government sought from ScotRail to resolve the issues? Can the ongoing consultation be considered a fair assessment of the service if it is not currently being delivered?

Fiona Hyslop: I am concerned that, when 78 per cent of tickets used to be bought at ticket offices and that figure has gone down to 14 per cent, there will be circumstances—whether for reasons of maintenance or other issues for which staff want to be elsewhere—in which an office is closed when it is meant to be open. That has not helped the scores. That should and could be resolved with more certainty and reliability about when ticket offices will be open.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary set out how the pending outcome of the ongoing station opening hours consultation would have affected those scores, how the Government expects to see significantly improved scores and how all that will drive efficiency and improvements on our publicly owned railway?

Fiona Hyslop: We need efficiency and improvement on our railways. The management of that is the responsibility of ScotRail. However, as I have said in a previous answer, the new regime will ensure that staff are made available at stations. They might not be in ticket offices, but they will be at stations after the vast majority of changes have taken place. Indeed, stations where there are increases in scores are where there is accessibility to allow use of ticket barriers and so on.

Things move on, change and need to be improved. The SQUIRE inspectors will use the agreed times for inspection purposes, so we would expect ticket offices and facilities to be open and fully functional. As I explained in my previous answer, that is to provide certainty and reliability that is not there at the moment.

Decarbonising Social Housing (Rural Areas)

5. Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what additional measures will be introduced to support rural housing providers to achieve the net zero emissions target by decarbonising social housing. (S6O-04213)

The Acting Minister for Climate Action (Alasdair Allan): We are committed to delivering vital support to decarbonise homes through the social housing net zero heat fund, which has been supporting social landlords to retrofit their housing stock since 2020. To date, the fund has helped to decarbonise more than 13,000 homes. To support rural housing providers, the most recent fund refresh included a grant per property uplift for rural and remote rural locations of 11 per cent and 22 per cent respectively. That acknowledges the increased costs in rural locations and heeds calls from the sector to ensure a just transition to net zero.

Meghan Gallacher: Rural housing providers face unique and complex challenges that set them apart from providers in urban areas. When they attempt to meet net zero targets, they are faced with high retrofit costs due to traditional construction, lack of access to skilled labour and materials and, as the minister cited in his response, funding gaps. The grants that are given by the Government often fall short of covering the substantial costs of decarbonising rural housing. That is not to mention the difficulties of complying with the energy performance certificate system, due to the issues that I have just raised. Such issues need to be fully addressed in the heat in buildings framework when the relevant bill comes to the Parliament. Will the minister commit to working towards a tailored strategy for rural communities that does not leave them at a disadvantage?

Alasdair Allan: The member rightly points to the distinctive housing types in different locations, including in many parts of rural Scotland. We are committed to building on the progress that has been made in improving the energy efficiency of those houses. Although some rural and island households have made the transition, we recognise that, for some properties, there are limitations due to their location or building type or, indeed, due to grid capacity. In rural and island communities, Scottish Government support is available to improve the energy efficiency of homes and to switch heating systems through, for example, the social housing net zero heat fund and various other schemes. Many of those schemes include a rural and islands uplift to reflect the very issues that the member rightly points to.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I am frequently contacted by people in rural and island communities who are struggling to figure out what is available to them in order to make the improvements that they want to make to their homes. Will the minister lay out what additional support is available for energy efficiency improvements to households in rural and island areas, including through the Home Energy Scotland grant and loan scheme?

Alasdair Allan: The Home Energy Scotland grant and loan scheme offers a £1,500 uplift to the grant funding that is available for energy efficiency measures in remote rural areas and islands. Through our area-based schemes, we provide an uplift to reflect higher delivery costs in those areas. Households in extreme fuel poverty in remote rural and island areas can benefit from insulation improvements worth up to £21,100. The warmer homes Scotland scheme operates a national customer price model to ensure equal access to grant-funded installation of energy efficiency improvements across Scotland, including in the areas that the member mentioned.

Conservancy Fee (Leisure Vessels on the River Clyde)

6. Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on Transport Scotland's engagement with Peel Ports regarding the introduction of a conservancy fee for leisure vessels sailing on the River Clyde. (S6O-04214)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): Although some of Scotland's ports are publicly owned or owned by communities, most are owned by commercial entities such as Peel Ports. It is for port owners to determine how best to manage their assets and utilise their resources, within the boundaries of any statutory requirements or limitations. In relation to fees and dues, how, when and what to charge forms part of that consideration. However, I am aware that the proposal has raised a number of concerns from vessel owners across Scotland who access the Clyde estuary. I therefore wrote to Peel Ports on 18 December regarding that issue.

Stuart McMillan: I thank the cabinet secretary for that helpful reply. She is very much aware of the concerns of the boating community. She will also be aware of the work that I have undertaken, alongside Kenneth Gibson and Clare Adamson, through the cross-party group on recreational boating and marine tourism, which I convene. Will the cabinet secretary confirm whether she is prepared to meet members of the boating community in order to listen to their serious concerns about the proposal? What powers does the Scottish Government have to prevent such a fee from being imposed?

Fiona Hyslop: Ship, passenger and goods dues are charges that can be levied under the Harbours Act 1964. The levels at which such dues are set is, in essence, a commercial matter for the relevant port authority. Section 31 of the act provides that Scottish ministers have a right of objection to the imposition of such charges if certain criteria are met, but that right has never been used in the past 25 years. Therefore, any

person who is considering making a formal objection should take independent legal advice. Given that ministers might have an adjudication role, it might not be appropriate for me to meet directly with anyone who seeks to make such a legal objection. However, I am sure that, as he is doing today, Mr McMillan will represent the interests of his constituents in the boating community.

I understand that Peel Ports has committed to conducting a consultation before considering introducing any new charges, so I encourage members of the boating community to engage with that. I am sure that, as he is doing today, Mr McMillan will continue to represent the interests of his constituents in the area.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): As Peel Ports has jurisdiction from the River Clyde at Glasgow Green right down to the Firth of Clyde, it has a significant impact on about 450 square miles of inshore waters. It has claimed that the imposition of conservancy fees for leisure vessels is common practice on the part of other statutory harbour authorities. I asked the Scottish Government whether it could provide data on that, but it does not hold such data, which I find alarming. Does the cabinet secretary understand why that is the case? Will she look to gather data on other statutory harbour authorities' charging of leisure vessel conservancy fees? Will she also examine the oversight and regulation of port authorities in Scotland more generally?

Fiona Hyslop: I set out the oversight and governance aspects in my previous answer. I must point out, though, that the vast majority of port authorities are commercial operators, and we do not hold information about commercial entities across a variety of areas. However, given the current concerns, I will see whether it is possible to identify whether other commercial port authorities would be prepared to share their information to enable us to gain a better understanding. I understand that other such authorities charge in a way that has not been done for some of the vessels that we are discussing.

Renewable Energy Output (Value to United Kingdom Economy)

7. Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what the current value of Scotland's renewable energy output is to the UK economy. (S6O-04215)

The Acting Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy (Gillian Martin): The majority of electricity that is generated in Scotland is from renewable sources, and Scotland plays a crucial role in the United Kingdom's overall renewable energy landscape. As of 24 September 2024, Scotland hosted 27 per cent of UK renewable

electricity capacity. Following work that was undertaken in 2023, the Fraser of Allander Institute estimated that, in 2021, Scotland's renewable energy sectors and supply chains supported more than £10.1 billion-worth of output, more than 42,000 full-time equivalent jobs and more than £4.7 billion of gross value added across the Scottish economy.

Gordon MacDonald: It is vital that we continue to maximise Scotland's renewables capabilities and take full advantage of our abundant natural resources. How much electricity demand is met by renewables, and how will the proposed budget continue to invest in and grow that capacity?

Gillian Martin: In 2023, an estimated 64.7 per cent of the electricity that was consumed in Scotland came from renewable sources, but that percentage continues to grow. In quarter 3 of last year, for example, it had risen by more than 8 per cent compared with the same period in 2023.

The path to net zero presents enormous economic opportunities through supporting a just transition that creates jobs, promotes private investment and brings communities with us. The recent budget statement announced that, in 2025-26, we will commit £4.9 billion in capital and resource spend for activities that will have a positive impact on the delivery of our climate change goals. We will almost triple our capital funding for offshore wind, to £150 million. Such investment comes under year 2 of our five-year commitment to invest up to £500 million to anchor the supply chain in Scotland, which is expected to leverage £1.5 billion of additional private investment in the infrastructure and manufacturing facilities that are critical to the growth of the sector.

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): It has been two years since the Scottish Government unveiled its draft energy strategy and just transition plan. Russell Borthwick, the chief executive of Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce, said:

"We've been promised numerous times since that the final version would be published but we are still waiting, strategy-less."

The Scottish Government is asleep at the wheel, so when will the final strategy be published?

Gillian Martin: As I have said in many answers to similar questions from Conservative members, reserved policy in the area has been a shifting landscape, which has had an impact on some of our responses in our draft energy strategy. We are taking the time to look at that and, as the First Minister mentioned at First Minister's question time, issues relating to the court cases, which have had an impact.

We want the energy strategy to be fit for purpose, and we are working and have been

working very hard on it. We are taking into account all the consultation responses, and the strategy will be published shortly.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can squeeze in question 8 if I get brief questions and brief answers to match.

Energy Efficiency Area-based Grants (Reallocation of Unused Funds)

8. **Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the net zero secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding whether unused funds from energy efficiency area-based grant schemes could be reallocated, including to reduce fuel poverty in the coming financial year. (S6O-04216)

The Acting Minister for Climate Action (Alasdair Allan): I met ministerial colleagues on 12 September 2024 to agree the issuing of grant offers for area-based schemes. We agreed that that was a priority and noted the challenge in completing some projects by March. The grant offer therefore extends to June 2025 to help to ensure ABS project completion.

We have also boosted fuel poverty support this winter by allocating an extra £20 million to the warmer homes Scotland scheme, taking its support to £85 million. Through the 2025-26 budget, we propose to invest more than £300 million in our heat in buildings programmes, including support for people in fuel poverty.

Mark Griffin: Area-based schemes are place-based approaches that can transform whole neighbourhoods by improving health, creating jobs and cutting greenhouse gas emissions, but, over the past three years, more than £60 million of a possible £192 million has gone unspent. That is because, as the minister highlighted, councils often do not receive their grant allocation until well into the financial year. Will the Scottish Government commit to making sure that the funding is made available to councils in time for the funds to be spent on vital services throughout the year?

Alasdair Allan: As Mark Griffin identifies, area-based schemes are very valuable in addressing fuel poverty. Area-based scheme funding of up to £64 million was identified in the 2024-25 budget documents, as per the distribution agreed with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. However, ABS 2025-26 grant offers were delayed until September 2024 due to the Scottish Government facing what I hope he and others will acknowledge was an emergency spending control situation. However, from what I have said, he will be aware of the value that the Scottish Government places on those schemes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on net zero and energy, and transport. I apologise to members whom I was not able to squeeze in.

UK Covid-19 Inquiry Module 1 Report (Scottish Government Response)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a statement by Kate Forbes on the Scottish Government's response to the United Kingdom Covid-19 inquiry module 1 report. The Deputy First Minister will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:28

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): The Covid-19 pandemic affected every aspect of life in Scotland, and its impact continues to be felt. Today, as always, our thoughts are with those who lost loved ones. We understand that, in recognition of the loss, hurt and suffering of the people of Scotland and the wider UK population, we must learn from past events and make effective, practical and measurable improvements in pandemic planning and preparedness. It is vital that we take steps to be as prepared as we can be for the future.

In July last year, the UK Covid-19 inquiry published its report and recommendations in relation to module 1, which considered pre-pandemic resilience and preparedness.

The inquiry's report sets out its findings in detail, as well as the changes that it considers necessary to improve whole-system civil emergency planning and response in the UK to ensure that we are better prepared for, and are able to respond to and recover from, future emergencies. The findings and recommendations in the inquiry chair's report cover a range of matters including governance and organisational structures; engagement and collaboration; risk assessment, including capacity and capabilities; the development of cohesive strategies to prevent, reduce, control and mitigate the effects of future whole-system civil emergencies; the use of data and research; pandemic exercising; scrutiny, accountability and transparency; and how we support those who are most vulnerable to risks. We agree with the inquiry that changes are required in relation to those matters.

Scotland faces a range of significant risks, from pandemics to the impacts of our ever-changing weather. We must learn from past events and global best practice to ensure that we are prepared and ready. The changes that we have committed to will ensure that we are better prepared for future pandemics, that we are better prepared for, and are able to respond to, a range

of risks and threats, and that we can improve and strengthen our resilience as a nation.

I am pleased that the Scottish Government has now published its response to the module 1 report and recommendations. Those affected by the pandemic, in particular those who bore some form of loss, have placed a great deal of trust in the Scottish Government, not just to take on the challenges that Covid-19 posed, but to be open about and accountable for our performance. That trust is of the utmost importance to the Scottish Government, and it has informed all our considerations of the chair's findings and recommendations.

The report set out 10 overarching recommendations. Our response, which has been published online today, sets out our commitments for action and the timescales in which we aim to achieve them. We will provide regular updates to the UK Covid-19 inquiry to demonstrate our progress on the recommendations. My Cabinet colleague Angela Constance, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs, has responsibility for civil contingencies and is already working across Government to deliver the changes that we need.

As we move forward, we must continue to work closely with our local, national and international partners to take the action that is needed to deliver on the inquiry's recommendations. The changes that are needed to ensure our future preparedness cannot be made in isolation or by the Scottish Government alone, which is why, first and foremost, we are committed to working collaboratively with the UK Government. There has already been joint working with the UK Government and the devolved Governments of Wales and Northern Ireland to deliver a four-nations concept of operations and exercise plan for UK-wide whole-system civil emergencies. Those actions address the findings and recommendations that are outlined in the report. Recommendation 10 requires the UK Government to consult with devolved Governments to create a statutory independent body for whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience. We are committed to working together to ensure that any new body is able to deliver its function in a manner that respects the devolution settlement.

Our partners beyond Government are critical to delivering improvements on the ground, where the impact of emergencies is felt most starkly. We fully support the chair's findings and recommendations regarding the vital role that is played by the voluntary, community and social enterprise sectors, and the role that they can play in building and maintaining our resilience. I pay tribute to the work of those organisations during the Covid-19 pandemic. Health boards, local government and

Police Scotland, which are tasked with planning and responding to emergencies, were vital in the Scottish response. I also pay tribute to our communities and the third sector for the innovative and creative ways that they responded to the demands of the pandemic.

As set out in our national performance framework, the Scottish Government is committed, through our policies, to tackling persistent inequality. A more equal society is better able to prepare for, respond to and recover from civil emergencies.

Clearly, certain groups in our society are more susceptible and vulnerable to adverse shocks, and the pandemic not only introduced new inequality but exacerbated existing inequality.

We fully endorse the chair's recommendations and will take action to improve how we identify, assess and address the potential impacts of whole-system emergencies on the most vulnerable in our society.

The UK inquiry chair has made clear her expectation that institutions take swift action to consider and implement her recommendations to ensure that changes are in place as quickly as possible. We endorse that approach, and I reassure the people of Scotland that we have not been waiting for the chair to publish before taking action on many of the issues that the inquiry raised.

In August 2021, the First Minister established the independent standing committee on pandemic preparedness to provide expert advice on future pandemic risks and how best to prepare for them. The committee provided its final report in November 2024, which covered a range of topics that are closely aligned to those in the inquiry's report, including effective data sharing and usage; the integration of behavioural science; the improvement of connections between the academic and wider preparedness communities; and the establishment of a Scottish pandemic sciences partnership.

The Scottish Government has already accepted the committee's recommendations in principle and will provide further details on our planned actions in due course.

We have made changes to embed the reforms in public services and the justice system that the pandemic necessitated. Improvements in the longer term were delivered via the Coronavirus (Recovery and Reform) (Scotland) Act 2022, which was passed in June of that year.

We have taken steps to increase and secure the types and levels of personal protective equipment items that are held in our national stockpile.

On 4 June 2024, Cabinet agreed to establish a new cross-Government governance arrangement for future pandemic preparedness. Our newly established ministerial oversight group, which is co-chaired by my colleagues the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs and the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, will meet for the first time in the coming weeks.

We have also commenced a programme of work to improve our risk assessment process, which better takes into account Scotland's circumstances and characteristics, including the impact that risks might have on the most vulnerable in our society.

As part of its examinations, the Scottish Covid-19 inquiry, which Scottish ministers established in December 2021 and operates independently of the UK inquiry, will consider matters relating to pandemic planning and response. We will consider those findings when they are available.

Given the importance of transparency around the actions that we are taking to manage civil emergencies, we will also report to the Parliament every three years on the improvements that we make to emergency resilience and preparedness in Scotland. The first report will be laid before the Parliament in September of this year.

I reiterate the Scottish Government's commitment to continue the highest standard of co-operation with both inquiries, because learning from them is vital.

I note my gratitude to those who are working on the UK and Scottish Covid-19 inquiries and those who have provided evidence to them. I am conscious of the immense responsibility that they hold, the enormity of the tasks that they face in understanding and distilling the events of the pandemic, and the important lessons for the future.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The Deputy First Minister will now take questions on the issues that were raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for that, after which we will move to the next item of business. Members who wish to put a question should press their request-to-speak buttons.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, which states that I am a practising general practitioner.

The Covid-19 report casts serious doubt on the ability of the Scottish Government to address key failings that occurred during the pandemic. One major concern is the lack of detail on how the Scottish Government plans to overhaul risk assessment and pandemic planning. The Scottish National Party needs to act decisively to update

frameworks to respond to new threats and run regular scenario tests.

Transparency is another issue. Regular bedtime deletion of WhatsApp messages means that we will never know the reasoning behind centralised decision making and the lack of involvement of key stakeholders.

The pandemic exposed stark health inequalities affecting Scotland's most deprived communities and those who are most vulnerable. Without clear leadership and meaningful reform, the SNP risks repeating past mistakes, leaving Scotland unprepared for the next crisis.

The Deputy First Minister talks about adopting a UK-wide strategy, but that sounds hollow given that Ms Lloyd, Nicola Sturgeon's chief of staff, wanted

"a good old-fashioned rammy"

with the UK Government. While the rest of the UK was developing an NHS app, the SNP Government decided that Scotland would go its own way for the sake of being divergent. How can we avoid that divergence in future policy and continue to work in a four-nations manner?

We watched the relentless march of Covid across Europe and knew that vulnerable groups would be most affected, yet inadequate protocols were in place to protect them. What will the Scottish Government do differently next time?

Kate Forbes: I thank the member for that series of questions. I hope that, in time, as he re-reads our response to the chair's report, he will see the way in which we have set out clearly our acceptance of the recommendations that have been made by the chair and the fact that we have attached clear actions and timescales to each of our responses.

The member made three particular points, one of which concerned pandemic exercises. Recommendation 6 talks about the need for there to be

"a UK-wide pandemic response exercise at least every three years."

That is a direct quote from the chair's recommendations; we are not suggesting that that is our response. We are committed to participating in the tier 1 national exercise programme, which seeks to exercise responses to a range of risks rather than just a pandemic, to make sure that we are prepared for any eventuality. I am sure that, as a practising GP, the member will know that those risks come in all shapes and sizes and that many of them are difficult to forecast.

The member mentioned risk assessment. Recommendation 3 calls for a better approach to risk assessment, and we have accepted that

recommendation. We will continue to improve the approach to risk assessment, and we will take a joined-up approach with the other UK nations.

The member also suggested improvements on transparency, which is addressed in recommendation 8. We have accepted that recommendation in principle, and we have agreed to regular reporting. I have already set out the timescales for the first report, which will be laid this summer. Rather than wait indefinitely, we have set out a clear timescale, and we would expect Parliament to scrutinise that first report.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I welcome the fact that all four nations are working together to improve resilience and planning for future pandemics. Many lessons need to be learned, but I will focus on just three of them. First, I welcome the three-yearly reporting to Parliament. Given the lack of planning and scrutiny in the past with regard to the Silver Swan initiative, that will be a definite improvement.

Secondly, I think that the Deputy First Minister would acknowledge that trust is important and that, therefore, openness and transparency must be our watchwords. That must be more than just a principle; it must also be practice. So, can the Deputy First Minister tell me that the wholesale deletion of WhatsApp messages by ministers and civil servants, including John Swinney, will not happen again?

Thirdly, and finally, we know that risk assessments were not undertaken when the Scottish Government gave the green light for health boards to discharge untested patients into care homes, with the result that Covid-19 spread like wildfire among the most vulnerable. Can the Deputy First Minister assure the chamber that such actions will be fully risk assessed in the future?

Kate Forbes: On the point about WhatsApp and the use of mobile phones, that is an example of how the Scottish Government has responded in advance of today's statement. As the member will know, we have set out a new policy on the use of WhatsApp, which means that corporate devices will not be able to access it. As a result, and in response to the review by Emma Martins, we have set out a new policy for the use of mobile messaging.

The member also talked about the importance of health resilience, which is captured in the report and in our response to it. As I said, we have been taking a lot of steps to improve the resilience of our health system in order to deal with pandemics in the future. We have identified a number of points in our response to the inquiry's chair, some of which relate to PPE supply, distribution and training. We are also looking to work with the UK

Government on areas of joint surveillance, recognising that the 2011 UK pandemic flu plan was not fit for purpose. Those are just three examples of how we are ensuring that there is greater resilience across the health service and that the people in it are prepared and have the capacity to respond in the future.

I note that the member welcomed the commitment on reporting to Parliament. I think that it is important that we do that on a joint, UK-wide basis. That is precisely why all four nations are, I believe—unless someone corrects me—responding simultaneously this afternoon.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise the chamber that several members wish to ask their questions. To get as many in as possible, I need succinct questions and succinct answers to match.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): It is undeniable that there are profound lessons to be learned from the effect of health inequalities during the pandemic. Will the Deputy First Minister outline how those inequalities will be addressed as part of the public health planning that is being done in response to the evidence shown in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic?

Kate Forbes: Increasing healthy life expectancy and reducing health inequalities across Scotland is an ambition of the Government. We recognise that health inequalities in Scotland have widened in recent years due to several issues, particularly Covid-19. We are developing a population health framework that will take a cross-Government approach to improving the key building blocks of health, including population health, and reducing health inequalities. That issue is prevalent in the inquiry chair's report and in our response to its recommendations.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): The rapid development and deployment of technology during Covid was key to the management of the pandemic and demonstrated that Governments can be agile and active when the need arises. Despite that, the development of healthcare technology and telemedicine has fallen back into the slow lane. What will the Government do to ensure that the demonstrable benefits of technology deployment, including data gathering and sharing—especially in an emergency—are fully realised?

Kate Forbes: The member makes a very good point. Data is included in recommendation 5, as is "research for future pandemics". We accept that recommendation and are fully committed to working with the UK Government to ensure that we have reliable data and research for future pandemics, both for Scotland and on a four-nations basis. We have agreed to that recommendation in full.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I thank the Deputy First Minister for her statement. Along with other members in the chamber, I acknowledge the comments that have been made about the people who lost their lives during Covid.

Scotland's response to the pandemic included the third sector in many ways. As the Government has, in its statement, already committed to the significant improvements in pandemic preparedness in social care and health, what help will be given to ensure that our third sector, too, can rise to those demands?

Kate Forbes: Clare Adamson is right to acknowledge the work of the third sector not only during the pandemic but in response to a number of the inequalities that were exacerbated then. I referenced their importance in my statement. We also accept that the work in relation to preparedness needs to go beyond the boundaries of Government, and we will continue to engage with the third sector and others in ensuring our preparedness for a further risk.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the four-nations approach that is being taken. For lessons to be learned, a collaborative approach is vital.

As the Deputy First Minister said, during the pandemic, certain groups in our society were particularly vulnerable, and Covid only exacerbated pre-existing inequalities. More work must be done on that. Can she assure Parliament that the Scottish Covid inquiry will investigate the issues around inequalities and bring to light the injustices that were felt by some of the most vulnerable in our communities? What timescale can we expect for that work?

Kate Forbes: If I heard the member correctly, she asked for reassurance on what the Scottish Covid inquiry would do. As she will know, it is really important that the Scottish Covid inquiry be entirely independent of Government, so it would not be appropriate for me to determine or to guide the areas that it chooses to explore. However, I imagine that the issues that she has identified will inevitably be explored, because they are of such importance to our understanding of the impact through the inquiry.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): The Scottish Government has openly supported continued innovation in life sciences and public health research for the development of diagnostics, vaccines and therapeutics, to provide the capability to respond to novel threats when required. Can the Deputy First Minister outline what investment will be made in that sector in the Scottish budget for 2025-26, and how it will benefit Scots across the country?

Kate Forbes: The member is absolutely right that life sciences are not only a critical driver of growth in our economy; they are potentially life saving, because they provide life-saving therapies and contribute significantly to that. In our programme for government, we set out measures to grow the sector, which currently contributes more than £10 billion to the economy and supports 42,500 jobs. As part of our enterprise package, we will continue to support innovative and high-growth companies that operate in the life sciences sector.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): This is the first module of 10 that will complete over the next few years. The inquiry is essential and it cannot be rushed, but the recommendations should be worked on at pace. I am grateful to the Deputy First Minister for setting out how that is being done at the moment. However, pandemics do not wait for us to complete work, learn lessons and then implement them before they happen. How confident is the Deputy First Minister that, if we were to have another pandemic in the short term, we would be ready, without the full learning from the inquiry?

Kate Forbes: As the member said, we cannot afford to wait. In my statement, I set out a number of steps that we have already taken in advance of the chair publishing the report and of our response to the recommendations. I mentioned that the pandemic preparedness group that was established published its recommendations last year. Many of those recommendations are similar to those of the chair, and we have already made significant progress on those recommendations. Much of what we have responded to is already in train. The areas that require four-nations responses are probably the items that are new in this response.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I am sure that members are reassured to learn that the Government will maintain an adequate stockpile of PPE. Will the Deputy First Minister reassure members that that stockpile will be refreshed so that no staff are opening out-of-date face masks and gowns in the event of another pandemic, and that we will use the time between pandemics—we must think of it in those terms—to ensure that there is an adequate mix of masks to fit all face types, genders and body types, so that we do not have a situation again in which a predominantly female workforce is unable to use face masks that are designed for men?

Kate Forbes: We continue to hold a national stockpile of PPE items, and we regularly update the items that are held in the stockpile to reflect the learnings from the Covid pandemic. All of that is reviewed regularly as part of a four-nations planning and preparedness exercise.

The Scottish Government has recently commissioned a review of the current and future arrangements for face-fit testing of FFP3 masks in health and social care settings, and we will consider the findings of that review once they are available.

To reassure the member and others, I point out that NHS National Services Scotland, which manages the storage and distribution of PPE items on behalf of the Scottish Government, is working continually to improve all arrangements and to ensure that the appropriate PPE items are available at the point and time of need.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, thousands of nurses and other healthcare professionals across Scotland administered crucial vaccines to the wider population. I remind members that, as a nurse, I was part of Dumfries and Galloway's vaccine team during that time.

The vaccine programme was one of the most pivotal moments in tackling the pandemic, reducing harms and deaths, enabling a return to a certain level of normality and reuniting friends and family by enabling safe socialisation. Will the Deputy First Minister speak to what lessons the Scottish Government has learned on the medical response to the pandemic, particularly through the vaccine and testing programme, and how those will enable better planning and pandemic preparedness in the future?

Kate Forbes: The public hearings of the UK Covid-19 inquiry covering vaccines and therapeutics are currently live, so it would not be appropriate for me to comment on evidence that has been presented there. However, we have conducted evaluation studies of our vaccination and testing programme and, in January 2024, we transferred operational oversight for vaccines to Public Health Scotland to ensure that roles and responsibilities are clear and understood in the event of future emergencies. That is one example of the changes that we have made.

One significant lesson learned from the pandemic in relation to vaccines concerned the availability of a workforce to administer them. I thank all those who participated in distributing vaccines. Our vaccine teams are now larger than they were pre-pandemic.

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): Of course, the previous pandemic of any significance was the Spanish flu pandemic 100 years before, so it is perfectly possible that we will all be dead and gone by the time of the next one. Notwithstanding that cheery thought, institutional memory is a fickle thing, and it is perfectly possible that there will be no first-hand memory to draw on. Therefore, is the Deputy First Minister certain that the processes

and procedures that are being put in place will survive the test of time?

Kate Forbes: The member is right to identify the importance of institutional memory and the danger of relying only on it, which is why our four-nations response is so critical. It writes that memory in to the four institutions that govern these islands. For example, one of the recommendations is that we should have a much simpler structure for whole-system civil emergency preparedness and response. I argue that things are always easier to remember if they are simpler than if they are overly complex and bureaucratic.

Irrespective of what the future holds, we understand our responsibility to be prepared, and we are committed to taking the lead on that.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): I understand that, as part of the response to the report, there has been a United Kingdom-wide call for a national laboratory for pandemic preparedness. I note that the standing committee on pandemic preparedness has urged the creation of a centre for pandemic preparedness in Scotland. Will the Deputy First Minister outline the Scottish Government's work on that so far and say when delivery of it might be expected?

Kate Forbes: We have accepted that recommendation in principle and will work with partners on how to deliver it. The member is right that, in its final report, which was published in November, the independent standing committee on pandemic preparedness made a series of recommendations relating to the use of data, governance, funding and relationships between the private, public and academic sectors. We are developing next steps and I will be happy to update the Parliament in due course.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the ministerial statement. There will be a short pause before we move on to the next item of business.

A9 Dualling Programme

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-16085, in the name of Jackson Carlaw, on behalf of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, on an inquiry into the A9 dualling programme. I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak button.

15:00

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): One of the frustrations of opening a debate on behalf of the committee is that I cannot freewheel in my usual style; I have to adhere to a text, which is very frustrating.

The subject of the debate will be familiar to many colleagues across the chamber. However, I was not directly involved in it prior to convening the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee's inquiry into the A9 dualling programme, other than as a semi-regular user of the road.

As convener of the committee, I put on record again my thanks to Laura Hansler. Every petition has its origin in a member of the public who comes to us with an issue that they wish us to pursue. We do so without fear or favour, with no manifesto underpinning our work but to challenge and represent the petitioner's concern.

Laura Hansler joins us in the public gallery, and I thank her for lodging the petition calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to fulfil its 2011 promise to dual the A9 between Perth and Inverness, which provided the catalyst for our inquiry. I commend her for her commitment to the issue over a long number of years, including through the forthright and powerful evidence that she provided directly to the committee, as well as by faithfully attending meetings to observe the evidence that we heard from past and present Scottish Government ministers and officials, about which I will say more shortly.

The petition was lodged in December 2022 and it includes a call for completion of the dualling work by 2025. As members will be aware, before we had the opportunity to even consider the petition, the then Minister for Transport, Jenny Gilruth, announced that the 2025 completion date was "simply no longer achievable". That announcement in February 2023 and the initial evidence that we gathered from the petitioner, the Civil Engineering Contractors Association and Transport Scotland led to the committee taking the unusual step of elevating its consideration of the petition to the level of an inquiry.

Throughout the inquiry, the committee sought to explore the circumstances that led to the 2025 completion date becoming unachievable, as well as to consider on-going challenges that might impact on the successful dualling of the A9 by the Scottish Government's new target completion date of 2035. In doing so, we gathered evidence from people with technical and industry expertise, from people and businesses that were affected by issues along that arterial route, and from those who held the highest positions in the Government.

The committee is grateful to all who have contributed to our consideration of the matter, whether in person or in writing, including the former First Ministers Humza Yousaf, Nicola Sturgeon and the late Alex Salmond, whose final appearance before the Parliament was at our committee. I thank the many political parties that sought to give evidence to the committee during its inquiry, which I must say excludes the Scottish Greens. I also thank the clerks and all parliamentary staff who supported the committee throughout the process, as well as Transport Scotland officials for the volume of evidence that was made available to the committee when we requested various documents relating to the A9 dualling programme.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): Does Jackson Carlaw agree that the committee looked at not only what went wrong but how to put things right in the future? In that respect, the evidence that we heard from Grahame Barn, the chief executive officer of the body that represents 80 per cent of civil engineering companies in Scotland, was extremely helpful in the detail of his recommendations about how procurement might be done more effectively in the future.

Jackson Carlaw: I hope to say more about that, and I am quite sure that Fergus Ewing will not miss the opportunity to do so himself.

Like me, Fergus Ewing will have been slightly surprised when the documents that we received from Transport Scotland turned out to be about 18 inches thick. There was quite a bit of reading and digesting, even if quite a lot of the documents turned out to be redacted.

Special thanks should also be offered to Edward Mountain, who attended many of the evidence sessions and contributed to our deliberations in his role as reporter from the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee.

Although the extensive evidence that we considered did not uncover, in the parlance of the day, a smoking gun that suggested that the Government had acted in any way maliciously—it did not suggest that at all—it became clear to the committee that a lack of clarity over the availability of funding resulted in a failure to deliver the project

on time. It was clear, too, that the unwillingness of the Scottish Government and Transport Scotland to be open and transparent about the challenges that were being faced has damaged public trust in the Government's ability to deliver the dualling programme.

Our committee is no stranger to public concerns about the Government's approach to major road projects, which we continue to examine as part of our consideration of a number of petitions. Transparency in relation to Transport Scotland's decision-making processes is a recurring theme. Although we look forward to inviting the cabinet secretary to the committee in due course to discuss several petitions that relate to road projects that are in hibernation in different parts of Scotland, it might be worth reflecting on how past experiences, such as the lack of open, external discussion of delays and drift on the A9 dualling programme, have negatively impacted public perceptions of Transport Scotland.

As our report makes clear, the delays that have been experienced are, frankly, unacceptable for people who live and work in the north of Scotland. Although a revised date for completion of the project has been announced, the news of a delay to the expected completion of the Tomatin to Moy section leaves the committee unconvinced that the lessons of the past have been learned.

We are particularly grateful for the candid evidence that was provided to us by the Civil Engineering Contractors Association, which told us that its members regarded Transport Scotland

“as the worst client to work for in the UK.”

It is possible that that opinion might have softened as a result of a change in Transport Scotland's approach to procurement contracts, which means that there will now be a greater balancing of risk between the Scottish Government and contractors. CECA Scotland praised Transport Scotland for taking the “large leap” of changing its procurement approach, with the number of bids received for the Tomatin to Moy section being an encouraging indication that contractors are content with the new form of contract.

It is to be hoped that contractors now have a more positive view of working with Transport Scotland, as it became increasingly clear to the committee that, due to the scale of the civil engineering work that is planned for Scotland—specifically, the north of Scotland—over the next decade, it will be not only the availability of funding that determines whether the Scottish Government can deliver on its commitment on the A9 but the availability of a workforce to carry out the construction of the remaining sections as competition among members of the industry to undertake the projects continues to rise.

To put that into context, we heard that the north of Scotland can expect to see about £20 billion-worth of investment from SSE in the next five years, and that a further £20 billion to £30 billion will be invested by Scottish Power, Network Rail and others in major projects across Scotland over the next decade. Those organisations need the road to be completed in order to fulfil their obligations to those projects, but those projects will be competing for the same workforce as we require to complete the A9.

The Scottish Government has told us that it considered market capacity when it developed the updated A9 delivery plan. There are those who would like the Government to take a more flexible and responsive approach to market capacity, with a view to accelerating the dualling programme, should the capacity exist in the construction and engineering sector to do so. That is why the committee is a little disappointed by the Government's recent rejection of any plans to accelerate the current programme.

During her evidence to the committee, Nicola Sturgeon reflected on whether the Government was

“as candid as we should have been with ourselves, as well as with the public, about just how challenging it would always have been”—[*Official Report, Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, 29 May 2024; c 7-8.*]

to meet the 2025 target. We know from our work on the inquiry that there are people who feel that the Government should have been more candid about progress, or the lack thereof, on dualling the A9. Laura Hansler commented that part of the reason for lodging her petition was to challenge the very people responsible for the “unforgivable lack of transparency” surrounding the non-delivery of the dualling programme. Perhaps the cabinet secretary could respond to those who feel that there has been a lack of transparency up to now and set out what steps are in hand to change that.

In a previous parliamentary session, I had the pleasure of serving as convener of the Forth Crossing Bill Committee, which colleagues might recall was established to examine the construction of what we now refer to as the Queensferry crossing. During the A9 inquiry, I invited reflections from others, including former First Ministers and ministers, on how the existence of a cross-party parliamentary committee that was tasked with looking at a major project provided an impetus and helped to uncover solutions to difficult issues that might otherwise have led to drift.

That was a legislative requirement for the Queensferry crossing. It is for Parliament to decide whether that is a route to look to in the future, but I think that the existence of the Forth Crossing Bill Committee undoubtedly helped to maintain a focus on a project that, after all, was eventually

delivered on budget and on time. Our report suggests that taking the step of establishing such a committee would support the rebuilding of public trust and confidence that the commitment to fully dual the A9 between Perth and Inverness will be delivered.

The whole Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee has had an opportunity to consider the Government's response, and we are slightly disappointed. We feel that the Government had an opportunity to reflect, to reset, to reboot and to restore public confidence, so that MSPs do not end up having the same debate in Parliament in 2035, having had another inquiry into why the A9 had still not been completed. I therefore encourage the cabinet secretary to seize the moment and the opportunity of the committee's report and to do all that she can to ensure that public confidence is there and that the road is delivered.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee's 2nd Report, 2024 (Session 6), *Inquiry into the A9 Dualling Programme* (SP Paper 669), including the recommendation that a dedicated committee should be established to provide oversight and maintain momentum on scrutiny of long-running, multi-session infrastructure projects, such as the A9 dualling programme.

15:09

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): I begin by thanking all who contributed to the committee's work on this inquiry, which arose from its consideration of petition PE1992, which was lodged in 2022. In my response to the committee, which was issued on 9 January, in my covering letter and again today, I welcome the committee's consideration of the issues relevant to the future progress of the dualling programme.

Much has changed since the committee began its consideration of the petition, and its report recognises that. The delivery plan for completion of the A9 dualling programme was announced in December 2023. That plan involves the procurement of four design and build contracts as well as, subject to further decisions to be made in late 2025, the procurement of two mutual investment model—MIM—contracts. That approach was supported by a Cabinet decision to prioritise the completion of the A9 dualling programme within its budgets.

Since the announcement of that plan, the Government has made good progress, including through commencing procurement of the Tay crossing to Ballinluig project in May 2024; the awarding of the contract for the Tomatin to Moy project in July 2024; publication of orders for the Killiecrankie to Glen Garry and Dalraddy to Slochd

projects; and progression of the land acquisition processes for the Tay crossing to Ballinluig, Pitlochry to Killiecrankie, Glen Garry to Dalwhinnie and Dalwhinnie to Crubenmore projects.

I will say more in my closing speech about the progress that has already been made and the further progress that is expected during 2025.

Fergus Ewing: Will the cabinet secretary accept an intervention?

Fiona Hyslop: I would like to move on.

On Tuesday of this week, Transport Scotland published a report on its assessment of rescheduling and acceleration proposals for the A9 dualling project, which was an issue that the committee referred to in its report.

On the basis of the assessment's findings, Transport Scotland's report did not recommend rescheduling or trying to accelerate the dualling programme, although it did recommend that further assessment should be made of the potential for an advanced works contract at Dalnaspital junction. I have asked Transport Scotland to take that forward.

It should be borne in mind that the potential rescheduling opportunities are limited. The first two contracts for the A9 dualling programme have already been constructed and are operational, the third contract reached the contract award stage in July 2024, and the contract award for the fourth contract is expected in summer 2025. Rescheduling is therefore feasible only in respect of the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth contracts, which are due to begin procurement in summer 2025, winter 2026-27, summer 2027 and winter 2028-29 respectively.

However, as the seventh contract, for the section from the pass of Birnam to the Tay crossing, is already scheduled to start at the earliest date possible, based on the expected date of completion of that project's statutory processes, and is not dependent on any other project, any change of date would mean delaying completion beyond the currently expected date. In practical terms, the scheduling options are therefore limited to the timing of procurement and construction of the fifth contract, for the section from Pitlochry to Killiecrankie, of the sixth contract, which is the A9 north MIM contract, and the eighth contract, which is the A9 central MIM contract.

Fergus Ewing: Will the cabinet secretary give way now?

Fiona Hyslop: I will come to you shortly, Mr Ewing.

The report published earlier this week shows that rescheduling and reversing the procurement sequence of the sixth and eighth contracts would

result in an expected delay of around a year in the overall completion of the dualling programme. That is due to the need to delay procurement and construction of the fifth contract to avoid an overlap that the current delivery plan was developed to avoid because of the implications for road user disruption. Those changes in the procurement sequence would also reduce continuity of the bidding pipeline for those projects, making them likely to be less attractive to bidders.

I appreciate that there is a range of views about how completion of the dualling programme should be achieved. On that note, I will take an intervention from Mr Ewing.

Fergus Ewing: The Tomatin to Moy section was announced by Michael Matheson in February 2021 but will not be completed until 2028, taking seven years from start to completion. There are eight remaining sections and eight times seven is 56. Doing the sections one-by-one and using the traditional procurement method, rather than the framework method, is surely almost guaranteed to lead to a repeat of the mistakes of the past.

Can the cabinet secretary say, in consideration of the request that was made by all parties except the Greens at a meeting that we had with you and the First Minister last June, what consultation Transport Scotland had with industry about how to accelerate the project in practice, given that Transport Scotland will deliver it?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members to always speak through the chair. Cabinet secretary, I can give you the time back for the intervention.

Fiona Hyslop: Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer.

There were a number of points in Fergus Ewing's intervention. As he will know, because he has attended the briefings that I have provided on the A9 project, the work on the sections will not happen one by one. The whole point is that work will happen concurrently across the A9. Work will happen on the south of the A9 at the same time as work on the north of the A9, and the processes for them will happen simultaneously. That is why trying to reorder the current scheduling would have an impact. There would be a danger of concurrent issues that would affect both price and certainty of delivery. Certainty is something that the committee was very keen on.

I believe that the Transport Scotland report demonstrates that the plan that was established and published in December 2023 is robust and represents a practical way to undertake this large programme of works in the years ahead. We remain fully focused on and committed to delivering dualling of 50 per cent of the A9 between Perth and Inverness by the end of 2030,

85 per cent by the end of 2033 and 100 per cent by the end of 2035.

As I noted in my response to the committee, the Government considers that many of the committee's conclusions and recommendations in its inquiry report relate to two main themes: transparency and certainty. I hope that the various activities that I have outlined in my response demonstrate the action that we are taking on those themes. I am wholly committed to progressing the programme and to listening to Parliament, local residents and businesses, and keeping them informed and engaged. We have regular meetings and publish newsletters and there is a new A9 dualling website.

I also noted the committee's recommendation regarding the establishment of a new parliamentary committee. The Government is clear that that is a matter for Parliament to determine. The Government will, of course, direct its reporting to the appropriate committee, which is currently the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee. The first of the six-monthly update reports to that committee was issued on 21 November 2024, and I have written to it on six other occasions with updates.

It is essential that there is a sound evidence base for decision making on the use of mutual investment model contracts for the contracts to be procured, in line with the requirements of the Scottish public finance manual and the Treasury green book. The work on that, which has already started, involves updating cost estimates, undertaking further market consultation with contractors and financial investors, updating the outline business case for the programme and undertaking the necessary assurance reviews of that work. There is continuous engagement with contractors, as members might appreciate.

Once those activities have been completed, ministers will be in a position to determine whether the current delivery plan intention to procure two MIM contracts will be confirmed. The Government will then ask to make a statement to Parliament to set out the conclusion of the further decision-making processes. I want to be very clear to Parliament about the Government's position on that work. If a decision is taken not to make use of MIM contracts on the A9 dualling programme, we will implement an alternative approach such as use of capital-funded design and build contracts, and there is a Cabinet decision to prioritise the completion of the A9 dualling programme within Scottish Government budgets.

Jackson Carlaw: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Fiona Hyslop: I was about to close, but, if I have time, I will take the intervention, Deputy Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please be brief, Mr Carlaw.

Jackson Carlaw: I note the commitment to come forward with a statement following the consideration of matters at the end of this year. The commitment is to bring forward a statement not necessarily this year, but potentially into next year. There is a concern that, at that point, the Parliament will be maturing. Is the cabinet secretary certain that we will be able to have proper scrutiny of any decision that comes forward at that late stage?

Fiona Hyslop: I am not sure where the member's comment that the statement would be brought forward into 2026 came from. That would be a matter for Parliament. I am very keen to move things forward, so I take responsibility for trying to bring the statement to Parliament in such a state that there can be proper accountability, which is required in relation to such a major decision.

I have been updating Parliament since December 2023 and I will continue to update it and local MSPs on progress. The design and development of the different sections will involve engagement with and input from local residents, businesses and communities. With the Tomatin to Moy construction work starting in earnest in the autumn, following preparatory works that have already started, there will be continuous dualling work until 2035. I reiterate that, as I said to Mr Ewing, there will most often be work on more than one site on the A9 at any given time. I trust that that will be recognised in members' contributions today.

15:19

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): As a member of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, I thank all those who have participated in the inquiry and those who have supported the committee in its work, as well as the petitioner, Laura Hansler. I also recognise and pay tribute to all those who have tragically lost their lives on the A9 during the preceding years and decades.

I drive on the A9, which is north of Perth, maybe a couple of times a year. When driving that road, there is always a slight sense of unease. There is a feeling that is not experienced on other roads. Almost without fail, you will see something; it may be a car pulling across the carriageway with barely enough time or a tight overtaking manoeuvre. There will always be something that makes you take a deep intake of breath.

However, the communities that live nearby and rely on the A9 do not have to deal with driving on that road a couple of times a year; for some, it is a daily experience, and it is taking its toll on those communities—emotionally and economically, and tragically, with far too many people seriously injured or worse as a result of road traffic incidents.

The reality is that the communities have been badly let down by the Scottish Government and Transport Scotland in their handling of the A9 dualling. That is why the findings of the inquiry are important. The communities deserve answers, and we owe it to them and to all future users of the A9 to learn from the failures of the past and to ensure that the project now moves forward. If the Scottish Government can do that, it can begin to rebuild the public's trust.

I have reviewed the Government's written response to the committee's report and, unfortunately, it is far from clear about the degree to which it is willing to accept and learn from the failings of the past. When we look at those failings, we see that the Government's approach to transparency has been seriously lacking and that it has contributed significantly to the current state of the project. When ex-First Minister Nicola Sturgeon accepted that, she said to the committee:

"I would ask myself whether we were as candid as we should have been with ourselves, as well as with the public, about just how challenging it would always have been to meet the target"—[*Official Report, Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee*, 29 May 2024; c7-8.]

When we consider transparency, we have to look at the timeline. It was 8 February, 2023—less than two years ago—when the Scottish Government came clean and said that the 2025 completion date was no longer achievable. There is a massive disconnect between saying less than two years ago that it would not be complete by 2025 and now saying that it will not be completed until 2035.

During the past couple of days, Transport Scotland has doubled down on that and has said that the 2035 timeline cannot be accelerated, effectively claiming that any attempts to accelerate the project might slow it down further. That seems like a staggering and bizarre claim, but if it is the case, it points to the degree to which the Scottish Government deceived the public by keeping up the pretence—until two years ago—that the project could be completed this year. Whether the Scottish Government is willing to accept it or not, the reality is that either hanging on to the 2025 timeline for so long was an attempt at deceit or the revised and moveable 2035 timeline is an attempt to deceive. Which is it? Of course, it could be both.

The Government has acted in bad faith for too long, and we can have no more deceit. We need an evidence-based and transparent timeline, and we need parliamentary scrutiny. The committee was clear that the Government had evaded scrutiny in the past. In reading the Government's response to the committee, it appears that the Government is trying to water down the role of parliamentary scrutiny and has dodged the question of establishing a committee that could oversee the dualling of the A9 and other major projects.

Fiona Hyslop: I am already accountable to Parliament. I answer questions and I respond. I have given statements and will continue to do so. I report to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee. It would be wrong for the Government to tell Parliament what to do in carrying out its scrutiny and accountability responsibilities. I, and anyone else related to this issue, will absolutely respond and be accountable to the relevant committee. Having been the deputy convener of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee under the convenership of Edward Mountain, I know that it is a very strong committee, and I am happy to report to it unless the committee and Parliament decide otherwise. It is for the Parliament and not the Government to decide whom the Government is accountable to. That is how Parliament works.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Interventions will need to be slightly briefer, although we have a bit of time in hand. I will give you the time back, Mr Golden.

Maurice Golden: The cabinet secretary will be aware that I sat on the Parliamentary Bureau—

Fiona Hyslop: So did I.

Maurice Golden: —and I am aware of the voting on that issue. The bureau is where the Scottish National Party could back the establishment of a specific committee or, as part of the bureau process, could consider the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee covering such a large portfolio. That would help—that is the fundamental point of the committee's report.

The committee also came to the conclusion that the Government's failure to reach agreement on programme funding was a significant factor contributing to the delays that we are now experiencing. Looking to the future, the committee is not confident that the funding is in place to ensure completion by 2035. It calls on the Government to be clear with its future funding plans and the timescales for those plans and to ensure that those funding plans can be scrutinised.

15:27

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I thank the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee for its thorough report. The committee not only took evidence on the petition but included a reporter from the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee. It then went on to undertake an in-depth inquiry, resulting in evidence from a wide range of Government ministers, starting with Derek Mackay and finishing with Màiri McAllan. We owe the committee thanks for the robustness of its scrutiny, its determination to get to the bottom of the saga and its commitment to exposing the failings and mistakes that have left us so far behind progress.

The committee's report arose from a petition called "Dual the A9 and improve road safety", which was submitted by Laura Hansler and supported by the A9 dual action group. The petition, which was first brought before the committee in 2022, is clearly driven by safety concerns and expresses frustration at the delays in progress. It highlights the commitment to dual the A9 that was made in 2011 and calls for the completion of the work by 2025.

As we start 2025 and the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee secures this debate, we all recognise the petitioners' continuing disappointment over the timescale for the completion of the project. The petitioner wanted to highlight the exponential rate of fatalities on the road, arguing that the road is now barely fit for purpose, with an unsustainable influx of traffic on the infrastructure. Between 2011 and September 2022, there were 52 fatalities, and there have been more since. We regularly hear the passion and anger from MSPs in the chamber about the lack of progress and the lives that are being lost. With every road fatality, families and lives are devastated, and the poor reputation of the A9 is reflected in those figures. A recent freedom of information request showed that there have been 313 collisions between vehicles on the A9, with almost 200 of those on the single carriageway. Such collisions often cause fatalities, injuries, delays to travel and road closures, which have an impact on communities and businesses.

There is always a debate about the behaviour of road users and the state of the road, but the Scottish Government made its decision on that debate when it committed to dualling the A9 from Perth to Inverness, and that debate should not be a distraction from its failure to deliver on a key infrastructure programme. The commitment to dual recognises the A9 as a key arterial route—referred to as Scotland's spine—that provides a link from the Highlands to the rest of the country. It is a key route for many businesses and is of vital economic importance to Scotland.

The committee's report meticulously details the timeline and decision-making aspects of the project. It identifies the lack of leadership at project and ministerial levels as being problematic. In comparing the A9 project with the Queensferry crossing, it argues that the A9 project would have benefited from the appointment of a project director who was solely responsible for it. The director of major projects who was involved had overseen several major infrastructure sites, which led to the committee's being unclear about the extent to which the A9 work had been prioritised and whether other transport projects had detracted from progress there.

Furthermore, the committee raised concerns about the lack of ministerial continuity in that five different ministers had been responsible for the A9 project in a period of just over 10 years, while the responsibility for transport had frequently been moved between ministerial portfolios and levels. Although the former Transport Scotland chief executive defended ministers' engagement, no one minister has been tasked with seeing the project through from beginning to end.

The committee also identified concerns over future funding for the project. The decision to reclassify the non-profit distribution model in 2014 left a vacuum for a new private finance model. It was delay in addressing that aspect that led to Transport Scotland telling ministers, in 2018, that the 2025 target was unachievable. Although evidence to the committee argued that that was not clear advice and that, until late 2022, it was still possible that capital funding could fund the project, the committee sounded unconvinced by that argument and concluded that delays to the decision contributed to a 2025 completion date being unachievable. The committee's proposal for the introduction of a duty of candour is one that ministers should listen to.

The petitioner submitted her petition in 2022 in the belief that 2025 was still the completion date. It is concerning that, by then, ministers were increasingly aware that that target was not deliverable. They also raised important points about the procurement model used by Transport Scotland, which was unattractive to contractors and resulted in there being only single bidders. The whole sorry saga has had a negative impact on public confidence in Transport Scotland and in the Scottish Government's ability to deliver major infrastructure projects.

As the committee shifts its focus to the 2035 target, although changes to procurement and funding are welcome, concerns remain over poor risk management and transparency of decision making and information sharing. There will always be factors that are outwith the control of the Government; the test is how effectively it responds

to those. Although we can see improvements in communication and ministerial direction, those do not detract from the Scottish Government's failures on the project, the broken promises to constituents from Perth to Inverness on its projected completion, and the lives that have been lost while progress has stalled.

Earlier this week, Transport Scotland published its response to the committee's request to accelerate dualling, saying that to do so would mean risking the 2035 end date. For the communities who have waited so many years and who were promised that dualling would be completed this year, that response will be another disappointment. The cabinet secretary has said that the current timetable is "robust and practical", but what faith can those communities have, given that there has been such slow progress to this point? Each delay puts drivers at risk and deprives communities of safe and reliable transport links. There must be a guarantee that the latest timescale will not slip further.

This is a serious issue, which the committee has robustly scrutinised, and the Scottish Government has been shown to have come up short. The delay and dither have not only damaged Scotland's economy and hindered growth, as well as having a negative impact on communities' wellbeing; they have led directly to loss of life and to despair and anguish for too many families.

15:33

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife (Green)): I thank the committee for its scrutiny of the petition on dualling the A9, and I congratulate Laura Hansler on successfully getting her petition through the committee stage and on to the floor of the chamber. I have met Laura. Although it is fair to say that we do not agree on all aspects of the A9 issue, I agree with her on the need for investment to make our roads safer. I agree, too, that delays in such investment continue to result in crashes, tragic injuries and deaths. In tribute to all the victims of road crashes in Scotland, we should strive to make every dangerous road and street safer and work towards the objective, which the Scottish Government has now adopted, of there being zero deaths on our roads.

Over the years that I have served as a member for Mid Scotland and Fife, I have listened carefully to my constituents about the need for safety improvements on the A9. I want to use this opportunity to reflect the views of communities along the section between the Pass of Birnam and the Tay crossing. That stretch of the A9 is unique. The hills surrounding Dunkeld and Birnam constrain the pass and tighten the availability of space for the road, the railway and the surrounding community. The wider community,

which includes Inver, is severed by the A9, to the point that access to the railway station is difficult and dangerous. Along that short section, there are eight junctions that serve communities and popular visitor attractions, including the Hermitage, and none of those junctions could be considered safe.

For many years, local people have been fearful of using the A9 for their everyday business. The Dunkeld junction is terrifying, and the aftermath of repeated fatal crashes there has been traumatic for everybody in the community. I am told that Transport Scotland officials have been warned not to use the junction when they head north on to the A9 on business, but the families who live there are expected to just carry on and use the junction every day. That is unacceptable. Solutions for that stretch need to be put in place urgently; we should not wait for the eventual completion of the dualling project in 2032.

A roundabout is proposed at Dunkeld as an integral part of the dualling programme. That is welcome, because saving lives is far more important than a couple of extra minutes being added to the journey from Inverness to Perth. I welcome the fact that orders for the section between the Pass of Birnam and the Tay crossing will be published in spring, but, in the meantime, other options need to be pursued.

I gather that officials are looking at interim improvements, which will be discussed with local communities in the months ahead, and I ask the cabinet secretary to ensure that the process leaves no stone unturned. I welcome the many discussions that we have had about the A9 in recent years. A temporary roundabout at Ballinluig has been introduced in the past. A slip road might also be possible within the constraints of the land that is available to ministers. Speed limit reductions and enforcement measures can be put in place relatively quickly and effectively. Reactivating the A9's safety cameras would also be an obvious improvement. Improved lighting is the biggest and simplest change that could be introduced quickly at that junction.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I seek confirmation from Mark Ruskell and his party that they are signed up to the dualling of the A9, not just to safety improvements and roundabouts, which seems to be what his speech is about. Are you up for dualling the A9? Are you signed up to it?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Speak through the chair.

Mr Ruskell, I will give you the time back.

Mark Ruskell: I thought that the debate was primarily about safety improvements, in which dualling has a role to play. However, as Mr

Mountain will know, it is about much more than dualling, and I will come on to that later.

When recent works were taking place to upgrade gas infrastructure on the A9, the contractors brought lights to the Dunkeld junction for the first time. Local people instantly felt safer, because they could see and be seen, but when the contractors left, the road fell once again into darkness. The lights need to be brought back.

There is vehicle-activated signage at other junctions on the A9, warning drivers of turning traffic, including at Gloagburn, so why not at Dunkeld? Many immediate low-cost improvements could be made to the A9. When Jenny Gilruth was Minister for Transport after Covid, there was a dreadful spate of crashes. Low-cost measures involving signage and lighting were put in place, and they were effective, but that infrastructure needs to be maintained and improved. Some bollards are weakly lit, and some line markings are poor and have eroded, so they need to be fixed. I ask the cabinet secretary to please keep up the momentum on those measures and ensure that they are reported on, alongside the regular project updates to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, as the dualling project moves on.

The Dunkeld roundabout solution was discussed over a number of years as part of a co-creative process with the community on A9 improvements, and I welcome that Transport Scotland was open to that approach. It was innovative and resulted in a number of asks, of which the roundabout was one.

Connection to the station was also highlighted, and the opportunity that the dualling project presents to reconnect the villages to the railway needs to be on the table in some form. An overbridge that can blend into the area is desperately needed. The severance caused by the road has worsened in recent years due to flood damage, and the sight of pedestrians and cyclists attempting to cross the A9, which I have seen happen, leaves your heart in your mouth.

I look forward to further contributions to the debate. I will reflect on wider A9 project issues in my closing speech, but it is clear that, on the ground, Perthshire communities on the most sensitive and controversial section of the A9 deserve safety action now, well before the dualling project is completed.

15:39

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I welcome the committee's debate and its final inquiry report, and I thank all those who were involved in making it a reality, including the petitioner. The inquiry has proved that the Scottish

Parliament is open to Scotland's citizens and that public petitions can have an impact.

I will touch on some of the inquiry's findings and the Scottish Government's response to it. It should not be forgotten that at the heart of all this is the fact that the A9 continues to be a dangerous road, with many people sadly having lost their lives when travelling on it. Communities the length of the route, tourists and haulage vehicles use the road to get to where they need to go and to keep services and goods deliveries running across the country. Swift action to address the problems on the A9 has been needed for many years, and continuous delays are a failure of the Scottish Government.

I will highlight and elaborate on some of the inquiry's findings. The report states that the 2025 target for dualling was missed not due to one single issue or incident but, instead, because of the Scottish Government's

"failure to reach agreement on programme funding".

That is thought to have

"significantly contributed to progress stalling as the programme was reaching the procurement and construction stages."

That might have been remedied with

"an individual whose main or only focus was to progress the A9 dualling programme".

With the rapid turnover of SNP transport secretaries in recent years, it is little wonder that that was raised as a concern, although I note that the Scottish Government disagrees with those points in its response.

I also note the finding that

"A lack of open, external discussion of the challenges being faced in the delivery of the A9 dualling programme has negatively impacted public confidence in Transport Scotland and its ability to deliver major infrastructure projects within the timescales it says it will".

It is of great concern that confidence in a Government body such as Transport Scotland is being questioned. The Scottish Government has responded to the committee to say that Transport Scotland's ability to deliver has not been negatively impacted. There seems to be a misreading of concerns about confidence in the body. Significant effort will need to be ploughed into addressing the public's confidence in Transport Scotland, and I hope that the Scottish Government will take that on board. Particular attention needs to be paid to addressing confidence in Transport Scotland among communities in the north of Scotland, as projects in central and southern Scotland being completed before the completion of the A9 dualling has led to a confidence deficit in those northern communities, which was picked up by the inquiry.

The Scottish Liberal Democrats welcome the inquiry's proposal of routine and regular sharing of information with the Parliament as a key way to address concerns about the transparency of decision making on major projects such as those on the A9. I welcome the Scottish Government's agreement in principle to that.

If I may, I will remark on something that is slightly outside the inquiry. The A9 north of Inverness is also a critical road for the communities that it connects. I recognise that Transport Scotland's work on safety issues covers the whole of the A9, and it is important that regular assessments are made, as we know that that section of road is vital in ensuring access to public services.

The importance of the A9 in connecting large parts of Scotland means that improving safety on the route should be a priority for the Scottish Government. Dualling the road will help with that, and a new report by the Scottish Government to accelerate that is welcome. I also note that the Government expects to complete work on the £5 million programme of additional measures to enhance safety on the route in advance of dualling by March this year. After so many deadlines being missed, that one needs to be met. Progress on the A9 needs to be realised swiftly for the safety of communities up and down Scotland that use the route.

15:43

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): You do not have to wander very far in Inverness or strike up many conversations there to find somebody who has a lot to say about the A9 dualling. I admit to being one of those people. I thank the members of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee for their work and scrutiny in putting together the report, which has given us the opportunity to discuss it in the chamber. I also thank Laura Hansler, who is a constituent of mine, for lodging the petition and for her wider work locally, with which I am, of course, familiar.

Accidents on the A9 have a huge impact on the communities along it. Not only have dozens of loved ones lost their lives, but every time that there is an accident, people worry that the person who was on their way home might be stuck in traffic or be in an ambulance. Like everyone else, I want accidents to be avoided, livelihoods to be supported and lives to be protected.

Two thirds of respondents to the committee's question on what the strategy should be said that it should be to dual as quickly as possible, regardless of disruption, which demonstrates the strength of feeling and urgency that exists for the

project. That will not be lost on the Scottish Government, given that I and members from different parties and regions have been passing on comments from us and those we represent, saying just as much. A dualled A9 from Perth to Inverness must now be delivered as quickly as possible.

Although I like to focus on the now and the next—and I think that progress is more important than recriminations—it is absolutely right that a committee in this Parliament has scrutinised past delays. That work will not only undoubtedly be useful for other large projects in the future but—I hope—reduce the likelihood of future delays to this project and build resilience in the plan from here on.

Not everything can be foreseen—Covid and Brexit are examples of that—but how events are reacted to and dealt with makes a difference. Delays such as the incredibly disappointing one to the Tomatin to Moy section, which came about due to procurement issues, were, as the report states, avoidable, and reacting to changes in funding with greater speed than we have seen would give certainty to all who are involved in delivering the programme.

In the Highlands, there is a strong sense that the process has not been transparent. People have been let down, and the Government was not up front about the timescale slippage as quickly as it could have been. I agree with the statements in the report on the need for honesty and the duty of candour.

Two years ago, I told a previous minister that trust had to be rebuilt. A lot of trust is still to be rebuilt, but I certainly feel that mine is being steadily rebuilt, in large part due to the cabinet secretary's approach. On the A9 and the A96, her actions have aligned with her words, and I have found her to be approachable and honest. Most importantly, as I have seen on recent journeys, there are spades in the ground on the A9.

The new A9 safety web portal is a great resource, and I recognise that the £5 million programme of interim safety improvements is to be completed by March. I have already noticed a really positive difference, particularly around Dunkeld and the Slochd.

My focus now will be on continuing to attend, along with colleagues, regular meetings with Transport Scotland and the cabinet secretary to oversee progress, raising the issues that constituents are still bringing to me and ensuring that my voice is one of those that sees the forthcoming progress through. The report gives us a really good foundation as to what those expectations should be.

I will be driving on the A9 on Saturday. When I am going back and forth to the Parliament, I am a fairly loyal train user and I like to keep my car in the Highlands, but, sometimes, due to timings of work commitments or to train timetables, or just because I need to carry more than I can on my own, there is no other option. That is the case for a significant number of people who drive on the A9. For as long as central beltters keep inviting us to morning meetings, we will need to drive there.

When I have to drive, I plan my whole week around not doing so at night, because there are places where that can feel dangerous. However sensibly and responsibly we drive, we cannot control the actions of others. On Saturday, I expect to see multiple examples of terrible driving. That is not unique to the A9 but, on the A9, we have to plan for cars that choose to overtake dangerously or for getting stuck on a winding bit of single carriageway behind someone who is doing 45 miles per hour and braking at every average speed camera.

My concern for the dualling of the A9 is based not on a belief that all roads must be dualled but on my knowledge of how that particular road design impacts the way that it is used. The frustration that builds, along with the confusion for those who are not familiar with the road when it swaps from dual to single carriageway, does not lend itself to a safe journey. Many drivers on the A9 are not familiar with it and might not even be familiar with UK roads, so it is important that we make it as easy as possible to drive that road safely.

I return to those whose lives have been most badly affected by accidents on the A9. My heart goes out to everyone who has been impacted, and I firmly believe that the best way to honour the lives that have been lost is for the dualling work to be completed. I look forward to seeing that happen as soon as possible.

15:50

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Everyone has reminded us why we are here this afternoon. It is for the simple reason that we are discussing a target that was promised a long time ago—the dualling of the A9 by 2025—and because of the petition that was lodged by Laura Hansler to get the issue considered in Parliament. As others have done, I thank Laura for the time and effort that she has put into that. I also thank the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee for allowing me to attend its meetings and for giving me a fair chance to question all the witnesses. I am extremely grateful for that—especially considering the number of questions that the convener allowed me to ask.

Like many people, I am a habitual user of the A9—I am up and down it every week. Unlike Emma Roddick, I cannot always manage not to travel in darkness. Sometimes, when we have sat late on a Thursday evening, I travel up the road after dark, but with a certain amount of trepidation. When I put in my claims for my mileage, the parliamentary staff have given up questioning why the mileage goes up and down each week. The reason why that happens is that, quite often, I end up going via Dundee, having gone halfway up the A9 only to find it closed. That is a problem that many people have to face.

The promise to dual the A9 was made in 2011—a long time ago—by Alex Salmond. When he gave evidence to the committee on 8 May 2024, during the inquiry, I thought to myself that he seriously got it. I think that he understood the need to link Scotland together by linking all the cities to ensure free flow of trade between them. On the day that he appeared before the committee, two foolscap documents of information were provided to us on his behalf. I sat down and waded through those documents and found a particular event that I thought was relevant, which was a meeting between him and Alex Neil about progress on dualling the A9 and how it was to be carried out. I started to refer to the meeting, but before I got halfway through my question, he had already told me the date that on which the meeting took place and what it was about. He was in fine fettle when it came to the information and the facts and figures, and his detailed knowledge of the issue was truly impressive. I was genuinely impressed, and I came away at the end of that meeting thinking that, if he had been there to see the project through, it might have actually happened, because he understood the need for it.

Lots of people who came after Alex Salmond did not understand the need. Let us go through the whole list: Stewart Stevenson, Keith Brown, Derek Mackay, Humza Yousaf, Paul Wheelhouse, Graeme Dey, Jenny Gilruth, Kevin Stewart and Fiona Hyslop—although I note that Fiona Hyslop has now moved on from being a minister and has become a cabinet secretary. There have also been a couple of First Ministers—Humza Yousaf and Nicola Sturgeon—who also did not seem to understand the need. From today's debate, I have gathered the impression that the Greens are also among the people who do not understand the need for dualling the A9 between Perth and Inverness.

Fiona Hyslop: Edward Mountain noted that Keith Brown was a transport minister. He had responsibility for transport between 2010 and 2018. Alex Neil led on the project from 2010 to 2012 and, when Nicola Sturgeon became First Minister, Keith Brown took over lead responsibility. He was not called to the committee to give

evidence, but his written submission, which I have read, gives an interesting perspective on the issues. Mr Mountain might want to acknowledge that there was continuity of ministerial responsibility for transport, albeit that that minister did not always have lead responsibility for the A9.

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

Edward Mountain: I absolutely accept that there was continuity—there was continuity in changing ministers for transport when it became too difficult to justify the jobs that they were doing.

I have read the cabinet secretary's response to the committee, which I am, I guess, as disappointed by as many other people are. It talks about "certainty" and "transparency" but all that I can say is that, since the promise was made to dual the A9, I have never come across a more clever way of obscuring information, a more deceptive way of talking about when a project will be delivered or a bigger list of broken promises.

I am afraid that I am disappointed by the cabinet secretary's response, which almost says, "Nothing to see here. It's all changed. Move right along." I do not accept that. I do not accept it for highlanders or for any of the constituents whom I represent. I will also say that I am concerned about the role that Transport Scotland has had during the process. It seems to think itself above scrutiny and above the Government.

My time is short, but I would like to say that one or two people have suggested that there should be a separate committee for transport. I have convened the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, which dealt with transport, and the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee. Neither of those committees has had time to deal with transport properly. My plea for the next Parliament is that it set up a committee whose sole job is to deal with transport and infrastructure.

I have probably used all my time, but the delays continue to cost lives. I do not need to remind people that, during the period from 2020 to 2024, 168 lives were lost. I appeal to the Government: speed it up. Frankly, the response from Transport Scotland to the cross-party plea to speed the work up was a bit of a joke.

15:56

Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): As all my colleagues have, I thank Laura Hansler for bringing the petition to Parliament. I joined the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee in 2023. Shortly after the petition was first considered, I joined members in thanking the clerks and many stakeholders who gave evidence to the inquiry.

Much has changed since the original petition was lodged with the committee in 2022, but one thing continues to be the case: the A9 has not been dualled. Sadly, death on the A9 remains too common. During the debate, we must not forget that that is why the dualling project is necessary.

We have heard in both written and in-person evidence that the 2025 target was not considered by the officials or ministers to be unachievable. Alex Neil, who had responsibility for the project in 2011, said the target was “perfectly feasible” and other ministers said that the project remained a priority for the Scottish Government, so where did it go wrong?

The committee found that a number of factors played a role in the 2025 target being missed. I want to focus my remarks on the funding model of the project, its management and proposals for a memorial to the people who have lost their lives on the A9.

Regarding the model of funding, we heard from both the late Alex Salmond and Màiri McAllan that there was always the expectation of a mixture of public and private financing. However, following reclassification of the non-profit distributing model in 2014 as public financing, it was not clear how financing the project would be achieved. Transport Scotland warned ministers in 2017 of a “diminishing window” for a procurement strategy to be agreed, but the new funding model would not be established until 2019. A discussion paper from December 2021 shows that a decision on financing was still to be made then. Instead of deciding on funding and making clear that the 2025 deadline would be missed, ministers failed to decide at all. Uncertainty seems to have contributed to the delays that we have seen and is a consistent theme of the inquiry.

My next point involves the management of the project. Unlike the Aberdeen peripheral route or the Queensferry crossing, which had project directors, no one person had sole responsibility for dualling the A9. Given that other capital projects and ministerial churn will continue to be factors regardless of the timescale, having one person to drive the project forward could be greatly beneficial and allow challenges to be resolved more quickly—challenges which, as we have seen, have previously slowed progress. Although dualling the A9 is a very large project, that solution is something that should be considered, moving forward.

The petition that sparked the inquiry called for a national memorial to be created for those who have lost their lives on the A9. That petition closed with over 4,000 signatures. In the committee’s call for views, we heard that dualling the A9 should come first and that that would be the best memorial—but we also heard that bereaved

families should be listened to. The petitioner told the committee that the proposal came from communities and people who had interacted with the A9 dualling campaign. A memorial to A9 deaths, or to road deaths in general, could provide great comfort to those who have lost family or friends. In recognition of the pain that has been caused, the committee recommended that a memorial be considered and consulted on by the Scottish Government.

Looking to the future, the committee’s report makes a number of recommendations. They all come down to ensuring transparency. If trust is to be rebuilt, the Scottish Government must be up front about the challenges that are faced and the progress that is being made. I hope that the Scottish Government considers the recommendations from the inquiry so that, 10 years from now, we are not sitting here, having the same debate.

16:02

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): I, too, thank the clerks for their assiduousness, helpfulness and patience, and I pay tribute to Laura Hansler, who has been dogged, determined and, indeed, indefatigable.

When I was a boy, in my youth, my mother, Winnie, was particularly famous in Scotland. As I went around with her, I used to be asked repeatedly, “Fergus, are you going to go into politics and follow in your mother’s footsteps when you grow up?” I would always be inclined to answer, “No I won’t. I want to do a proper job first”—but here we are.

It was back in the 1990s—I think that I can trump everybody here on the grounds of longevity—that I moved at the SNP conference that the A9 be dualled, so I have a bit of baggage here. We have heard from many people across the chamber about the sad loss of life on the road. I have lost friends. It is devastating for every family involved. The tragedy affects them not just for a short period but for the whole of their lives. I think that we all recognise that, irrespective of our views.

The Scottish Government has manifestly failed. I was part of it for a while, and although I was never responsible, I cannot elide myself from responsibility—I say that in all candour. I did speak behind the scenes and tried to influence things, but I was unsuccessful, and I obeyed the rules and did not speak out. I might have made up for that in the past few years, but I want to be honest. I know that the cabinet secretary is determined to do what she can, and I admire that. It is genuine; I can feel that—I think we all can. However, with respect, a little bit more humility in the response to the

request for acceleration would have been seemly, and it is not too late for the cabinet secretary to put that right.

I want to focus on one major and very serious issue, which is partly technical. My view, which is based not on my expertise, because I do not profess to have any, but on what I have learned from speaking to Grahame Barn, who has been a fount of wisdom, and to many other people in the civil engineering industry, is that the current approach of proceeding one by one with traditional procurement will not only fail in the future, as it has in the past; it bears very obvious foreseeable risks—risks that cannot really be gainsaid.

For example, every one of those processes involves three or four companies putting in bids once they get on the short list. That costs hundreds of thousands of pounds, so the unsuccessful ones have lost a hell of a lot of money. Secondly, the profit ratio is only about 2 or 3 per cent. Thirdly, as Jackson Carlaw mentioned in his opening speech, those companies all have an unprecedented level of other work. I could go through it all but, by my tally, it amounts to more than £60,000 million. That is unprecedented.

If I was one of the big companies and was looking around for what to do, I would want to be sure that I could make a good return. Don Fanucci, in “The Godfather”, put it well when he said that everyone needs to wet their beak. That is facetious, perhaps, but it is true. If I can make 6 per cent, why on earth would I go for 2 per cent? Why would I carry the greater risks that the contracts that return only 2 per cent offer?

Further, experience has shown that those contracts have not really performed timeously. I said in an intervention earlier that the Tomatin to Moy section was announced just before the 2021 election, and that was very welcome, but it will not be completed until 2028. That is seven years. There are eight remaining contracts. Eight sevens are 56. I am not saying that that will happen and that we will not see the project completed until 2080, but the way that we are approaching it currently is flawed. It is exacerbated by the fact that there is a plethora of other work to be done.

I am told—and Grahame Barn said this in his oral evidence to the committee in June 2023—that a framework approach is far preferable to get things done. In such an approach, three, four or perhaps more companies will be on a list of approved contractors and will all be guaranteed work for eight, 10 or 12 years. Transport Scotland actually pursues that approach—Amey and BEAR Scotland have framework contracts for eight years and an option to renew for four—so why not use it for the main tendering of the major project? SSE has seven contractors on its framework and

Network Rail has three. Scottish Water, I believe, uses a framework as well.

From the company's point of view, it is guaranteed work for about a decade. That means that it does not have the problem of a contract finishing and nothing to fill its place, which then leads to people being hired and fired. The approach leads to reduced costs, because companies can buy materials for the next contract ahead as well as the one that is being done and build up long-term relationships with suppliers.

I say to the cabinet secretary that we should not go on making the same mistake. Somebody once said that you should never make the same mistake twice when you can make it five or six times and be sure of it. The approach that is being taken is almost guaranteed to lead to delays, although not necessarily in every one of the contracts. If that happens, any residual faith in the Scottish Government in the Highlands will be utterly shot to pieces.

I want to make an offer to the cabinet secretary: please reconsider the request for acceleration. I make this in all seriousness. Consider it with the industry, which does not appear to have been consulted. To quote the Godfather himself, Vito Corleone: cabinet secretary, I have made you an offer you should not refuse.

16:09

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Goodness—follow that!

As others have done, I thank the committee for all its work. I also thank the committee clerks and, of course, Laura Hansler for her work and commitment to this vitally important cause. The debate is undoubtedly important for me and for my constituents, but it is a disgrace that we are having to have it again. It is a shameful indictment of the Government's abject failure to deliver on its promises to my constituents.

At the beginning of 2025, the original target date for delivery, we should be preparing for the final stretch of dualling to be completed. Instead, we are here in Parliament, listening to more excuses from the Scottish Government on why it is not complete.

Many of us on the Conservative benches, along with the stalwart campaigners, some of whom are in the gallery today, have been campaigning to get the road dualled between Inverness and Perth for far too many years. My colleague Murdo Fraser and I launched our campaign for the dualling as far back as 2006, when we were both young, fresh-faced and full of hope—that should give you an idea of how long ago it was. Our petition attracted well over 20,000 signatures and clearly

played a role in encouraging the SNP, which included the A9 dualling in its 2007 manifesto. However, here we are, 18 years later, still waiting.

I have been using the A9 all my life. I still just about remember heading up the old road on the way home to Orkney via the Kessock ferry and the long and winding route up to Scrabster. There have been major improvements since then, including new bridges and new stretches of dualled road. Between 1979 and 1997, under the Conservatives, 25 miles of the A9 were dualled between Inverness and Perth, and 12 miles of it were dualled between 2007 and 2022 under the SNP.

Although that work has undoubtedly made the journey shorter and safer than it was, the SNP promised us a fully dualled A9 between Inverness and Perth—and a safer road. However, travelling on the road last year, particularly during the summer, it felt as though almost every journey was disrupted by an accident. There is, of course, inconvenience in a journey delayed, but far worse is sitting in stationary traffic as emergency services pass or an air ambulance flies over, desperate to get as quickly as possible to the scene of another accident—sitting in the car with the fear that, just ahead, yet another incident may have been serious enough that another family or community will have to be told of the loss of a loved one. Too many have already lost their lives, and too many will probably experience that in the next few years.

We did not need to be here. All major projects face challenges and issues with the terrain or economic factors, as other members have said. That must always be considered. However, dualling the A9 is not some engineering marvel. Put simply, it is the building of a road where there is already a road; it should not challenge, as it has done, the abilities of a country with the engineering heritage and expertise of Scotland.

What galls most about this shameful saga is the dishonesty of the Scottish Government. The communities that are most reliant on the road could have accepted some delay to the project if real progress had been made or been obvious but, time and again, they were told by SNP ministers—or by SNP MSPs quoting SNP ministers—that all was fine and on track and that dualling would be completed, as promised, by 2025. Nothing has changed.

The deception went to the very top. Following his budget statement to the Parliament on 15 December 2022, I asked John Swinney, the then Deputy First Minister and Acting Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy:

“Will the cabinet secretary finally admit what my Highlands and Islands constituents and his Perthshire constituents know, which is that the promised dualling of

the A9 between Inverness and Perth will not be completed in 2025 or, indeed, any time soon?”

He responded:

“The Government’s position on the completion of the dualling of the A9 remains intact.”—[*Official Report*, 15 December 2022; c 86.]

To some people—possibly more charitable people than me—that response might be acceptable, if, ignoring the evidence of his own eyes on the lack of progress on the dualling, John Swinney was still naive enough to think that an engineering miracle could happen and the project could still be completed as promised.

However, that was not the case, because more than a week before John Swinney gave me that response in the chamber, the Scottish Government had been told that the dualling would not be completed by 2025. An email had been sent that said:

“it should be made clear that the current published completion date of 2025 will no longer apply to the Programme.”

That email was sent directly to the then Deputy First Minister, John Swinney. When John Swinney told me that nothing had changed, that was not true. He knew that the 2025 date would not be met, but he kept the deception going that it would. John Swinney, the then Deputy First Minister and now First Minister, misled the Parliament when he said that the SNP promise to dual the A9 would be delivered.

If John Swinney is confident that he did not mislead the Parliament—or the communities or campaigners who will have heard his comments—he should refer himself to his own newly appointed independent adviser on the ministerial code, surely confident that they will clear him of any breach. Of course, I doubt that he will, because this Government does not do accountability or transparency. Even when it knew definitively that the dualling would not happen as promised, it refused to be honest with Parliament and the public. As has been the case far too often with this Government—the ferries fiasco is an obvious example—no one has lost their job.

This has been a shameful saga that has involved endless broken promises, deadlines missed, communities lied to, lives ruined and, of course, lives lost. Too many families now mourn loved ones who have been lost on the A9. So, my message to the SNP Government is simple: no more failures, no more excuses—get the A9 dualled.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I call Emma Harper, who will be the final speaker in the open debate.

16:15

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. I thank members of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee and its clerks for producing the report, and I join members in congratulating campaigners, including the petitioner, Laura Hansler, on their tenacity in seeking improvements to and the dualling of the A9, which is a critical route. As other members have done, I welcome Laura to the chamber.

Members will undoubtedly be aware that, in relation to the South Scotland region, I have championed the need for significant improvements to the main arterial routes in the south-west—the A75 and the A77. Those roads connect Scotland with Northern Ireland, Ireland, England and wider Europe. I know how much commitment, dedication and work it takes to champion road improvements. I wanted to speak in today's debate partly because many of the issues that have been uncovered in the committee's inquiry into the dualling of the A9 are mirrored elsewhere.

The A9 and all our roads must be safe, reliable and resilient. Members have described their experience of driving along the A9 and encountering specific hotspots—or not-spots, even—such as the Dunkeld junction. The magnitude of the investment that is required and the complexities that are involved in upgrading infrastructure on such a scale in the current financial environment have been and will continue to be considerable. However, that is a challenge that the Scottish Government is committed to meeting.

The cabinet secretary has described in detail the status of the contracts that are under procurement and those that are about to be procured. The Scottish Government anticipates that nearly 50 per cent of the A9 between Perth and Inverness will be operating as dual carriageway by the end of 2030 and that that will rise to 85 per cent by the end of 2033 and 100 per cent by the end of 2035. I am sure that campaigners will welcome the progress that has been made.

The former cabinet secretary Fergus Ewing brought up the subject of frameworks for contracts, and it was interesting to hear his comments on that. It is clear that the dualling of the A9 will sustain and improve the quality of life of people in rural Perthshire, the Highlands and beyond.

Emma Roddick gave a good description of the challenges that drivers on the A9 face. I have been that position, too, although not very often. People are not familiar with driving on a road that is a single lane in some places and a dual

carriageway in others. I am sure that many people who visit the Highlands have gasped when they have tried to cross the road or even when they have tried to drive north or south.

The report says that the dualling of the A9 is expected to improve safety, which is crucial. It is forecast that there will be fewer fatalities and fewer casualties with serious injuries every year. Driver stress and accidents will be reduced, as will journey times for emergency vehicles, which will increase the survival chances of people who need urgent emergency care. Those benefits will be transformative for a route that serves 35 per cent of our landmass and carries cargo that accounts for around 10 per cent of Scotland's gross domestic product.

It is of paramount importance that we consider the safety of our roads. One life lost on Scotland's roads is one too many. It is welcome that the Scottish Government is committed to achieving safer road travel in Scotland, now and in the future. The Government does not accept that road casualties are inevitable, and it is vital that we continue to work to bring overall casualty numbers down. It is important that we do that on all our roads, including the A9.

Improvements are long overdue, and it would be remiss of me not to again call on the cabinet secretary to progress at pace the recommendations in the strategic transport projects review 2 on the main arterial routes in the south-west and on how we can progress at pace the A9 improvement work.

The Government has demonstrated its commitment to dualling the A9, and progress is being made. I again thank the members of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee and its clerks for undertaking the inquiry, as well as the witnesses who provided evidence, and I look forward to the cabinet secretary's response.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): We move to the winding-up speeches; members may wish to know that we have a little time in hand.

16:20

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I thank members for the reflective tone of this debate. Several members have reflected on the original decision, which was made back in 2011. I acknowledge the fact that that decision was made and that dualling the A9 is a priority for the Scottish Government, as it is for most parties in the Parliament.

However, I invite members to look at the history of that decision. It is important to remember that

the original business case for a full dualling of the A9 failed because it did not meet the right cost to benefit ratio, including the consideration of safety measures. Ultimately, a political decision was made to prioritise a full dualling programme above other roadbuilding and transport projects that communities across Scotland were calling for and we are where we are today.

Whether a full dualling of the A9 would pass the test today—particularly given the objectives in the national transport strategy, which are weighted towards safety, connectivity and economic growth but also towards climate—is a good question, but we are beyond that now and today's scrutiny has very much been about how the programme will be delivered in the years to come.

A number of members have spoken about the importance of dualling, and I recognise that it has a role. I am somewhat disappointed that very few members have spoken about junctions and junction safety, which I think are just as important. I also point to some evidence that the committee heard from stakeholders, which particularly highlighted figures from 2023.

Fergus Ewing: Will the member give way?

Mark Ruskell: In a second.

Figures from 2023 showed that per-kilometre collision rates on currently dualled sections of the A9 are actually higher than those on non-dualled sections. We must reflect on that, because dualling is not a complete solution.

I will give way to Mr Ewing.

Fergus Ewing: Laura Hansler and my constituent Chris Miller have worked tirelessly on safety measures. I did not have time to discuss those today but they are absolutely essential. The Road Safety Foundation has found that the chances of dying in a road traffic accident on a single-carriageway trunk road are 10 times greater than those of dying on a motorway and three times greater than those of dying on a dual carriageway. That is before one considers the additional complexities of the A9, where there is rapid oscillation between dual and single carriageways and where there are also sections of two-plus-one-lane roadway. Does that not prove that highlanders are at greater risk of dying than people in the central belt and does that not, in itself, make a case for giving us the same expectation of safety as central belt dwellers?

Mark Ruskell: Perhaps Fergus Ewing did not hear me, so I reiterate the point that, in 2023, the number of collisions on dualled sections of the A9 was actually higher than that on non-dualled sections. It is a complex picture. I am not discounting the fact that dualling has a role to play and that the switch between non-dualled and

dualled stretches is highly confusing and results in accidents.

However, we must also recognise the bigger picture. I do not know whether Mr Fairlie will be concluding the debate, but he will know that we saw high traffic speeds in the continuously dualled section between the Keir roundabout in Dunblane and Broxden before average speed cameras were brought in there and that we have seen a number of serious issues at junctions. There have been deaths, collisions and tragedies in southern Perthshire over many years, on a dualled section of the A9.

I simply ask Mr Ewing and others to reflect on the fact that this is not a simple issue of dualling versus non-dualling. It is a complex issue, and junctions and the ways that communities use the road are important. It is important that we get into the guts of that, take some of the heat out of the debate and look at the matter in the light of communities' experiences.

I will reflect on a couple of other points that members made in the debate. I welcome the committee report's focus on the need for scrutiny and transparency. Mr Golden reflected on the words of the former First Minister on the need to be candid about the 2025 date. There has been some confusion about that and there is a need to shine some light on it. I think that, for a number of years, Mr Ewing thought that the Scottish Green Party was delaying the work, although maybe not particularly in relation to the A9.

I am pleased that Edward Mountain, who is the convener of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, is in the chamber. Our committee has done a great piece of work in scrutinising the progress on ferries 801 and 802. There could be a case for us to look in more detail at the A9, particularly as the briefings start to come through, and consider issues around delivery and communities' concerns. Scrutiny and transparency are hugely important.

I am interested in the comments of Fergus Ewing and the committee convener about the competition in the road-building sector and other industries, not just for funding but for engineers and expertise to deliver pipelines of projects. That is familiar, because I have heard the same concerns being voiced by the rail industry, which also needs certainty but has subcontractors that are looking around for other sectors in which they can sustain work. That is an important theme for the Parliament to reflect on.

The Government's response to the idea of potentially rescheduling the various contracts needs more unpicking outside the chamber, although I recognise that reordering them could well have some substantial supply chain impacts,

which would bring risks in terms of price. We have not been able to unpack that in our debate this afternoon, but it is an area of analysis that the NZET Committee could get into.

This afternoon's debate has been useful. Our thoughts are with the communities that suffer from underinvestment in the A9, and we look forward to the delivery of safety improvements.

16:27

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I, too, start by paying tribute to Laura Hansler, who lodged the petition and has worked for so long to get improvements on the A9. I thank the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee for its report, which shines a light on the broken promises and the mismanagement of the project to dual the whole A9. The Scottish Government kept repeating a promise that it knew would never be kept, and the lack of transparency and honesty with the public and the Parliament was breathtaking. Because of that, the committee has recommended a duty of candour. This must never happen again. We must have regular updates on progress and timelines so that we cannot be hoodwinked for decades.

The committee recommends that there should be a committee with the sole responsibility of oversight of major projects. That was the case for the Queensferry crossing and it is surely good enough for the A9.

Fiona Hyslop: On a point of factual accuracy, there was a separate committee for the legislative aspects of the Queensferry crossing, but the monitoring thereafter reverted to the relevant committee.

Rhoda Grant: That should be the case for the A9, because many aspects of it would benefit from having a committee to look at issues and monitor progress.

Many members talked about the loss of life on the A9. Emma Roddick described graphically the dangers of driving on the road, and Foysoyl Choudhury and Claire Baker talked about the high and unacceptable numbers of fatalities. Every fatality brings heartbreak for a family. These are not just numbers or statistics; they are human beings who have been at the heart of their communities and are a loss to them, too.

That is why Foysoyl Choudhury mentioned that Laura Hansler, the petitioner, is keen to have a memorial to those people. Maybe if we had a committee to look at the A9, it could lead progress on a memorial for those who have lost their lives.

Claire Baker talked about the economic impact that the A9 situation is having on the far north. Jackson Carlaw spoke about the number of

organisations that are waiting for the road to be dualled, because SSE and others—such as those involved in renewables—need to use the A9 to operate projects.

Fergus Ewing turned that on its head by saying that other projects that are happening will require a huge workforce, that having one contract would be much more attractive to those who might bid to complete the A9 and that all the contractors will be competing for the same workforce. There is a risk in not trying to speed up the A9 work because, if it coincides with those other developments, that might force prices up as well as slowing things down because there is a lack of a workforce. I ask the cabinet secretary to consider that.

Emma Roddick highlighted that most of those who responded to the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee were keen for the timing to be sped up. The committee was told that the main reason for the delay and for not meeting the 2025 deadline was funding. Foysoyl Choudhury pointed out that the Government knew as far back as 2014 that the NPD funding route would not work. Claire Baker told us that the Government had been warned in 2018 by Transport Scotland that there would be a delay. Fergus Ewing laid out the timeframes in which those decisions were made and said that the Moy to Tomatin stretch of the A9 could take more than eight years from procurement to build.

It has become quite obvious that it should have been known a decade ago that the promised timeframe would never be met, yet it took until 2023 for that to be admitted. Covid was blamed for the delay, rather than the Government admitting that the issues had started a long time before that. There may be delays ahead, because the cabinet secretary said that she was not sure that the MIM contract will work. There are contingencies but, if the problem is again funding, that will build in a delay to the 2035 deadline.

Fiona Hyslop: I refer to my opening remarks—that issue absolutely will not cause a delay. In my opening statement, I made a point of providing assurance on funding.

Rhoda Grant: I am grateful for that assurance, and I hope that the issue will not cause a delay. Past experience has been that funding mechanisms led to the delay that has already taken place.

Mark Ruskell and others talked about safety and improvements, which it is important to have in place. Roads are there to mitigate risk to drivers, and it is important that we have a dual carriageway, because that is the best form of mitigation.

Beatrice Wishart and others talked about the A9 north. That is not part of today's debate, but we

need to ensure that safety measures are put in place for the A9 north, which has been blocked on a number of occasions. Imagine being pregnant and in labour, being driven more than 100 miles to Inverness maternity unit from Caithness and coming up against a road closure. The road is partially closed at Scrabster, which is one of the main ports and economic drivers in the far north. To protect the economy of Caithness, we need to ensure that that is not ignored.

We hoped to celebrate the opening of the dual carriageway between Inverness and Perth this year, but Highland communities have been badly let down. The Government needs to level with people. It should stop hoodwinking them with promises that it knows it cannot keep, and it needs to pull out all the stops to deliver by 2035 or earlier.

16:34

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):

As others have done, I start by thanking the committee, its convener and its members for the assiduous work that they have done on this important topic, which affects my constituents and many other people throughout Scotland. I thank those who gave the committee evidence and, in particular, I thank the petitioner, Laura Hansler, as others have done, for pursuing the matter assiduously, as a citizen, and using the Parliament's processes to raise such an important issue.

My colleague Maurice Golden outlined his experiences on the A9. My history on the A9 goes back many years. Growing up in the Highlands, I can just about remember what we call the old A9, which wended its way through towns and villages and made a journey from Inverness to the central belt take for ever. The new A9, as it was known, which was built in the late 1970s and early 1980s, was a vast improvement on what was there before. In the intervening period, traffic levels on the A9 have—at the last count, I think—expanded five times compared with what they were when the road was proposed five decades ago. That shows that there is a need for continual improvement of the infrastructure.

The case for progressing the dualling is unanswerable. Like other members, Rhoda Grant talked about the lives lost and the tragedies that we are all familiar with on the A9 of people being killed, when, in other circumstances, their lives could potentially have been saved. *[Interruption.]* I will give way to Pauline McNeill—oh no, she has disappeared. That might have been an error, Presiding Officer. I will carry on.

Every fatality is a tragedy to the family involved, and every serious accident carries with it horrible

consequences for those who are involved. There is also an economic cost, because the road is closed. There is a cost to the emergency services and to the economy.

When there are diversion routes because the road is closed—as it was recently, when it was closed near Ballinluig—those routes end up getting clogged up, as the route from Kirkmichael to Pitlochry was. I have written to the transport secretary about this. Locals get stuck in jams and are sometimes unable to move for two to three hours, because HGVs are trying to pass each other on a very narrow road that is totally unsuitable for being used for a diversion. That causes even bigger concerns and potentially even more serious consequences, should there be another accident. Should emergency vehicles need to get through, they would simply be unable to do so, because of the unsuitability of diversion routes. There are all those knock-on consequences from the very high accident rate on the A9.

As we have heard throughout the debate, a promise was made that the A9 would be dualled by 2025—a promise that was broken. Maurice Golden referred to the pretence that was kept up by the Scottish Government over a period of years—until 2023—that that promise could be kept.

Jamie Halcro Johnston gave striking evidence about the dishonesty on the part of some in the Scottish Government. He quoted something that the current First Minister said to him in this chamber in 2022. That is a very serious matter, should it be the case that the current First Minister misled Parliament and my colleague who asked the question. If the information that was available to the current First Minister was other than what he stated to Parliament, the matter needs to be properly investigated.

Emma Roddick referred to the duty of candour issue in the committee report. That is a really important aspect of the report, because we expect ministers to be straightforward and open with Parliament. I hope that the cabinet secretary will listen to that. In an afternoon in which we have heard a few quotes from “The Godfather”, I will give Mr Ewing this one from Michael Corleone:

“I respect those who tell me the truth, no matter how hard it is.”

People in Parliament would rather hear the truth, even though it might be uncomfortable for ministers.

People have been let down. To put it into context, in the past 18 years, 11 miles of the A9 have been dualled. If we go back to the period between 1979 and 1997, we had a Conservative Government that was responsible for roads in

Scotland. In the same length of period—18 years—that Conservative Government built 62 miles of dual carriageway, which puts into context the very slow progress that has taken place. We now see a new pledge to complete the dualling by 2035. I hope that we can trust that pledge, but I have to say, on past record, that we will believe it when we see it.

The committee report called for an acceleration of the dualling timetable. The committee's convener was his usual diplomatic self when he referred to the Government's response to that call as disappointing, and Edward Mountain used similar language. I think that it is worse than disappointing; I think that it is dismal to be getting such a response from the Government.

Of course, there is an issue with capacity among civil engineering companies in Scotland, and the committee's convener referred to that. However, I agree with Fergus Ewing, who, in his powerful contribution, referred to the need to avoid a sequential approach to placing contracts and said that such an approach presents the danger of slippage. I would rather see a framework approach to contracts, as Mr Ewing proposes, because that would avoid the risk of this vital work being put back even further.

Mark Ruskell was a little coy about the Greens' commitment to dualling. However, I agree with him on one point, which is the need for short-term improvements. He has raised that, as have I, because we should not see improvements as optional extras. We can progress dualling but, at the same time, we must recognise that short-term improvements to lighting, signage and, potentially, road layout at junctions could be brought in now. Those measures would help to avoid accidents and save lives in the short term, while we wait for the vital dualling process to be completed.

An issue that no member has touched on, but which constituents have raised with me, is the blighting of properties along the route. Property owners are unclear about exactly where the route will go, because of the delay in issuing project plans. Individuals are unable to sell their properties because they are unsure whether they will be affected. That is another impact on individuals' lives that the Scottish Government needs to be conscious of.

Finally, I turn to the issue of a dedicated cross-party committee. Edward Mountain made the important point that the NZET Committee, which he convenes, simply does not have the time or capacity to assess such issues properly. Although the cabinet secretary said that that is a matter for the Parliament rather than for the Government, we should not forget that the SNP has a large number of votes on the Parliamentary Bureau. If the SNP decided that that issue should be pursued, it would

be within its gift to talk to other parties to make that happen. We hope that it will.

We have a Government that has failed us, we have a broken promise, and I fear that we currently have a lack of urgency about where we go from here. I urge the Government to listen to everything that has been said during the debate. It should listen to the committee and to the petitioner, Laura Hansler, and get on with this vital work before more lives are lost.

16:42

Fiona Hyslop: I have listened carefully to the range of points that have been raised in the course of the debate. As I am sure that all members will have done, I have reflected on Maurice Golden's contribution on the impact of fatalities on families and local communities. Before I turn to addressing members' other points, I want to highlight the strategic importance of the delivery plan that the Government announced in December 2023, which was the first such plan ever to be published setting out the milestones, dates and actions for progressing delivery of the A9 project. I will comment further on the progress that has been achieved and on what is expected in the year ahead, because we are getting on with all those actions.

I have absolutely learned the lessons about transparency and certainty. Edward Mountain seemed to be surprised that I focused on those aspects in my opening remarks, but I did so because those were the committee's themes and the focus of its recommendations for improvements. While I am on the subject of Edward Mountain, I also reflect on his point about the work capacity of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee—and that was before land reform matters were allocated to it. A future Parliament might want to consider those points when looking at transport and infrastructure.

Edward Mountain: The Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee has to speak to three cabinet secretaries and the Deputy First Minister. It does not have time to cover transport if it takes in all the ministers whom it is supposed to see in the course of its other work. Does the cabinet secretary support the principle that, in the next session, the Parliament should have a designated committee to deal purely with transport, by which I mean roads, ferries and railways?

Fiona Hyslop: If the member had listened to my previous point, he would have heard me say that there is merit in transport and infrastructure being dealt with separately. It would be for a new Parliament to decide where those areas should be dealt with, precisely because of the workload issues that he has mentioned.

The delivery plan that we produced in December 2023 was developed to balance three key factors: market capacity to bid for and construct the projects making up the A9 dualling programme, disruption to road users and challenging financial constraints. The delivery plan provides much-needed certainty for road users, local communities and the construction industry on when works are expected. It transparently identifies key milestones when critical decisions are required to progress with procurement or make a contract award, and it identifies when dualling works on individual contracts are expected to become operational. The delivery plan was, and continues to be, supported by a Cabinet decision to prioritise completion of the A9 dualling programme within its budgets. It remains the Government's focus to complete the A9 dualling programme in line with that plan.

On progress, in addition to the significant milestones that have been achieved, which I mentioned earlier, a number of advanced contracts have been procured for works such as ground investigations. Those are each important in helping to de-risk the main construction contracts.

The Government has also taken steps to engage with interested parties. In January 2024, a briefing was held for MSPs, and in February 2024, a stakeholder briefing was held in Inverness, followed by a public exhibition that visited Inverness, Aviemore, Dalwhinnie, Pitlochry and Perth. At the end of February 2024, the dedicated A9 dualling website was launched, and quarterly newsletters were issued in spring, summer and autumn 2024. In November 2024, the first of what will be regular updates on progress was issued to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, and a briefing for MSPs was held in December 2024, where there was extensive discussion with Fergus Ewing on the pros and cons of framework contracts. I heard the points that he raised on framework contracts during the debate. I am prepared to continue that conversation, but, in the spirit of candour, I cannot imply that that will definitely happen, but we want to go ahead and provide certainty with the plan that we have. I am open to those discussions.

Fergus Ewing: Can the cabinet secretary confirm as a matter of fact that the plan and the scheduling that were announced in December 2023 were presented as a *fait accompli*? There was no consultation with industry about it, just as there was no proper consultation, such as a market day, with industry in relation to the consideration of the request for acceleration. That failure to consult with industry is potentially a fatal flaw to the deliverability of the programme.

Fiona Hyslop: On that point, it is wrong for Fergus Ewing to imply that Transport Scotland has

somehow produced the December 2023 plan without having continuous, regular engagement with the industry to identify capacity. That is part of the work of identifying what would be sustainable.

I will move on to some of Jackson Carlaw's points, but I also want to look ahead. I confirm that made orders will be published tomorrow for the Crubenmore to Kincaig project, which will mean that made orders will have been published for 92 per cent of the length of the A9 dualling programme, which might address Murdo Fraser's points about issues for properties.

Other significant milestones on the A9 dualling programme that the Government is working towards during 2025 include the commencement of statutory procedures for the Pass of Birnam to Tay crossing project and the commencement of main construction works on the third contract, for Tomatin to Moy, both in spring 2025. They also include the award of the fourth contract, for Tay crossing to Ballinluig, and the commencement of procurement for the fifth contract, for Pitlochry to Killiecrankie, both in summer 2025. Another milestone is concluding the process of further decision making on the use of MIM in late 2025. Achievement of those milestones will represent real practical progress.

Mark Ruskell raised issues around Dunkeld. He knows that I am alive to those issues and active in discussing with Transport Scotland what might be possible. Of course, remember that that roundabout was not part of the original proposals, but after discussion with the community, it was a response to a co-created request.

In parallel with that work, the Government will progress towards the completion of its £5 million package of additional engineering measures that are intended to address the perceived contributory factors to collisions, and I say to Beatrice Wishart that those measures are expected to be completed in March this year.

The A9 safety group will continue to meet, and I encourage everyone to access the new A9 safety web portal. We will continue to have engagement plans and there will be a briefing in Perth in May or early June. As I indicated earlier, there will be regular committee responses and updates.

Jackson Carlaw made an important point about the capacity of the workforce. I have met SSEN to discuss issues across Scotland, not just about roads or the A9, but about capacity for the renewable sector, and there has been engagement and careful consideration of workforce capability. The committee made the point that it is easier to plan when there is certainty. If there is chopping and changing and things are reordered and rescheduled, that does not provide certainty. We will have to strike a

balance in our delivery. Jackson Carlaw also assumed that an acceleration of the project would allow an increase in capacity, although it might do the reverse, which the report has highlighted. It could pose a risk for workforce issues and compound things, which could inadvertently cause delay.

Foyso Choudhury made a number of points about funding. I refer him to my earlier remarks.

I am conscious that I need to bring my remarks to a close. I reiterate my commitment to providing transparency and certainty on the progress of the A9 dualling programme as it moves forward in the months and years ahead. I encourage members to take advantage of the regular updates and briefings, and to sign up for the newsletters and publicise them to their constituents so that they can remain informed on the progress of this vital programme of work. The committee did its job of scrutiny. Although it looked at the past, it also made recommendations for the future.

I have been in post for 18 months, and was involved in the work to publish the plan in December 2023. I am very conscious of my duty to the Parliament on transparency, accountability and scrutiny. I take those responsibilities very seriously, which I hope that I have evidenced in what I have said and in the actions that I have taken, as Emma Roddick reflected.

The Presiding Officer: David Torrance will wind up the debate on behalf of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee.

16:52

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): As deputy convener, I am pleased to close this important debate on behalf of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, and I thank colleagues across the chamber for their contributions this afternoon. I also offer my thanks to the committee clerks and to the Scottish Parliament information centre for their assistance along the way. Our inquiry was in-depth and it involved a number of complex issues, and their contributions to the process were invaluable, as always. Thanks must also be given to everyone who took the time to give evidence to the committee, including individuals, organisations, community councils, cabinet secretaries and former First Ministers. All those submissions were key to helping to inform our work and scrutiny.

The A9 is a key arterial route that is often referred to as Scotland's spine, as it links the Highlands with the rest of the country. In addition to being a popular tourist route, this trunk road is a key economic route that helps to ensure the delivery of essential supplies to rural communities. It is likely to see a further increase in the volume of

traffic as investment and growth, particularly that which is aligned to our national transition to net zero, continues in the region.

I speak as someone who regularly travels on the A9, though perhaps not as often as colleagues including Emma Roddick, Fergus Ewing, Murdo Fraser, Edward Mountain and Jamie Halcro Johnston, who have shared their experiences and those of their constituents of tragic and terrifying collisions on the route. Like others, I commend the petitioner, Laura Hansler, for her pragmatic and persistent approach to pursuing this important matter.

Over the course of the debate, we have heard about the impact that the failure to dual the A9 has had on communities across the Highlands and rural Perthshire. That frequently occurs in the form of long diversions and delays each time the road is closed to allow emergency services to respond to an incident. Those situations are not only frustrating for those relying on the road to get around but, as others have highlighted, now spark a sense of dread among those living closest to the road that the sound of the sirens means that another life may have been lost.

Although much of our inquiry and the contributions that we have heard in the debate have focused on the practicalities of the dualling programme, it is also important to reflect on the petition's call for a national memorial. Paragraph 160 of the committee's report states:

"The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government consult on the proposal for a national memorial".

The primary motivation for dualling the A9 has always been to address road safety concerns on a route that has developed a reputation as one of Scotland's most dangerous roads, and we heard today from Emma Harper, Maurice Golden and Mark Ruskell about that.

Since the A9 opened to traffic in the late 1970s, more than 330 people have died on the section between Perth and Inverness, and the majority of those fatalities involved a head-on collision of vehicles. We heard from road safety experts that dual carriageway roads can vastly reduce the risk of head-on collisions because they tend to involve the use of barriers, which prevent crossover, and the configuration of junctions to allow traffic to more safely join and exit the road.

During the course of our inquiry, 11 people lost their lives in incidents on the A9—a powerful reminder to all of us of how essential it is that the dualling be completed. On behalf of the committee, I extend my condolences to all those who have been impacted by fatalities on that route, and I urge the Government to work with Laura Hansler on the proposal for a lasting

memorial to those who have been injured or killed on the A9.

We have also heard that completing the dualling programme as quickly as possible would be a fitting tribute to those who have lost their lives on the route. Without repeating the points that many colleagues, such as Foyso Choudhury and Emma Roddick, have made this afternoon, I will focus the remainder of my remarks on a key theme that ran throughout our inquiry—how the programme is funded.

The evidence that we heard indicated that, from the outset, there had always been an expectation that a mix of capital and private finance would be used to deliver the dualling programme. A key difficulty arose in 2014, when the non-profit distribution model was reclassified as public rather than private finance, and, although the progress on statutory process at that stage meant that no immediate decision on procurement was required, documents that we received indicated that, by 2017, officials were impressing on ministers the need to agree a procurement approach that would ensure that the 2025 target date would remain achievable.

By 2018, the options that were being presented to ministers indicated that, without a readily available alternative to NPD, a fully capably funded approach would be required to ensure that the programme remained on track for completion in 2025. Of course, we now know that a combination of issues—including challenging financial circumstances, delays to agreeing a suitable procurement option and the availability of up-front capital to progress the dualling—resulted in the admission from the Scottish Government that the 2025 target was no longer achievable.

As other members have commented, the Government has now published a revised delivery plan that suggests that A9 dualling will be delivered within the original estimate of £3 billion. The cabinet secretary has spoken of a Cabinet decision to prioritise completion of the dualling programme within the Scottish Government budget.

The committee has tentatively welcomed that information. I say “tentatively” because, although the Scottish Government refers to “certainty” in response to our recommendations for clarity on the funding for A9 dualling, we are aware that procurement of the north and central sections, using mutual investment model contracts, is subject to on-going due diligence and further decision making, which is expected later this year.

As our report set out, we remain concerned about what will happen should that due diligence determine that MIM contracts are not suitable, and we continue to seek clarity from the Government

on what contingency plans are being put in place to ensure that funding will be available when it needs to be and that the 2035 completion date will not be negatively impacted by a change in approach to procurement of the remaining sections.

The cabinet secretary also referred to the need to follow annual budget practices, which we acknowledge, but she can be left in little doubt, following the contributions from Fergus Ewing, Murdo Fraser, Rhoda Grant and Emma Roddick, that members across the Parliament will be knocking on her and the finance secretary’s doors if funding is not in place to deliver the swift completion of the A9 dualling programme.

As the convener, Maurice Golden and many other speakers have said this afternoon, we believe that transparency is essential to rebuilding public confidence in the programme. I very much welcome the commitment from Transport Scotland to provide six-monthly updates on the progress of the dualling programme to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee and to other interested members of the Scottish Parliament. As was the commitment from current and former members of the Scottish Government with regard to the importance of parliamentary scrutiny, routine and regular sharing of information is key to addressing concerns about the transparency of decision making on major projects such as those. To enable that scrutiny to take place, we recommend that, in addition to six-monthly updates from Transport Scotland, the Cabinet Secretary for Transport provide statements to Parliament at key milestones that are aligned to the delivery plan that was published in December 2023.

No one wants to be standing here in 10 years’ time, still discussing this issue. Members have heard from the convener and me that we strongly believe that enhanced parliamentary scrutiny has an important role to play in driving momentum on the programme. The level of engagement with our report and today’s debate demonstrates the appetite of members to undertake that scrutiny, and I look forward to working with colleagues throughout the remainder of this parliamentary session, and perhaps the next, to support the effort and ensure that the commitment to fully dual the A9 between Perth and Inverness is successfully delivered.

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There is one question to be put as a result of today's business. The question is, that motion S6M-16085, in the name of Jackson Carlaw, on behalf of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, on an inquiry into the A9 dualling programme, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee's 2nd Report, 2024 (Session 6), *Inquiry into the A9 Dualling Programme* (SP Paper 669), including the recommendation that a dedicated committee should be established to provide oversight and maintain momentum on scrutiny of long-running, multi-session infrastructure projects, such as the A9 dualling programme.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Health and Social Care (Rural Scotland)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-14408, in the name of Tim Eagle, on improving access to health and social care in rural Scotland. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament considers that people living in remote and rural areas face unique challenges when it comes to accessing health and social care; understands that the recruitment and retention of staff, poor infrastructure, and the inability to access certain services are all common issues that impact health and social care in rural and remote areas; notes what it sees as the failure of the Scottish Government to deliver infrastructure investment in the Highlands and Islands region and elsewhere, including the failure to deliver a new Belford Hospital in Fort William, complete upgrades to Dr Gray's Hospital in Elgin, and build a replacement hospital for the Isle of Barra, among other delayed projects; understands that many communities in rural areas face a reduction of services, such as the reduced access to NHS dentistry in Dunoon and loss of care home beds across the Highlands and Islands region; believes that all of these factors contribute to the wider issue of rural depopulation, and notes the calls for the Scottish Government to properly invest in health and social care in rural and remote areas and deliver better health outcomes for residents.

17:02

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I remind members that my wife is a general practitioner partner in a practice in Buckie and that I previously served for five years as a councillor in Moray.

When I first came to the Parliament, nearly a year ago now, the one thing that I really wanted to address was rural depopulation, and I focused on that issue in my first members' business debate. In this debate, I want to focus on arguably one of the most fundamental issues that impacts rural depopulation: access to healthcare.

Following the debate on the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee's inquiry into remote and rural healthcare, I raised some of the pressures that rural communities face, but I wanted more debate on such a big topic and to give other members an opportunity to highlight their local issues and stories. I am grateful to everybody in the chamber today.

I will not lie: there is an element of politics in this, as I fundamentally do not believe that the Scottish National Party Government has served residents of rural Scotland well. That is not just my view; I have heard too many stories of appalling failures to deliver healthcare from the people I

represent—a lady who slipped and fell having to lie on her back for eight hours while waiting for a 20-minute ambulance journey; a man having a heart attack sitting outside a local district general hospital; the fact that it takes five, six or seven years to reinstate maternity services; and cancer diagnoses taking longer in rural areas than in urban areas. Those are appalling failures, but, as I know my colleagues will show, that is what is going on.

I think that I can split the issue into two areas. First, there are the macro problems: the big issues that fundamentally lead to poor health outcomes in rural areas—the topics that are discussed around the dinner table and are much discussed in this chamber, such as rural transport, connectivity, roads, local provision of services, housing and employment. Then, there are the smaller issues: the niche technical issues around rural healthcare delivery.

I asked a range of doctors across the north-east and the Highlands to tell me in their words what the issues are. They said that smaller teams are less resilient, so a small reduction in staffing has a bigger impact, whether temporarily or in the long term. They noted that there is less third sector community support than there was before, and they spoke of significant recruitment challenges.

One GP said that the role of a GP has fundamentally changed over the years, with most GPs now working part time, partly due to the workload and partly for a better work-life balance. A higher headcount is therefore required, which, in turn, is harder to deliver in rural areas. GPs need a realistic funding model that can sustain smaller establishments. The current system does not work.

Another GP spoke about the lack of any real push on remote and rural training programmes and said that a specialism in rurality should be encouraged in early work at medical schools. One doctor said that, due to their sheer size, larger hospitals tend to have a responsive and dynamic learning environment—something that is not easily delivered in smaller hospitals. There is also a lack of specialist trainees rotating through smaller rural hospitals to provide support to consultants and doctors in their foundation years. Another doctor pointed out that, when a long-term generalist who is amazing in their field is expected to retire in a few years' time, there should be a mechanism by which another doctor can be brought in earlier to learn their core skills.

I am sure that the cabinet secretary is aware that, at present, maternity and orthopaedic services—and even basic screenings—are not being delivered in some areas. In my region, there are serious staff shortages in Elgin, Thurso, Campbeltown, Stornoway and Uist—I could

continue. There are also recruitment challenges in general practice, as we saw with the first group of graduates from the Scottish graduate entry medicine programme. Of the 52 students who graduated, two have taken up posts in my region and eight others have taken up other rural posts.

If I had longer to speak, I could talk about social care, community nursing, mental health support, cancer diagnosis, vaccines and immunisations. We have unique challenges in rural Scotland, but we should never feel that we are being treated as second-class citizens.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): In the spirit of commending workers in rural areas, I note that one advantage of smaller teams is that they are able to adapt, innovate and trial things more effectively. For example, Ross memorial hospital in Dingwall has been far more effective at reducing delayed discharge because it knows the teams on the other side a lot better. Does Tim Eagle agree that freeing up healthcare professionals and empowering them to take decisions on the ground is often more successful in rural areas?

Tim Eagle: I agree. I do not have time to go into this in my speech, but I would argue that some of the centralisation in relation to community treatment and care nurses and mental health support has not worked, because local teams are better at making local decisions.

Too often, the pressures that we are put under in rural Scotland manifest themselves in unfair treatment of staff, who are part of our rural communities. That is never acceptable. However, I understand that patients are anxious, worried and in pain and that they are never getting appointments or are, perhaps, being sent further away for treatments. We need to reflect those concerns in the Parliament and through our national health service boards. Health professionals on the ground should never face punishment for lack of delivery by those who sit on the Government benches here. I have a small plea: rather than leaving behind frustration or anger the next time that we need healthcare, let us consider leaving a packet of biscuits or a cake—maybe even a thank you.

We need bold, brave and common-sense policies that can deliver real and lasting change. If we want more doctors in our rural communities, we need to incentivise them to come. If we want rural healthcare to be strong and sustainable, we need to accept the costs that come with that and to provide working environments that offer educational opportunities and a fair work-life balance. We need to ensure that, in 21st century Scotland, we are providing the services that people need.

Other countries have been successful: in Estonia, the Government has developed an artificial intelligence-powered health information system; Brazil has taken on large volumes of community health workers; Chile has put in place a rural practitioner incentive programme, which provides financial and housing incentives and professional development opportunities; and Australia has the Royal Flying Doctor Service. The four key themes that underpin those global approaches are decentralisation, the use of technology, the use of incentives and ensuring community involvement. We need a campaign that brings all that together, continues to raise awareness and brings together people from across Scotland to show what is happening with absolute clarity. That is why I will start an awareness campaign for rural healthcare.

What I have said is no political trickery. It is a reality that must be fixed. We do not need more talk; we need positive action. Our communities feel the daily pain of a weakening health system, our staff are too often exhausted, district general services are depleted and health boards seem to have adopted an attitude of, “You come to us—we do not come to you.”

One person in the chamber could change that. They could grab those four themes and go wild with common-sense and actionable policies, shake up the system, support our rural staff and provide the change that is needed. If the cabinet secretary does not do that, I hope that the people of Scotland will let the Scottish Conservatives do it in 16 months’ time, because—rest assured—we would.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before we move to the open debate, I advise members that we are heavily oversubscribed for this debate. It is inevitable that we will have to extend it by half an hour but, even then, we might struggle to accommodate everybody. I am keen to include everybody who wants to speak in the debate, but that might mean that later speeches have to be truncated somewhat. I ask that all members stick to their speaking allocations and do not go beyond them, because they will be cut off.

17:10

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): I thank Tim Eagle for, as he said, giving us all the opportunity to raise important matters. I wish to focus, as I have intimated to the cabinet secretary, on one of them—namely, the forced removal of vaccination services from GPs in 2023.

Last spring, an infant in Highland died. No doubt, as is appropriate, the fatal accident inquiry will investigate the circumstances in due course. The family seeks total privacy: that must be

respected. However, as the cabinet secretary knows, it is the belief of GPs who have been consulting, informing and advising me—notably, Dr Alastair Noble and Dr Adrian Baker from Nairn and, more recently, Dr Ross Jaffrey from Beaulieu—that the case arose because of lack of access to vaccination following the loss of provision of the service by local GPs.

That change was brought in in 2023. When I took up the case, I challenged whether it should take place at all. I have challenged Humza Yousaf, Michael Matheson, Neil Gray and the current and previous First Ministers, in the chamber, in meetings and, repeatedly, in letters. What has happened is that the GP contract has enforced removal of that service from GPs, despite the fact that three quarters of GPs in Highland voted against the contract.

Now, 90 per cent of GPs want to have the service back. I am informed by Dr Jaffrey in a paper that he provided recently—I have furnished the cabinet secretary with a copy of it—that the 10 per cent of GPs who do not want it back are largely members of a Highland health board practice who are, no doubt, taking their lead from NHS Highland.

There are many problems with that. There is cost—the old system cost roughly £1.5 million, and it is believed that the new system costs £6 million. If we extrapolate that across the whole of rural Scotland, it is a massive waste of money.

However, the cost is not as important as the harm. I think that we would all accept that. One of the truly utterly shocking facts is that details of who has and who has not received immunisation—whether it is for flu, measles, mumps and rubella, whooping cough or Covid—cannot be shared with GPs. Immunisation is done at centralised locations, and when they see a patient, GPs do not know whether the patient, particularly when the patient is child, has been immunised. As Dr Jaffrey pointed out in his recent paper, that is leading to a drop-off in immunisation rates. He said that they used to have a surge and do 60 per cent in October to get herd immunity up, but that has all gone. The facts are there in Ross Jaffrey’s report. I cannot go over them all, but the levels of immunisation in things such as—

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): Will the member take an intervention?

Fergus Ewing: Yes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Be very brief, cabinet secretary.

Neil Gray: I have met Fergus Ewing and those GPs’ colleagues, whose advice I am very grateful for. I hope that he will accept that I have also

provided clear guidance and authority to NHS Highland to use the flexibility that is contained in the 2018 contract to ensure that, where general practice-led vaccination can take place in order to remove barriers to access to vaccines, it should and can do that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude.

Fergus Ewing: I appreciate that the cabinet secretary's intentions are entirely honourable and good. I entirely accept that. However, as a former minister, I gently say to him that good intentions are not enough. Given what the cabinet secretary said, I do not know why NHS Highland has not restored the service to GPs. In 25 years here, I have never wished to be alarmist about a health issue, but if action is not taken soon, what will the cabinet secretary say if another infant's life is lost because they cannot access life-saving vaccinations for diseases that we thought had gone for ever—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We need to move on. I call Finlay Carson. You have up to four minutes.

17:15

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I congratulate Tim Eagle on bringing this crucial topic to the chamber.

Living in rural Scotland remains a massive challenge and it is certainly not getting any easier, thanks to the centralist approach that the SNP Government is taking. I was born and raised and, thankfully, still live in beautiful Galloway, so I know the many benefits of residing in a rural community, not least of which are the stunning scenery, the abundance of fresh air and—which is most important—being part of the strong bond that rural communities represent.

However, the pros are rapidly being overtaken by the cons, especially when it comes to accessing health and social care, for starters. People are having to travel greater distances to access an ever-increasing range of services that are often taken for granted by people who live in towns and cities. We are seriously struggling to recruit and retain staff across a wide spectrum of skills, from dentistry to midwifery to nursing and social care staff. The large number of unfilled vacancies places an even greater strain on an already under pressure NHS workforce.

As we heard earlier in a members' business debate that was brought to the chamber by Rhoda Grant, the Scottish Human Rights Commission's 2024 report on the Highlands and Islands highlighted the pervasive issues of rooflessness, hunger and limited access to healthcare. Although

the report's findings are specific to the Highlands and Islands, they resonate deeply with us in Galloway.

I am delighted that the commission will now look more closely at similar problems that are being experienced in my constituency. Access to healthcare remains a significant challenge where long waiting times and limited availability of services are barriers to the care that residents need. That is not only a violation of their rights, but a threat to their health and wellbeing.

As in other rural and remote communities, there is a serious crisis in midwifery, particularly in Wigtownshire, which I have raised on countless previous occasions in the chamber. According to two former GPs—Dr Gordon Baird and Dr Rod White, to whom I am indebted for their forthright opinions and advice—the current maternity arrangements fall well below any minimum standard.

NHS Dumfries and Galloway's integration joint board carried out a review to examine the current system, which has failed women and families for the past six years and has led to many distressing stories of roadside deliveries and dashes to the maternity hospital in Dumfries. Women in labour are simply being told to bypass their local community hospital's accident and emergency department and, with no access to a local midwife out of hours, are forced to travel up to 90 miles along the A75. It should be pointed out that Stranraer is in many ways deprived. There, 40 per cent of people lack access to personal transport—never mind public transport—so we can add that to the equation in getting to Dumfries, which might involve waiting for an ambulance.

It is little wonder that Dr Baird and Dr White insist that, without appropriate action, the system falls way below any minimum standard that could be regarded as fair or reasonable. They insist that the integration joint board's review was not independent in its structure or conclusions.

Data has often been ineptly handled to mislead politicians. Indeed, the board's record on implementation of such reviews affecting Wigtownshire, including on the future of our four cottage hospitals, is dismal, to say the least. As well as overruling mothers-to-be, who wanted the birthing suite at the Galloway community hospital to reopen, and instead forcing them to make that journey to Dumfries, the IJB ignored the findings of an independent review that was carried out by health experts from Ayrshire, which recommended that local maternity facilities be reopened.

All of that flies in the face of the advice of Minister for Public Health and Women's Health, Jenny Minto and, indeed, that of Maree Todd, who

visited Stranraer and who wrote to me last October, stating:

“The Scottish Government expects all NHS Boards to provide maternity services that are delivered as close to home as practicable, and to offer a full range of birth place options within their region.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude.

Finlay Carson: In nobody’s mind is 90 miles “close to home”.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude.

Finlay Carson: Once again, I urge the cabinet secretary to consider an urgent review of the matter.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Neither of the last two speeches has been within four minutes. We will need to do better, otherwise members who want to speak in the debate will be deprived of the opportunity to do so.

I call Douglas Ross. You have up to four minutes, Mr Ross.

17:19

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I congratulate Tim Eagle not just on securing tonight’s debate but on the tour de force speech that he gave on issues affecting his constituents—our constituents—in the Highlands and Islands and other people across rural Scotland.

The issues that I raise tonight will not be a surprise to the cabinet secretary; I have raised them many times in the chamber before, and I will keep coming here and raising them until we see improvements and change.

The first issue is that of the save our surgeries Burghead and Hopeman group. Some of the campaigners were going to come down to the Parliament to watch the debate when it was previously scheduled, and they had hoped to be here today; however, because of illness, they are not. When I met them on Monday, they wanted the cabinet secretary and his ministers to know that they will be watching the debate at home in Moray to hear—they hope—a positive response.

Last month, when I raised the campaigners’ concerns and their proposals for a nurse-led unit in Burghead and Hopeman that they have lost, they hoped to hear positive news, but they did not get it: from Jenni Minto, they got a point-blank refusal.

I asked the campaigners for their words, because I do not want to make this a party-political issue. They said that I could tell members that they were “bitterly disappointed”. They also said

that it is “very frustrating”, given the positive meeting—which I attended—that they had had with Jenni Minto in Burghead in the summer. I hope that, following the proposals from the save our surgeries Burghead and Hopeman group, the cabinet secretary and his ministers will reconsider the plan, because, without Scottish Government support, it will go no further.

There is an opportunity to show the local group—campaigners who are dedicated to services in their area—that there is an opportunity to have a nurse-led service in Burghead. I have written to the cabinet secretary to ask that, if ministers continue to say that they will not support the plan, they tell us the funding calculation that they have made on the proposal. Without that, it will seem as though the local group is being fobbed off when there is a real opportunity to provide a local service.

The other issue that I want to raise, which has been on-going since 2018 and which I have mentioned repeatedly in the chamber is the lack of consultant-led maternity services at Dr Gray’s hospital. I spoke to Marj Adams and Kirsty Watson of the keep MUM—maternity unit for Moray—campaign group ahead of the debate. The points—both positive and concerning—that they want to get across are important.

On a positive note, Marj and Kirsty said that they are really encouraged by the system of consultation that is being held locally and by the local staff at Dr Gray’s hospital, who are pushing that forward. Like me, they are positive that elective caesareans could return to Dr Gray’s soon. If we could get a date for that, that would be welcome news in Moray.

Marj and Kirsty are slightly more concerned about the Dr Gray’s strategy planning paper that went to the NHS Grampian board on 12 December. Quite apart from anything else, it was quite a concerning report. What public consultation was there by NHS Grampian in order to hear from people in Moray, Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen city—in particular from those in Moray who rely on Dr Gray’s? Where was the public engagement? There does not seem to have been much. Marj and Kirsty stated that they have heard from several NHS staff that they fear that, at NHS Grampian board level, the commitment to the restoration of the consultant-led maternity unit at Dr Gray’s is weak.

The reason why we need the unit back again is clear from a freedom of information response that I have received about the number of babies born to Moray parents since 2018 who were born outwith the area. Of the more than 5,500 babies born to Moray parents since 2018, just over 1,000 were born at Dr Gray’s; more than 4,200 were born in either Aberdeen or Inverness. They need to be

born locally. We need that service back up and running, because, on top of that, almost 550 Moray mums, including my wife, have had to have a blue-light ambulance transfer to give birth. It needs to get a lot better, and I hope that the cabinet secretary will listen to those points and act urgently.

17:23

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I, too, thank Tim Eagle for securing the debate.

Access to health and social care in the Highlands and Islands is poor, which is borne out by the Scottish Human Rights Commission spotlight report that we debated earlier today. The availability of social care is declining. Since 2022, 218 social care beds have been lost in the Highland Council area alone, and the lack of social care is putting pressure on primary care when people await discharge to suitable accommodation. The lack of suitable support or accommodation means that people are trapped in hospital and, because of that, hospitals cannot admit other people for treatment, which leads to lengthening waiting lists all over the place.

Back in 2021, the Feeley review recommended a human rights-based approach, whereby people are aware of and can advocate for their rights, and can easily access and maintain the care that they need. That recommendation has not been met and, sadly, things have simply got worse. The situation is even more distressing for those who are in their final days. Time that should be spent at home, surrounded by loved ones, is spent trapped in hospital.

The Scottish Human Rights Commission recommends human rights-based budgeting that provides services that fit the needs of the people who access them. The lack of access to gynaecological services and maternity care in rural areas is unacceptable.

Neil Gray: On Rhoda Grant's point about social care, the progress that we are seeking to make in relation to a national care service is about enshrining a human rights-based approach to decision making and budgeting. Does she agree that, as we seek to reconsider the issues around a national care service, we should maintain a human rights-based approach to decision making and budgeting at all levels on social care?

Rhoda Grant: I agree that a human rights-based approach to budgeting must be taken at all levels to meet people's human rights. That was clear from the Scottish Human Rights Commission's report.

I return to the issue of gynaecological services and maternity care in rural areas. It is

unacceptable that mothers are having to travel 100 miles to give birth when they are in middle of labour. That is surely not a human rights-based approach. The situation is even worse when the roads are blocked.

Hospitals and services in the Highlands and Islands have been impacted by budget cuts. The Caithness health review is on hold, as is NHS Highland and NHS Grampian's joint maternity redesign. We have had more positive news about the Belford, but the go-ahead for the replacement hospital has been given only for the planning and design stage. The planning and design stage for the new hospital on Barra was completed, but then the project was unceremoniously dropped by the Scottish Government. That provides cold comfort to the people of Lochaber in the context of the Belford, who must keep up the pressure for their hospital. In relation to Barra, the Scottish Government must reinstate its commitment to the Castlebay campus and provide people with the hospital that they need. I could cite many other issues.

I know that we are tight for time, but I want to turn to the Government-initiated Scottish graduate entry medicine programme. Although it aims to boost rural GP numbers, it has delivered only two trainee doctors in the Highlands since 2016. We know that allied health professionals are not available, so people cannot access services that are no longer provided by GPs. We need a review to be carried out of the GP contract, and we need that to be done with a vision for rural areas in mind. I urge the Government to do that as soon as possible.

17:27

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): As other members have done, I thank Tim Eagle for bringing the debate to the chamber. The number of speakers and the pressure that is being brought to bear highlight just how important the issue of access to health and social care is to those of us who live in rural Scotland and, of course, on our islands, and to our constituents and communities.

There are a number of areas that I would have liked to cover today, but I am very conscious of time, so I will not be able to go into detail on all of them. However, I hope to cover some key areas of concern. As Tim Eagle did, I will start with GPs.

I recently met GPs in Orkney, who raised some of the challenges that they face, which have only increased over the years, seemingly with little response from the Scottish Government. The waits to see a GP have grown, as has the paperwork that they have to deal with—they spend hours on repeat prescriptions or meeting data

requests from patients. Because all of that has to be delivered by GPs themselves, they have less time to spend dealing with patients, which only increases the pressures on the system.

I know from personal experience the pressure that social care is under. There are not enough carers, and there are not enough places in suitable accommodation for people who need care, so our hospitals are full of people who simply do not need to be there. That situation is not getting better; it is only getting worse.

Only last year, the Moss Park care home in Fort William was threatened with closure. The residents were prepared for resettlement in new homes. Understandably, they and their families were concerned that those new places would not be local and would not be in the communities that they grew up in, where they wanted to stay. There was also understandable concern in the community that the loss of places at the Moss Park care home would mean that staying in Fort William or even Lochaber would be impossible for local people in the future.

Although it appears that there has been a reprieve for the home, for how long will that be the case—a few years or slightly longer? That community in Fort William—current residents of the home and those who may need it shortly, and their families—deserve to know that care places will still be available locally in the future. At present, they cannot be confident that that will be the case.

Neil Gray: I hope that the member will recognise that, along with the constituency member, Kate Forbes, I met residents and family members at Moss Park and that interventions by the Government and Highland Council have seen the home being saved. I recognise the strength of feeling in that community and will continue working with Highland Council to see a long-term and sustainable approach.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Saved for how long? That is the problem.

What will the loss of care provision mean for the Belford hospital, which is itself in need of replacement? I joined the local community, campaigners and other politicians in Fort William last year to highlight the increasingly desperate need for the much-promised but much-delayed replacement finally to be delivered. A clear message was sent to the SNP that Lochaber would not accept more delay. There has been positive news about the Belford recently, but, like many in the community, I will not accept that real progress has been made until we see spades in the ground as work on the build begins. That community has been let down too many times

before by SNP ministers in Edinburgh who are big on promises but not so big on delivery.

Colleagues have spoken about the long journeys faced by young mothers in Caithness and Moray and those are also faced by many living on Skye. A former paramedic described to me a high-speed drive, with blue lights on, from Skye to Inverness. It was winter, it was dark and the roads were unsuitable for anything other than careful and often slow driving. That situation is not acceptable and I am sure that even those on the SNP front benches will recognise that.

That story also highlights the pressure that the Ambulance Service is under. I held my own members' business debate just a few years ago on the pressures faced by the Ambulance Service and its crews and I know that the service continues to be called on to help or provide cover in areas outwith what should be its remit. That is only exacerbated on Skye when promises to return 24/7 urgent care to Portree hospital fail to be delivered time and time again.

I must conclude, but I could have spoken, as others have done, about the pressures on mental health provision, the loss of local dentistry, a lack of the physio support that is important for many older residents, nursing shortages and the lack of accommodation. I hope that this debate will leave the health secretary under no illusions about the severity of the pressures on our rural health services and the desperate need and public demand for a reverse to the running down, centralisation and loss of services that we have had during the SNP's 18 years in power.

17:31

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I am grateful to my colleague Tim Eagle for bringing forward this debate on rural healthcare.

At 5 past 4 this afternoon, just over an hour ago, I received an email from a constituent, which I will read out word for word. It states:

"Dear Rachael I'm waiting for cataract surgery at Borders General Hospital. I was told in December it would be possibly a year. Now I've just had a call from BGH telling me if I don't accept the Jubilee Hospital as an option I'll be removed from the waiting list. This I find to be totally unacceptable as I'm 82. I can't travel to Glasgow; I'm not able. So as from today I am no longer on the waiting list. Just thought I'd let you know this because I believe it's the SNP government who has made this decision. Listening to First Minister's questions today I was shocked at what I was hearing about the NHS and replies from John Swinney as if everything is ok. I just can't believe this."

Neil Gray: Will the member write to me with the details of that case? We are investing in making sure that we can get through the waiting lists and are using the national resource that is the Golden

Jubilee hospital, as well as regional resources, on matters such as cataract surgery. I want to see more detail about what has been communicated to the constituent, because that is certainly not the way that we would want, or expect, patients to be communicated with.

Rachael Hamilton: I am very grateful to Neil Gray for that response and will certainly write to him. I have also written to him in the past couple of days to invite him to come to the Borders to thank the hard-working front-line staff and to see what more can be done to improve the terrible outcomes that we are seeing in the Borders, an issue that was covered last night on the “Representing Border” programme on ITV Borders.

Only 58 per cent of patients are seen within the four-hour target. Those figures are the worst on record since 2007 and the third worst in Scotland, and Neil Gray knows that. I put on the record that that is not caused by the influx of flu patients, because those figures are from November and so are not about that.

In the brief time that I have, I will cover the financial situation of health boards across Scotland. We received an email earlier saying that NHS Grampian is going into stage 3 of the intervention framework. In my constituency, the financial situation of NHS Borders is critical, and the cabinet secretary knows that. In just two years, the deficit has doubled to £33.6 million. The board has been at level 3 since 2021, but what support has the SNP Government offered? In my opinion, it has put the board under further strain by asking it not only to balance the books but to make cuts at the same time. Ironically, one of the cuts that has been outlined is a 10 per cent reduction to a workforce that is already struggling to cope with demand.

Wait until you hear these figures. In the past four years, NHS Borders has lost 10,000 working days every year to staff absences related to mental health. I have brought that figure to the chamber before—it is unbelievable. The staff who are carrying the burden

“are running out of goodwill.”

That is a direct quote from the chief executive, Peter Moore. Even when NHS Borders manages to achieve financial balance, it will still have to pay back outstanding brokerage, which may have reached a staggering £100 million by March 2027.

I realise that we are short of time. There is so much more that we need to do, and I would like the cabinet secretary to come to the Borders to meet the hard-working staff.

17:36

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I thank Tim Eagle for raising this important topic in the chamber. In addition to the list of facilities that need replacement that is included in the motion, I once again raise the need for a new-build Gilbert Bain hospital to serve residents in Shetland. The hospital also serves a wide maritime area because of Shetland’s geographic position. It is often the closest available medical facility for fishing vessels, offshore energy sites and passengers from cruise ships in the North Sea.

Last year, 134 ships carrying more than 138,000 passengers visited Shetland, and some had to visit the Gilbert Bain hospital. The coastguard rescue helicopter regularly flies to Lerwick to land patients who have been airlifted from vessels or oil rigs for treatment at the hospital. It is long past time that the 1950s-designed hospital was replaced with a modern, fit-for-purpose facility. I once again put on the record my call for progress on a new hospital for Shetland.

There is much that could be said on the subject that we are debating this evening but, as time is not on my side, I will limit my remarks to some of the issues that Shetland patients face. The first is travel. NHS Shetland has arrangements with mainland health boards, such as NHS Grampian, to provide the healthcare that is not available in Shetland. However, the impact that communication, or miscommunication, between different hospital departments can have on island patients was raised with me recently.

One of my constituents was required to stay in an Aberdeen hospital for a night longer than necessary because they were waiting for a prescription from the hospital pharmacy. Had there been a more pragmatic approach, they could have been discharged and the further night in a hospital bed in Aberdeen would have been avoided. The script could have been handed to the patient and they could have taken it to a pharmacy in Aberdeen and been able to fly home that evening.

The rules on the reimbursement of travel costs also impact on access to healthcare. For Shetland residents on the island of Bressay, the only way to reach the hospital or health centre in Lerwick is by ferry across a mile of water. The current travel rules allow reimbursement only when patients travel more than 5 miles by sea, which raises the question of why 5 miles was set as an arbitrary limit. Either there is a stretch of water that needs to be crossed or there is not.

That, too, needs a pragmatic approach. I welcome the fact that NHS Shetland is running a six-month pilot scheme in which Bressay residents may claim for a trip to the Lerwick health centre. That follows both the community council and I

raising the financial impact on patients, which can be significant when a series of frequent and recurring appointments is necessary.

Underlying all those issues are the challenges of depopulation that rural and island Scotland faces, which are highlighted in the motion. The lack of infrastructure, housing and digital connectivity impacts on recruitment and retention of NHS staff and, in turn, the reduced healthcare provision exacerbates depopulation.

Technology allows us to embrace new forms of healthcare, which can be transformative for healthcare provision, particularly in rural and island areas with small populations, but the lack of reliable digital connectivity makes the credibility of that prospect distant until real action is taken to improve rural and island high-speed broadband. Age Scotland found that, in Scotland, 25 per cent of people aged over 60 do not use the internet, which is another barrier to healthcare through technological means when we consider that 27 per cent of the population in rural areas are aged 65 plus. Addressing healthcare needs in rural and island healthcare includes investment in infrastructure.

I just about have time to let members know that, when I visited the Out Skerries community last summer, the poor information technology connection at the nurse's house was the subject of debate. I had been told that, when the general practitioner had been in the isle a few days previously, they were unable to get online.

I am out of time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise the chamber that there remains significant interest in the debate. I am, therefore, minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 8.14.3, to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes. I invite Tim Eagle to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[Tim Eagle]

Motion agreed to.

17:40

Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): I thank Tim Eagle for this important debate. Like my colleagues, I also thank our exceptional healthcare workers. My daughter was recently taken into Aberdeen royal infirmary, so I know that staff are working extremely hard and doing a fantastic job under pressure.

I take this opportunity to raise some of the concerns about our declining health services that I hear of every single day as the constituency MSP for Aberdeenshire West. Our local services are at

risk of collapse and our GPs are crying out for help. The cabinet secretary will be aware that I have long campaigned to keep our community hospitals open, particularly Inch war memorial hospital, which was closed at the start of Covid and remains so, despite broken promises made by two First Ministers.

Elsewhere, closures such as that of the Scolty ward dementia unit at Glen O'Dee in Banchory see services removed. The minor injuries unit in Huntly has had its overnight provision slashed, which causes a serious worry that GMED services will also soon face cuts. Those local units would relieve pressure on ambulances and the ARI, but the health board simply does not have the funds to keep them open. As has been mentioned, NHS Grampian was escalated to stage 3 of the finance framework today, which will no doubt lead to further cuts and closures.

Like others, we have also seen a reduction in services being provided locally. The SNP Government's one-size-fits-all approach simply does not recognise the reality of our rural communities, and that has very real consequences in people's lives. Centralisation has resulted in elderly constituents being forced to make lengthy journeys, often in areas without public transport, for something as routine as a flu jab. Some residents in Alford were even told that they should organise taxis with other patients, which is a ridiculous suggestion, considering that they would not know other patients' appointment times due to the general data protection regulation.

As others have touched on, ambulance provision affects my whole constituency. In October, a baby was delivered under traumatic circumstances, and the family had to do CPR for half an hour on a newborn baby before an ambulance arrived.

Although I am grateful that the health secretary has agreed to meet me, I have little confidence that the SNP will implement any meaningful change after mismanaging our NHS for 18 years. Where communities find solutions—such as covering the capital cost of a new 4x4 first responder vehicle in Braemar—the Scottish Ambulance Service rejects them, saying that it will not cover the maintenance costs. I look forward to the cabinet secretary's response to that when we meet; it is a decade after the Braemar ambulance was stripped from the community.

For rural communities, the decline of healthcare provision is now literally a matter of life and death.

17:43

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I thank the

member for securing this debate. For obvious reasons, I will focus on my constituency, which is part of the rural Borders. Of course there are pressures in rural areas on the broad range of health services, which by the nature of distance, topography and demographics—with more elderly people—differ from urban areas. I know that not only because I am constituency MSP, but because in earlier times I lived in Minnigaff, in rural Galloway, which is 60 miles from either Ayr or Dumfries hospital.

However, although there are pressures, as there are across the UK, there are advantages to being rural. Everyone across the professional and voluntary sector seems to know someone who knows someone else, whether GPs or pharmacists, or housing agency, social work or NHS Borders staff. Collaboration, which is so difficult in urban areas, is personal. Of course, volunteers interact not only professionally but socially, and in smaller communities, there is even closer-knit collaboration.

Regarding Rachael Hamilton's comment, I have had similar situations and have intervened successfully for a constituent when an alternative offered to them simply was not practical. What was said was wrong—not what Rachael Hamilton said, but the message that her constituent received.

In recent years, NHS Borders has successfully taken on 33 international recruits. The figures are slightly historical, but they show that a further 27 had not yet started and they demonstrate success. How did the health board do it? It set in place contacts with local services, schools, key worker housing and so on for the recruits and their families. Things were made comfortable for people who wanted to come to work professionally in the Borders.

I turn to hospital at home, which does what it says on the tin. It was launched as a pilot in the Borders in 2023. On a recent visit to Borders general hospital with the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, we learned of the success of hospital at home for the wellbeing and recovery of patients, particularly the elderly. NHS Borders benefits from the largest slice of the Scottish Government's funding to continue to develop that service, having been allocated £600,000 from a £3.6 million pot. Evidence shows that those who benefit from the service are more likely to avoid hospital or care home stays for up to six months after an acute illness. It frees up hospital beds, and more than 90 per cent of people who took up the offer had nothing but praise for it. It is so much better if people can be treated and recover at home, in the comfort of familiar surroundings.

The voluntary sector is integral to the delivery of healthcare and wellbeing across the Borders. The

Royal Voluntary Service has a Scottish Borders hub. Volunteer drivers can take clients to regular NHS appointments in the community, and patient transport for cancer care appointments, which may be outwith the local area—even as far as Edinburgh royal infirmary—is covered. Similarly, Borders Wheels, which I visited in Galashiels, is available to take people to health appointments and respite care. Such services are difficult to connect in urban areas.

We Are With You—formerly known as Addaction—is a drug and alcohol support service in the Borders that I have visited a few times. It is free and provides non-judgmental support and advice from what it now calls the with you team. Everything, whether in person or online, is confidential. The only time that that might change is if the service has serious concerns about the safety of a client or someone else. We Are With You provides support groups, as well as support for family and friends. There is a free syringe service, which is very discreet.

Finally, Dementia Friendly Tweeddale is very supportive, not just of people who have been diagnosed with dementia but of their families. I commend all the NHS services and volunteers across my constituency for what they do.

17:47

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): We have heard a number of accounts today of how remote and rural communities suffer from a lack of attention from the Scottish Government when it comes to health and other services. Ayrshire, in my region, is no different. Doctors at Girvan community hospital recently came to the conclusion that they were unable to continue the valuable overnight service for patients in the area. They cited “sustainability and workforce issues” as the reason for the withdrawal; in other words, a lack of money, a lack of resources, a lack of trained GPs coming through the system and a lack of focus by the Scottish Government on the needs of rural Scotland. It is the first time that local medics will not staff the facility. Until now, the 20-bed unit has been nimble and quick in its response to patient needs. The fear now, with doctors coming from further afield to deal with urgent cases, is that a quick and reliable response will be placed in jeopardy.

Those in charge have maintained that patient care will remain a priority. Some rejigging of the region-wide urgent care service means that there will at least be some help at hand. However, that downgrade is even more concerning to locals, given the availability of ambulances in the rural Carrick area, which has already been highlighted. To add to their concern, there are constant road closures and diversions on the main route—the

A77—to hospitals. I have been assured that ambulances are given priority access through road closures, but anyone travelling by themselves to hospital can be faced with substantial diversions that make their journey take hours.

However, that is not the only example of how rural healthcare in Ayrshire is suffering under the SNP. In addition to the lack of ambulances in the rural Carrick area, there have been service changes for patients of clinics in Ayr and Kilmarnock. Flagship schemes to attract more GPs to work in areas such as rural Ayrshire have fallen flat, and people find registering with a dentist challenging. No consideration is given to patient transport when local clinics are moved to centralised locations.

Health services in rural Scotland face so many unique challenges because of the geographical hand that they have been dealt. However, often, the nationwide failings of the health service are felt even more acutely in smaller countryside locations. No one pretends that there will be an easy fix. However, the SNP has been in power in Scotland for coming up for 18 years. With every year that goes by, its attempts to blame everyone else become less and less credible. As members' contributions to the debate have shown, people often feel such failings more painfully the further away from the big cities that they live.

17:50

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I thank Tim Eagle for securing the debate. It has been a popular subject, which has enabled members to talk about issues in their own rural areas. I managed to write some additional notes as previous speakers were making their contributions.

At the end of last year, just before recess, the Parliament's Health, Social Care and Sport Committee published its report on remote and rural healthcare in Scotland. The committee made recommendations on education and training; staff recruitment and retention; the current design and delivery of services; primary care; multidisciplinary and team working; and the importance of the third sector. It was good to hear Christine Grahame mention those aspects, too.

A prevalent issue was the lack of housing in remote and rural areas, not only for full-time workers but for people who have been assigned placements as part of their training in more remote and rural areas. I have been raising these challenges in the Parliament for the past eight years: cancer pathways; maternity services in Wigtownshire; the recruitment and retention of health and social care staff; addressing delayed discharges; and ensuring that our local social care

system is able to cope with increasing high demand. I have also been working with former GPs Dr Gordon Baird and Dr Angela Armstrong to raise rural Wigtownshire healthcare issues here in the Parliament.

I will touch briefly on some of those challenges. With an older population, there are more hip and knee replacements and more cataract surgery. I have a background as an operating room nurse and was previously a clinical educator for NHS Dumfries and Galloway, so I know that such surgeries are complex as far as anaesthesia and the required technique and skills are concerned. Only three or four hip or knee surgeries can be done in a day. I welcome the fact that we now have national treatment centres that can focus on addressing those issues.

Some work is being taken forward. NHS Dumfries and Galloway has successfully recruited nurses from Uganda. As part of embedding them into the work environment, it provided them with support on the Scots language and phrases, so that they would ken when somebody said, for example, that they had a sair heid or that their lugs hurt. That is really positive.

NHS Dumfries and Galloway has experienced a high number of deregistrations of dental practices. Minister Jenni Minto is well aware of that: she has been paying attention and has taken loads of questions in the chamber about it. We know that many people are now paying for private treatment and others have no dentist at all. Just last week, I met a constituent who is a retired dentist whose practice had focused on paediatrics and the prevention of dental caries. He welcomed the fact that the baby box now contains a toothbrush, which helps to prepare babies for the feeling of having a toothbrush in their mouth. That is another good news story. I know that the Minister for Public Health and Sport is working with NHS Dumfries and Galloway on dentistry. However, my dentist constituent said that he suggested 20 years ago that a mobile dental hub model should have been created for rural dental services in the area.

I will not pursue maternity issues, because Finlay Carson has covered those. I invited Mr Carson and Colin Smyth to join me at a pre-arranged meeting with the minister, because I wanted us to have a cross-party and apolitical approach. The minister met us last November. Engagement is happening.

The final area that I want to mention is delayed discharges. I know that the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, Neil Gray, is all over the issue with NHS Dumfries and Galloway. There are challenges with rural care packages and delayed discharges, but more than 90 per cent of all hospital discharges now happen without delay.

17:55

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I start, as others have, by congratulating my colleague Tim Eagle on bringing this hugely important matter to the chamber.

We are all aware of the pressures that the Scottish health service is under and the incredible work that our healthcare professionals do in such a difficult environment. Those pressures are magnified when trying to deliver healthcare in rural areas. There is much that we could discuss in the debate, and much already has been discussed, but I want to focus on the part that technology could and should play in the health service, especially as a major solution for rural healthcare delivery.

We need a health service that effectively delivers healthcare across our country, and that delivers an environment that supports our healthcare professionals. We need to recognise that delivering effective and efficient care will require different approaches and adaptations for rural and urban settings. The development and adoption of technology into the health service in the United Kingdom has lagged way behind the rest of the world, and Scotland lags behind the rest of the UK. The inability to share data across health boards and between primary and secondary healthcare, pharmacy and the third sector seriously hampers our ability to deliver effective and efficient healthcare.

However, the problem that we are trying to solve is one of time. How do we give our healthcare professionals more time to deliver healthcare, as opposed to swamping them with administration and red tape? First, we need a Scotland-wide technology platform with a basic architecture that allows for interoperability between health boards and facets of healthcare, with different and appropriate levels of access. Once that is in place, we will have the ability to take out duplication that occurs in back office administration across health boards. We will also have the ability to share good practice and access patient records directly, and once that is in place, we can start to look at how we take services to the people, rather than insist that people come to the services in all cases, as was raised by Tim Eagle.

We have the ability to deliver scans, pharmacy and vaccinations, as was highlighted by Fergus Ewing, and even the ability to deliver doctors' surgeries, from mobile units. With a basic communication and collaboration platform, those mobile units could be directed to any hotspots, and a workforce plan for rural communities could be easily established. Tim Eagle highlighted the specific problems of small teams and staff shortages. If we layer AI on top of that, diagnosis from scans can be almost immediate. While we

are on the subject, imagine being able to remotely access consultants from a mobile doctors' surgery. Multilayered access to healthcare currently takes months of appointment making, with the patient having to travel from pillar to post. That is especially relevant for people who have to take a ferry or drive hundreds of miles for a 15-minute appointment.

Those options are not fantasy or science fiction—they have been available for years. That is how we deliver access to healthcare for all. It is how we create a rural healthcare system that encourages people to stay in a rural setting, and it is how we reduce the intolerable strain on our health service.

As the old saying goes, the definition of madness is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. Continuing to increase investment in the health service without a long-term plan, as Audit Scotland said in its report on the SNP health service, is unsustainable. Change the delivery mechanism. Give more time to our healthcare professionals to do what they do best. Otherwise, all the Scottish Government is doing is continuing to manage the decline of healthcare in this country, which is felt ever more acutely in our rural communities.

17:59

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): As a South Scotland MSP, I am no stranger to the harsh realities that people who access health services in rural areas face, and like other members, I receive lots of correspondence on the issue. Living in remote and rural communities should not limit people's access to basic and specialist care, but we know that it does.

I was going to cover maternity services, but other members have spoken about that very well. We need to understand patients' wishes about local models of care, in particular for maternity services, because we all agree that women having to deliver babies in lay-bys is not safe. The pretence that we are doing something to make something else safer does not hold true in those circumstances.

I will move on to the other points that I want to raise. The intentions of the national centre for remote and rural health and care are very welcome, but I do not think that the initiative is widely understood by boards, clinicians and patients. If we want to maximise what the centre could do, we need to do some work on that.

I turn to the healthcare workforce. As another member said, the Health, Sport and Social Care Committee's inquiry into remote and rural healthcare highlighted the critical importance of the local availability of suitably trained staff and of

development opportunities to support the recruitment and retention of the healthcare workforce. That applies across the board but is particularly important for some of our professional workforce, such as nurses, allied health professionals, consultants and GPs. The Government must work with trade unions, professional bodies, training providers and NHS boards to discuss opportunities to improve the flexibility and delivery of training.

Neil Gray: That is what we are trying to achieve with the nursing and midwifery task force, which I hope that the member recognises. Its recommendations and findings are due to be published and we will seek to deliver on them as quickly as possible.

Carol Mochan: I recognise that we have discussed that before in the chamber. I suppose that some of my frustration is about the urgency. We have a lot of the evidence, and we need to move on to delivery. Some of the initiatives that Brian Whittle mentioned about the delivery of training would be very helpful.

I want to mention apprenticeships and the opportunity to introduce tailored and flexible approaches to education and training. As I have said before in debates about the NHS, I strongly urge the Government to consider those opportunities and to move them forward, because I know that they have been discussed. Professional bodies want to engage with apprenticeships as they see the benefit for both patients and staff. Does the cabinet secretary have an update on that, with particular regard to allied health professionals? I met the British Dietetic Association, a professional organisation that is keen to support work on that, which understands the importance of having people in remote areas. Those sorts of initiatives would also create good quality jobs for people. The association absolutely sees the benefits of such initiatives, but the work on education needs to come together in order to make them happen.

In the interests of time, I will leave it there. I know that the cabinet secretary and his team understand the issues; it is about how we get some of the work over the line. I thank members for their contributions to the debate.

18:03

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): I welcome the debate and thank Tim Eagle for securing it. The number of participants should send the cabinet secretary a clear message. I join my colleagues who have shared their testimony and concerns about the SNP's on-going failure to address the crisis that rural healthcare faces.

I represent the south of Scotland and, from Dunbar to Dumfries, residents have been badly let down. Vital healthcare facilities have been withdrawn in East Lothian, and in the Scottish Borders, Borders general hospital repeatedly asks only those with life-threatening emergencies to attend. In Dumfries, there is a similar picture. In December, the emergency department of Dumfries and Galloway royal infirmary was operating beyond capacity.

Health boards are warning that they are operating under an extremely high degree of pressure, which is causing patients concern and their families worry and stress. Sadly, such announcements about a state of emergency have become the new normal under the SNP Government. In large part, they stem from the problem of delayed discharge, which is a result of the SNP's failure to tackle the crisis in social care and care-at-home services. Vital services in my area, the south of Scotland, have been withdrawn as the Government pushes a centralised model of care, which clearly does not work in rural areas.

East Lothian residents are sad and angry at the loss of two well-used local facilities that have closed in the space of a year and which ministers gave repeated assurances would not be closed without consultation.

The Edington hospital provided East Lothian's sole minor injuries clinic and offered local palliative care facilities. People who need step-down or palliative care are now sent to Haddington or they remain, undischarged, on wards in Edinburgh. That clearly does not aid their recovery.

Belhaven hospital, which offered residential care, was closed later last year, to the disgust of Dunbar residents. The way in which it was closed was nothing short of shocking.

With little or no notice, vulnerable people were taken from their beds and moved 12 miles away to a different hospital. The move was unexpected, unwanted and distressing for the residents. To add insult to injury, some patients were relocated late into the night, with some frail and elderly residents still being moved at 1 am. Our rural communities have been truly betrayed, and that is a concrete example of that.

I carried out surveys about the Edington and Belhaven hospitals. More than 500 people responded, and their views were stark. Some local residents could no longer visit dying family members because of travel and logistical issues or, simply, the financial pressures of getting to and from Edinburgh. Some elderly patients, in their dying days, were taken away from places where they said that nurses felt more like family members.

The Health, Social Care and Sport Committee recently issued a report into remote and rural healthcare. It highlighted significant problems that people in rural areas face when they seek to access NHS services.

Too often, the Scottish Government forgets about rural residents, who face specific challenges, including the need, as I said, to travel long distances to access services. Imagine how long it might take someone who has an injury or wound to get from Oldhamstocks to Edinburgh royal infirmary.

The healthcare problems that Scotland's rural communities face are not new, but it is clear that they are getting worse. How can the Government claim to be supporting rural communities when nearly half of all NHS vacancies in Scotland are in rural boards?

Whether it relates to the model of care, social care provision or the NHS workforce, the SNP Government is failing to deliver what our communities really need.

18:07

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): I congratulate my colleague Tim Eagle on securing this important debate.

Rural GP practices are struggling, and too many are on the verge of collapse. Friockheim health centre in Angus, which was Tayside's highest-ranked practice, was forced to close in 2022. In NHS Grampian, six practices have handed their contracts back to the health board. In large part, that is because of the SNP's complete lack of workforce planning.

As we have heard today, patient safety is at stake, as is the sustainability of primary care in rural communities. Alarm bells should be ringing in Bute house, but we keep hearing the same recycled platitudes from successive SNP health secretaries, and there is nothing to show for it.

There are enduring problems in several areas. First, the 2018 GP contract still has not been fully implemented, and it has been a disaster for rural GP practices.

Secondly, having a one-size-fits-all approach has become a serious human rights issue in rural communities.

Thirdly, the NHS Scotland resource allocation committee formula is supposed to ensure that resources for the NHS are distributed fairly across the country, but figures show that NHS Grampian has been short-changed by a quarter of a billion pounds since the SNP got into power. Astonishingly, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde received £743 million more than it was due.

The SNP must properly invest in healthcare in rural and remote areas, which includes rural proofing in budgeting. I sit on the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee and I say to the cabinet secretary that rural proofing in budgeting is not happening. Rural communities are losing out in a postcode lottery for healthcare, and that must not be allowed to continue.

18:10

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): Those of us who represent rural communities are all too aware of the challenges that residents in those communities face in accessing healthcare. Those challenges can be found in all corners of north-east Scotland.

Tim Eagle's motion highlights how many of Scotland's rural communities are facing a reduction in services. That is exactly what we are seeing in Aberdeenshire, with a significant reduction in minor injuries services in Fraserburgh, Peterhead, Huntly and Turriff. That is doing nothing to help local residents and is only increasing the pressure on staff and resources in larger hospitals, such as Aberdeen royal infirmary, which recently declared a major incident and is actually turning people away. What an absolute shambles has been created by this devolved SNP Government.

To make things worse, rural patients are often confused about when local hospitals are open and what services they offer. Turriff hospital, for example, used to have a minor injuries unit, but it was scaled back during Covid and has never been fully restored. From looking at the NHS Grampian website, I am no clearer about what services it now offers.

I also want to raise the issue of ambulance waiting times. I am sure that, as I certainly have, members who represent Scotland's rural regions will have heard awful stories from constituents who have faced agonising waits for an ambulance. Last year, patients who were waiting for an ambulance in Turriff faced a wait that was nearly three times longer than the waits that were experienced by other north-east patients. That waiting time has come down thanks to a new ambulance, which was delivered due to the hard work and campaigning of former MP David Duguid, who ran an excellent campaign to have an ambulance based in Turriff. That means so much to the local residents, and I commend him for all the work that he did on that.

Geography will, of course, always be a challenge when communities are spread far over wide areas, but this devolved SNP Government needs to do more to reduce rural inequalities and halt the problem of rural depopulation.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I thank all colleagues for their co-operation in allowing me to call everybody who wanted to speak, and to allow them at least four minutes to speak. With that, I call Neil Gray to conclude the debate. You have around seven minutes, cabinet secretary.

18:12

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): I thank Tim Eagle for raising the subject, and I thank all the members across the chamber for their contributions to this important debate.

Tim Eagle opened his speech by referencing the fact that rural depopulation was the subject of the first members' business debate that he brought to the chamber. It was also the subject of the first interaction that I had with a political chamber when, as a teenager in Orkney, I attended a meeting of Orkney Islands Council and discussed island depopulation. For him, it was his first members' business parliamentary debate, and for me, it was my first interaction with a political chamber. We both share a sense of responsibility for ensuring that we have sustainable rural and island communities. I care deeply and passionately about the issue, as do the members of my ministerial team, both of whom represent rural and island communities.

There are opportunities for us to work together across a number of areas to better meet the unique place-specific needs of our rural and island communities. In my closing remarks, I will set out our plans to deliver good-quality services that will be sustainable in the long term, in order to improve outcomes across those communities. I will also do my best to address as many as I can of the points that have been raised around the chamber.

The motion calls for proper investment to be made. As members will be aware, the Government's 2025-26 draft budget includes a £21.7 billion investment in reformed health and social care, which is an uplift that exceeds consequentials and takes funding to an all-time high. In recognition of the need for capital investment to support rural health services, the budget provides £139 million of additional investment for health infrastructure, including restarting the work on the replacement for Belford hospital, which Jamie Halcro Johnston referenced.

Finlay Carson: I have no doubt that the cabinet secretary understands the issues of rural Scotland, but will he commit to reviewing the national resource allocation committee formula as a matter of urgency, as he committed to doing in the chamber last year? There is no doubt that that formula is leading to the closure of maternity

services and cottage hospitals across the likes of Dumfries and Galloway.

Neil Gray: The NRAC formula accounts for the additional cost of delivering services in rural areas. All boards are within less than 1 per cent of NRAC parity—I do not recognise the figures that Tess White gave in that regard, so I will need to go back and study her assessment more closely. Of course, the NRAC formula continues to be under review, and we make sure that we do our best to ensure that all boards receive a fair settlement.

We are continuing to shift the balance of care to make it more preventative and community-based by increasing general practice capacity—which was a focus of Mr Eagle's speech—and improving access by the end of 2026.

We have increased the funding for general medical services by £73 million this year to more than £1.3 billion. The role of the primary care team is vital in rural and island areas, where its wide-ranging expertise takes on added significance, as Christine Grahame referenced in her remarks this evening, and which the Deputy Presiding Officer referenced in response to the committee debate at the end of last year.

In November, I announced an additional £13.6 million of recurring funding to support general practices in recruiting and retaining key staff. We have also published a plan that sets out a suite of 20 actions that the Scottish Government will take to improve GP recruitment and retention, including in rural and island areas, which is an issue that several colleagues have raised. Those actions include the rural fellowship scheme, which offers GPs the opportunity to develop the required skills through direct experience of working in rural general practice. We will also be looking at the golden hello scheme to ensure that we are providing the right incentives for GPs to take up harder-to-fill posts in rural settings. That, too, is something that Mr Eagle asked me to consider: we are already doing it.

We have commissioned NHS Education for Scotland to work with the profession to redesign the current GP retention scheme in order to make it more flexible, so that it supports GPs at times in their career when that flexibility is needed.

To further support GPs, we have significantly expanded the primary care multidisciplinary team workforce, with more than 4,900 staff working in such services, funded through the primary care phased investment programme. I understand the call that is coming from some, although not all, general practices for people in those roles to be directly employed by practices. That is something that we continue to consider. In recognition that barriers to implementation can be exacerbated in rural and island settings, we are partnering with a

number of areas, including in the Borders and Shetland, through the primary care phased investment programme to demonstrate what a fully functional and effective multidisciplinary team model looks like in practice.

Looking to the future, I note that the primary care route map will set out how the system operates across rural areas and fits with wider reforms. We have invested in the national centre for remote and rural healthcare, which is hosted by NHS Education for Scotland, in order to bring in a co-ordinated approach, which includes working to improve recruitment and retention and to grow skills and access to training, and to develop new models of service delivery, all of which are focused on improved outcomes for rural and island communities.

Furthermore, in partnership with NES's centre for workforce supply, we will deliver a sustained model of direct support that will provide rural and island employers across health and social care with the whole-system approach that is necessary in order to improve recruitment and retention.

As I set out in the debate in December, we have—

Brian Whittle: Will the cabinet secretary give way on that point?

Neil Gray: I will give way very briefly.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you additional time.

Brian Whittle: I really appreciate the cabinet secretary taking this time. Currently, we are told that we are 1,000 GPs short. By adopting the technology that I was talking about, might you not find that we are not 1,000 GPs short and that we could be more effective in how we deliver healthcare?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Again, I ask members to speak through the chair. I will give you that time back, cabinet secretary.

Neil Gray: Embracing innovation and technology is a central theme of the reform and improvement that I am seeking to take forward. On the point that Mr Whittle has put to me, it is exactly about ensuring that we are freeing clinical capacity and time for our staff to deliver the aspects that can be delivered only by humans—the caring, loving and compassionate approach that we need. Some of those innovations are already in development. NHS Near Me and the work around hospital at home are areas in which technology has been used to provide exactly that approach. I would be happy to engage more with Mr Whittle on how we could go further.

As part of that work, we are seeking to define the core services that should be delivered in our

communities and to balance them with the need for specialised care, which might be provided outside the local area when it is clinically appropriate in order to ensure the best outcomes for patients. That conundrum of ensuring both that we deliver services as close to people's homes as possible and that those services meet a patient-safety test has been at the heart of everybody's speeches: I know that colleagues are all well aware of it.

I want to touch briefly on some speeches. Colleagues referenced maternity services. I am more than happy to get back to members on the matter, as will Jenni Minto, who is the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health.

There is on-going work in Dumfries and Galloway, Caithness and other areas on making sure that we meet the needs of patients.

On Mr Ross's point about the Burghead and Hopeman practice, Ms Minto continues to engage with the health and social care partnership. Another meeting on that very point is due later this month.

I am sorry that I cannot respond to everybody's contributions today: they have been extensive, and based on the real-life experiences of constituents and members' own experiences of the health and social care services in our communities.

I want to give the assurance that the Government continues to take the needs of rural and island communities seriously. I have set out the areas that we are seeking to invest in, which I hope colleagues can get behind. Colleagues will know that all the ministerial team's doors are open to members to discuss any ideas or issues that are prevalent in their communities, and we will continue to work to make sure that we improve public services in rural and island communities. I am committed to driving the reform that we need in order to secure sustainable services now and in the future, across our communities—whether they are rural, island or urban—and to improve the outcomes for our population nationwide.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate. I thank members for their co-operation in allowing so many members to participate in the debate.

Meeting closed at 18:21.

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