



OFFICIAL REPORT  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Meeting of the Parliament

Thursday 26 October 2023

Session 6



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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**Thursday 26 October 2023**

**CONTENTS**

	<b>Col.</b>
<b>GENERAL QUESTION TIME</b> .....	1
Insch War Memorial Hospital (Reopening).....	1
Reaching 100 Per Cent Programme (Consultation).....	2
Fishermen’s Safety at Sea (Government Support).....	3
Stroke Improvement Plan (Update).....	5
NHS Lanarkshire Neonatologists (Discussions).....	6
Alzheimer’s and Dementia Deaths.....	7
<b>FIRST MINISTER’S QUESTION TIME</b> .....	10
Covid-19 Inquiry (Provision of Communications).....	10
Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (Budget).....	13
Cabinet (Meetings).....	16
HIV (Elimination of New Transmissions).....	17
Childcare Costs (Parents’ Jobs).....	18
National Health Service (Waiting Times).....	20
Fund to Leave (Domestic Abuse).....	22
Victim Safety (Remand Decisions).....	23
Newman Bonar Ltd (Closure).....	24
FBU Scotland (“Firestorm” Report).....	25
Covid and Flu Vaccination.....	25
Anne’s Law (Implementation).....	26
Looked-after Children (Transition to Adulthood).....	26
<b>ASYLUM SEEKERS (FREE BUS TRAVEL)</b> .....	28
<i>Motion debated—[Paul Sweeney].</i>	
Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab).....	28
Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP).....	31
Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con).....	32
Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP).....	34
Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab).....	36
Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green).....	38
Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab).....	40
Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP).....	41
The Minister for Transport (Fiona Hyslop).....	42
<b>PORTFOLIO QUESTION TIME</b> .....	47
<b>EDUCATION AND SKILLS</b> .....	47
Pay Awards in Schools (Discussions with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities).....	47
Post-school Learning.....	48
Video Games Technology (Education and Skills Development).....	50
Violence in Schools (Nutrition and Behaviour).....	52
Vaping in Schools (Ministerial Discussions).....	54
Secondary School Teachers (Action on Numbers).....	56
City of Glasgow College (Industrial Dispute).....	58
<b>EMBEDDING PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN THE WORK OF THE PARLIAMENT</b> .....	61
<i>Motion moved—[Jackson Carlaw].</i>	
Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con).....	61
The Minister for Parliamentary Business (George Adam).....	66
Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con).....	70
Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab).....	74
John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP).....	77
Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con).....	81
Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP).....	85
Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab).....	87
Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP).....	89
Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP).....	90
Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab).....	93

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con).....	96
George Adam .....	98
David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP) .....	101
<b>ECONOMIC CRIME AND CORPORATE TRANSPARENCY BILL</b> .....	106
<i>Motion moved—[Shona Robison].</i>	
<b>DECISION TIME</b> .....	107

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# Scottish Parliament

Thursday 26 October 2023

[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.

### Insch War Memorial Hospital (Reopening)

**1. Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the work that it is doing to support the reopening of Insch war memorial hospital. (S6O-02640)

**The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care (Michael Matheson):** Any decision on the future use of Insch war memorial hospital will be decided between NHS Grampian and local stakeholders. Once a decision is made, the Scottish Government can consider what support can be offered. I met the community on 3 May this year and encouraged the group to remain engaged with the health and social care partnership as it develops its plans for local services.

**Alexander Burnett:** Insch war memorial hospital closed at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020. Despite the efforts of the local community and the manifesto promise of the former First Minister, it has not yet reopened. Given the Scottish Government's commitment to spend an extra £100 million per year to reduce waiting times, is the cabinet secretary prepared to spend a small percentage of that sum in funding the operating costs of a new modular 12-bed unit at Insch? That would not only significantly reduce pressures on other local health services but would allow beds to be freed up at Aberdeen royal infirmary and, in turn, allow overdue operations to take place.

**Michael Matheson:** Any plans that the local health board has on use of Insch war memorial hospital are a matter for local partners, who should decide on the best configuration to meet local health needs. Alexander Burnett will recognise that the £100 million that we are investing in tackling waiting lists—it will be £300 million over the next three years—is revenue funding and not capital funding, so it cannot be used for the purpose that he has highlighted. He will also be aware of the challenge that we face in respect of his colleagues at Westminster having cut our capital grant, which means that there is less

capital available to invest in our national health service estate and in capital projects right across the country. He might want to encourage his colleagues at Westminster to increase capital expenditure to allow us to invest in such facilities in the future.

### Reaching 100 Per Cent Programme (Consultation)

**2. Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it consulted Elon Musk as part of its R100 programme. (S6O-02641)

**The Minister for Small Business, Innovation, Tourism and Trade (Richard Lochhead):** I have never spoken personally to Elon Musk. Maybe that will happen one day. Who knows?

Starlink, which is a subsidiary of SpaceX, which was founded by Elon Musk, was one of the many companies that we engaged with when preparing to launch our reaching 100 per cent Scottish broadband voucher scheme. However, at that time, it chose not to register. We have, however, continued dialogue with Starlink and other providers, and all parts of Scotland are now capable of accessing a low earth orbit satellite broadband connection commercially.

**Willie Rennie:** That confirms that the Scottish National Party Government is dependent on the controversial American billionaire and his low earth orbit satellites to deliver its manifesto promise on R100.

The truth is that the R100 programme is still going, when it was supposed to have been completed two years ago. The Government itself admits that thousands of people will not benefit from R100 until 2028. Is the minister not even just a little bit embarrassed that he is now using Elon Musk as his latest excuse for failing to deliver the SNP R100 programme on time?

**Richard Lochhead:** I am not sure whether members noticed, but it was Mr Rennie who raised Elon Musk—not me, as the minister responsible for connectivity in Scotland. I was simply answering his question.

I can say that access to superfast broadband in Scotland has increased by 46.8 percentage points in the past 10 years. That compares with 29.8 percentage points across the rest of the United Kingdom in the same period. We are making really good progress in Scotland, which also benefits Mr Rennie's constituency. Of the 30,680 premises in North East Fife that have benefited, 28,368 are capable of accessing speeds of 24 megabits per second and above. The R100 project is also rolling out to most of Scotland.

We are, in order to understand what it will mean for Scotland, also speaking to the UK Government about the £8 million that it has announced will be invested in satellite connections.

**Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP):** Despite telecommunications legislation being wholly reserved to Westminster, the Scottish Government has made more than £600 million-worth of investments through the R100 contracts. Can the minister provide an update on engagements with the United Kingdom Government to extend Gigabit Networks to Scotland's rural communities, given that telecoms are the UK Government's constitutional responsibility?

**Richard Lochhead:** The Scottish Government continues to work closely with the UK Government to prepare for project gigabit activity in Scotland, which will, of course, offer even faster connections. That has the potential to build on the transformational impact of R100 and continued commercial activity.

Of course, we continue to urge the UK Government to be more flexible in its approach to funding for project gigabit and to ensure that sufficient funding is available to deliver across Scotland, where many of the connection costs can be higher than is the case in other parts of the UK.

In September and October this year, the Scottish Government and Building Digital UK carried out a pre-procurement market-engagement exercise with broadband infrastructure suppliers to gauge the level of market interest in bidding for new gigabit-capable broadband contracts in Scotland.

### **Fishermen's Safety at Sea (Government Support)**

**3. Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government how it supports the safety of Scotland's fishermen when at sea. (S6O-02642)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon):** The Scottish Government takes the safety of all fishers in Scottish waters very seriously. Although maritime safety regulation remains a reserved power of the United Kingdom Government, the Scottish Government continues to support the work of the Scottish fishing safety group, which has worked with partners to support a range of safety improvements through the marine fund Scotland. The group is a joint fishing industry and Scottish Government initiative that supports Scottish fishing on safety matters. It has clear aims and objectives involving efforts to achieve zero deaths annually and to reduce the number of accidents across the industry. The group, which is

co-chaired by the Scottish Government and the Scottish Fishermen's Federation, consists of 14 representatives from across Scotland and the UK bodies that are responsible for maritime safety regulation.

**Beatrice Wishart:** The cabinet secretary will be aware of the video showing the aggressive and downright dangerous behaviour last week of the French-registered Spanish vessel Antonio Maria towards the Shetland fishing boat Defiant, 18 miles east of Unst. The Defiant had shot its gear when the longliner Antonio Maria circled and tried to foul the Defiant's propeller. That is not the first time that there has been such an incident in waters off Shetland. The case of another Spanish vessel—the German-registered Pesorsa Dos—is well documented.

Constituents question where Scotland's fishery protection vessels were in all that and what action, if any, has been taken to follow up on the latest shocking incident. Can the cabinet secretary respond to that question? Can she also indicate what representations the Scottish Government has made to the UK Government and the flag states about fishing vessels that appear to have little concern for safety at sea and fishermen's lives?

**Mairi Gougeon:** I appreciate Beatrice Wishart's questions and the concern that such incidents have caused. Safety in the marine environment is a complex area, with various jurisdictions involved. If I am not able to cover everything in my response today, I am happy to follow up with the member.

I understand that the incident that took place last Monday occurred outside territorial waters and relates to a maritime safety incident. Under devolution, the Scottish Government's powers are restricted to enforcing marine and fishery-related offences: they do not extend to enforcement of maritime safety regulations. Maritime safety is a reserved function, and jurisdiction over those incidents rests with the flag-state authorities of the vessels involved.

Although there was no evidence of a fishery offence taking place, the Scottish Government deployed its marine protection vessel MPV Hirta to investigate the incident further, and it has passed information that was gathered to the UK Maritime and Coastguard Agency.

In terms of next steps, senior operational staff are arranging a follow-up meeting with the MCA and Police Scotland to discuss further opportunities to work collaboratively to support safe working practices in the marine environment.

**The Presiding Officer:** There is much interest among members in this issue, so I ask for concise questions and answers.

**Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):**

For years, fishery protection staff have been underpaid and undervalued. That needs to change to keep that expertise and experience in the service. What is the cabinet secretary doing to retain officers and to strengthen the protection fleet to enable better policing of our waters?

**Mairi Gougeon:** Rhoda Grant will, no doubt, be aware that we take a risk-based approach to incidents that are reported to the marine directorate, because we have limited resources. We have a number of vessels, but we have, of course, a very large marine area to try to cover and get across. That is why we have a risk-based approach in place. However, we make the best of the resources that we have.

I very much value and appreciate the work of the teams that we have working across the marine directorate—in particular, in compliance and working across the vessels, which I have had the opportunity to visit.

If there are particular issues that Rhoda Grant would like to raise with me, I would be more than happy to follow them up.

**Stroke Improvement Plan (Update)****4. Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):**

To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the delivery of its stroke improvement plan. (S6O-02643)

**The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto):** Since the publication of the stroke improvement plan in June, the Scottish Government has appointed a consultant stroke physician as clinical lead for stroke to lead on implementing the plan. We are developing a bundle of rehabilitation measures for inclusion in the Scottish stroke care audit, and we are developing measures of patient experience of rehabilitation. We are also increasing access to thrombectomy procedures for patients who present to spoke hospitals and we are undertaking significant planning to further expand Scotland's thrombectomy service, with a plan outlining expansion of the national thrombectomy service to be published by the end of 2023.

**Roz McCall:** I thank the minister for that response and for the information on thrombectomy.

I want to follow up on thrombectomy. The minister will be aware of the medical procedure of thrombectomy. For others in the chamber who might not be aware of it, it can be used where a large blood clot that is blocking blood flow to the brain can be removed. As a result of thrombectomy, a patient might be up and about within days instead of being in a wheelchair for life. It is truly amazing.

Around 10 per cent of stroke patients would benefit from receiving thrombectomy. However, currently in Scotland, it happens for fewer than 1 per cent, which is the lowest level in the United Kingdom.

I note the minister's words about the Scottish Government's commitment to the stroke improvement plan moving forward, but I want to push her on when the Scottish Government will publish the blueprint for the steps to get us up to a fully functioning, safe and sustainable national 24/7 service, to make it available to everyone who needs it.

**Jenni Minto:** I commend the work that Roz McCall has been doing to promote and explain the different symptoms that a stroke could result in. I appreciate that work very much.

The Scottish Government remains committed to introducing a high-quality and clinically safe thrombectomy service in Scotland. The delivery of a national thrombectomy service has already received over £26 million of investment. Through the national thrombectomy programme board and the thrombectomy advisory group, work is being undertaken to drive expansion of the thrombectomy service. We expect additional spoke hospitals to begin referring appropriate patients for thrombectomies in the coming months, to increase geographical access to thrombectomy procedures.

**NHS Lanarkshire Neonatologists (Discussions)**

**5. Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what recent meetings it has had with neonatologists from NHS Lanarkshire. (S6O-02644)

**The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto):** Scottish Government officials had discussions on the new model of neonatal care with neonatologists from Lanarkshire alongside neonatologists from other Scottish neonatal units at the recent Scottish neonatal consultants group meeting. Senior Scottish Government officials also recently met the chief executive and medical director from NHS Lanarkshire to discuss neonatal intensive care.

**Mark Griffin:** If the Government is relying on clinical advice that is now five years out of date to downgrade University hospital Wishaw's neonatal unit, it is absolutely shocking that the minister has not taken the time to meet the experts who run that unit. Will the minister commit to meeting the award-winning experts from NHS Lanarkshire neonatal unit before progressing with the plans to downgrade that absolutely crucial life-saving unit?

**Jenni Minto:** It is important to recognise that the best start project started in 2018, it has taken evidence from experts on the clinical side, and it is

those experts whose advice we are following. Originally, we had eight neonatal units. The number was reduced to five. The next stage, which was reviewed in 2022, involved going down to three.

I am happy to meet the unit staff at Wishaw general hospital. However, it is important that officials continue to meet with the services there and with parents of patients who are involved with the service. We have very much involved Bliss Scotland in all the work that we have been doing; it represents parents who have experienced what must be an incredibly traumatic time in their lives.

**Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):** I echo Mark Griffin's comments about the vital neonatal service at Wishaw general.

Parents and families who have used the service over the many years that the award-winning neonatal department has been open are deeply distressed, worried and concerned that they will not be able to travel locally in order to get the care that they need for their babies and themselves. Will the minister commit to ensuring that she engages with families who have used the service over those many years in order to hear about their life experiences and why the department is so important to them and their families?

**Jenni Minto:** It is important to remind members that the neonatal unit in Lanarkshire will remain open and will bring the patients—the babies—back as soon as possible. We have made the decisions that we have in order to ensure that the sickest and smallest babies—the most vulnerable babies—get the best treatment ever, and we have based that on clinical evidence. As I said to Mr Griffin, I am happy to meet people in North Lanarkshire.

### Alzheimer's and Dementia Deaths

**6. Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reported statistics showing that the number of people in Scotland dying from Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia has more than tripled in the last 20 years and concerns that the country is unprepared for further expected increases. (S6O-02645)

**The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd):** First, our thoughts and condolences are with everyone who has lost a loved one. Scotland's new dementia strategy was published in May this year, setting out a 10-year vision for dementia policy. It recognises the importance of being able to access a timely diagnosis and post-diagnostic support that is right for those with dementia and for those who are caring for them.

We will soon publish our first two-year delivery plan, which has been developed in collaboration with people with lived experience and with local and national partners. The plan will include measurable deliverables to help us to achieve the ambitions of our dementia communities, as detailed in our strategy.

**Alex Rowley:** I have read the strategy, and I look forward to seeing the delivery plan, because I find it difficult to see how we get there from where we are now. I recently met a group of carers in Dunfermline, who described to me a dehumanisation of care and a service that is in crisis. Community care is failing people up and down Scotland. What is the plan to tackle the problems that we have right now in social care?

**Maree Todd:** We have invested more than £6 million of ring-fenced funding over the past two years in dementia post-diagnostic support, and a significant further allocation for dementia PDS in 2023-24 will be issued this year to integration joint boards. That is in addition to the estimated investment in dementia by health and social care partnerships of £2.2 billion—a 14 per cent increase since 2014.

In addition, as we have set out this week as part of our £1 billion national health service recovery plan, we will reduce and address waiting times year on year for all conditions, including dementia.

As the member will be aware, Derek Feeley did an independent review of adult social care in Scotland and said that the system, although it works well in many ways, is under strain. His recommendation was clear: if we keep doing the same thing, we will keep getting the same outcome. He made a very strong case for transformational change, which we are pursuing in the form of the national care service. I look forward to Alex Rowley and Scottish Labour supporting us—

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you, minister.

**Maree Todd:** —in that endeavour.

**The Presiding Officer:** I call Christine Grahame.

**Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** Thank you, Presiding Officer—I will be brief. I invite the minister to meet, as I have, with the Dementia Friendly Tweeddale group to learn of its work in supporting carers and those with dementia to continue to enjoy life and their activities after diagnosis, and even add more.

**Maree Todd:** I would be absolutely delighted to do so. I recently visited a dementia meeting centre in Kirriemuir, which was a wonderful experience. I learned a lot from the people who were there, and



I would be more than keen to meet the people in Christine Grahame's area.

**The Presiding Officer:** That concludes general question time. Before we move to First Minister's question time, I invite members to join me in welcoming to the gallery His Excellency Mr Miguel Berger, Ambassador of Germany to the United Kingdom. [*Applause.*]

## First Minister's Question Time

12:00

### Covid-19 Inquiry (Provision of Communications)

1. **Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** In the past hour, Jamie Dawson KC, counsel to the United Kingdom Covid-19 inquiry, has explained that the Scottish National Party Government was asked to provide all communications relating to key decisions that were made during the pandemic, including all informal messages, including on WhatsApp. Mr Dawson has said, "No messages were provided."

Grieving families deserve answers and full transparency from the Scottish Government. Why has Humza Yousaf not handed over key messages to the inquiry?

**The First Minister (Humza Yousaf):** First and foremost, my thoughts remain with all the families who have been bereaved or otherwise affected by Covid. The Government will co-operate fully with the UK inquiry and the Scottish public inquiry.

When it comes to what we have released and what we will provide to the inquiry, I make it clear that we will hand over, and have handed over, any potentially relevant information that we hold, be that on WhatsApp, in email or in any correspondence.

If concerns have been raised by the inquiry—as Douglas Ross has rightly said, they have been raised—we will fully investigate them. We will, of course, hand over relevant material, and we have done so. We will continue to provide messages, but that has to go through the appropriate processes. We will continue to hand over those messages. We will continue to co-operate fully with the public inquiries—both the UK inquiry and the Scottish inquiry. The concerns that have been raised will be fully investigated.

**Douglas Ross:** I am not sure what the First Minister is talking about. The issue was raised this morning. Surely he is aware of what is happening. Jamie Dawson said:

"The Scottish Government has provided the inquiry with no WhatsApp or other informal messaging material, either in its own possession or in the possession of the individuals whose individual rule 9 requests are being handled by the Scottish Government."

He also said:

"No clear comprehensive response emerged in the corporate statements from the Scottish Government."

However, in May this year, having been asked a direct question by a journalist, Humza Yousaf said that, if a request for messages, including on

WhatsApp, was made, the Scottish Government should be “absolutely open and transparent”. In June, in the chamber, he said:

“WhatsApp messages, emails, Signal messages, Telegram messages or whatever ... will absolutely be handed over to the Covid inquiries and handed over to them in full.”—[*Official Report*, 29 June 2023; c 15.]

The inquiry has heard this morning that that has not happened. Where are the messages? Where have they gone? Has the Scottish Government deleted any messages?

**The First Minister:** The Scottish Government did not routinely make decisions through WhatsApp. I know that that is very different from what has been intimated the UK Government did, but that is not how we made decisions—[*Interruption.*]

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):** Members, we will hear the First Minister.

**The First Minister:** Decisions were not routinely made over WhatsApp. I have said and will continue to say to every Government minister and official that we must comply fully with the inquiry. Relevant information has been passed on.

I note the concerns that were raised this morning. Therefore, I have, just this morning, asked the Solicitor General to internally investigate whether any other messages have to be handed over.

Messages—whether through WhatsApp, email or correspondence—have been sent. All that information has been provided. I have also provided a statement to the inquiry. However, I note the concerns that have been raised, and I give an absolute assurance to the families who are listening, particularly those who have been bereaved by Covid, that, where we hold any relevant information, that will be passed on.

**Douglas Ross:** But that is not happening—that is what we heard this morning. That should not take the involvement of the Solicitor General; the First Minister must know what is required and must have heard—as I did—what the King’s counsel for the inquiry said.

I will not say that this was deliberate, but the First Minister might have inadvertently misled Parliament there—[*Interruption.*] I think that that is okay to say, because we know that SNP ministers routinely use WhatsApp to discuss Government matters. At the end of last year, it was revealed that four SNP ministers—Neil Gray, Kevin Stewart, Maree Todd and Humza Yousaf—were using WhatsApp to conduct Government business.

Counsel to the Covid inquiry revealed today that witness statements

“suggest that informal communication such as WhatsApp messages were used by key decision makers to discuss matters around the progress of the pandemic in Scotland ... and ... decisions that the Scottish Government might have to take.”

Crucially, one Scottish Government official has voluntarily handed over WhatsApp messages from the pandemic period, which proves that they exist, so there is no excuse for not releasing them. Why is that information being withheld from grieving families, the inquiry and everyone who deserves answers?

**The First Minister:** That is a complete mischaracterisation. I did not “inadvertently” mislead the chamber. I did not say that there have never been discussions over WhatsApp; I said that we did not “routinely” make decisions over WhatsApp, which is very different from what the UK Government did. [Interruption.]

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

**The First Minister:** I would expect Scottish Government ministers and officials to comply with our mobile messaging apps usage policy, which, I believe, I wrote to every member of the Parliament about. I would also expect every minister and Government official to comply with the “Do not destroy” notices that the UK inquiry issued.

Concerns have been raised, which Douglas Ross is absolutely right to reiterate, on behalf of the inquiry. I can only say to the families who are listening that we will take on board those concerns and internally investigate fully, because my understanding—certainly as I stand here today—is that relevant information has been passed over. However, if any concerns are raised, they will be fully investigated. I will ask the Solicitor General to investigate, and I will update the Parliament on any investigations.

**Douglas Ross:** The First Minister spoke about the letter that he sent on 20 July to all MSPs, which I have here. He said:

“I should reiterate here that the Scottish Government is committed to openness and transparency, and we are cooperating fully with both the UK and Scottish Inquiries”.

That is totally the opposite of what we heard from Jamie Dawson this morning. [Interruption.] SNP members are saying no, but counsel to the inquiry has said that the inquiry has not received what it asked for from the Scottish Government.

The Scottish Government has records management policies that require officials to retain records. The SNP’s business manager, George Adam, told the Parliament last year that

“All recorded information that is held by ministers or officials that relates to the business of the Scottish Government is subject to freedom of information law, irrespective of its

format or the platform on which it is held.”—[*Official Report*, 8 December 2022; c 1.]

The Covid inquiry has powers to compel evidence. Refusing to hand over such information would not only be an insult to grieving families and a shocking display of secrecy; it would potentially break the law.

Will the First Minister confirm that he will be transparent and release every bit of information that the Government holds? Does he accept that, if any messages have been deleted, that would be illegal?

**The First Minister:** It is not this Government that has broken the law or will break the law. We will not only comply with the law but comply and co-operate fully with the UK inquiry and the Scottish public inquiry.

We have passed over what we believe to be relevant information. That being said—[*Interruption.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** First Minister.

**The First Minister:** Douglas Ross is shouting, “Nothing”—[*Interruption.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** First Minister, please give me a moment. A question has been put to the First Minister; let us hear him respond with no other comments.

**The First Minister:** Douglas Ross is saying that nothing has been handed over, but that is incorrect. My statement to the Covid inquiry is more than 100 pages long, so to suggest that no information has been passed over is simply incorrect.

We are not just complying with our policy. On the back of this morning’s comments from counsel, I am seeking assurances that the DNDN—“Do not destroy” notice—has been fully complied with, not just by ministers but by every relevant Scottish Government official. We take seriously the concerns that have been raised by counsel. The Government will, undoubtedly, fully co-operate with the UK inquiry and the Scottish public inquiry.

### Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (Budget)

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** In the past week, two major fires have brought misery and heartache to families who have lost everything. In Lochgelly, a fire ripped through a four-storey block of flats and, in East Kilbride, six homes were destroyed. According to the Fire Brigades Union, both fires raged on because of delays due to cuts in services.

Today, one firefighter has told *The Courier* that firefighters were 15 minutes later than they could have been to a second fire in Fife, and that it is

only a matter of time before the cuts put lives at risk. He said:

“We all want to do our best by the communities we serve, but it’s difficult when we have one hand tied behind our back.”

Why cannot the First Minister see that those cuts are putting lives at risk?

**The First Minister (Humza Yousaf):** First and foremost, I pay tribute to each and every one of our firefighters, who do an incredible job in Scotland. I know that from my position as First Minister and, previously, as Cabinet Secretary for Justice.

However, I do not agree with the point that has been made about cuts. Despite the difficult financial circumstances, which are due to United Kingdom Government austerity, we are providing the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service with more than £368 million this year, which is an increase of £14.4 million on 2022-23.

If I look at how many firefighters we have in comparison with other parts of the UK, I see that as of March last year there were 11.3 firefighters per 10,000 of the population in Scotland. That compares to 6.1 in England and 8.4 in Wales.

If I look at the pay, I am pleased to say that I see that firefighters accepted an improved two-year pay offer of 7 per cent for 2022-23 and 5 per cent for 2023-24.

The most crucial statistic for the public, who are interested in their safety, is that over the 10-year period between 2011-12 and 2021-22 the number of recorded fires dropped by 14 per cent.

We continue to increase investment in the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and to have more firefighters per head than other parts of the UK. Crucially, fires are going down because of the investment that we have made.

**Anas Sarwar:** In short, the First Minister is saying that firefighters are wrong, and is burying his head in the sand.

The fire service budget is set by the Government, and it has fallen by 22 per cent in real terms over the past decade. The chief fire officer has been clear about where the service is headed. He has said that 780 firefighter posts—between 20 and 25 per cent of the workforce—could go if the Government does not change course. He went on to say that that would impact on response times.

When fighting fires, every second counts, so why does the First Minister think that he knows better than firefighters on the ground—and the chief fire officer—about how to keep people safe?

**The First Minister:** I am saying to Anas Sarwar that, as a Government, we have increased our investment in the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. That is a fact. This year, we have increased the funding by 14 per cent. We have more fire officers per 10,000 of the population than other parts of the UK have. Crucially, the incidence of fires is going down. That is what the public care most about.

Anas Sarwar is right to say that changes and reforms are being made in relation to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. In relation to those reforms, assistant chief fire officer David Farries said:

“We’re trying to make sure we get a fire service that’s fit for the communities of Scotland in the future.

This gives us an opportunity to rebalance and reshape the service in a way that meets 21st Century needs.”

I think that that is absolutely right. I trust the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to make those changes and to do so in a way that continues to keep people safe. I am not sure why Anas Sarwar does not.

**Anas Sarwar:** When it comes to trusting firefighters, it is me, rather than the First Minister, who is standing up here and speaking for firefighters, who are campaigning outside Parliament. Perhaps he wants to go outside and talk to them. There has been a 22 per cent fall in the budget in real terms. This Government’s financial mismanagement is already affecting every part of a fire service that is suffering from a decade of neglect.

In the past 10 years, hundreds of firefighters have been lost, a dozen appliances are now being removed, and the First Minister is ignoring warnings that his Government is putting lives at risk. In the past few months alone, those changes have affected fire stations in every corner of Scotland—Dundee, Greenock, Dunfermline, Glenrothes, Methil, Perth, Hamilton, Kirkcaldy, Edinburgh and four in Glasgow. If those are not cuts, what is?

When the single fire service was created, the Scottish National Party said that it would not result “in cutting front-line services.”

Was that SNP spin or SNP incompetence?

**The First Minister:** Again, let me, instead of sticking to the spin that Anas Sarwar is continuing to articulate, stick to the facts. The facts are that since 2017-18, there have been substantial year-on-year increases in funding to support the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. On top of that, we have more firefighters per 10,000 of the population than other parts of the UK have. Of course, the number of fires is going down, too.

Anas Sarwar is right that there has been a decision to withdraw some appliances temporarily. My understanding is that the number is 10 of the 635 operational appliances, which is 1.5 per cent. The independent His Majesty’s Fire Service Inspectorate in Scotland has provided absolute assurance that the SFRS temporary changes are based on a robust analysis of activity levels, historical demand and, importantly, the ability to supplement any initial response within—this is the crucial bit—an acceptable timeframe.

We continue to invest in our fire service. I want to thank and pay tribute to the FBU and to our firefighters on the ground. I will continue to promise them that we will, as long as we are in Government, continue to ensure that they get the investment that they need to keep our public safe.

### Cabinet (Meetings)

3. **Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** To ask the First Minister when the Cabinet will next meet. (S6F-02458)

**The First Minister (Humza Yousaf):** Tuesday.

**Alex Cole-Hamilton:** Vast numbers of people are being forced to call emergency dental helplines because they cannot find a national health service dentist. An investigation that I am publishing today shows that that happened almost 16,000 times last year in Fife alone. That is hardly surprising, given that there is just one Fife practice accepting new NHS patients.

Across Scotland, people are desperate—some are even resorting to do-it-yourself dentistry. The First Minister’s recovery plan promised to abolish NHS dentistry charges altogether, but they are not going away. Next week, they will go up; some will even double. What the Government did not tell us is that there are new charges for emergency appointments and for services such as denture repairs. Why are people paying more for less under the Scottish National Party?

**The First Minister:** The word that Alex Cole-Hamilton did not mention in his question was “pandemic”. The pandemic had a significant impact on our dental services—not just here in Scotland, but right across the United Kingdom. Alex Cole-Hamilton was also incorrect to say that we have not made progress in removing dental charges. We have done so for young people under the age of 26, and we look forward to making continued progress.

On growing the NHS dental workforce in Scotland, we have 55 dentists per 100,000 of the population compared with 43 per 100,000 in England. We are investing in our NHS dental services, and the Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care will be more

than happy to write to Alex Cole-Hamilton with details of the progress that we have made.

Crucially, when it comes to the oral health of our young people in particular, which I know is of interest to us all, there has been significant progress there, as well. It will take time, but I can absolutely guarantee not just the public but the people who work in our dental sector across Scotland that we will continue to invest in dentistry so that we can continue to improve outcomes for patients across the country.

#### **HIV (Elimination of New Transmissions)**

**4. Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP):** To ask the First Minister, in light of the launch of Scotland's new HIV anti-stigma campaign in partnership with the Terrence Higgins Trust, what action the Scottish Government is taking to eliminate new transmissions of HIV. (S6F-02449)

**The First Minister (Humza Yousaf):** We are delighted to partner with the Terrence Higgins Trust and other HIV stakeholders in this important anti-stigma campaign. Tackling stigma is one of the many ways to address HIV transmission in Scotland by reducing barriers to testing and treatment, as well as improving the lives of people living with HIV.

We remain committed to eliminating HIV transmission in Scotland by 2030. Our HIV transmission elimination delivery plan, developed by the deputy chief medical officer and stakeholders, will prioritise the recommendations for HIV elimination that we published last year. Our aim is to publish that plan in the coming months.

**Clare Haughey:** Stigma often presents a barrier to people accessing HIV testing, and this anti-stigma campaign is an exciting milestone in Scotland's mission to improve the lives of those living with HIV and update public attitudes. A first of its type in the UK, the campaign will reflect the realities of living with HIV in Scotland today, where, if an individual is on the right treatment, they can live a long, happy and healthy life and cannot pass the virus on to others. Does the First Minister agree that tackling stigma around HIV will help Scotland reach zero new transmissions of the virus and improve and save lives?

**The First Minister:** I absolutely agree with Clare Haughey on that point. Tackling stigma is fundamental to achieving our HIV transmission elimination goal by 2030. The campaign that Clare Haughey referenced in her original question is just one way of addressing that stigma. We are also working with NHS Education Scotland to produce training materials for non-HIV specialists in the NHS to improve the detection and diagnosis of HIV. We are also working with Waverley Care to

support the fast-track cities Scotland initiative, which provides stigma-related training activities for the health and social care workforce.

Almost half of the population in Scotland would be ashamed to tell other people that they were HIV positive, so work is still very much required to challenge misconceptions while also improving access to testing, preventative treatment and support for people living with HIV. Those points will be prioritised in our HIV transmission elimination delivery plan.

**Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):** This new partnership is welcome. We must do all that we can to eliminate new transmissions of HIV. I therefore ask the First Minister for a progress update on commitments made by the Scottish Government on world AIDS day 2022, including the pilot of an ePrEP clinic, which would act as an important and significant step towards ending stigma and giving people greater control over their own healthcare.

**The First Minister:** I will ensure that we write to Carol Mochan with full details of an update, but Scotland has been world leading in the implementation of HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis—PrEP—since the introduction of our programme in 2017. We have to recognise that PrEP has to be as accessible as possible for those who require it in communities up and down Scotland. That point is well made by Carol Mochan.

Work is very much under way to pilot the online PrEP clinic: £400,000 of funding has been provided for the development of the project, which is currently in the important development stage and on track to be taken forward during 2024 and beyond. I will ensure that a fuller update is provided to Carol Mochan.

#### **Childcare Costs (Parents' Jobs)**

**5. Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):** To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to reported concerns that parents are having to give up their jobs due to childcare costs. (S6F-02455)

**The First Minister (Humza Yousaf):** Early learning and childcare plays a crucial role not only in children's development but in helping parents, particularly mums, to return to work. Our current offer is, of course, the most generous in the United Kingdom, with all three and four-year-olds and around a quarter of two-year-olds entitled to 1,140 hours of childcare each year. Independent research shows that 88 per cent—almost nine in 10—of parents with a three to five-year-old were satisfied that they could access childcare in a way that meets their specific needs.

However, I recognise that we have to go further to support more parents to find or, indeed, stay in

work. That is why, in the programme for government, I set out my plans to improve and expand the childcare offer and work with our partners to help 13,000 more children and families access that childcare by the end of this Parliament.

**Meghan Gallacher:** Childcare costs are one reason why so many women choose not to start a family. Families with children are having to cut down on essential items because they cannot afford to work and pay for childcare. That is why the roll-out of free childcare is so important. It is not a luxury but a tool to get parents into work and our economy moving.

Given that the Scottish Government has not announced anything on childcare since the programme for government, how will he reassure women that they will not end up pregnant then screwed by this Government?

**The First Minister:** The programme for government was, of course, just last month. I am more than happy to provide an update to Meghan Gallacher as we make substantial progress.

I go back to the point that, in Scotland, we have the most generous childcare offer in the UK.

One of the important points that I mentioned in my programme for government is the sustainability of the private, voluntary and independent sector. Scotland is the only part of the UK to pay staff who are delivering funded ELC the real living wage. We are committed to providing the necessary funding to increase pay to £12 an hour for staff who deliver funded ELC provision in the private, voluntary and independent sector. We are investing in that most-generous childcare offer, and I am sure that other Governments in the UK might want to follow Scotland's lead.

**Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** The First Minister will be aware that the data that was produced by the Pregnant Then Screwed campaign is damning. Does he share the confidence that the Scottish Government ministers have that the private sector childcare nursery model is still viable, even with the proposed Scottish Government funding?

**The First Minister:** I saw that report, and I thank Pregnant Then Screwed for the information that it provided in its report. That is why I was keen to put on record that we recognise that there are challenges, particularly in the PVI sector. We all recognise that in our conversations with the private, voluntary and independent sector. That is why we will be providing funding to increase pay to £12 an hour for staff who deliver ELC provision.

I go back to the point that I made to Meghan Gallacher a moment ago. Independent research—I stress the word “independent”—shows that 88

per cent of parents with a three to five-year-old were satisfied that they could access childcare in a way that meets their needs.

However, I recognise the point that the member raises about the sustainability of the sector, and that is why I am absolutely committed to working with the PVI sector to ensure that we have a sustainable ELC provision.

**Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** I am afraid that what the Government has done so far on the PVI sector is not enough. The First Minister knows that there is an exodus of experienced staff from the private, voluntary and independent sector. He cannot do just the £12-an-hour living wage. He needs to increase the fee rates, or we will have a sector that is just not sustainable. He promised to do that in the leadership contest. Is he going to deliver?

**The First Minister:** Again, we will update the Parliament on our plans around the budget in due course at the end of this year.

It is fair to say that the overall capacity across the whole childcare sector, in terms of the number of registered places, remained stable between March 2020 and March 2023. We know from the delivery data that we collect from councils specifically that the number of hours that services offer has increased.

However, I take the point that there are challenges around the sustainability of childcare. That is why we will continue to invest in childcare to ensure that we have the most generous offer anywhere in the UK.

### **National Health Service (Waiting Times)**

**6. Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** To ask the First Minister what steps are being taken to eradicate long waiting times for NHS treatment, in light of Public Health Scotland data showing that over 1,500 patients have waited more than three years. (S6F-02459)

**The First Minister (Humza Yousaf):** Excessively long waits are, of course, unacceptable. We are working hard to drive down the longest waits, and we have already seen a significant reduction since targets were announced last July. The latest Public Health Scotland data shows that 73 per cent of in-patient day-case specialties had fewer than 10 patients waiting for more than three years, and only eight had 10 or more.

That is welcome progress, but there is undoubtedly more to do. That is why, in each of the next three years, we will provide an extra £100 million to accelerate treatment for patients and reduce in-patient and day-case waiting lists by an estimated 100,000 patients. That investment will

allow us to maximise capacity, build far greater resilience into the system and deliver year-on-year reductions in the number of patients who have waited far too long for treatment.

**Jackie Baillie:** Let us talk about people, not percentages. It is true that, in July last year, the First Minister announced a series of targets for completely eradicating long waits for treatment. By September 2022, not a single one of those targets had been met. In fact, instead of there being zero, as promised, there are a shocking 6,831 Scots waiting more than two years.

The £300 million over three years that the First Minister has recently announced is expected to treat 100,000 people. The waiting list sits at 800,000 people, and it is growing. The British Medical Association and the Royal College of Nursing have been scathing about the total failure to acknowledge the workforce crisis, and even his own economy minister has admitted that the Government had no idea how it will all be funded.

When will the First Minister end the wait for the 800,000 people who are on the waiting list? In light of the SNP's failure to deliver on existing promises on waiting times, why should patients believe it now?

**The First Minister:** Again, Jackie Baillie does not acknowledge the impact that the global pandemic had on health services right across Scotland and the United Kingdom.

There are, of course, differences in how we record waiting times across the UK. Waiting times in England and Wales are measured by the referral to treatment time, which is the 18-week target, and which is, as I say, not directly comparable to Scotland's treatment time guarantee. Nonetheless, when we look at the data from 30 June this year, it shows that, per 1,000 of the population, 122 patients were waiting for the treatment time guarantee and new out-patient appointments here in Scotland. That is fewer than in England, where 134 patients per 1,000 are on the RTT waiting list, and in Wales the figure is 243 per 1,000. Although I acknowledge that there are differences in how those figures are measured, my point is that the global pandemic has impacted health services right across the UK.

We have made significant reductions. The number of people who are waiting for more than two years for new out-patient appointments is down by 59 per cent. When it comes to people who have been waiting as in-patients for longer than two years, the figure has also reduced by 28 per cent since targets were announced. We will continue our record investment in the NHS, to ensure that our staff numbers are at historically high and record levels, and to make sure that our

NHS staff remain the best paid anywhere in the UK.

**Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con):** Given the unacceptably long secondary care wait times, desperate patients are being forced to continue to see general practitioners, placing greater strain on primary care and taking up appointments, and forcing patients with new issues to wait, leading to them going to accident and emergency departments in desperation. That is a system-wide cycle of despair that contributed to a record number of deaths last winter.

You have spoken about surgical waiting times, but what about our patients who are waiting for medical clinics, chronic pain management, respiratory care or cardiology? What tangible changes are you making specifically for them?

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

**The First Minister:** That is exactly why we are investing an additional £300 million to reduce waiting lists for patients who have been waiting for far too long.

Sandesh Gulhane asked what we are doing. We are doing everything that we possibly can and our NHS staff are doing everything that they possibly can to increase activity to aid the recovery. I will give Sandesh Gulhane one example. In-patient day-case activity for quarter 2 was at its highest since the start of the pandemic. In fact, it was the sixth quarterly increase in a row, with 58,813 patients being seen in quarter 2.

We are increasing activity, but we are also increasing the workforce where we can. We have recently seen historically high numbers of NHS staff, and we are making sure that they continue to be the best paid in the UK. What will help us in relation to that NHS activity is making sure that no NHS worker, be it a doctor, a nurse or any of our NHS staff, feels that they have to go on strike because they are not being fairly paid. The Government will continue to make sure that our NHS staff are the best paid in the whole of the UK.

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

#### **Fund to Leave (Domestic Abuse)**

**Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP):** Will the First Minister outline how the newly announced fund to leave will support women who are fleeing an abusive relationship?

**The First Minister (Humza Yousaf):** The new £500,000 fund to leave pilot will help to reduce the financial burden on women, who can receive up to £1,000 to pay for the essentials that they and their children need, such as rent or clothing. The fund is for supporting women who are experiencing

domestic abuse and who, as we all know, face many challenges and difficulties, including financial barriers, when they plan to leave abusive partners. It is vital that such women can access the support that they need when they need it. That can be through local authorities, the local women's aid group or partners who are involved in delivering the fund.

I would always urge any women who are experiencing domestic abuse or violence to reach out for the support that is available through Scotland's domestic abuse and forced marriage helpline.

### **Victim Safety (Remand Decisions)**

**Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con):** Claire Inglis was tortured and murdered in her own home, leaving behind a young son. Fiona and Ian Inglis have found the strength to be here today, 24 hours after their daughter's killer was jailed. They are here for answers. Why was a violent criminal with dozens of convictions granted bail not just once or twice but five times? Since Claire's murder, why has the Scottish National Party Government passed a law that will make it even harder to remand criminals in custody? Will Humza Yousaf commit to an independent, robust and transparent inquiry?

**The First Minister (Humza Yousaf):** First and foremost, my thoughts are very much with Ian and Fiona Inglis—Claire's parents. I cannot imagine the trauma and grief that they are going through. There cannot be anything more unnatural in this world than to have to bury one's child. I extend the condolences and sympathies of the Government to Ian and Fiona.

Forgive me, Presiding Officer, but, with your indulgence, I will take a bit of time to answer some of the questions that Russell Findlay has posed on behalf of the family.

First, it is appropriate for me to say that decisions about bail and remand are, of course, for the independent judiciary and courts to determine. They are not for the First Minister, any Government minister or any politician to interfere in or intervene in.

I do not agree with Russell Findlay's characterisation of the Bail and Release from Custody (Scotland) Act 2023. The act makes it clear for the first time that the court should specifically consider victim safety, which includes safety from physical and psychological harm, when applying the new bail test. That is explicit for the first time in the 2023 act. Victim safety is at the heart of any decision that should be made on bail and remand.

On the independent inquiry that Russell Findlay has asked for, he knows that I cannot intervene or

interfere in the decisions of the judiciary. On the concerns that have been raised by Russell Findlay and Ian and Fiona Inglis when it comes to prosecutorial decisions and decisions to either oppose or accept bail conditions, I will convey those concerns directly to the Lord President and the Lord Advocate, and it will be for them to appropriately respond. I cannot demand an investigation into a decision that has been made by the independent judiciary; it would be unwise for me to do so, because that would undoubtedly be seen as interference with a decision that has been made by the independent judiciary.

This dreadful and tragic case reminds us of the need to do more to tackle domestic abuse and domestic homicide. That is why the Scottish Government is committed to developing a multi-agency domestic homicide review model in partnership with key stakeholders. I will give more information on that to Russell Findlay and any other member who has an interest.

### **Newman Bonar Ltd (Closure)**

**Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab):** I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests, which shows that I am a member of Unite, the union.

Today, it was announced that Newman Bonar Ltd, the company that was set up earlier this year to acquire historic Dundee textile manufacturer Bonar Yarns, is closing, risking the livelihoods of 57 workers and their families. I invite the First Minister to take this opportunity to join the provisional liquidators in asking that any party that has an interest in acquiring the business contact them. Will the First Minister join me in fighting to save those important manufacturing jobs in Dundee?

**The First Minister (Humza Yousaf):** I share Mercedes Villalba's clear disappointment that Newman Bonar has gone into liquidation. My immediate thoughts are with the staff and their families, who are again going through uncertainty. The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy had met and written to the company in recent months to encourage it to fully engage with Scottish Enterprise so that every available option to save the business could be explored. I know that the business has had a long-standing presence in the community and is an important local employer.

We will certainly do everything that we can in our power to protect jobs and the manufacturing footprint in Dundee. Scottish Enterprise is engaging directly with the liquidator to better understand the situation, given last night's announcement. As a Government, we stand ready to provide support to any employees who potentially face redundancy through partnership



action for continuing employment—PACE. I will keep Mercedes Villalba updated on how conversations are going.

### **FBU Scotland (“Firestorm” Report)**

**Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green):** This week, FBU Scotland launched its “Firestorm” report. In the past seven days, we have seen firefighters tackle floods and flames. Our fireys are gathered outside right now, and they are clear that they cannot continue in their current roles, never mind adapt to the future roles that they are expected to perform, with the current levels of investment.

What is the First Minister’s response to FBU Scotland’s “Firestorm” report? Will he agree to meet firefighters themselves—not their managers, but front-line firefighters—to hear directly their concerns?

**The First Minister (Humza Yousaf):** First and foremost, I go back to the response that I gave to Anas Sarwar. We will continue to ensure that we invest in the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, because it does an incredible job, and, of course, in our firefighters. We have regular dialogue with the Fire Brigades Union. In fact, just this morning, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs committed to meeting the FBU in order to meet directly firefighters on the front line.

Of course, this financial year, we increased the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service’s budget by £14.4 million, despite the financial pressure that we are currently under. On top of that, we continue to make investments in the SFRS, which have enabled it, through its incredible hard work, to reduce the number of fires that have taken place over the past year. I have read through the “Firestorm” report, and the cabinet secretary will meet the FBU, as she committed to do this morning.

### **Covid and Flu Vaccination**

**Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** Under the Scottish Government’s vaccination programme, I recently had the Covid and the flu vaccines at a very busy, efficient and, indeed, friendly vaccine centre. However, that is anecdotal. Will the First Minister please provide an update on vaccination take-up?

**The First Minister (Humza Yousaf):** Christine Grahame makes an incredibly important point. We know that the vaccines for Covid and flu are incredibly effective and important. I encourage anybody who is eligible to come forward for vaccination. The programme is progressing very well—so far, 1.7 million vaccinations have been administered. That includes more than 1 million flu

vaccinations and almost 700,000 Covid vaccinations.

For people who are at highest risk, our rephrasing of the programme has resulted in 73 per cent of care home residents having already been vaccinated, with the remainder due for completion by the end of this month. A large number of people have appointments throughout the rest of October and November, with vaccinations due to be delivered by early December.

I reiterate to all those who are eligible that getting the flu vaccine and the Covid vaccine could save their lives. It is the safest and most effective way to protect yourself and the national health service this winter, so if you are eligible but have yet to book an appointment, please do so. I encourage everybody who is eligible to get those vaccines.

### **Anne’s Law (Implementation)**

**Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con):** This week, I met campaigners to discuss the impact of lockdowns on families of people who live in care homes. After a long campaign, it was welcome that the Scottish Government announced that it would implement Anne’s law. However, there are concerns that that has still not happened and that the issue currently sits in the National Care Service (Scotland) Bill. Campaigners want the implementation of Anne’s law to be decoupled from the bill. Will the First Minister agree to meet the campaigners? Will ministers look urgently at decoupling the implementation of Anne’s law from the bill and delivering it now?

**The First Minister (Humza Yousaf):** Through changes that were made by the previous minister for social care, Kevin Stewart, we gave practical effect, through regulation, to Anne’s law. Notwithstanding that, if there is something else that we can do, I will consider Miles Briggs’s suggestion in relation to decoupling.

However, the National Care Service (Scotland) Bill is progressing. We took time to pause it due to concerns that were raised by local authorities and trade unions. Of course, I will ask the Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care to meet Miles Briggs and the families who represent those who live in care homes to see whether there is anything further that we can do.

### **Looked-after Children (Transition to Adulthood)**

**Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP):** As we mark care experienced week, will the First Minister provide an update on the steps that the Scottish Government is taking to improve the experiences of and outcomes for looked-after children as they transition to adulthood?

**The First Minister (Humza Yousaf):** I think that every member of the Scottish Parliament who has met care-experienced people—particularly care-experienced young people—will have been moved by their plight, their strength and their advocacy. Yesterday, I had the great privilege of meeting a group of care-experienced young people in Glasgow, where I heard about some of the challenges that care-experienced people face during their transition to adulthood.

For anyone, moving away from home can be a challenging time when we rely heavily on our family support networks, but not everybody has a family support network. Not everybody has the luxury of their mother and their father—or, indeed, wider family—to rely on.

That is why I was pleased to set out the Government's proposal for a £2,000 payment for care leavers to provide financial support at such a pivotal moment in young people's lives, as part of a broader package of support. That is a key step in keeping the Promise, and I reiterate to members today that I, as First Minister, and the Government fully intend not only to keep the Promise but to ensure that it is delivered.

**The Presiding Officer:** That concludes First Minister's question time.

**Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con):** On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I declare my interest as a practising general practitioner in the national health service.

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you, Dr Gulhane. Your comment has been recorded.

The next item of business is a members' business debate in the name of Paul Sweeney. There will be a short suspension to allow those leaving the chamber and the public gallery to do so before the debate begins.

12:45

*Meeting suspended.*

12:47

*On resuming—*

## **Asylum Seekers (Free Bus Travel)**

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing):** I ask members of the public who are leaving the gallery to cease their conversations until they are outside, because we are about to restart our proceedings. I thank them for their co-operation.

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-10188, in the name of Paul Sweeney, on free bus travel for people seeking asylum. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. Members who wish to speak in the debate should press their request-to-speak buttons.

*Motion debated,*

That the Parliament notes the calls to extend the current provision of concessionary bus travel in Scotland, including in the Glasgow region, to include people seeking asylum; acknowledges the efforts of third sector organisations that are working in the asylum sector in leading the free bus travel campaign, which was launched in December 2021, such as VOICES Network and Maryhill Integration Network; notes that free bus travel for people seeking asylum has been publicly supported by all faith leaders in the Scottish Religious Leaders Forum and also recommended by the Poverty Alliance and Mental Health Foundation; understands that people seeking asylum do not have the right to work and rely on a financial allowance, which amounts to approximately £6 per day; appreciates that asylum and immigration are reserved matters for the UK Government, but considers that there are interventions that can be made within devolved competence to improve the lives of people in Scotland who are in receipt of asylum support; notes the commitment in the Programme for Government 2022-23 to consider how best to provide free bus travel to people seeking asylum, and further notes the calls encouraging the Scottish Government to set out how it plans to deliver on this commitment as soon as possible.

12:47

**Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab):** In December 2021, alongside ambassadors from the VOICES network, who are in the gallery today, I launched a campaign for free bus travel for people seeking asylum here in Scotland.

Since then, the campaign has attracted widespread support from across the asylum sector and from third sector organisations such as Maryhill Integration Network, MIN Voices, the Scottish Refugee Council, JustRight Scotland, Grampian Regional Equality Council and Friends of Scottish Settlers, among others. On top of that, there is cross-party support in this Parliament. This week, the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee backed the extension of countrywide provision to asylum seekers through

the national concessionary bus travel scheme, calling the policy “transformative”. I also thank Bob Doris, the member for Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn, and Mark Ruskell, the Green member for Mid Scotland and Fife region, for their continued cross-party efforts in support of the campaign.

In my Glasgow region, an all-day bus ticket costs £5. People seeking asylum do not have the right to work and therefore rely on an allowance of only £6 per day to cover the cost of living; for the ever-increasing number of people living in provided hotel accommodation, the allowance can be as little as £1.36 per day. Having to fork out £5 for bus travel to attend medical, social, legal or even urgent Home Office appointments is simply not an option unless they go without food or other essentials. Asylum accommodation is often situated in isolated parts of cities with the lowest rents and unaffordable public transport, compounding the isolation for many new Scots.

Concessionary bus travel is therefore a key social justice policy and one that has the ability to positively transform the lives of those who are stuck in the dreadfully slow and inadequate asylum system that is presided over by the Conservative-run Home Office.

People who are seeking asylum are among the most vulnerable people in our society. They are forced to live in squalid conditions on next to no money and they are prevented from getting a job to earn money despite often being highly qualified and despite being eminently capable people who are able to contribute so much to our communities.

The difficulties that are faced by people who are seeking asylum in Scotland lie firmly at the door of the Conservative United Kingdom Government. However, the Scottish Government has the ability to improve the lives of asylum seekers in many practical ways. Free bus travel would enable people who are seeking asylum to explore and integrate in their new home country. It would also vastly improve their quality of life, with the cost of bus travel eating up the already scarce amount that is provided by the Home Office for essentials.

As I mentioned in my opening remarks, the third sector and the asylum sector are right behind the campaign, but it is important to draw attention to the support from wider civic society, too. Indeed, all faith leaders in the Scottish religious leaders forum have signed an open letter in support of the policy, and the Mental Health Foundation and the Poverty Alliance have recommended the proposal.

I have been pleased to work on a cross-party basis with parliamentary colleagues, engaging with the Scottish Government on this ask and liaising directly with successive transport ministers and Transport Scotland. I also personally met the

Deputy First Minister in her previous role as Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government and the Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy in his previous role as Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development with special responsibility for refugees, both of whom saw merit in the proposal.

Following the commitment in the 2022-23 programme for government to work with the third sector partners and councils to consider how best to provide free bus travel for asylum seekers, a 12-week trial took place earlier this year in Glasgow. However, there was no mention of a national roll-out of free bus travel for asylum seekers in the 2023-24 programme for government, which came as a disappointment to those who have worked on the campaign for almost two years now. Now is the time to implement it on a full-time basis.

The Scottish Government is already providing concessionary travel through the young persons scheme and the older and disabled persons scheme. The framework is there and it can easily be extended.

**Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con):** Mr Sweeney will be aware that the proposal is the subject of an active petition that is before the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee and that it has drawn cross-party support. On behalf of the committee and the petitioner, I put the issue directly to the First Minister when he appeared before the Conveners Group just before the October recess. At that meeting, he gave a very strong commitment to look into seeking to deliver on the aims of the petition. Is Mr Sweeney pleased, at least, with that progress to date? Is he, like me, hopeful that the Minister for Transport will be able to advance the First Minister’s commitment beyond that which he was able to give in June?

**Paul Sweeney:** As an alumnus of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee and an evangelist for its work, I commend the member for Eastwood, in his capacity of convener of that committee, for putting that question to the First Minister at the recent session with him. I am pleased that there are encouraging responses from the First Minister. I hope that the Minister for Transport has heard those remarks, too, and will respond in due course.

First Bus, which serves the Eastwood constituency, is the largest bus operator in Scotland and indeed in Glasgow, which is the asylum dispersal area with the highest numbers in the United Kingdom. It has confirmed that it would support any mechanism that would offer travel assistance to displaced people providing that provisions were reviewed and tied to a

reimbursement rate that was similar to that for the existing concessionary travel schemes.

I have had recent correspondence with the Minister for Transport in which she committed to looking further into the proposal. In addition, the First Minister, as the member for Eastwood mentioned, has said that he is actively considering the matter. I therefore urge the minister to update Parliament today on whether the Government will make an order, in exercise of the powers conferred by the Transport (Scotland) Act 2005, to establish a national bus travel concession scheme for those people who are seeking asylum in Scotland as defined by section 94 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. Extending the free bus travel scheme on that basis is well within the Scottish Government's gift.

Supplementing the existing concessionary travel schemes will cost a fraction of the overall Scottish budget, and the change can be brought in at speed and at pace, providing quick relief to those who are seeking asylum here in Scotland. Frankly, for such small change, it would make a huge difference to thousands of lives.

12:54

**Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP):** I am grateful to Paul Sweeney for bringing the debate to the chamber. I also note that a petition on this very issue has been lodged. Clearly, there is public momentum behind the campaign, and I know that the Scottish Government will be listening very carefully.

We know that the financial burden that is associated with bus travel is an obstacle for many asylum seekers. I, too, welcome the pilot schemes and urge the Government to carefully consider the recommendations that arise from them, such as the pilot that is being conducted by the Refugee Survival Trust and First Bus, which is supported by the Grampian Regional Equality Council and the Scottish Refugee Council.

As Paul Sweeney mentioned, earlier this week, in my capacity as convener of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, I announced the publication of the committee's report on its inquiry into the lived experience of asylum seekers in Scotland. The committee heard very clearly from witnesses on the issue and has therefore included in its report a strong recommendation for the expansion of the national concessionary travel scheme to include asylum seekers. I hope that that will lend further weight to calls for something that would make a huge difference to their lives.

Understanding that immigration and employment are reserved matters, on three separate occasions, the committee wrote to the

UK Government's Minister for Immigration, Robert Jenrick MP, inviting him to give evidence to us, but no reply was received. That is disrespectful, to say the least. Once again, it falls to the Scottish Government to mitigate the situation. We in the Scottish Parliament can provide action to back up our message of welcome and support for asylum seekers.

What I say will never be as powerful as the words of asylum seekers themselves, so I will use my remaining time to give voice to their words, which have been given to me in a statement by asylum seekers who are working with the Maryhill Integration Network. I read them verbatim:

"We are writing this statement as a collective of people who are currently in the asylum process, in communities and in hotel accommodation across Scotland. Free bus travel will provide us with the opportunity to travel, especially to appointments crucial to our asylum claim, such as with our lawyers. Hotels feel like open prisons, and although we can leave, we have no funds to do so. Being confined into one space has also led to a decline in our mental health and wellbeing as we are left alone, with nothing to do as we don't have the right to work. Free bus travel will also allow us to integrate into the community, volunteer, attend college classes, places of worship and become familiar with our new home. The current asylum support is only enough to cover our food and essential needs, so some of us who are unable to walk for long distances due to medical reasons, may need to prioritize spending the allowance on transport. We want to contribute to society by volunteering, we want to gain new skills and we want to have the choice to travel. We are individuals with experience and education, and most importantly we are human. Humans that have gone through hardship, struggle and even persecution—and with this free bus travel, we will have some degree of freedom during our difficult Immigration process. The immigration system is stressful with many difficulties, with Free Bus Travel in Scotland, for such a small change, it will have a huge difference for us all."

Those are their words, Presiding Officer. I need not say anything further.

12:58

**Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con):** I thank Paul Sweeney for bringing this important debate to the chamber. It concerns a timely issue that the Parliament is right to discuss. As we have heard, many organisations have raised the issue as a matter of concern. It is from members' business debates such as this one that we become more informed and start asking serious questions. We have also heard that the issue is the subject of a live petition, so there will be progress on it.

In preparation for the debate, I read through the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee's recently published report and the report on the travel choices project, which members received last night. Both reports

highlight benefits to asylum seekers, but it is clear that more work needs to be done.

We need to understand the costs of the measure—the bus companies would need to be reimbursed from somewhere. We need to understand whether there is more of an issue in rural areas such as the north-east and Highlands than there is in urban areas. We need to understand how we can identify those who might be eligible for the scheme. We need to understand how the scheme would benefit those in rural areas, where bus services are few and underresourced. I suppose that the Government might have choices around options that it could provide in the scheme, such as whether travel would be limited by ticket price or distance, or whether it should be an unlimited scheme to allow asylum seekers to travel right across Scotland.

As we have heard, there are still many unanswered questions, and it is imperative that the Scottish Government looks into the matter in greater detail, as the committee report calls on it to do. I know that the Assembly in Wales has taken similar action, so it should be possible for us to learn from its experience and to evaluate its scheme prior to considering one for Scotland.

I fully appreciate the calls from many charities and faith groups to introduce the scheme here. It feels like a simple thing that we can do to help those who are fleeing persecution. However, we have to understand better the implications on public finances and the potential implications for our local government colleagues. With so many strains on public finances, we need to be sure that this is the right thing to do at this time.

We also need to have people's asylum applications dealt with faster. I note from the travel choices report that one of the asylum seekers who took part in the pilot had been here for 20 years without a decision being made.

The cost to the public of transport in Scotland is high. Bus and train fares are high, and we need to work together to ensure that transport is not a barrier to accessing vital public services and support.

I appreciate that Mr Sweeney is a member for Glasgow, so the focus of the motion is on that city. However, rural regions such as the one that I represent have different challenges and priorities. I would like to know whether such a scheme would help asylum seekers in those areas when rural bus services are under such pressure.

**Paul Sweeney:** The member is making a series of fair points. However, will he also note that the total number of asylum seekers who are present in Scotland as of March this year was only just over 5,000? We are talking about a relatively small number of people, so there would be a fairly

marginal increase in the number of entitlements in the current schemes.

**Douglas Lumsden:** I absolutely recognise that but, in this chamber, we are often challenged about where money is going to come from, so it would be good to know the overall cost. I am sure that it will not be huge, and the proposal is surely something that we can implement.

I echo the final paragraph in the statement by the faith communities, which have also called for the scheme to be introduced. In doing so, I commend the work of the third sector in Scotland, which carries a great deal of the burden in our social care sector. The faith communities' statement says that they look with hope

“to a future in Scotland where everyone has the opportunity to thrive and contribute to their communities.”

That is a sentiment that we can all agree with.

I agree that the Scottish Government should look more closely at getting accurate costings, and should consider where the money should come from and how the system would work. It must also consider the implications for our rural communities, because one size probably will not fit all, but I am sure that that is something that we can overcome.

I thank Mr Sweeney for raising the issue, and I look forward to discussing it further as we go through the process.

13:03

**Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP):** I thank Paul Sweeney for bringing the debate to the chamber.

I want to live in a Scotland where we treat everyone who lives within our borders with dignity and respect. I gently remind Paul Sweeney about his party's chequered position on immigration, but he and I can agree that the Tories at Westminster have ripped up the rule book when it comes to treating people with compassion—particularly people seeking asylum. The rhetoric from Suella Braverman and Robert Jenrick, among others, has been nothing short of appalling. It has made bringing forward proposals such as free bus travel for people seeking asylum more challenging.

No doubt there will be people watching the debate who disagree with the motion, saying that the money could be better spent elsewhere—we know that the Scottish Government budget has consistently been cut, and it is tight to say the least. However, I think that, sadly, many will have been taken in by the rhetoric from the UK Government and will not appreciate that we are talking about a very small number of people. As Paul Sweeney indicated, we are talking about around 5,000 people.

Along with the local MP, Ronnie Cowan, I have met many of the asylum seekers in my constituency. The hotel that is being used to accommodate them initially had a maximum capacity of 80, but that has recently been increased to 160. That doubles up the strangers in rooms. No extra money is coming from the UK Government to help to deal with that and provide local services as a consequence.

Asylum seekers want a home of their own and they want to contribute to society, and many have skills that many local businesses and the public sector could utilise. Instead, they are left to find things to do day after day before returning to their room without their family. Until we have experienced the lives that asylum seekers live, nobody can fully understand what they are going through mentally. They are human beings, and they often come from war-torn countries.

The Scotland that I believe in is a warm and open country that welcomes people who want to come here and create new lives for themselves. Organisations such as Your Voice are doing a great job in trying to help asylum seekers in the Greenock and Inverclyde constituency. I am very proud of my constituents and the job that they have done in opening up the hand of friendship and being very warm and welcoming to asylum seekers. However, the fact that asylum seekers are regularly moved around the country without any choice makes things a lot harder for my community and other communities in which there are asylum seekers. I have spoken to a man who, in the space of 15 months, has moved from a hotel in Northern Ireland to three more in Scotland. At the end, he came to Greenock. That is no way to live—it is an existence.

That is why I fully support providing free bus travel for people who are seeking asylum, which might make it just a wee bit easier for them to get around.

**Jackson Carlaw:** It is clear that asylum seekers who are under 25 and over a certain age will already be eligible for free bus travel. I do not have an issue of principle with the Government; it is an issue of practical implementation, in that the Government has to identify, in a transparent and measurable way, a cohort of individuals to extend the scheme to. I hope that the minister will be able to advance us on that. I think that we agree on the principle; the issue is the practical way in which it might be implemented.

**Stuart McMillan:** I am sure that the minister will deal with that matter. Obviously, that was not a question for me.

I have witnessed locally men supporting each other over language barriers. If a person speaks Arabic and is well spoken in English, they can

become a helpful conduit for the rest of the group. That can be very important when people need to raise an issue or seek help, particularly when it comes to reading formal letters.

Asylum seekers receive a very small allowance each week. If a person is staying in a hotel, they will receive £9.58. Asylum seekers stay in hotels in my constituency. As we know, that is not a huge amount of money, particularly with the costs of travel. For a relatively low cost, the benefit of free bus travel to asylum seekers would be truly game changing, and it would reflect the different approach that we could take in Scotland to supporting those in need. However, I go back to the point that I know that finances are extremely tight, to say the least.

Disabled asylum seekers aged between 22 and 59 may experience issues in accessing the current concessionary travel scheme, as their eligibility may be dependent on the receipt of certain UK welfare benefits that asylum seekers cannot access.

The Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee report was published this week, and the convener of that committee, Kaukab Stewart, has already spoken in the debate. I will quote from that report. An asylum seeker told the committee:

“When I’m stressed, everything about me goes down. So bus passes would be a big help”.

I welcome the committee’s findings. An extension of the existing national concessionary scheme to include all asylum seekers would be transformative. I hope that the Scottish Government will consider that during the upcoming budget process, but I also recognise that doing that would be extremely difficult.

13:09

**Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab):** I thank my friend Paul Sweeney for bringing the debate to the chamber. I pay tribute to him for his long-standing work—in this Parliament, in the House of Commons and in the communities of Glasgow that he represents—on this issue and wider issues that have an impact on people who are seeking asylum.

As we have heard, the issue that we are debating sits in the context of the Illegal Migration Act 2023 and the backlogs in asylum processing, which demonstrate—I think—a lack of support and dignity afforded to people who are seeking asylum from the many dangerous situations in which they have found themselves in their country of origin.

I spoke on this subject on behalf of Scottish Labour in the debates on the Illegal Migration Bill, and I have expressed my view of the callous approach that the UK Conservative Government

has taken in passing that bill. It is vital that the Scottish Government uses the powers and resources that it has at its disposal to alleviate the structural problems that people seeking asylum face when they are living in Scotland.

As we have heard, access to transport is one of the most fundamental and basic barriers with which we can provide help. We have heard that asylum seekers are not allowed to work and therefore have to live off an allowance that amounts to only £6 a day. That leads to there being little money left for travel, once basic essentials such as food are taken into account.

We should make no mistake about it: travel is essential. Seeing a general practitioner or a solicitor, attending support appointments, seeking advice or just seeing other people to feel a sense of community are all fundamental things that every member in the chamber takes for granted; it should be no different for those who are seeking asylum.

Over the past year, the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, on which I sit, has heard a lot of evidence on the subject through our inquiry into asylum seekers in Scotland, and, as we have heard, it has highlighted the issue of free bus travel. Just last week, the committee's report made clear recommendations on that issue, and the evidence in that report is compelling. Along with committee colleagues, I was greatly moved by the evidence that we heard, both formally and informally, about the impact that a lack of access to travel has on people.

During the committee's work, it was particularly helpful for us to visit the Maryhill Integration Network and hear directly from people who experience those barriers daily. I thank my colleague the committee convener, Kaukab Stewart, for taking the time today to share some of those experiences.

I will add to that some of the formal evidence that we heard. Pinar Aksu of the Maryhill Integration Network told the committee that free bus travel

"would make life a little easier for people who are living in such horrific conditions",

and that

"in cases in which people are put into hotel accommodation in rooms that have been described ... as their cells, it would literally save lives."—[*Official Report, Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, 2 May 2023; c 22.*]

The observations that I have quoted hold true for asylum seekers across Scotland; in particular, for those who live in rural communities, such as many of the rural areas in my West Scotland region.

Obviously there are higher costs for providing concessionary travel for individuals in rural areas,

which is why the committee wanted to recognise the importance of ensuring that the scheme is properly designed, tested and costed. I think that every member in the chamber agrees that we have to do that.

I welcome the recognition in the motion of the calls by the Scottish religious leaders forum for access to free bus travel for asylum seekers. When I spoke to people who are currently in the system, I heard that there are challenges with getting to a place of worship, for example, which—as we all know—is a fundamental human right. I also heard about the ability to access services that are provided by faith organisations such as the Jesuit Refugee Service in Glasgow and the excellent English for speakers of other languages classes that are run at St Aloysius' church in Garnethill. I look forward to visiting that service soon and discussing the work that we are doing to try to improve access, not least by ensuring that people can get transport to such services.

I am conscious of time, so I will conclude. I welcome the debate, the work that the committee has done and its strong recommendations. I look forward to hearing from the minister how we can move forward quickly with an enhancement of the national concessionary scheme to ensure that people who are seeking asylum are afforded the basic human rights and dignity that I think such a scheme would provide.

13:14

**Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife (Green)):** I, too, thank Paul Sweeney for bringing this important members' business debate to the chamber, and I pay tribute to the incredible activists who have been driving the campaign over the past two years; I know that many of them are in the public gallery today. For me, their testimonies have been deeply moving, and I am sure that it is thanks to them that many of us are in the chamber to take part in the debate, amplifying their voices.

It will come as no surprise to many of my colleagues to hear me talk about buses. I am incredibly proud of the success of the extension of concessionary bus travel to under-22s. With millions of young people now signed up to the scheme, we have been shown exactly how transformative free bus travel can be.

All young people under 22, including those who seek asylum, can access that concession, which, undoubtedly, makes a huge difference to their daily lives, especially in the middle of a cost of living crisis. Extending that scheme to all people who seek asylum would be a real and tangible step that would make a huge difference to a

community that is forced into poverty by the Home Office.

I use the word “forced” carefully. People who seek asylum are forced into poverty because they are not allowed to work. Instead, they must rely on a limited form of housing and support from the Home Office of £6 a day for all essential living needs: clothing, travel, keeping in touch with loved ones, toiletries, school supplies for their kids, food and so much more. That is barely 58 per cent of what anyone else would receive on universal credit.

Those who live in hotels get only £1.40 a day. In my region, more than 100 people in Perth are in that situation. In Perth, a bus day ticket costs £3.90. To travel by bus from Perth to Edinburgh or Glasgow, a ticket costs £9. Travel is completely unaffordable for someone who survives on £1.40 a day.

Over the past few years, the inadequacy of that so-called support from the Home Office has become painfully clear. The UK Government has forced torture survivors into squalid camps on former Army bases; folks have been forced on to repurposed barges, which are better described as floating prisons; and, here in Scotland, people have been stuck in hotels, sharing rooms with people that they do not know, for months on end, unable to access the services and support that they desperately need.

Asylum is, of course, reserved to the UK Government. Although we may want to dismantle that racist and hostile environment in its entirety, we cannot yet legislate in this place to do so. However, we have the powers—and the responsibility—to mitigate some of the worst harms that are caused by UK Government policy. The Scottish Government has shown leadership in protecting people who seek asylum, through the limited powers that are available. Extending free bus travel must be part of that safety net.

We also now have evidence of how such a scheme might work and the impact that it could have. The Scottish Government funded a pilot in Glasgow, and there have been similar schemes in Aberdeen and Wales. The evidence is clear: 100 per cent of participants in Glasgow said that the scheme had a positive impact. Every pilot has recommended a national roll-out of free bus travel to all people who seek asylum.

I know that the minister is actively considering the outcomes of the recent pilot and the options going forward. I thank the Scottish Government for its constructive engagement over the past two years with me, Paul Sweeney, Bob Doris and others.

I end by saying that we do not need any more evidence to show us how much such an

intervention is needed or the impact that it will have. In the words of a pilot participant in Glasgow,

“this ticket is a life saver.”

The route to implementation may be challenging, but we have to get such a scheme over the line. That is our responsibility, as a country that is proud to protect all those who seek safety.

13:18

**Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab):** I congratulate Paul Sweeney on securing what is an important debate, and I thank him for his tireless campaigning on the issue. Most of us in the Parliament agree that the UK presides over an asylum system that treats asylum seekers inhumanely.

Earlier this week, I visited the Muthu Glasgow River hotel in Erskine, which currently provides accommodation for around 160 asylum seekers. From the discussions that I had there, it was clear that travel costs remain a major financial burden for asylum seekers. Under current Home Office rules, as we know, asylum seekers are prevented from working, even though many have skills that we need. At Erskine, they receive a payment of £9.50 to cover essential costs, including travel. As Paul Sweeney and others have indicated, many at other sites receive far less.

It was clear that a lot of work has been done in Erskine. The staff have worked with Renfrewshire Council to ensure that young asylum seekers at the hotel are provided with concessionary bus travel under the scheme for people who are under 22 years old. That allows about 10 asylum seekers at the hotel to have bus passes, but that means that the remainder—the majority—are ineligible for any concessionary travel schemes that are currently offered.

Given the hotel’s location in Erskine, asylum seekers there often have to rely on bus travel to reach other parts of Renfrewshire or greater Glasgow—for example, to go to college. They often need to travel to appointments with their lawyers or to access volunteering and—as I said—education, but also to connect with members of their community who live further afield. We need to be aware of the language issues, as many asylum seekers do not yet have good English. Bus fares in the Erskine area can be as high as £5.20 per day, which is more than half the £9.50 payment that asylum seekers are given.

The recent travel choices trial that took place in Glasgow earlier this year highlights the positive impact that free bus travel can have on asylum seekers. It is clear that free bus travel for asylum



seekers can work, and it is crucial that we encourage integration from day 1. I would be interested if the minister could outline any work that has been done on costings for such a scheme, to enable further discussion. It is important that the Parliament uses the powers that are available to us to ensure that asylum seekers in Scotland are treated as humanely as possible.

13:21

**Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP):** I congratulate Paul Sweeney on securing this debate on free bus travel for all asylum seekers and on his on-going dedication to the campaign. I also thank the VOICES network and Maryhill Integration Network, which is based in my constituency, for their dedication and tenacity in leading the campaign.

I thank MIN for the wide range of other campaigns that it shows leadership on and for the support that it offers migrants in the north of Glasgow more generally. It is great to see people from MIN here this afternoon.

I make it clear from the outset that I support the campaign. We must find a way to deliver free bus travel to all asylum seekers. I have been pleased to work in partnership with colleagues—particularly Paul Sweeney and Mark Ruskell—on a cross-party basis. That partnership work is a key strength of the campaign.

However, the campaign's most compelling strength is the lived experience of our asylum-seeking community. It is absolutely clear that the UK Home Office does not come close to supporting the most vulnerable people to meet their basic needs. They are forced to survive on as little as £45 a week, as we have heard, which is little more than £6 a day. If they stay in a hotel, they have little more than £1 a day. They are also denied the right to work.

In my constituency, I regularly see the impact on asylum-seeking individuals and families of not having enough funds to live on. They struggle to buy day-to-day items that people take for granted and live in temporary accommodation; often, they struggle with a variety of underlying health conditions and live in trauma.

The day-to-day reality for many asylum seekers is deeply challenging. Simply getting on a bus is an unaffordable luxury for many. That is why it is welcome that asylum seekers in Scotland who are under 22 or over 60 have full access to the Scottish Government's national entitlement scheme, but we must go further.

Given the financially precarious and fragile situation that asylum seekers are living in and—to be frank—the appalling support that the UK

Government offers, it is right that we should look to extend free bus travel to all asylum seekers. I know that the Scottish Government agrees with that. The recent free bus travel pilot project, which was funded by the Scottish Government and run through the Refugee Survival Trust, demonstrates that commitment.

The pilot may have been small in scale, but it was powerful. Analysis of the project clearly demonstrates the powerfully beneficial impact that having free bus travel delivers for our asylum-seeking community. The survey of the pilot's 150 participants showed a 38 per cent increase in those who used buses every day—the rate went up to 72 per cent. Of the participants, 92 per cent travelled more frequently and 88 per cent took longer journeys.

Most journeys were to allow asylum seekers to attend appointments, which sometimes related to their asylum case and sometimes were for other reasons, such as health. Journeys were also made to meet family and friends, which has a clear benefit in tackling social isolation and promoting positive mental health. One in five journeys was made for shopping, and given the limited budget that asylum seekers live on, that is really important.

According to one asylum seeker—I bet that I cannae find the quote now, Presiding Officer—two things changed after the pilot. Their mental health improved and they saved money. They were more available for activities with their son—they could watch him play football—and they were able to use food banks. Is this not a pathetic society that we live in if we have to give someone a free bus ticket to get to a food bank, because they do not have enough money? We must—and we can—do better.

I know that there are budget constraints in this place, but we must find a budget consensus and deliver on this campaign. I know, too, that there must be complexities involved in delivery, because why on earth would the Welsh Government, whose initiative I welcome, extend free bus travel to refugees but not asylum seekers? To my friends who have contacts in the UK Government, I say that if there are complexities in delivering this initiative across Scotland, they should work with us to ensure that we deliver both in budget terms and in practical terms. This simply must happen.

13:25

**The Minister for Transport (Fiona Hyslop):** I thank Paul Sweeney for bringing this debate to the chamber. I know that he has taken a keen interest in the issue for some time now, particularly in his current role as convener of the cross-party group on migration. A number of members have

consistently raised and supported the interests of asylum seekers fleeing war and persecution, not only in this parliamentary session but in previous sessions, and I would highlight among them Bob Doris and Mark Ruskell.

I thank all members for their contributions. Many will be members of the cross-party group and fully behind the campaign to make all people seeking asylum in Scotland eligible for free bus travel under the concessionary travel scheme. For my part, I reflect on the fact that, within months of becoming Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning in 2007, I had established a means by which children of asylum seekers who had been living in Scotland for the requisite time and who had met their academic grades were eligible for home fee status and subsequently free university tuition. At that time, many families had to wait five years or more for their applications to be processed and could go to university only by paying prohibitive international fees.

Therefore, I, too, come from a tradition of working out what can be done to provide support to people seeking asylum living in Scotland. Indeed, my officials and I are in the process of working through a number of areas that need to be addressed to progress our commitment to work with third sector partners and local authorities on how best to provide free bus travel to asylum seekers. The first question is whether there is political agreement to do that. From what I have heard this afternoon and from our earlier programme for government commitment, I think that there is clear cross-party support for action in this area. We have heard from, among others, Kaukab Stewart, convener of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, who said that the committee's report, which was published on Tuesday, supports the extension of the existing national concessionary scheme to include all asylum seekers and views that as a transformative effort for people in Scotland seeking asylum.

However, in recognising the shared appetite to make progress, I know that members will recognise that delivering the provision of free bus travel is more complex and that there are factors that require to be worked through further. We must ensure that the introduction of free bus travel does not have unintended or negative consequences for the people whom, as we will all agree, we are seeking to support.

As a result, I want to highlight certain practical issues as we consider how free bus travel can be delivered to all asylum seekers in Scotland. Amending the statutory concessionary scheme will require secondary legislation, and we should weigh up the merit of local schemes for those asylum seekers who currently do not qualify. That

is why I am interested in the work that has been undertaken in the local pilots in Aberdeen, Falkirk and Glasgow, which has shown clear evidence of the benefits that access to free bus travel can offer asylum seekers. I am carefully considering those conclusions in weighing up how best to proceed.

Another consideration is the powers that the Scottish Government has in this area. Everyone will recognise that the issue needs to be worked through fully as proposals are developed. In broad terms, immigration is reserved, while integration and transport are devolved. We understand that the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Executive are both considering the question of providing travel support to asylum seekers, and we are liaising with both on shared interests in this matter.

Finally, I want to highlight the issue of funding. That has two dimensions, the first of which is how the Scottish Government might fund what would amount to a recurring annual cost. It is estimated that extending the concessionary travel scheme to all people seeking asylum in Scotland could cost between £1.3 million and £3.2 million annually. The variation in the estimates is due to uncertainty around the expected take-up of the scheme and potential levels of patronage, and it will increase if more asylum seekers are dispersed here, as is planned by the Home Office. The budgetary pressures in this financial year are such that there is currently no funding to support that proposal, although the other issues to be worked through would, in any case, be unlikely to be resolved fully in the same period.

**Paul Sweeney:** I thank the minister for giving way on that point, and I recognise some of the complexities around having no recourse to public funds, although JustRight Scotland has offered helpful legal advice in that regard, which I hope the minister and her officials have noted.

Is the minister happy to share the detail of the different proposed models so that we can all have sight of what is being proposed and the detailed working of the costings?

**Fiona Hyslop:** I note the first point and I will come back to the second point.

The second dimension of funding is what effect any proposed provision in this area from the Scottish Government could have on current UK Government support for asylum seekers, which has been flagged up by Mr Sweeney's intervention. It might also affect the small notional travel element of that support. Members will know that the Home Office is responsible for providing asylum support payments. The Scottish Government has no control over the rate applied.

I know that members and others would like an immediate answer to all those points. That is not

possible now, but I assure you that we are actively working through them.

The Scottish Government is clear that people seeking asylum should be supported to integrate from day 1 of arrival. That principle has been set out in the pioneering approach of the new Scots refugee integration strategy for the past decade.

The Scottish Government has repeatedly called for the UK Government, which is responsible for decisions on asylum, including dispersal policy, to ensure that the financial element of support that is provided to people who are seeking asylum reflects the real costs of daily life, including digital access and travel costs.

Historically, the UK Government settled people in and around Glasgow and a support infrastructure has grown in that area over the years. However, the Home Office introduced a full dispersal policy in 2022, presuming that asylum accommodation could be procured in any local authority across the UK, and asylum dispersal is now taking place outside Glasgow.

Therefore, if there is a greater need to help with travel to access essential support services, such as legal advice on applications, that will need to be provided across all areas of Scotland, if we are serious about supporting every asylum seeker to integrate into society and feel at home in our communities from the day that they arrive.

I thank all the contributors to today's debate. I have discussed the issue with Emma Roddick—the Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees—and we agreed that, despite not having all the levers that we would wish to be available and some of the complexities that I have touched on, we are determined to continue to explore every avenue to provide the support that people who are seeking asylum in Scotland so obviously need, to help them in their journey in Scotland and to have a better future.

However, I must stress that we must consider unintended consequences that could potentially cause more difficulties than would be resolved for those who we want to help.

I am meeting representatives of Maryhill Integration Network and partner organisations, including the VOICES Network, JustRight Scotland and the Scottish Refugee Council, on 14 November to hear first hand about the lived experience of people who are seeking asylum and located in Scotland.

I will be extending an invitation to interested MSPs to discuss the issue in more detail with Emma Roddick and me. I look forward to working with you all to put in place the right support for those who come to Scotland seeking safety.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Thank you, minister. That concludes this debate, and I suspend the meeting until 2.30 pm.

13:33

*Meeting suspended.*

14:30

*On resuming—*

## Portfolio Question Time

### Education and Skills

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur):** Good afternoon, colleagues. The first item of business this afternoon is portfolio question time, and the portfolio on this occasion is education and skills. Anybody who wishes to ask a supplementary question should press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question.

#### Pay Awards in Schools (Discussions with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

**1. Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government when it last met COSLA to discuss pay awards in schools. (S6O-02632)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth):** I am advised that the Minister for Local Government Empowerment and Planning met COSLA on 24 October. Local government pay was discussed at that meeting.

It is important that I reaffirm that the workers who are involved in this dispute are local government employees, not teachers, so it is not a specific education dispute and I am not directly involved in the negotiations. Negotiations on local government pay are, rightly, between COSLA, as the representative of the employer, local government and the trade unions that represent the workforce. Nevertheless, I have an agreement with COSLA that we will work together to ensure that any disruption to learning is avoided as far as possible in the event of further industrial action.

I will be meeting COSLA ahead of further planned industrial action next week; similarly, I met COSLA prior to the previous action.

**Claire Baker:** The cabinet secretary will know that, although the GMB and Unite the union voted in favour of the offer from COSLA, Unison staff overwhelmingly voted to reject it, and members are beginning a rolling programme of strikes in various regions, including Fife. Even the unions that accepted the offer have stated that the negotiating process fuelled “uncertainty and mistrust” and that the revised offer should have been put

“on the table months ago”.

I hear what the cabinet secretary says about her involvement in the discussions with COSLA, but I would like an update on what the Government is doing to try to resolve the current dispute. Something that is purely within her remit is workforce planning. Will she give an update on

what work the Government is doing to ensure that there is proper workforce planning in schools?

**Jenny Gilruth:** I welcome the news that, as Claire Baker outlined, GMB and Unite the union members voted to accept the deal. Negotiations remain on-going in relation to the wider challenges with Unison. I am aware that council leaders are due to meet tomorrow in that regard.

As I outlined, my focus is on ensuring consistency in how our local authorities engage when industrial action happens in their area. I met COSLA regularly to discuss that point in the run-up to the previous action, and I was clear about the need for us to have a joint understanding of what that should look like. My expectation was that most schools should have remained open at that time, subject to a school-by-school risk assessment, which is the responsibility of local authorities. We had an agreed form of wording—I do not think that I need to read it out today, but I can share it with the member—which was shared with the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland. That was really important in ensuring consistency.

More broadly, I work regularly with COSLA on the challenge relating to workforce planning. I have asked the strategic board for teacher education to look more holistically at how we can plan better with regard to workforce planning. I look forward to engaging with COSLA on that point and on the issues relating to school closures when we next meet.

**Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP):** How does investment in school education in Scotland compare with that in other parts of the United Kingdom?

**Jenny Gilruth:** Independent research conducted by the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that, in 2022-23, school spending per pupil in Scotland was more than £8,500. That is more than 18 per cent, or £1,300, higher than the level in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, where spending was about £7,200 per pupil.

We have the highest spending per pupil, the lowest pupil to teacher ratio and the best-paid teachers in the UK—all of that in the face of more than a decade of austerity from the UK Government and further cuts. That is what we have been able to achieve with one hand tied behind our back. Imagine what we could have achieved with the full powers of independence.

#### Post-school Learning

**2. Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what progress it is making on implementing the recommendations on the skills delivery landscape in the report, “Fit for the Future: developing a post-

school learning system to fuel economic transformation". (S6O-02633)

**The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey):** The programme for government sets out our plans for implementing reform of our education and skills bodies and putting the voices of children, young people and adult learners at their core.

On post-school learning, James Withers's report was an important milestone in developing our approach to reform. We have been clear that we accept the direction of travel that is set out in the report, but we will take a little bit of time to fully consider the recommendations and engage with stakeholders before updating the Parliament in the coming months on a set of actions. That is what we are actively doing.

**Kenneth Gibson:** Scottish ministers agree that parity of esteem across all qualifications is essential, with recognition needed of the importance of vocational skills. What is being done to deliver that message to our schools, young people and parents? How can we ensure that employers have greater input into skills development to ensure that the skills are available to fuel future economic growth?

**Graeme Dey:** As Kenny Gibson indicates, the theme of parity of esteem comes across strongly in the Withers report. It has also come across in my interactions with a host of interested parties, not least young people who have chosen to undertake apprenticeships.

The message is already being delivered in a number of ways in schools. The Developing the Young Workforce network and careers advisers are important conduits for making young people aware of the range of qualifications that are now available in the senior phase, including foundation apprenticeships, and enabling them to access the support that they need in order to make decisions on their next steps. However, there is more to be done, and the delivery of an enhanced national careers service, as we have in mind, will be central to that.

Employers will always have an important role to play in post-school education and skills development. Withers made important recommendations about strengthening that role, and I am considering how we best do that with a number of employer voices.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I will take a couple of brief supplementary questions.

**Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con):** It has been months since the Withers report was published and, as we heard yesterday, the Scottish Government has been largely silent on it.

Can the minister confirm whether the Government intends to implement recommendation 5, on establishing a single national funding body, and, if so, when?

**Graeme Dey:** I think that Liam Kerr equates what he terms as silence with inactivity. A great deal has been going on to develop our thinking on the matter. I note, and am sympathetic to, that specific recommendation from the Withers report. However, as Liam Kerr would expect, we are working through any potential unintended consequences that could flow from that. As we all do in this chamber, we want the best outcome for our learners.

**Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP):** Workplace learning is a critical part of ensuring that students maximise the value of what they learn in the classroom or lecture theatre. What is the Scottish Government doing in response to the Withers report to maximise the use of apprenticeships and other forms of workplace learning in the education system in order to support Scotland's economic growth aspirations?

**Graeme Dey:** I agree with Ivan McKee on the importance of workplace learning, which I would like to see more of, building on the work of careers advisers and, in particular, DYW networks in highlighting the range of opportunities available in the senior phase. I assure members that apprenticeships will continue to be front and centre of our work on not only reform but our whole post-school system. I am also keen to explore how, in conjunction with employers, we increase opportunities for work experience to help young people decide on the best career options for them.

### **Video Games Technology (Education and Skills Development)**

**3. Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on the potential role of emerging video games technology in education and skills development. (S6O-02634)

**The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey):** Digital technologies have been used to enhance teaching and learning experiences in Scotland for some time. When deployed effectively, digital technologies, including video game technology, have the potential to increase the engagement and motivation of learners and develop skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, collaboration and digital literacy. It is, of course, for teachers, schools and local authorities to decide whether and how to make use of all forms of digital technology to best effect.

**Clare Adamson:** Next week is the second annual Scottish games week. I urge colleagues to attend events at Dynamic Earth and Michael Marra's event in the Parliament, and to speak in my members' business debate.

The cultural, social and commercial value of the games sector is staggering. We need to embed the sector in public policy, because video games are used in so many instances, including in colleges and schools as well as in medical advances. Gaming forms part of so much that we do in society. How are the requirements of the games industry being embedded in our schools and colleges to ensure that we can truly meet our ambitions for Scotland as a digital nation?

**Graeme Dey:** We are in a period of rapid digital advancement and should consider what opportunities progress might offer for our respective interests. In education, delivery colleagues are already exploring how available and emerging technologies, including video game technology, might be used to enhance teaching and learning.

On a recent visit to the newly merged college in Stornoway, I saw for myself how students in schools across the vast area that that institution now covers were participating in remote learning as part of games-related courses being delivered by the college. On a tour of Abertay University, I was fascinated to see the learning that can be delivered by games technology—fascinated, I should add, as a 60-year-old whose most recent interaction with games tech was probably playing Space Invaders. In all seriousness, the learners of today are far more acquainted with such technology than someone of my vintage, and we would be missing a trick not to seize the opportunities that it presents in education.

**Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** The minister should not knock Space Invaders.

It is a great pleasure to follow on from Clare Adamson's advert about next week. Development companies can offer much, in relation to science, technology, engineering and mathematics education, directly to our schools. I think of the work of 4J Studios—which is based in East Linton in East Lothian, with a small outreach office somewhere in Dundee—and its interaction with primary school and secondary school pupils. Can the minister outline what work is being done to facilitate individual industry players to work in schools?

**Graeme Dey:** As we move out of the territory of Space Invaders, which I was by no means knocking, I am coming out of my comfort zone—this is more in the space of the cabinet secretary.

**The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth):** I have not played Space Invaders. [*Laughter.*]

**Graeme Dey:** I meant in the context of primary schools, cabinet secretary.

It would be reasonable to expect that we will do as much as we can to encourage such work. I will be happy to write to Martin Whitfield in greater detail.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Let us move on before there are ministerial splits.

### **Violence in Schools (Nutrition and Behaviour)**

**4. Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of any link between nutrition and behaviour in its work to address violence in schools. (S6O-02635)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth):** The Scottish Government's programme for government restates our commitment to ensuring that our young people have access to the right nutrition, and we will continue to work with partners to ensure that that is realised.

The latest behaviour in Scottish schools research, which is being published in November, will provide teachers' insights into factors that may underlie behaviour in our schools. We are also currently working with Young Scot and YouthLink Scotland to understand the impact of the cost of living crisis on young people's readiness to learn. The Scottish Government will consider those findings carefully to identify any actions that should be taken to address the concerns that have been raised.

**Monica Lennon:** I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for her response and for recently meeting me and the Scottish Trades Union Congress women's committee to discuss some of these issues.

Today, I was pleased to attend an event in Parliament, sponsored by Jim Fairlie MSP, celebrating Scotland's school meals and front-line caterers. Speeches by Assist FM and Food for Life Scotland reinforced the importance of feeding and nourishing young minds.

With the national good food nation plan coming to consultation, does the cabinet secretary agree that the roll-out of universal free school meals has never been more important? Can she update Parliament on when universal free school meals will be piloted in secondary schools?

**Jenny Gilruth:** I thank the member for her question. We had a really worthwhile meeting with the STUC a few weeks ago, at which we

discussed the issue of school nutrition. I touched on some of the work that I hope to take forward with Mairi Gougeon in the space of the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022, recognising the opportunities that the act provides us to ensure that there is appropriate nutrition in our schools, particularly in relation to our roll-out of free school meals, as the member has touched on.

We have recently established a joint ministerial working group on food, which will enable us to have a cross-Government approach to those matters. I specifically asked for there to be an agenda item that relates to school nutrition. That is in addition to some of our broader work that supports the food for life programme, which aims to increase the amount of healthy, locally sourced food that is served by local councils and schools, and which currently operates in 17 local authorities. That provides another option to work more closely with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities in relation to the 2022 act.

The member asked for an update on the secondary school pilot. I do not yet have a date for its roll-out, but I am more than happy to write to the member on that. We discussed the pilot in some detail when we met recently.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** There are a couple of supplementaries.

**Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP):** The roll-out of universal free school meals for all pupils in primaries 1 to 5 and in additional support needs education settings has been startling. Will the cabinet secretary provide an update on the uptake of free school meals in general?

**Jenny Gilruth:** The Government is pleased that we can support families at this very difficult and challenging time through our free school meals scheme. I can confirm that our latest pupil census shows that more than half of pupils are now registered for free school meals, with the proportion of eligible pupils increasing to just over 70 per cent. I would like to see that figure increase, so we will continue to work with COSLA on ensuring that that happens.

This year's healthy living survey also found that 2,301 free school lunches were provided to children and young people on survey day. That represents an increase on the previous high of free school lunches that were provided in 2022. However, again, I am keen to work with COSLA to ensure that we see a continued increase across the piece.

We recognise that uptake has been impacted by changes in relation to behaviour at school as a result of the pandemic, but undoubtedly there is more work to be undertaken with COSLA on increasing that figure further.

**Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** Not only is good nutrition linked to tackling violence in school, it is also linked to physical and mental health, attainment and the prevention of malnutrition—I am sure that we are all fed up of seeing queues of schoolchildren outside the chip shop at lunchtime. It is not just about ensuring high-quality school meals, but about encouraging the uptake of school meals, which is too low, especially in urban areas.

What will the Scottish Government do to promote and encourage school meals uptake?

**Jenny Gilruth:** I thank the member for his question. I recognise his interest, particularly in relation to physical exercise and the impact that that can have on raising attainment more broadly.

I provided an update in response to Michelle Thomson's question. The proportion of eligible pupils has increased to around 70.4 per cent. However, we will need to do more to work with local authorities, particularly in urban areas. I recall the chip van that used to be parked outside the school when I was at school, so it is not a new problem that schools are facing.

It is imperative that we engage directly with local authorities and headteachers who know our school communities and can put in place the encouragement that is needed to see a further increase in the uptake of school meals.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Question 5 has been withdrawn.

### Vaping in Schools (Ministerial Discussions)

**6. Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills has had with ministerial colleagues regarding action to reduce instances of vaping in schools. (S6O-02637)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth):** We remain concerned about the proportion of young people who are using vaping products. Scottish Government officials in the education and health and social care portfolios are working together to ensure that we take a holistic approach to tackling vaping in schools.

We are also working with Education Scotland and public and third sector partners to support work on substance use education. Future work will be informed by insights from our forthcoming behaviour in Scottish schools research, which, as I alluded to in a previous response, will be published next month. We would expect local authorities to work with schools to ensure appropriate measures are in place to deal with incidents of vaping.

**Maurice Golden:** We know that underage vaping is widespread, but we do not know how prevalent it is in our school system. Analysis that I conducted at the start of the year revealed that at least 22 local authorities were unable to provide information on vapes being confiscated from pupils. What information does the Scottish Government hold on the problem, and how many schools are now recording that information consistently?

**Jenny Gilruth:** On the evidence that we hold on the issue, although the most recent survey of young people's substance use shows that the majority of teenagers do not vape regularly, we are concerned about the proportion of young people who have tried vaping. We know that the majority of pupils agree, or would strongly agree, that their school has given them the advice and support that they need to make important decisions about drinking, alcohol, smoking and drugs. However, more broadly, I think that there is further action that we can take.

The member will recognise that there is a split in responsibilities in health and education. Education Scotland is taking forward further work to that end at the national level. I would, however, be more than keen to see the data that the member has gathered on the topic, as I have not had sight of it. More, broadly, he has raised a really important topic.

In my initial response to the member, I alluded to the behaviour in Scottish schools research, which will tap into some of the behaviour change that has happened in our schools, particularly since the pandemic. I would be happy to meet the member to talk about the issue in more detail, recognising that it is a challenge in our schools at the current time.

**Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):** We know that the colourful packaging, cheap price and easy accessibility of vaping products confirms that they are targeted at our younger population, almost one in 10 of those who vape are thought to be under the age of 16, and the health implications are still not known. Urgent action is required. Will the cabinet secretary update members on any discussions that have been had with schools and local authorities about stores that sell those products within the vicinity of schools, to work towards ensuring that youth vaping, particularly in the school setting, is reduced and eradicated?

**Jenny Gilruth:** The enforcement of the legislation on the sale and purchase of those products is carried out by local councils as part of the enhanced tobacco sales enforcement programme, which is overseen by the Society of Chief Officers of Trading Standards in Scotland and funded by the Scottish Government.

Last year, we wrote to all retailers who sell nicotine vapour products to remind them of their responsibilities to comply with legislation on the sale of those products—the member made an important point about the targeting of young people in that space. More broadly, we encourage anyone who has information about suppliers who might be providing vapes to underage young people to contact trading standards.

There is, however, a challenge in relation to some of the legislation. We are keen to work across the UK to take a four-nations approach to tackling the issue more broadly. As I alluded to in my response to Maurice Golden, there is a separation between the educational responsibilities and those of the health directorate. I will continue to work with my colleagues in the health directorate to ensure that the Government takes a consistent approach to dealing with the issue.

### **Secondary School Teachers (Action on Numbers)**

**7. Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to increase the number of new secondary school teachers. (S6O-02638)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth):** The Scottish Government is committed to supporting the recruitment of more teachers, and we are providing £145.5 million in this year's budget to protect increased teacher numbers and support staff across all local councils.

We work with partners to promote teaching as a highly rewarding career and the opportunity to make a difference to the lives of children and young people. The aim of that work is to improve recruitment and retention and to attract more highly qualified individuals into teaching in areas and subjects where they are needed most.

In addition, the strategic board for teacher education, which is made up of a range of key education stakeholders, is looking in detail at issues around the recruitment and retention of teachers in Scotland.

**Jamie Greene:** The cabinet secretary must be disappointed that, last year, more than 800 vacancies went unfilled in our secondary schools. There is widespread concern about the lack of science, technology, engineering and mathematics teachers, particularly in rural areas. The golden hello, which is aimed at addressing shortages of rural teachers, has reaped disappointingly low levels of interest and take-up. Why is the Government struggling to meet its own targets for recruiting into secondary schools? More important, what reassurances can the Government offer



parents and pupils that they will not be facing reduced subject choice because there are simply not enough teachers available to teach certain subjects?

**Jenny Gilruth:** I recognise Jamie Greene's interest in the area. I know that he has asked a number of written parliamentary questions recently. He mentioned the golden hello. I declare an interest, having ticked the box back in 2008 and gone to Elgin for a year to teach. The preference waiver payment provides probationary teachers with an additional payment, as the member has alluded to.

More broadly, there has been a change in relation to how people engage with the system. I held a round-table meeting with probationers just before parliamentary recess and heard from them a number of different approaches to how they regard their employment, with people perhaps being less likely to move than they might have been in the past. We need to recognise that challenge, particularly in relation to Jamie Greene's points on specific subjects.

We have a teaching bursary scheme, which gives bursaries of up to £20,000 for career changers wishing to undertake a one-year postgraduate qualification in the hard-to-fill STEM subjects that Jamie Greene alluded to, including physics, maths, technical education, computing, science, chemistry and home economics. That scheme has been extended to include Gaelic as a secondary subject and Gaelic medium across all secondary subjects and at primary level.

It is worth my while to point out that, since December 2014, the number of schoolteachers in Scotland has increased by 8 per cent. However, I recognise that there are subject-specific challenges, particularly in secondary schools. I have commissioned the strategic board for teacher education to look at the issue in further detail and to provide me with greater advice on how we can support the challenge.

**Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP):** Alongside the work to increase teaching numbers, retention is a key matter, which I think the cabinet secretary has alluded to. What further work is the Scottish Government undertaking to promote and support retention across Scotland's teaching profession?

**Jenny Gilruth:** The retention of teachers is absolutely key. Undoubtedly, the historic pay settlement that was reached earlier this year will go some way towards showing our teachers how valued they are in Scotland, but we are also working with our partners to promote teaching as a highly rewarding career, with, as I mentioned in my initial response, the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of our young people. The

aim of that work is to improve recruitment, as well as—in relation to Audrey Nicoll's question—retention, and to attract more highly qualified individuals into teaching to make a difference in our classrooms.

In addition, as I mentioned in my response to Jamie Greene, the strategic board for teacher education is looking in detail at issues around the recruitment and retention of teachers in Scotland. I am looking to work with our teaching unions on that issue more broadly to consider how we can work together to encourage more people into teaching.

**Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab):** The Institution of Engineering and Technology has highlighted some of the problems that it is seeing in finding STEM teachers. I welcome the cabinet secretary's comments about bursaries. However, in that organisation's report, it asked for a review of those bursaries, because they are not attracting people who work in STEM sectors to change careers and go into teaching. What more can the cabinet secretary do to attract those people into teaching?

**Jenny Gilruth:** Pam Duncan-Glancy raises an important point. She has touched on some of the additionality that we have provided, which I outlined in my response to Jamie Greene. There have been historical challenges in a number of different subjects over a number of years. For example, there are gender divides in the teaching of physics and maths, and we need to be cognisant of that and encourage more women into the teaching of those subjects and more generally.

I am more than happy to meet Pam Duncan-Glancy to talk about opportunities in this regard. Although I will not commit to a review while on my feet today, I am more than happy to look at the issue in a bit more detail. In our secondary school recruitment process specifically, there are gaps in certain subject areas, and we need to be cognisant that different action will be needed to respond to those challenges accordingly.

#### **City of Glasgow College (Industrial Dispute)**

**8. Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on any discussions between the City of Glasgow College senior management and trade union representatives regarding the on-going industrial dispute. (S6O-02639)

**The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey):** Although colleges are responsible for operational decisions on resourcing and staffing, the Government expects the principles of fair work to be at the heart of decision making, and I have written to all college principals to make that clear. I

expect every effort to be made, in consultation with the campus trade unions, to protect jobs.

On the City of Glasgow College specifically, I have engaged with the chair of the Glasgow Colleges Regional Board, which has governance oversight on the situation at the college. In addition, the Scottish Government has regular meetings with College Employers Scotland and representatives of campus trade unions, at which workforce issues are discussed, including the issues at the City of Glasgow College.

**Kaukab Stewart:** I have been contacted by numerous students, parents and staff while the dispute has been on-going. The continued impasse, which has led to further strike action, has caused disruption to students' educational experience, and it has the potential to do severe damage to the reputation of the college. What additional powers does the minister have to intervene on the matter? Does he agree that now is the time to step in and exercise those powers in any way that he can to help to bring about a resolution?

**Graeme Dey:** As I have already outlined, workforce issues relating to redundancy and severance are operational matters for the colleges to consider. Ministers have no locus to intervene.

I have also made it clear in all my discussions with the sector that, when it comes to workforce matters, fair work must be the guiding light. In my engagement with the chair of the Glasgow Colleges Regional Board, I sought assurances that fair work principles have been followed at the City of Glasgow College and that impacts on learning and students have been considered in decision making.

I think that we can all agree that industrial relations at the college are extremely poor. As Kaukab Stewart has mentioned, that undoubtedly has a detrimental effect on students. I hope that she will be interested to learn that Education Scotland has commenced a planned thematic review of all three colleges in Glasgow, which will cover, among other things, governance and management. If—I stress the word “if”—that activity were to highlight any areas of concern, it would be open to the Scottish Funding Council to take an interest in such matters.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Given that we have a bit of time over the course of the afternoon, I will take a brief supplementary from Willie Rennie.

**Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** The industrial dispute at the City of Glasgow College is symptomatic of the wider deep-rooted problems that we have in the college sector. As the minister prepares for the budget process for next year, where do colleges fit within his priorities? Will he

review the Government's policy of no compulsory redundancies and bring that policy to the college sector?

**Graeme Dey:** I respect Willie Rennie's position on the matter. His underlying message is that we must find more money for colleges. Of course, what we never hear from Opposition members is where we could find that money from. I accept that not having to answer that is a luxury that Opposition members have.

Of course colleges are a priority for us. As Willie Rennie well knows, the issue here is not simply about the budget process; it is also about how we engage with the colleges. He knows that we have been doing a lot of work on flexibilities for colleges to enable them to have a bit of scope to create a more sustainable situation in the immediate term until we can get them into a stronger position.

With regard to the policy of no compulsory redundancies, the position on that has not changed. I hope that Willie Rennie accepts that. It is not the case that colleges have been removed from that policy; they have always been where they are now. I hope that that answers his question.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** That concludes portfolio question time. There will be a brief pause before we move to the next item business to allow for a changeover of front-bench members.

## Embedding Public Participation in the Work of the Parliament

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing):** The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-10765, in the name of Jackson Carlaw, on behalf of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, on embedding public participation in the work of the Parliament. I advise members that we have some time in hand this afternoon, so there will be plenty of time for lots of interventions.

I invite Jackson Carlaw to open the debate on behalf of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee.

14:59

**Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con):** It is some considerable time since I was last invited to lead a debate in what, during my salad days in this Parliament, our then chief whip David McLetchie used to refer to as “the graveyard shift” and for which I routinely had a season ticket in those early days. I am thrilled and delighted to see so many people here this afternoon to embrace the concept of the committee’s report. In those days, I used to be unrelentingly jolly as a matter of principle, if only to keep myself awake until 5 o’clock, so I will be suitably jolly throughout this afternoon’s proceedings.

I begin by welcoming to the gallery some of those who participated in the citizens panel that we held and who were witnesses to the committee or advised us during the drafting of the report. I thank the clerks, Lynn Tullis and Andrew Mylne, who is also at the back of the chamber. I also thank Alanis McQuillen, Miriam Dornan and Wojciech Krakowiak—who has recently left us—who were fantastically helpful on what Martin Whitfield and Richard Leonard called, rather ungenerously, the committee’s “world tour”, as we sought to establish what the practice of deliberative democracy was in Paris, Belgium and Dublin.

I am here on a mission to sell to you the principle of public participation in our democracy, because I believe that the implications of the report could lead to a profound change in the way that democracy operates in Scotland and to the way in which the public, in the widest sense, are able to engage in parliamentary life.

The work did not begin during this session of Parliament, although we have been working on it for 18 months, since citizen participation was added to remit of the public petitions committee, but in the previous session, because the suggestion of participative democracy arose from

the then Presiding Officer Ken Mackintosh’s commission for parliamentary reform, which was adopted by Parliament at that time. It is during this session of Parliament—because of Covid and for other reasons—that the investigation into that work has been taken forward.

I will first say what the inquiry involved. Two initial surveys gathered views from the public, organisations and academics. We established a citizens panel here in the Parliament—I will say more about that. We took feedback from that panel and recommendations from the public, from focus groups, from members and their staff and from committee conveners. I remember that the conveners were able to go round the wall of a room, deciding which of the recommendations on display they liked the most and which they did not like at all. We rejected the one that they did not like at all, which was that a citizens panel should be set up to consider an MSP code of conduct. I wonder why they were so unenthusiastic about that.

In doing that, we worked out how deliberative democracy has operated elsewhere in the places where it has been quite successful. We would not be the first Parliament to adopt that. We would be one of the early adopters, but other Parliaments in Ireland, Paris and Brussels have adopted it quite successfully.

It is fair to say that the committee went on a journey. Any members who heard my contribution to a recent debate on whether the establishment of commissioners creates, almost by default, a fresh level of government in Scotland will appreciate that some of us on the committee were concerned that we might be embedding into our process something that might undermine democracy, rather than enhance it. The reasons for that may not be immediately apparent. It is just as legitimate for people not to participate as it is for them to participate, but would greater weight be given to those who do than to those who do not, and might that skew the outcomes for communities? We went on a journey, but it is fair to say that all members of the committee became persuaded, during the course of our work, that that was a good thing for us to do.

Various themes emerged from our citizens panel. Many of its members had never participated in anything before. They were drawn randomly, by an external agency, to reflect different demographics and not to be the “usual suspects” as we sometimes, rather unkindly, describe those who participate in the work of our committees. Interestingly, for those who had never participated before, the process was also a journey for them. Many did not realise that there was a difference between Parliament and Government. I think that

we often overestimate the public's understanding of the Parliament's role in our natural democracy.

We also wanted to see the experience of others in action, which is why we went to Ireland, where, interestingly, the subjects for citizens panels are debated in election manifestos so that they have a legitimacy if the mandate for the Government is there. Because Ireland has so much of its social legislation embedded in its constitution, the process can sometimes end in a referendum.

In Paris, the city authority has set up a citizens panel. I think that it will correct its practice, because it brought 100 people into a room and asked them what they wanted to talk about, only to find that 100 complete strangers were not very sure, so they went back to the city authority. The danger of that was that they were then debating an issue for which there was perhaps not an electoral mandate.

We also spoke to the Parliament of Brussels, which has embedded deliberative democracy in its committee processes. It brought together a committee of about 60, with 45 laypeople and 15 politicians, and they all looked at one other with great suspicion. The 15 thought, "We're very important people. We've been elected. Why should we listen to you?" The 45, in turn, said, "Well, we know what we're talking about. You don't." Since they got over that hurdle, it has actually led to very informed and constructive underpinning of the legislation that is going through the Parliament. I think that we saw the advantage of that.

**John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):** I have not been on the committee so I have not been in the discussions, but I am interested in the relationship between people who are elected and people who represent a cross-section of society but are not elected. How do the member and the committee see the balance between the two?

**Jackson Carlaw:** I think that the committee very much feels that citizens panels that are led by Governments and people's panels, which is what we are recommending in the Parliament, should be there to serve the debate and consideration of the elected representatives, not to act as a separate imperative for action to take place.

Interestingly, what came out of our meetings with the people who had participated in Paris and Dublin—and, indeed, here—is that the key thing is feedback. People want to have feedback. They are perfectly prepared to be told that we are not going to do something if it is explained to them why we are not going to do it. That was very instructive. Whether we like it or not, the lesson for many people who have participated in national public consultations or initiatives such as this has been that, if they have ever come up with anything

awkward, the lead authority has then buried the whole thing rather than having to discuss it. The cumulative effect of that is a sort of suspicion and a cynicism about whether there was really any genuine endeavour to consider what the people who participated in the panel actually thought. Feedback is the key, but there is an understanding that it should be the national Parliament that ultimately makes key decisions.

**Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):** I am fascinated by the member's discourse. We have had an opportunity to discuss the subject in the Conveners Group. From the experience of the world tour, are there particular types of issues that lend themselves to citizens panels? How do those relate to budgetary issues? The debates that we have here often involve people saying, "That's a great idea, but how are you going to pay for it?"

**Jackson Carlaw:** In Ireland, the key initial citizens panel was focused on the issue of the legalisation of abortion. It was fascinating to meet many of the 100 people who had participated in that. They had been on quite a journey, because there was a fact-based secretariat that underpinned everybody's opinion, and there were no bad opinions. That led to a significant change and subsequent recommendations. It was not necessarily a budgetary consideration in that instance. In Paris, it was about issues relating to the rental sector and green spaces in the city. In Brussels, it was different again, because it was underpinning the various committees that were reporting.

We have made recommendations to the Government and we have had constructive discussions with the Minister for Parliamentary Business. Of course there are budgetary concerns. It can cost £1 million to £2 million to host a full citizens panel of maybe 100 people that is sustained over time. However, the report goes on to recommend what Parliament can do. We think that Parliament has a role to take forward in extending deliberative democracy and we recommend in our report that, within budgets that already exist, pilots take place in the balance of the current session—one on an issue of post-legislative scrutiny and one on an issue of interest that a people's panel of about 20 to 30 people could constructively report on before going back to the lead committee with their evidence, in order for that to be taken forward.

We would not want to involve politicians in that panel—again, we would want its members to be randomly drawn from the public—but we believe that the pilots would give the Parliament a real sense of how the process could work. I believe, and I am convinced, that we would seek to embed that into parliamentary life in the Parliaments of the future. There are lots of other issues—

**Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP)**  
rose—

**Jackson Carlaw:** I think that I am out of time.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I can give you more time, Mr Carlaw.

**Michelle Thomson:** I would like to make a comment on post-legislative scrutiny. The Parliament is still struggling with that, for good reason, because of the complexity and the multiple variables whereby decisions are made about policies where there are reserved and devolved powers and so on. How much more deeply did the committee look at the type of post-legislative scrutiny that might be appropriate for a citizens assembly?

**Jackson Carlaw:** I do not think that we went through all the different issues. What I can say is that, in anticipation of members embracing the principle in the debate, the Parliament's participation and communications team—PACT—which has been established and is now really experienced and effective, came forward with two suggestions that went to the Conveners Group. That group has embraced one of the suggestions as being the subject that a pilot on the issue might take forward. I do not have the actual provision in front of me, but it relates to previous climate change legislation, on which the group thinks a piece of post-legislative scrutiny would be effective.

I will try to draw my remarks to a conclusion. There are lots of other recommendations in the report that I know will be brought out in the summary later on, particularly some relating to the Presiding Officer's role and responsibilities. Fools rush in where angels fear to tread, though. *[Laughter.]* We were slightly more reluctant to be too prescriptive on all that.

Even as someone whom members might imagine to be sceptical about such initiatives and endeavours, I say that we genuinely saw things that would allow Scotland to evolve its own model. All the different ones that we saw were quite distinct. It is not that we are suggesting that we embrace one of them. Nor are we suggesting a legislative route, because I think that what we in Scotland might want could evolve through our own experience. Let us, as a Parliament, embrace the principle of all that, have pilots and then work to see what the most effective way of involving people in Scotland in the life of our democracy would be. So many more people than ever before wish to have that opportunity. I hope that this afternoon we can begin the process of allowing that to happen.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee's 2nd Report, 2023 (Session 6), Embedding Public Participation in the Work of the Parliament (SP Paper 427), including its responses to the recommendations of the Citizens' Panel on participation; agrees with the Committee's recommendation that the Parliament establish two further citizens' panels (or people's panels) in the current parliamentary session with a view to making the use of such panels a regular feature of committee scrutiny from Session 7 onwards; endorses the Committee's recommended principles for the future use of deliberative democracy and its recommendations for panel size, composition and participant selection, and acknowledges the work already being done by Parliament staff to develop and improve engagement methods.

15:12

**The Minister for Parliamentary Business**

**(George Adam):** I thank Jackson Carlaw for his excellent speech. I appreciated his tone, and he summed up perfectly what we are all trying to achieve. He does not need to sell the idea to me. He has given us many examples of why public participation is a good thing for us to adopt. It will be a way of helping us to deal with the many challenges, difficulties and decisions that we face and, at the same time, to find out exactly what the public—the people whom we serve—want from us, with Parliament then making the decisions.

I commend the committee and the Parliament's participation and communities team for the thorough work that they have undertaken to produce the report and its recommendations. As Jackson Carlaw said, its publication marks an important milestone for the Scottish Parliament as it considers how it will meaningfully and practically involve the public in its work. I commend, too, the approach that the committee has taken to the public participation inquiry and, in particular, the world tour that Mr Carlaw took us through. I was obviously on the wrong committees when I was a back bencher, and I have the wrong job now. Apparently, they have tour T-shirts and jackets to sell, as well as the idea of public participation.

All the stuff that came from the committee was considered and balanced, and it has produced a timeline of viable next steps. I am pleased that the report and its recommendations have also been framed with the longer-term view in mind. The core principles outlined by the committee place transparency, accountability and inclusivity at the centre of its vision for the Parliament's move towards a more participatory system. That is easy for me to say, Presiding Officer.

The report is an important step in improving our democratic infrastructure. I welcome the committee's proposal to work towards establishing the use of more citizens panels as well as a good

practice model and an accountability framework for use across the Parliament's scrutiny work.

The Scottish Government is also committed to putting in place standards, values and practices to guarantee high-quality participation. The Scottish Government's vision for public participation is that people can be involved in the decisions that affect them, making Scotland a more inclusive, sustainable and successful place. In our response to the institutionalising participatory and deliberative democracy expert working group report, we outlined our intention to deliver that.

We have delivered a number of deliberative engagements. Probably the most well known are our two citizens assemblies, and we routinely run small-scale participatory engagements. For example, we ran a citizens jury on the proposed use of QCovid, a risk protection model for Covid-19 that draws on health data. A citizens jury works in a similar way to a people's panel, and that one helped us to understand how people in Scotland view the ethics of using such models. The in-depth process of learning and deliberation that took place around that citizens jury gave us a clear understanding of what the public do and do not find acceptable.

**Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** We heard from Jackson Carlaw about the challenge that exists in relation to the understanding of the separation between Parliament and Government. Does the minister see a potential flashpoint with regard to the public's understanding about what they are answering and how they are trying to help if the Government is participating with citizens assemblies or juries and the Parliament is doing the same thing?

**George Adam:** I take that on board. Obviously, the Government has to engage with the public to help them to understand what is going on, but I understand that there could be some confusion. As we move forward with the model, I am willing to find a way in which we can all work together to ensure that we get the job done, rather than all doing the same thing at the same time. In these challenging times, with budgetary constraints, it is important to think more wisely about how we use what we have got.

Our experience of the citizens jury that I mentioned shows how valuable the public considers evidence-based responses to be when tackling complex issues or taking difficult decisions.

As members know, the need to deal with complex issues and take difficult decisions has always been a part of the work of Government and it is an increasing feature today. Jackson Carlaw brought up a perfect example of how Ireland managed to deal with the discussion around the

abortion issue. There are various issues that are of note in this Parliament at this time, and we might need to think about how we can use such mechanisms to deal with them, too.

What will be important to the success of Parliament's work in that regard will be our ability to ensure that those who are furthest from Government and whose voices are seldom heard are being listened to, and that that work is trauma informed. One thing that I always bring up with officials is the fact that I do not want to see the usual faces turning up. Those of us who have been councillors will have been involved in many of the smaller attempts at engagement with the public, and will be aware that, in a lot of cases, those events are attended by the same people all the time. I think that it is important to bring in people from all walks of life. Where is the young man or woman from Ferguslie Park or the east end of Glasgow? Where are the people from all walks of life, so that we can ensure that we are engaging properly with the public?

**Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):** The minister described some individuals as being seldom heard. Does he agree that it is not necessarily that they are seldom heard but that, often, they are found to be easy to ignore, and that Government and Parliament have a responsibility to make it easy for them to come to us?

**George Adam:** I totally agree. We need to find a way to make it easier for them to contact us. It can be intimidating for people to approach Parliament, MSPs or other elected officials, so we need to make the Parliament, the Government and ourselves more approachable. I note that the report outlines barriers to participation that the committee suggests that Parliament considers. I strongly encourage that as an area that we proactively pursue.

Listening to seldom-heard voices is fundamentally important if we want to ensure that the decisions that we make are fairer and better meet the needs of the people whom we serve. In the Scottish Government's experience, it is not just about the big policy issues or about one method of participation versus another; it is about how we, in all our roles, consider who is most affected by the policies and services that we design and find the best way to ensure that the voices of those people are included from the very beginning.

**Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP):** I am new to all this, and I am following the debate for the first time in the chamber. I am sticking around for it, and it is very interesting.

Mr Carlaw talked about people's panels, and the Government talked about citizens juries. However, people with lived experience are not necessarily a

representative cross-section of society. By definition, they are a specific cohort of people who are very easy to ignore. It is vital that we engage with people with lived experience on social security and addiction issues. Where does lived experience fit in with people's panels and citizens juries? Is that a third layer?

**George Adam:** I thank Mr Doris for sticking around for the debate.

Mr Doris has accurately hit the nail on the head when it comes to why we should ensure that everything is accessible to everyone. My officials will tell members that I constantly challenge them to say who is coming, who we are engaging with, who we are talking with, what the benefit is and how they can help. The whole idea is to ensure that the individuals whom we are talking about get the empowerment of being involved in the democratic process. That helps with many other discussions that Mr Doris and I have had about people engaging with us in elections, for example, because they see a reason for getting involved in the process.

**Jackson Carlaw:** It occurs to me to suggest to the minister and maybe helpfully to Mr Doris that, although the criteria for drawing people to participate would be random, the basis of those criteria can be determined if a particular panel was going to be held on a specific issue and it was felt that that would be fundamentally important to the consideration. That would be true about some issues, but not necessarily about others. The point is that we do not want the politicians to select the individuals who would participate. There should be a genuinely random representation, but that can be an informed representation if the issues so determine.

**George Adam:** I agree with that, too. Some issues will be very specific and will affect a certain cohort. We need to ensure that we get the best possible value from all the citizens assemblies or, in the Government's case, citizens juries. For clarity, citizens panels and citizens juries are, in effect, the same thing.

It is also important to ensure that participants' expenses and time are paid for so that no one faces financial barriers to getting involved. To that end, officials in the Scottish Government are finalising guidance on participant payment. I welcome the committee's view that the methods that are used for this work should be proportionate to the topic. The Scottish Government advocates that approach.

I also welcome the principles and aims outlined by the committee, which will enable people to be involved in the work of Parliament. We all share that vision with the committee.

It is important that we all take on the task of supporting a fairer and more successful and innovative democracy. The Scottish Government will seek to support the committee where that is helpful as it moves forward with its plans. The evidence is there for us to know that that is the path that we should actively follow. I look forward to hearing the views of others today as the committee starts to lay the foundations to create this new and exciting model for democracy in our Parliament.

15:22

**Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con):** As a relatively new member of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, I missed out on the world tour. However, I thank all those who participated in the committee's public participation inquiry. I particularly thank the 19 individuals who worked closely together over two weekends and in three remote online sessions in October and November 2022 for their thoughtful and helpful contributions, and the recommendations that they made to Parliament. A number of those recommendations are about the future use of deliberative democracy, for which I commend the panel. Any steps that the Parliament can take to promote greater public participation, and to amplify diverse views from communities across all parts of Scotland, should be encouraged.

The reality is that the Parliament and the MSPs in it hear from a limited cross-section of the population—usually those who are in the wider Holyrood bubble. They are people, interest groups and campaign groups that understand how the system works and how to bring influence to bear on the political process through responding to consultations and media campaigns, and engaging directly with MSPs. That does not mean that those people should not have a voice, but the views of the few are often seen as representative views of the public and, in many cases, the views of the few may not be the views of the wider public.

Furthermore, political parties often seek out those whose views align with their own, in order to push their own political agendas as being representative of the general public's views. One does not have to look too far back in the current session of Parliament to find examples of recent bills, or parts thereof, that have been passed into legislation that are completely out of step with the views of the general public or the interests of a particular community.

**John Mason:** Maurice Golden mentioned community. Does he agree with the panel's recommendation that

“community engagement by MSPs doesn’t exclude people that are outwith community groups”?

Sometimes those who appear to be community leaders do not actually represent the whole of their community.

**Maurice Golden:** Yes, I agree absolutely. It is about “community” in the widest possible sense. We have often engaged with community councils, for example, and although they do a fantastic job, in many cases, the same community leaders are often involved in many different interactions with elected officials and others.

The point of this process is to widen participation beyond leadership at every single level. That has to be the focus, so that Parliament hears from the people from whom we do not normally hear. If we cannot hear from them, we need to hear from the people who represent their views.

The process and outcomes from establishing the citizens panel have warranted Parliament’s taking a closer look at widening use of such panels. The committee’s recommendation that the Parliament run two more panels—one on an existing piece of legislation, and one on a current topic of interest—should be adopted. If they are deemed to be of value, a model for further use should be rolled out for the next session of Parliament.

Linked to the previous point about ensuring that the Parliament hears from and considers as wide a range of representative views as possible, it is crucial that we widen community engagement and raise awareness of the Scottish Parliament. On a previous committee visit, I found that there was confusion over the roles of committees, Parliament and Government, and that there is, in some cases, mistrust. As the Parliament enters its 25th year, that has to change.

In response to the panel’s recommendations in that area, I share the views of the committee that more can and should be done by Parliament to strengthen and widen its engagement with the public, while I also acknowledge the work that the Parliament is currently doing in the area and the clear steps forward that it has taken over the past few years.

With regard to highlighting specific recommendations from the panel, I will focus first on embedding the process of parliamentary democracy in schools. If the curriculum can be strengthened to do that, that would be a positive step. However, that has to be done with a focus on citizens’ participation and the role of Parliament, and must not be an attempt to push certain political views.

**Martin Whitfield:** Does Maurice Golden feel that young people across Scotland perhaps gained better knowledge and experience as a result of their interaction with the Parliament in the first two or three sessions than they do in the interactions that happen now? I do not mean simply because of Covid—our young people face more challenges, in the form of travel costs and overnight stays, even to visit Parliament. Those issues are raised with me by a lot of schools.

**Maurice Golden:** We are seeing that that is far more challenging—and particularly so for certain schools. It is not just about having teachers available; it is also about getting volunteers who might be required, and it is about the costs that are associated with visits.

I was almost, but not quite, still at school in 1999, so I do not have lived experience of that. We could, as a Parliament, look at how we might engage more with pupils and allow for more understanding and better access.

**Ruth Maguire:** That is the one area of the report that made me raise an eyebrow a little, because I wondered whether it was children themselves who had said that they needed more education on the Parliament. My experience from going out to schools has been that children often know how things work a lot better than many intelligent adults in my community do, because they are looking at democracy in the round and how the Parliament works.

**Maurice Golden:** That is a fair challenge; however, we can also do more to allow our young people access. Separately, for example, we are looking at how we can work more closely with the Scottish Youth Parliament. However, to go back to the leadership point that John Mason raised, we need to be cautious about whether its view is representative of the views of all young people.

**Bob Doris:** I am certainly being dragged into the debate. I declare an interest as a former modern studies teacher. In some secondary schools—not those in my constituency, I hasten to add—citizenship is passed to the modern studies department. If curriculum for excellence means anything, it means that citizenship is a whole-school endeavour. That is certainly so in primary schools, but it must also be the case in secondary schools, otherwise we focus citizenship education on young people who self-select by taking modern studies. It should be a whole-school, whole-community endeavour.

**Maurice Golden:** Certainly. That is almost the same as the point that the people who want to become politicians are the first whom we should not allow to do so. Such self-selection is part of the general thrust of the debate. We need to widen



such arrangements beyond students who are interested in modern studies.

I turn to the panel's recommendations on changes to how the Parliament works—specifically, recommendation 13, on answering questions. I have a lot of sympathy and strongly agree with the view that frustrations are caused when ministers fail or refuse to give straight answers to straight questions.

**John Mason:** Is the problem not that, sometimes, the question is not a straight question but a trap?

**Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP):** Hear, hear.

**Maurice Golden:** There are two sides to every coin. However, I can attest that a simple yes or no answer—if there is one—often suffices. If members look at the *Official Report*, they will see that I have on numerous occasions tried unsuccessfully to get such a response.

The panel suggested giving the Parliament's Presiding Officer more power to make sure that Scottish Government ministers give adequate answers to questions, although the committee noted that

“this could make the Presiding Officer's job more difficult and more political.”

I believe that there should be a way of improving on the current situation, and I agree with the committee that the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee should consider ways in which the Presiding Officer might be given the power to decide that a question has not been adequately answered.

**Jackson Carlaw:** It is interesting that, in the Irish Parliament, the Ceann Comhairle—the Speaker—has such discretion. The form of words is for the Speaker to say to the relevant minister that they have perhaps been a little let down by their civil servants in the comprehensiveness of the response that they have just given, and that they might like to add to it a little further. In fact, the existence of that power has meant that it has never had to be used, which is interesting. It is not necessarily the case that a Presiding Officer would require to intervene, but the knowledge that they could intervene has elsewhere led to sharper and more focused answers from ministers.

**Maurice Golden:** I thank Jackson Carlaw for that helpful contribution.

When it comes to respect, it should be customary practice for members—in particular, ministers—to accept at least one intervention. If it is not, we should change the term from “debate” to “the reading of speeches”—and, in due course, we

would probably end up being replaced by artificial intelligence.

**George Adam:** On debating, I understand where Maurice Golden is coming from. I, for one, tend always to take interventions—I took about half a dozen during my speech—but, on the whole, there is also the drama of Parliament to consider. As Maurice Golden's colleague Stephen Kerr used to say, it is not a quiet place. At times, when I am giving a speech and one of his colleagues is trying to get in, I might let them in not at that point but later. The Parliamentary debate that we are involved in is a living and flowing thing. It is not just a case of having to take one intervention, or two; there is the flow of the debate itself to consider.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** To speak of the flow of debate, I note that I appreciate that Mr Golden has been extremely generous in taking many interventions, but I urge him to focus now on bringing his interesting remarks to a close.

**Maurice Golden:** The power of the Presiding Officer is noted.

I completely agree with George Adam's point and I appreciate that some debates are short, which is why I suggested taking one intervention. It is incredibly frustrating when ministers in particular, and members more generally—I do not mean all of them—do not take at least one intervention, because debate is the chamber's purpose.

The committee's response to the citizens panel's recommendations on embedding public participation in the work of Parliament is an excellent starting point and needs to be explored further. There will be constraints and challenges in what Parliament can do, particularly in relation to costs, but as the subject develops over the months and years to come, we should all engage with it and approach it with an open mind.

15:35

**Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** It speaks to the power of Maurice Golden's speech that so many members intervened. Debate is about analysing points and opinions, so that we can show the people of Scotland that we are testing the Government and testing ideas. That is the fundamental principle behind why the Parliament is here—it is a people's Parliament that holds the Scottish Government to account on behalf of the people of Scotland.

I compliment the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on the report. More important, I compliment the citizens who took part in producing it. We have heard today about the interesting dichotomy between the desire to

participate and the power that the Parliament wants to give citizens to participate.

Parliament has cross-party groups and, as the minister pointed out, the Government continually seeks the public's opinion and views. However, what is embedded in the report is a vehicle that will allow citizens to genuinely participate before questions come to be decided by committees.

We have heard the view that we get the usual culprits. The report offers much more than that, because it considers a process for bringing together a random group of our citizens to solve issues that we cannot solve, which would remove the politics from some of those questions. The representative nature of such arrangements would ensure that we did not have people giving the same evidence to a different committee on the same question. The proposal is about genuinely asking people to help us, please, with a problem, because we cannot solve it, and perhaps we should not do that. We would take the conclusions and do what we do very well here through committees and through the chamber, which is analysing and considering how we would implement proposals and how they would work.

With the Deputy Presiding Officer's consent, I take off my party-political hat for one moment to deal with page 3 of the report, which levels a number of suggestions at the committee that I have the privilege to convene. I assure members in the chamber and—more important—the citizens who raised the issues that the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee will consider the suggestions. As Jackson Carlaw said, we will respond to those people and explain our decision on a number of points.

My next point is about the Presiding Officer's role. It is fascinating to follow what Maurice Golden said about that and the intervention on him from Jackson Carlaw about what happens elsewhere. The Presiding Officers sit where they do because we as members of the Parliament have chosen them not to referee our debates but to facilitate debates. Burdening the Presiding Officers with an evidential decision on whether something has or has not been answered, with the sparkingly light evidence that they will hear in a well-versed question or a potentially poorly versed answer, needs to be considered with a great deal of scepticism. That is not to say that the disappointment is not shared across two thirds of the chamber when questions are not answered, but I think that to alter the role of the person who sits in the Presiding Officer's chair would be dangerous.

**Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** It is an interesting point and I picked up on that, but how many times have we seen a minister stand up in the Parliament and answer the

question that they want to answer, not the one that has been asked? That is the crux—although not necessarily the depth—of the answer. Does Mr Whitfield agree that it would be useful for the Presiding Officer to instruct the minister to answer the question that they have been asked which, in most cases, has been through the chamber desk anyway?

**Ruth Maguire:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Martin Whitfield:** With the consent of the Deputy Presiding Officer, I am happy to take the second intervention and then try to answer the first.

**Ruth Maguire:** I appreciated what Martin Whitfield was saying about the Presiding Officer intervening, and the evidence—or lack thereof—that she would have to go on for that. I wonder whether there is also a bit about personal responsibility. Each individual member is responsible for their contribution. Asking someone else to come in and referee—to use his term—does not sit right.

**Martin Whitfield:** We heard earlier the concept of two sides of the same coin but, in each of those interventions, we have perhaps seen both ends of a rainbow. It is the personal responsibility of every member as an MSP—and, indeed, if they have additional responsibilities as minister, cabinet secretary or First Minister—to address the questions that they are given. In answer to Edward Mountain's intervention, I say that, yes, that is a frustration, but it is genuinely a frustration for anyone who seeks answers. Sometimes even primary school pupils get frustrated because their teacher will not answer the question that they think they are asking—the teacher is answering a different question.

It is worth highlighting the comment in the report that refers members again to the general conduct that is expected of MSPs and the fact that members must treat individuals—including other MSPs, of course—with courtesy and respect. That raises the interesting element of the responsibility of being a member of the Scottish Parliament—with the additional responsibility of being a minister or cabinet secretary—and who answers for that responsibility when people feel that they have strayed. I will go no further on that, other than to again reassure those citizens who raised that issue that the committee will look at it.

With the time being where it is, I will put my party-political hat back on. I will talk about the definition of deliberative democracy. I hope that, during the debate, we can identify what we mean by deliberative democracy, rather than simple contributions to the Parliament and debates.

Following on from a number of interventions, particularly from Bob Doris and Ruth Maguire, I refer to page 6, which deals with the themes that emerged—in particular,

“that people from disadvantaged backgrounds often don’t feel that engaging with the Scottish Parliament is worthwhile”.

That is a frightening conclusion to come to—that there are people who are seeking to engage but who see no worth in doing so. Of the many very powerful comments that are contained in the report, it moved me that people might say, “I can’t be bothered because nothing will happen.” That is a poor reflection, and we must strive to tackle that.

**Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** Would Mr Whitfield also say that, as part of the report, it is important that there is an avenue and a route to be able to give evidence to, or to affect, this Parliament, which perhaps many of our citizens currently cannot see?

**Martin Whitfield:** That speaks to what I was saying earlier about the concept of the citizens assembly or the jury being asked about a specific problem or to set a legislative review.

There is also a requirement for the Parliament—in the committees and chamber—to reach out to seek lived experience when it is needed and to seek out the expert and not a usual suspect. The current petitions committee has to be thanked for the fact that it appears to reach out to a far wider group—through petitions and other methods—than has perhaps happened in the past, and we must emulate that approach.

I will concentrate part of my talk on theme 6. Along with Ruth Maguire, I am slightly disappointed in the level of urgency that education has been given. We have rehearsed to some extent where access to the Parliament sits within our schools and the curriculum, but one of the things that flow from the report is the consideration that one of the panels should perhaps be a young persons panel, made up of a random cross-section of people who reflect the appropriate experiences about which we have questions to ask. If a panel was brought together and its members were asked how important it is for young people to take part in the Parliament, I hazard a guess that an incredibly high number of them would respond, “It is very important, so please listen to us.”

15:44

**John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):** I thank the committee and the citizens panel for their deliberations and input. I have to say that I find this a really interesting topic, particularly how we balance, on the one hand, being a parliamentary democracy with elections and all the

complications that that system brings and, on the other hand, having and benefiting from panels or groups that might be more representative in one sense but which are not elected.

I note the panel’s recommendations and that the committee disagreed with some of them. I will go through the themes and comment on some of them in the same way that the committee did.

The first theme is about institutionalising deliberative democracy. I note that the committee did not agree with legislating for that, and I tend to agree with it on that point. However, other recommendations, such as number 9—building cross-party support for deliberative democracy, which is still to be defined—are absolutely fine, and we can endorse them.

Theme 2 is about growing community engagement. In general, the comments of both the panel and the committee are good—we need to hear from a wide range of people, including experts on a subject and those with lived experience. However, both of those groups are often minorities in society, and the wider public might not have strong views on the issue at all. There will be times when we, as politicians, need to focus on important issues, even though—perhaps because—the public is not engaged.

Recommendation 5 is to ensure that engagement by MSPs does not exclude people outwith community groups. That is an important point. As we touched on earlier, not every community group is representative of its community. For example, I am generally a fan of community councils, which are the most grass-roots organisations that we have and are democratically elected, but some are made up entirely of retired people, with no one of working age, let alone young people, at all.

Theme 3 is about raising awareness of the Parliament. I think that good efforts have been made on that, but I accept that there has been mixed success. It is always the case that some people are very satisfied when we do a little for them, either individually or as a Parliament, while others are very dissatisfied, however much we do for them.

Recommendation 15—the idea of highlighting Parliament’s successes—is interesting, but I have to accept that some people do not want that to happen. They do not want the Parliament’s successes to be highlighted; they want to run Parliament down and emphasise its weaknesses. The media has a part to play in that. One of the panel’s comments was that we should “use media outlets”, but I think that using media outlets is easier said than done. The media and, it seems, many members of the public are more focused on the dramatic side of Holyrood—the same happens

at Westminster—with people turning up to watch First Minister's question time, whereas the committee work is often less well attended by the public or featured less in the media, but is actually more important.

Recommendation 16, on a general information campaign, is certainly well meaning, but I think that that is exactly what a lot of Parliament staff have been working on for a number of years, with, again, limited success.

Theme 5, on bringing the Parliament to the people, and recommendation 11, which is on the idea of moving the whole Parliament around Scotland, might be impractical, and the committee did not support that recommendation. I slightly disagree with the committee on the idea of Parliament days, linked perhaps to committee visits, as happened in the past. I have taken part in a number of those, and I felt that some were very good. For example, one was in Hawick while Tricia Marwick was the Presiding Officer. From memory, on that occasion, we had a big reception on the Sunday evening and met many people from a cross-section of local society. On the Monday, the Finance Committee went on to have its meetings while the Presiding Officer had a separate programme. I think that that kind of thing can be worth while.

**Jackson Carlaw:** I, too, participated in some of those Parliament days. Apparently, in a lot of the work that was done afterwards to establish what the value of those days had been seen to be, it was felt that we had kind of landed, done our thing and gone away again, and that there was no lasting benefit. It was felt that the types of engagement that we should be seeking to take from the Parliament out into communities should be designed to leave more of a legacy with regard to appreciation of the Parliament.

**John Mason:** I think that it is possibly both. For example, I am going with the Economy and Fair Work Committee to Aberdeen on a specific issue a week on Monday, but, on other occasions, just the fact that we are there means a lot to the local community. I remember a visit that we had to Islay, looking at isolation, and I picked up that the people there really appreciated the fact that the committee had taken the effort—which they know about more than we do—to go.

I have been on committee visits to Orkney, Arbroath, Nairn, Islay, Largs—twice—Hawick, Pitlochry, Lochaber and other places, but I have to say that I do not think that we should go only to attractive rural locations. Parliament committees have not visited the greater Glasgow area, for example, so often.

As Martin Whitfield said, the cost of travelling to the Parliament is certainly a challenge for some. I

am keen that schools from further away and from less well-off areas should be able to come. We need to keep an eye on which schools are visiting and ensure that it is not only those that are closer and better off.

Theme 7 is about strengthening trust in the Parliament and the idea that we have touched on already—recommendation 13—of compelling Government ministers to give answers to all the questions that they are presented with, which is an intriguing concept. I think that all oral questions are generally answered, but maybe not in the way that the Opposition or the public would want. However, if the Presiding Officer were to assess all answers, I think that she should also assess all questions for genuineness and not allow trick or trap questions. Therefore, I agree with the committee that the recommendation is probably not feasible.

**Maurice Golden:** Does John Mason agree that any changes to the Parliament's structures, including the structures of debate, need to be made in the round and should be reflective of not the current session but the future of the Parliament and its future political make-up, whatever that might be?

**John Mason:** Was that a trick question?

I agree that we should take a longer-term view. I think that many of us find that difficult, with the election only two and half years away, but yes, we should look at that. To give respect to people such as Jackson Carlaw and Martin Whitfield, I note that some members are good at taking a longer-term view.

Recommendation 14 is on the idea of the public asking questions in the chamber. To some extent, we have tried that kind of thing on committees. For example, the Covid-19 Recovery Committee tried it, as did the Finance and Public Administration Committee recently in Largs. Questions were brought to the committee, and then the committee followed on by asking those same questions. However, it seemed to me that we were sometimes asking questions for the sake of it, and on issues that we had already looked at in depth.

**Michelle Thomson:** Will the member give way?

**John Mason:** If I have time, yes.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** There is time for a brief intervention.

**Michelle Thomson:** [*Inaudible.*—finance committee, but, if he does not mind me saying, perhaps that is missing the point, because perhaps we are too ready to have concluded what the answer is without allowing people to make their voices heard. Would he concede that?

**John Mason:** I would, although there are always dangers and two sides to these things. On the Covid-19 Recovery Committee, for example, we felt that airing certain questions, such as those challenging the science on vaccines, might not be helpful to anyone. There has to be a bit of freedom, but I accept that what we are doing with the chamber is slightly different from what we are doing with the committees, which have more opportunity to engage.

I get constituents coming in and demanding that I ask a minister or the First Minister a range of questions, ranging from why their bus was late to why their hospital operation has been postponed. My usual response is to suggest that we take such points up with the bus company or the health board as appropriate, and, nine times out of 10, we get a better answer that way. I realise that some MSPs raise the cases of individual patients in the chamber, but I question whether that is appropriate if they have not already asked the health board.

Overall, I commend the panel and the committee for their work on the subject. I absolutely agree that we can improve the things that we do as a Parliament. I am particularly keen that we get out and about around the country and engage with the general public where they live and work. It is clear that it has been appreciated when we travel further from Edinburgh. However, we need to keep an eye on the bigger picture—keeping a balance between listening to those who are democratically elected and involving panels or assemblies that are selected at random. Scotland is a relatively small country and we should be able to keep things simple. We need to be wary of multiplying the number of commissions, panels and other bodies, which makes the landscape even more complicated. Holyrood and MSPs are much more accessible than Westminster and MPs, and we should aim to build on that strength.

15:54

**Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I thank the committee for its excellent report.

Public participation in this Parliament is absolutely vital. As one goes further away from Edinburgh, where Parliament sits, one gets asked more and more questions. As one goes up to the very north of the Highlands, one finds that people know their local MSPs, but they know little about the other MSPs in Parliament, whom they feel outnumber their local MSPs. They also feel that people who do not have life experience in remote areas do not know as much about it as they should do. Therefore, highlanders and islanders need that participation, and they need it to be confirmed that there is not a bias towards what

happens in the central belt when decisions are made.

They also need to know how to engage with Parliament. John Mason made the point that a lot of constituents come into our offices and ask us lots of questions, but they do not know how to engage with Parliament or the parliamentary committees. Some of them will know how to write to their MSPs, and we are usually the last port of call in very difficult circumstances, but they do not know how to engage, for example, on the issue of the power lines that go from north to south. They do not know how to get involved or which committee to get involved with, and we need to rectify that.

When it came to the citizens participation part of the report, I have to admit that I was slightly sceptical. I pored over the report and found it actually quite interesting to see the recommendations of the committee and of the people who had taken part in the citizens panels that the committee had set up. I became swayed by it. That is why, very briefly putting on my hat as the convener of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, I can say that we are delighted to have bid for and—I think—been accepted by the Conveners Group to be the first committee to have a citizens panel to carry out post-legislative scrutiny of the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009. That is really important, and it will be an important way for the committee to hear what people think about that crucial subject.

Taking that hat off, as I have made that announcement—which I will probably get in trouble for somewhere along the line—I think it is important that, when that panel is formed and it does its post-legislative scrutiny, it is made clear to it what its remit is and how far it can go with its recommendations. There is no point in asking panel members to do something and giving them the story that they can take part, but then not allowing them to fulfil that role. There is a careful balance to be set.

I heard what Jackson Carlaw said about MSPs taking part in citizens panels, but sometimes an MSP should be there just to be able to say, “There is an issue with what you are recommending”. That would allow the panel to report back knowing how MSPs can use their recommendations.

When we set up the panels, there is a real need, as the report made clear, to put on them the right balance of people with the right experience. As plenty of people have said, a panel should not be made up only of the same vociferous characters that we meet in our constituency when we talk about the subject that the panel is going to look at, because they do not always represent the views of every person in the constituency. I would like to see the other people brought in.

The people on the panels also need to see the outcomes of the reports that they produce. I like the idea that positive action needs to be reported within nine months. I fear that, after that amount of time, people will feel that nothing has happened. The earlier that we can get back to them once they have produced a report on what they have done, the better.

Turning to the point in the committee's report about the powers of the Presiding Officer, I may, strangely, differ from Martin Whitfield. I am taken by the fact that, as a back bencher, it is very difficult to get an answer in this Parliament. I am also taken by the fact that Jackson Carlaw has suggested that having the power that is recommended in the report but not necessarily using it may be sufficient.

It is frustrating not just for us but for people who watch the events in this chamber. How many of us have been told, "Well, you never got an answer. They talked about something completely different to what you asked them about."? That is unhelpful, because it gives the wrong message about Parliament. The message that Parliament should be giving is that we are considering every single option and that those that are discounted are being discounted for good reasons.

I believe that the Presiding Officers should have more power. The Presiding Officers have made a decision to reduce the length of answers to some questions. That is right, because if we cannot get an answer in a minute, we are not going to get an answer in five minutes. Long answers mean that back benchers do not get to ask their questions and people get frustrated that the MSPs that they have elected are not getting answers.

**Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP):** I completely disagree with Edward Mountain on the point about the Presiding Officer being the arbiter of answers and on the idea of treating MSPs as being in different classes with regard to whether they are obliged to take an intervention. That would just be wrong.

I am, however, more supportive of Edward Mountain in relation to some other issues around public participation. Concern has been expressed for a long period—maybe 40 years—and by all parties that MSPs or elected members and Governments are much less accountable than they used to be, because so much has been hived off or outsourced to bodies such as commissions and so on. It is counterintuitive, but does he think that that might possibly contribute to MSPs being less accountable?

On Jackson Carlaw's point, if public participation is going to cost as much as it is, how does that square with what many of us agree is the proliferation of commissioners in the Parliament?

The two things seem to sit at odds with each other.

**Edward Mountain:** I thank Mr Brown for that question. I am not suggesting that we have lots more commissioners; we probably have enough.

As far as the long-term situation in the Parliament and the diluting of accountability, I do not agree with Mr Brown, because, at the end of the day, the decision whether to incorporate what is decided at citizens panels comes down to MSPs. MSPs have to and should answer to those panels on why they are or are not taking an idea forward.

I am sorry that I cannot sway Mr Brown on the Presiding Officer. There are definitely different views on that around the chamber, and I suspect that a member's views might also differ whether their party is in Government or not.

Another issue that was mentioned was the code of conduct. I absolutely believe that responsibility for that should reside with the current committee. Having sat on that committee, and seen members being judged by their peers and being answerable to their peers on their behaviour, I know that their peers are much harsher than perhaps anyone else would be. It is right that we answer to our peers.

One of the other issues that I picked up was a public register of interests, on which the public can indicate that they are interested in a subject and be notified by the Parliament that it is coming up. That is really important, and it will help people across Scotland to understand and feed into the process.

I absolutely agree with John Mason's point about external visits. As members will know, the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee held a committee meeting in Orkney and a subsequent meeting at Galashiels. Such meetings are important, because they are about the committee engaging with people. The committee can have a meeting at which people are allowed to contribute and participate, and then hold the more formal meeting afterwards. We should do more of that. I have not been to such meetings during the current session, but I was pleased to do so during session 5.

Finally, educating children on how the Parliament works is important. It is easy for schools in Edinburgh and Glasgow to pop across to the Parliament and make use of its excellent facilities, but when it comes to schools in the Highlands, it is more difficult. I have certainly struggled to get schools to come down from Skye, Wick and Caithness, because of the length of time that it takes to travel and the costs of doing so, which means that their children do not understand how the Parliament works. We have an excellent service here, but I do not know whether it travels

out to schools, which might be an option, or whether we should make sure that how the Parliament works is part of the curriculum, but everyone needs to know about that.

16:04

**Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):** Democracy is not just about putting a cross in a box every five years. The mandate that is given to political parties once the votes are counted is substantial, but the folk whom we represent should feel that they have trust in our institution and a stake in the decisions that we take. Election campaigns and polling days should not be the end of our interactions with citizens on policy. With all due respect, politicians and civil servants certainly do not have the monopoly on wisdom. Despite some effort, we cannot claim to be an especially diverse bunch that is reflective of our nation, particularly in terms of class and race.

The ideas and policies that are put in manifestos—as good or bad as they might be and wherever or whoever they come from—always need a lot of further work in the Parliament. They require input from and dialogue with a wide range of people and organisations to realise their good intentions and improve things for all the citizens whom we serve. No matter how much we might wish it, the legislation and guidance that we pass in here are not always in themselves enough to make the changes that we wish to see. We have to understand better how and where the laws that we have passed have made a difference—or not—whether there have been any unintended consequences or whether there are gaps that need to be addressed. Public participation in post-legislative scrutiny would be incredibly valuable in that regard.

I congratulate the citizens panel, the members of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee and the Scottish Parliament staff who so ably supported it for the excellent work that they have done in embedding public participation in the work of the Parliament.

I agree with the committee's recommendation that the Parliament should establish two further citizens or people's panels in the current parliamentary session. It is right that we work towards making use of such panels in regular committee scrutiny from session 7 onwards.

In commending the work of the Parliament staff, I make special mention of the care and attention that was given to ensuring that the inquiry was accessible and that there were different ways for people to take part. As well as the main online platform, the Parliament's PAC and education teams provided support and resources to partners and communities to gather a range of views. I

have personal experience of the excellent and creative work that the teams do to ensure that voices that we can find easy to ignore or exclude are central to committee work in areas that affect them.

In this instance, the work of the teams meant that the committee received additional contributions from people with learning difficulties and autism via two discussions with the learning disability assembly, the Scottish Assembly; it heard the views of young people in collaboration with Young Scot and the Scottish Youth Parliament; and it listened to the views of school pupils in Lochgelly, Galashiels and Glasgow.

**Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab):** On the really important point about accessibility, does Ruth Maguire agree that the materials that we provide as a Parliament—in particular, education materials to help people to understand what we do here—have to be accessible and include easy-read formats that would be recognised by people who have a learning disability?

**Ruth Maguire:** I absolutely agree. I do not think that anything should be coming out of our Parliament that is not in those formats. That would not be acceptable.

In addition, people were able to write to or email the committee in the usual way, which provided three additional submissions from Bòrd na Gàidhlig, the Scottish Election Study team and Media Education.

I am sure that committee members will talk more to the process, so I will share my reflections on the themes. Theme 2 was on growing community engagement. The committee's report acknowledges that the traditional model of parliamentary scrutiny can tend to prioritise people who already have an understanding of how the Parliament works and the resources to engage with its structures. I very much agree with the committee that that needs to be addressed. I have witnessed just how beneficial it is to hear from a wider range of people, particularly those who are directly impacted by an issue. When we do that, we make sure that we understand and look at things in the round.

I really value the contributions that are made to scrutiny by everyone who gives evidence and assists with committee work—I am not criticising anyone here—but there is undoubtedly sometimes a tension when organisations or individuals who give evidence are in campaign mode and are for or against the particular law that is being looked at, or are involved in delivering the changes that the law will bring about and do not wish to seem unhelpful or resistant to the overarching policy aim. I think that widening our scrutiny can only

help us to obtain a collective understanding of issues and to find a way through them.

We can all be inclined to be a bit binary and simple in thinking that people are either for us or against us, that there are goodies and baddies and that we must pick our team, but we all know that the world is not like that, and the complex issues that we often seek to address are not best solved through that approach. Properly engaging with the communities that we serve reminds us of their diversity and richness, not just of characteristics but of opinion, and that will help us to find a way through any challenges that we face.

Like Edward Mountain, I like the idea of letting people register interest in particular topics. I think that that is a helpful idea, because most folk do not have time to respond to individual consultations.

The Presiding Officer is telling me to close. I had a lot more to say. It has been a really interesting debate, and the committee's report is an excellent piece of work. I thank everyone who contributed, particularly the citizens panel.

16:11

**Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab):** I am happy to be here to talk about public participation and engagement and the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee's inquiry and report on public participation.

I am currently a member of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee. Sadly, like my colleague Maurice Golden, I missed the world tour. I am counting on our convener to organise another world tour, which I hope will be soon. Although I was not on the committee when the inquiry began, I have since worked on the committee through some of the report stages.

As many of my colleagues have said, public participation and engagement opportunities must be easily accessible to the public. One theme of the recommendations that I would like to talk about today is that of growing community engagement with the work of the Scottish Parliament. I have worked in third sector and charity organisations all my life. Through that, I have engaged with many different communities and organisations, and I have been saddened by what I have heard in the past about certain communities' engagement with the Parliament and with democracy in general. I heard from some people originating from more disadvantaged backgrounds that they believed that politics and participation were not meant for them. I heard from some young people that they believed that their opinion or participation was not wanted. As the inquiry report recommends, such barriers must be removed to encourage everyone to participate in

democracy and to engage with the parliamentary process.

Many of the organisations that I have been involved with are run by or have been created by black and ethnic minority communities. Over the years, I have been disheartened to hear that many people from those communities never thought to engage with public participation in the Parliament; moreover, they did not even know that it was an option for them to do so.

Many others felt that the public participation process was not meant for them and, even if it was, did not know how to engage with it. That was partly due to representation, which is a theme that is highlighted in the inquiry report. As MSPs, we must ensure that citizens are able to see themselves reflected in the Parliament. Many people also mentioned that they did not feel as though they understood politics or the parliamentary process enough to fully engage with it.

It is clear that our current methods of engagement with the public do not go far enough, especially when it comes to engaging with harder-to-reach communities. The citizens panel's findings and recommendations identified barriers associated with low levels of education, employment status, a lack of representation in Parliament and lack of trust in politicians and politics in general. It identified the areas of community engagement where we are still lacking and the barriers that still exist to prevent people in Scotland accessing, and feeling comfortable in accessing, democracy. Those include the expense of travel to Parliament, the need to take time off work if they work from 9 to 5, childcare costs and difficulties with accessibility requirements.

The proposed citizens panel will help to close the gaps in Parliament's engagement. We must ensure that people believe that they have a role to play in Parliament, that their voices are heard and that they understand the means by which they can engage and participate. The proposed mini citizens assemblies will be instrumental in that.

In our role as MSPs, we can also work to overcome the barriers faced by many members of the public. We should ensure that we are offering public participation opportunities for our constituents outside normal business hours, so that those with 9-to-5 jobs or childcare issues have flexible opportunities for engagement. We could provide participation opportunities in different locations so that all accessibility requirements can be met. That is how we can work, alongside the recommendations of the inquiry, to improve community engagement with the Parliament.



16:17

**Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP):** I have been absolutely fascinated by the debate so far. Anything that considers increased participation by citizens from across the country is of great interest to me. I have felt a little fear of missing out on the world tours and day trips, but I have taken up Maurice Golden's challenge not to have a prepared speech but to share my reflections and thoughts, as well as some experiences from another committee.

I have listened to many people talking about the pros and cons of citizen participation and about how representative certain bodies are, and I have concluded that the more varied the methods that we use and the longer we do that for, the better we can capture everyone's voices along the way and take them with us.

That requires bravery from Parliament, which has its structures. It has taken me two and a half years to get used to how we do things here and we can get attached to that. Those structures are comfortable, but they may not be working for the public, whom we are here to serve. When I was first here and went to events, one thing that struck me was that people would stand up and say to the public, "Welcome to your Parliament." That phrase has stayed with me throughout my time here, so I support and welcome the committee's work.

On the Equalities, Civil Rights and Civil Justice Committee, we have been doing our pre-budget scrutiny in a slightly different way. We have worked carefully with the Parliament's participation and communities team, who have worked very hard behind the scenes with some of our most vulnerable citizens, from across a geographical spread. People often do not have confidence, because they are in their communities and are battered down by the daily grind, but they have opinions about their housing, about how money is being spent by their local authorities and about whether their bins are being collected. They get frustrated and often do not have the skills or time to be able to feed that back to us so that we can make better decisions.

During our pre-budget scrutiny, we allowed time for the team to work with those citizens to build their confidence and to explain a little about how to make a valuable contribution, because they wanted to do that.

The environment is intimidating as well, so there has been some debate about whether people should come in or whether we should go out. Again, I advocate a mixture of the two, which will enable us to get a good-quality sample.

When the citizens came in, we also did some cross-portfolio work. My colleague Collette Stevenson, who is convener of the Social Justice

and Social Security Committee, came and joined that. The public who came along—the citizens—thought that it was great, because they do not think in silos when they are thinking about policy. We have portfolios and everyone has their responsibilities, but the average person out there does not care whose responsibility something is. People are holistic human beings and many portfolio areas have an impact on their life. They should be able to question things from where they are, so we perhaps need to think about more cross-portfolio working and doing scrutiny together across committees to get a true handle on things.

From that, the citizens devised their own questions that they wanted us to ask the minister. The minister then came to the committee and we asked verbatim the questions that the citizens had proposed. They were sitting in the public gallery in the committee room, so they were right there to hear the minister's responses to their questions.

The feedback from that was amazing. I was surprised by some of it. One person reflected that they did not understand quite a lot of the answers because politicians often speak using acronyms. I was careful earlier to say "participation and communities team" rather than "PACT". To be fair, using acronyms is like a code, isn't it? It is exclusive. Maybe we, as politicians, should be more mindful of the need for clarity when we speak. Anyway, that person is now going to use the public petitions process to put a petition to the Parliament and get us to look at the issue, which is fantastic.

In summary, we on the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee are leading the way. There are always early adopters of things, and I have shared a bit of our experience with members this afternoon. The citizens felt really empowered and their feedback was excellent. They thought that the Parliament as a whole had taken care of them and listened to them, and they felt very connected. They had not realised that they could see us, speak to us and hear their questions being put directly to the minister and answered.

We can all take heart that, although there is more work to be done, an amazing amount of good practice is going on. With the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee's report, there is the good will to carry that even further.

16:23

**Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP):** As members will know, I often refer to academic sources when researching for speeches. Thanks to Carnegie Europe, I now know the following:

“the principles of deliberation and sortition are not new. Rooted in ancient Athenian democracy, they were used throughout various points of history until around two to three centuries ago. Evoked by the Greek statesman Pericles in 431 BCE, the ideas”

are

“that ‘ordinary citizens, though occupied with the pursuits of industry, are still fair judges of public matters’ and that instead of being a ‘stumbling block in the way of action ... [discussion] is an indispensable preliminary to any wise action at all’”.

So this is not a new idea.

I read the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee’s report with great interest and, like others, I extend my congratulations to the authors, the participants, the participation and communities team, the advisers and the committee itself.

Since becoming an MSP, I have said that we need to make this place sing with a thousand different voices, both literally and metaphorically. As an aside, I note that the starting up of the Scottish Parliament choir, which will begin next Wednesday, 1 November at 1 pm in committee room 2—don’t miss it—will go some way towards that. Seriously, however, the extension to the involvement of the people who really count—our citizens—is extremely important. Let us hear them all sing.

I will comment on a few points that struck me. First, I propose to consider further the barriers to participative and deliberative democracy, rather than just the report’s recommendations and various themes. Three barriers resonated with me in particular: fear, representation and trust.

I believe that all of us here consistently underestimate people’s fear of speaking up in public. Despite our claiming, perhaps in a self-congratulatory way, that we are all Jock Tamson’s bairns, the fact is that, from the outside looking in, we are not. The way that we speak and our strange mannerisms and conventions appear inaccessible to many. Many of us here are well educated, but how often do we stop to consciously consider how our accents sound to ordinary Scots? I remember, just recently, being reminded by Darren McGarvey about his great work in the series “Class Wars” to drive our understanding of the impact of a working-class Glasgow accent.

Only the other day, I spoke to my colleague Emma Harper about what is, frankly, the bullying that she receives via social media for her sterling efforts to promote our Scots language. For women, who have been taught subliminally to take their place, often behind the men and after they have spoken, that must represent a particular challenge. I note that, even in this debate, only 16 per cent of the attendees are women.

The next barrier that struck me was representation. There is considerable complexity in getting together a group—any group—that can genuinely be a representative sample of our multicultural, multifaceted, urban and rural, Highland and lowland Scotland.

However, perhaps the most important barrier is that of trust, which is imperative if our politicians and our Parliament are to make people’s voices heard, yet it is lacking at the present time. There are 21 uses—

**Ruth Maguire:** Michelle Thomson mentioned trust, which lets me wedge in the bit of my speech that I did not get to. Could not the whole process build trust in our Parliament and in our institutions if we get it right and, as Jackson Carlaw said, if we listen properly and reflect not what people want us to do but the reasons why we are not doing that?

**Michelle Thomson:** That is an excellent point, with which I whole-heartedly agree.

I was about to mention that there are 21 uses of the term “trust” in the report, and rightly so. We must acknowledge how many people have lost trust in politicians in the political process and, by extension, their legislatures. Sometimes I despair as we go along in the hurly-burly of our politics, in which people challenge each other without thinking what that says to people outside about trust in their legislature. We need to be very careful about that. We need to maintain such trust, for it underpins and is the guardian of democracy.

I would add one group to that list, and that is journalists. The report notes that getting them more engaged would help to spread knowledge. Building the knowledge of journalists is valuable. I still encounter multiple instances where they either do not appear to, or perhaps choose not to, understand, for example, governance, or the separation of the Government and the judiciary—that appears to be an issue with MSPs, too—or concepts such as the fiscal framework.

On another note, I mentioned earlier that I consider the report to be a good one. Costs have been carefully considered, which is vital, as we are living in very constrained times. I notice with favour the consideration of governance and accountability, and that model must be maintained. I completely agree with other members’ comments about the proliferation of roles such as those of commissioners.

Moving on, the report notes that legislation will require Government and cross-party commitment. A common framework to measure impact was suggested. That must evolve over time, based on a thorough and committed feedback loop. On Martin Whitfield’s comment in which he expressed disappointment at the proposed timescales, I take a different view. It is clear to me that the proposal

must proceed with cross-party buy-in and the folding in of best practice and learning as we go along.

I am moving to a close, Presiding Officer—I have just a couple more comments. I suspect that Jackson Carlaw’s legendary sense of humour contributed to the writing of the report, which notes that

“there can be a tendency for attitudes within the ‘Holyrood bubble’ to become out of step with the views of ordinary people across the country.”

I think that that will win understatement of the year. There is also consideration of a travelling exhibition—hopefully, it will not be our oddest MSPs on display.

Seriously, though, I will conclude there. Both participative and deliberative democracy are vital to enhancing scrutiny, and they enshrine the vital link between citizens, our legislature and democracy. On that note, I say that I embrace the principle whole-heartedly.

16:03

**Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab):** I am pleased to wind up the debate on behalf of Scottish Labour. We started with a characteristically funny and wide-ranging speech from Jackson Carlaw as convener of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee. He commented that this debate might be seen as taking place in the graveyard shift, but I do not think that that is what we saw this afternoon. He spoke about wanting to inject suitable jollity into proceedings in this place, and I think that, this afternoon, we have had a bit of that—we have had a bit of serious debate, but we have also had some levity, which I think is important when we are considering these matters.

Seriously, though, I pay tribute to Jackson Carlaw and the committee for their work on this inquiry and, indeed, on the report, which is important for us all and which people across the chamber are keen to engage with more fully. Also, of course, we should thank all the committee clerks, the staff and the people who were involved in the public participation elements of the work, who I know are in the gallery today.

We on this side of the chamber welcome the recommendations that seek to improve the scrutiny of Parliament and Government and public engagement and trust in parliamentary processes. We welcome the report’s acknowledgement of the fact that Parliament’s current methods of engagement with the wider public do not always go far enough, especially when it comes to engaging with harder-to-reach people in our communities. More should be done to engage with and listen to citizens from across Scotland and to

ensure that we do not put off that work and that we seek to do as much as we can in the remaining years of this session, and then look to what we can do in future sessions to move that work forward fully.

I was taken by many of the international examples that were cited in the committee’s work. I declare an interest, in that I am a dual citizen, as I also hold Irish citizenship, although I do not live on the island of Ireland, so I do not expect to be asked to join a citizens panel there any time soon. In any case, as I think Maurice Golden said, politicians are the people who should absolutely be furthest away from that sort of work—there is truth in that.

The work that has been done in Ireland is particularly interesting, particularly on issues that have been difficult in the public discourse. Since about 2010, the way in which to proceed with regard to issues that have led to wide social or constitutional change in Ireland has been widely debated and decided on by citizens assemblies. Issues such as abortion, equal marriage, changes to the voting age or reform of Dáil Éireann, the Irish Parliament, have been debated and discussed through those mechanisms, resulting in proposals being brought to the Oireachtas.

**Jackson Carlaw:** One senior Irish politician paid a backhanded compliment to the principle of citizens panels. He said to me, “Jackson, what this is, is a method for gutless politicians to be excused the difficult decisions and to palm them off to somebody else.” However, on some of the big social change issues, that is, as I say, a backhanded compliment, because it means that the change is underpinned by citizen involvement, which then gives politicians the confidence to move forward.

**Paul O’Kane:** The mechanism could certainly be viewed as an easy way out for all of us sitting in the chamber grappling with some such issues. However, it is right that we should underpin decisions about such issues not just with social attitude surveys and polling but with a structure that shows that the Parliament has taken time to engage and to listen and to find out what people think.

Ruth Maguire’s comments chimed with my thoughts about some of the contentious issues that we have debated in this place, in relation to which the representation of competing interests by third sector organisations, lobbyists and various groups in society has resulted in people saying, for example, “We are right; you are wrong—there is no middle ground or room for concession”, when, if we had had a more participatory structure, we could have considered the issues in more detail.

**George Adam:** I agree with much of what Paul O’Kane has been saying. However, from my experience as the minister looking at the first two citizens assemblies in the Scottish Parliament, the question that we ask is equally important if there is not to be any confusion among the public about how they deliberate and come back on that. Does Paul O’Kane agree that the questions that we ask give the value that the public will see in our being able to deliver something?

**Paul O’Kane:** I certainly do not think that we should rely on other people. It is about us saying as a Parliament, “This is the direction. This is the vision.” It is also for the Government to propose its direction and vision, which should be scrutinised and underpinned, as I said in response to Jackson Carlaw’s question, so that we are not solely led or instructed by groups, but go hand in hand so that there is scrutiny of what is already taking place in the chamber.

A lot of recommendations that have much merit have been discussed. There have been interesting exchanges about how we can bring people closer to the Parliament, particularly people from rural communities, as Edward Mountain mentioned, young people, and people from ethnic minority backgrounds, as Foysoyl Choudhury, Kaukab Stewart and others mentioned. We have looked at how we can ensure that things do not become tokenistic. John Mason made some contributions in that regard. Questions should be meaningful. Participation is not just about saying that we are going to ask questions on people’s behalf. People should help us to shape our understanding of questions and the sorts of responses that we can have.

There have been interesting contributions on the role of the Presiding Officer and the absence of the Presiding Officer in the judgment of the quality of questions and answers. As someone who often falls foul of verbose and long questions, I might avoid any comment on the quality of my contributions being judged. However, there is merit in having a fuller discussion and debate about that issue. I was glad to hear Martin Whitfield speak in his contribution about how his committee might look at that.

Having just made a comment about time, I will wind up.

In his poem for the opening of the Parliament building, entitled “Open the Doors!”, Edwin Morgan said:

“We give you our consent to govern, don’t pocket it and ride away.”

That gets to the essence of what we are seeking to do through the report and the work. It may take time to get there, but today’s debate and the report and the recommendations are an important first

step, and we should all work together to move those recommendations forward.

16:37

**Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** I am delighted to wind up for my party in this excellent debate. There has been really good interaction across the chamber, which is very welcome.

The public participation inquiry was one of the key pieces of work that I was able to contribute to in my time as a member of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, and I got the opportunity to go on the world tour.

The Parliament has long strived to be a place that is welcoming and open to public participation. As such, it is to be welcomed that “Citizen Participation” was added to the committee’s remit at the beginning of the current parliamentary session.

The public participation inquiry has followed a number of different avenues since its launch early last year. We have heard about some of the engagement work in this debate. However, the most important aspect of the inquiry has been the citizens panel on participation. I was pleased that, through the panel, the committee was able to deliver not only some hugely positive, productive and helpful recommendations but an experience that deeply engaged those who were involved in the process. All those who took part in the panel’s work had positive things to say about the experience. The panel member Ronnie Paterson said:

“None of us was well versed in politics or academia, but we came up with the recommendations 100 per cent as a group ... The fact that we came up with those recommendations together shows the power of deliberative democracy.”—[*Official Report, Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee*, 14 December 2022; c 4.]

That is excellent feedback from a group of individuals who were brought together to represent us and to have their views and opinions expressed. They got the opportunity to do that. That showed the success that we had.

The panel was a success, and the committee carried out further engagement to see what we could add to the report. Earlier this year, as many members have indicated, a number of us had the opportunity to go to Dublin and Paris and to see, experience and hear about first hand how people had gone about things. It was two years ago this month that Paris city council voted to establish its own citizens assembly, which was formed by drawing on experiences of international practices. That assembly continues to find its feet and is delivering its first recommendations.

I am grateful to the participants and elected officials who provided my colleagues and me with very helpful insights as we went to those locations in other parts of Europe. I thank the committee clerks, the Scottish Parliament information centre and everyone who supported us to ensure that that happened, because they had to do a huge amount of work to ensure that, in the timescale that we had, we got information that was beneficial to us all.

This afternoon, we have heard some excellent contributions, which have shown the calibre of debates that we can have in the chamber on a topic such as this one, when members have the opportunity to express their views, interact and become involved in the debate.

My fellow member and convener of the committee, Jackson Carlaw, spoke about the reputation of this Parliament; the perceptions that we had about where it should go; the feedback on the recommendations; and the success of the whole process. There is no doubt that the process has been successful.

The question whether we will enhance or undermine that reputation was discussed, and has come out in the recommendations. The public understand that, but they still have a problem when they are talking about what is the Parliament and what is the Government. They get confused.

**Kaukab Stewart:** *[Interruption.]*

**The Presiding Officer:** Excuse me, sorry—can we have Kaukab Stewart's microphone on, please?

**Kaukab Stewart:** Thank you. I understand what my colleague is saying, but I ask him to rephrase it slightly. It is not the public that has the problem—it may be more incumbent on us to provide that education and to be more resourceful and creative in the way that we reach out.

**Alexander Stewart:** Yes—there is a lesson for us all as to how we in Parliament are perceived, and how we represent ourselves, and also how the public perceive us as representatives of them. There is currently an imbalance there, which needs to be talked about.

There is a lot of feedback as to where we are. The pilots that will be taken forward will give us an opportunity once again to evolve the model and work together to ensure that we can help one another.

The minister talked about the real challenges that were mentioned in the report, which we have to deal with as we move forward, and I think that that is the case. The vision for this Parliament is that we want it to be engaging and get the right balance, because that balance is important.

Maurice Golden spoke about the themes of the report, and talked about questions and answers, and how that element is managed and perceived in the chamber and in the community.

I do not have time to go through everybody, but I highlight the excellent contributions from Martin Whitfield, Ruth Maguire, Edward Mountain, Michelle Thomson and Kaukab Stewart. They all spoke with passion about what they see in the Parliament and how they want it to be represented.

A healthy level of public participation should be a key ingredient in the way that we deal with democracy in our systems. Through the public participation inquiry, we have clearly identified a number of ways that we wish to improve the process of participation in Scotland. It has contributed positively to where we are going.

In conclusion, much work has been done in the inquiry so far, and I look forward to seeing the progress that will be made in the coming years. The report talks about the timescales for 2023-24, with a report to be published in 2025. That report will set out the way in which democracy might become institutionalised in our whole Parliament and how we can work across the chamber to address the challenges.

I look forward to seeing some of the ideas being debated today being put in place at the start of the next parliamentary session. I also look forward to seeing this Parliament take another step towards becoming the inclusive, dynamic and engaging institution that it wants to be and should be.

16:44

**George Adam:** I have enjoyed this open and thoughtful debate—if only we could do it more often. *[Laughter.]* That is just a joke, but is it? Is it? We have all sat here and talked about the challenges and difficulties, and the ways in which we can go forward, and we have done so in a mature manner. We should perhaps all take that lesson from this debate when we move on to debate other things in the future.

I thank all who have engaged with the debate. One of its common threads has been not just engagement but who we engage with. Who is involved, and the type of participation that will work for them, really matter. We must be thoughtful about that.

One form of engagement by the Scottish Government, which I forgot to mention at the beginning of the debate is the travelling Cabinet, which has started up again. Unlike Mr Carlaw and his committee, who went to Paris and Dublin, we went to Inveraray. It was lovely. We spoke and engaged with the people of Inveraray and the rest

of Argyll about the specific issues that they had. That is an important thing for the Government to do, and it was good for me, as Minister for Parliamentary Business, to be able to chair that, because, first, I enjoy that kind of engagement with the public, and, secondly, it is good that we sometimes feel uncomfortable. It is good that Governments get the opportunity for the public to have their say, and that specific community got its opportunity.

**Michelle Thomson:** Will the minister confirm the rumour that the next visit will be to Ferguslie Park?

**George Adam:** No matter how many times the minister has brought that up, I have been told that we have been in Renfrewshire once before, so that is a difficulty. I will take from the debate that Ms Thomson encourages that as a way forward. There have been 51 travelling Cabinets since 2008, and they are a mechanism for the public to hear directly from the Government.

A participatory approach is a golden thread throughout all our work. That is demonstrated through our Verity house agreement with local government, our social justice work to empower communities and the review of local governance through our “Democracy Matters” conversations. It is also clear in our wider work to tackle some of our deepest challenges, such as poverty, inequality, the climate emergency and reforms to health and social care.

On 4 October, I updated the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, at its pre-budget scrutiny session, that the Scottish Government is looking to resource a team that will have the capacity and the authority to develop, maintain and co-ordinate a consistent approach to public participation across the Scottish Government. Work on that continues, and we recognise that it is not something that one organisation can deliver alone. That has come up in the debate today, because the Parliament also has a role. I am pleased to say that that was acknowledged in the committee’s report.

Quite a selection of individuals were involved in today’s debate. Maurice Golden mentioned parliamentary questions—I was going to say “PQs”, but we have already been told that we use acronyms far too often in this place, which is another thing that makes it quite difficult for others to engage. I like to think that I give short, snappy and concise answers to questions and that I engage with anyone who has asked a question. It is important that we take that on board. I have asked colleagues to explain their questions, so that we do not have the misunderstandings that can often happen.

**Martin Whitfield:** Does that not reflect what Ruth Maguire said, which was that there is a personal responsibility, almost irrespective of what hat a member is wearing, to respect the Parliament and act appropriately?

**George Adam:** Yes. However, part of my reasoning is that I do not want to be gibbering on for 10 minutes about something that has nothing to do with what the member asked.

**Maurice Golden:** I will reflect on how members might gain a better answer. For example, earlier this week, I spoke to Angela Constance to give her advance warning of what I was going to discuss, and the answer that I received was far fuller and was not designed to make a political point. Clearly, there is a place for that, but there are also ways in which members can improve their questioning.

**George Adam:** That is a very valid point. We have to engage with each other so that not only do we get the value out of the question session but the public understand what is going on and get value from it. That is a perfect example of us all taking responsibility in how we do business in the Parliament.

Martin Whitfield spoke about the examples in the report and how they should be embedded in the Parliament. That is important; they should be an important part of the Parliament’s processes.

Sometimes, some of us—not all—get involved in a rammy in this place over an issue, but the public just want people in this place to do our jobs. The public sometimes do not want to see us getting involved in an absolute rammy on various issues. When we are dealing with highly political and difficult debates, we possibly need to look at ourselves in the mirror and ask what anybody who is not in this bubble sees when we behave in that way. I try not to get dragged into that, but sometimes we cannot help ourselves. That is an important thing to look at.

John Mason mentioned how we balance parliamentary democracy with direct involvement for the public. That is an interesting point, because that is what this is all about. If the public are to engage in parliamentary democracy and vote, they need to see the value and to believe that what they talk about is being discussed in the chamber. That is exactly what we are looking to address through the report.

John Mason mentioned the Presiding Officer working out the genuineness of parliamentary questions. I do not know how the Presiding Officer would define that, but it might prove difficult.

Edward Mountain spoke about the importance of us delivering on the engagement, and he was 100 per cent correct. When I intervened on Mr O’Kane, I was saying that the questions that we

ask the groups to work on are equally important. If we ask for an all-encompassing long debate, we will get a detailed and good report, but it will be difficult for any of us to deliver on what is said. In the Irish scenario, the citizens assembly was asked direct questions about certain social issues, which got the answers from the public there.

I will close, as I see the Presiding Officer motioning to me that I have run out of time. In my opening speech, I said that I was looking forward to listening to colleagues and to seeing the exciting new models for engagement and for the people we serve. That can change our Parliament for the better, because the way of working can create a bond with the public and place importance on this place. I look forward to working with everyone in the chamber to deliver that brave new future for our democracy.

**The Presiding Officer:** I call David Torrance to wind up on behalf of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee.

16:52

**David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP):** I, too, welcome members of the citizens panel to the gallery. I thank the committee's staff for doing the hard job of keeping us on time and in the right place on our world tour.

The debate has been interesting, and it has been encouraging to hear colleagues across the chamber emphasise the importance of making the Parliament's proceedings accessible to people from all walks of life and encouraging people to engage in our work. When he opened the debate on the committee's behalf, the convener said that he had initially approached the topic with a degree of scepticism but had ended up as a cautious enthusiast. I think that all of us on the committee went on a similar journey.

For me, two things stand out. One was watching the progress that members of our citizens panel made from first arriving at the Parliament, looking a little overawed and uncertain about what they had let themselves in for, to having confidence and energy by the end of the process.

The citizens panel participants worked together for more than 32 hours over two weekends and three remote online sessions in October and November last year. I had the pleasure of participating in one of the online sessions, which was a day that I remember well. At the outset, we could tell that a number of people were initially nervous but, as the session progressed, I saw people growing in confidence, enjoying engaging with the process and collaborating well as a group.

We then invited a number of panel members to a committee meeting in December last year to

outline their recommendations to us, and it was obvious how positive the experience had been for them. It was extremely encouraging to hear their feedback and positive responses to being involved and to hear more about what each of them took away from the experience. Comments included:

"I have always been a follower of politics, but I did not even know the difference between Parliament and Government when I started the process—I did not understand the separation in the structure."

Another person said that some of the information that was presented to the panel

"confirmed things that I thought I knew, and other information completely dispelled illusions that I had."—*[Official Report, Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, 14 December 2022; c 5.]*

The second thing that shifted my view was visiting Paris and Dublin to see how deliberative democracy has worked and is working in those places. Neither of their systems—or the one in Brussels, which we also learned about—is perfect, but it was clear from speaking to the participants, politicians and officials who are involved that deliberative democracy is a valued part of how they do politics. I am confident that we can find a way to get such benefits here in the Scottish Parliament.

Jackson Carlaw, Paul O'Kane and Alexander Stewart have all spoken of the Irish citizens assembly. I believe that, in that Ireland model, we have a strong example of the benefits of a well-structured citizens assembly. The Irish citizens assembly was established in 2016, following the model of its predecessor, the Convention on the Constitution, which ran from 2012 to 2014 and whose recommendations had led to the 2015 marriage equality referendum.

For many years, and despite increasing pressure for change, politicians of all colours had been reluctant to engage directly in the issue of the eighth amendment and place it firmly on the political and legislative agenda. However, it took the input of only 99 ordinary citizens—randomly selected, so as to be broadly electorally representative of Irish society in terms of age, gender and social class—to help to break years of political deadlock and to reach a consensus on that highly polarising issue. The decision to call a referendum was based on that panel's recommendations. That is a clear example of how bottom-up citizen input can complement and enhance representation in democracy and act as an impetus for constitutional reform.

We all know the result of that historic referendum, which was held in 2018, but many people probably do not know that the outcome of the referendum virtually mirrored the assembly's vote, with results of 66 per cent and 64 per cent.

**Willie Coffey:** There has been quite a bit of discussion about the online element and the part that digital technology can play. Like me, the member will recall that it is only a few years since the Parliament embraced—at long last—the use of digital technology to aid participation, including for members to vote in our proceedings. It was always possible to do that, but it was embraced only because Covid made it a necessity.

Does the deputy convener see further opportunities for us to exploit digital technology to aid that process? Does the committee have a view on whether we should retain the current advantages that we have from using digital technology?

**David Torrance:** I agree with Willie Coffey. The committee does have views on that and, if he waits, there will be recommendations about that later in my speech.

We are fortunate in the in-house experience, knowledge and support that officials across the Parliament have provided, and I thank all those who have helped us during the inquiry.

To turn to some of the comments that were made during the debate about the confusing terminology, citizens panels, citizens juries and deliberative democracy are key terms that are defined in page 4 of our report. Parliament should know that, based on our citizens panel's recommendation, we recommend the use of the term "people's panel".

As well as recommending greater use of people's panels, our report considers many other aspects of participation. Early on in the inquiry, we heard some striking evidence about the many barriers to engagement, and that was amplified by the views of our citizens panel.

In response to Ruth Maguire's earlier question and Willie Coffey's intervention, I note that the panel made a number of thoughtful recommendations about how Parliament could do more to seek out a range of voices and make it easier for people to engage—for example, by better promoting translation services and the use of easy-read formats, and by creating a new web page where people can register their details, so that Parliament can alert them each time there is a new opportunity to express their views.

I echo comments that my colleague, John Mason, made about the fact that getting out and about around the country and engaging with the general public, where they live and work, is of great benefit and should absolutely be encouraged, because accessibility and opportunity are key to participation.

Our report responds in detail to all the recommendations that the panel made, and it was

encouraging to find that, in many respects, the panel was pushing at an open door.

As the minister mentioned earlier, the Parliament already has a public engagement strategy, and a lot of innovative work is already under way. We hope that the report and the contribution that the citizens panel has made will serve to push that work forward and give it a higher profile.

The final section of the report sits under the theme "Strengthening trust in the Parliament", and that was more challenging for the committee. As Maurice Golden mentioned, and as other members raised in the debate today, we heard early on in the inquiry that there is a widespread lack of trust in politicians and the political process, which many of us encounter daily in our constituencies and in the media. Therefore, it was not a surprise that three recommendations under that heading also came out clearly from the citizens panel.

One of those recommendations was to give members of the public an opportunity to put their questions directly to Government ministers. As a committee, we were unable to support the idea of delivering that through a new type of chamber proceedings, for a number of reasons that are set out in our report. However, we agree that the underlying idea might be worth exploring further if there is cross-party support for doing so. That might be something that the Parliamentary Bureau could look at.

The two other panel recommendations on the theme of strengthening trust were to give the Presiding Officer more powers to ensure that oral questions in the chamber are properly answered, and to set up a people's panel to discuss the MSPs' code of conduct. In each case, we had mixed feelings—we understand why public trust is damaged by the way in which we sometimes conduct ourselves in the chamber, and we therefore respect what has motivated those recommendations; however, we also see real difficulties in implementation. For that reason, we have proposed that the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee explore those issues further.

**The Presiding Officer:** If you could conclude, please.

**David Torrance:** That is not meant to sound as though we are just passing the buck; it is more a recognition that matters relating to members' conduct and to chamber procedure fall squarely within that committee's remit rather than ours. We look forward to hearing the outcome of the SPPA Committee's consideration of those issues in due course.



I will close this afternoon's debate by thanking members for their thoughtful contributions. I hope that the debate has gone some way to convincing other members to support the direction of travel that is set out in our report.

The experience of other countries has shown us that, if a Government is receptive, a citizens panel can deliver dramatic policy recommendations on difficult and emotive issues through people-led discussion, with complete transparency and fairness. It is now up to us to reflect on the role that they can play in our own democracy, and I encourage all members to support the convener's motion.

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you. That concludes the debate on embedding public participation in the work of the Parliament.

## Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill

17:01

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):** The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-10958, in the name of Shona Robison, on Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation. I call Shona Robison to move the motion.

*Motion moved,*

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 22 September 2022, and subsequently amended in relation to the Register of Overseas Entities, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament or alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.—[*Shona Robison*]

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

## Decision Time

**The Presiding Officer:** That concludes decision time.

17:01

*Meeting closed at 17:02.*

**The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):**

There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S6M-10765, in the name of Jackson Carlaw, on behalf of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, on embedding public participation in the work of the Parliament, be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament notes the conclusions of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee's 2nd Report, 2023 (Session 6), Embedding Public Participation in the Work of the Parliament (SP Paper 427), including its responses to the recommendations of the Citizens' Panel on participation; agrees with the Committee's recommendation that the Parliament establish two further citizens' panels (or people's panels) in the current parliamentary session with a view to making the use of such panels a regular feature of committee scrutiny from Session 7 onwards; endorses the Committee's recommended principles for the future use of deliberative democracy and its recommendations for panel size, composition and participant selection, and acknowledges the work already being done by Parliament staff to develop and improve engagement methods.

**The Presiding Officer:** The final question is, that motion S6M-10958, in the name of Shona Robison, on Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation, be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 22 September 2022, and subsequently amended in relation to the Register of Overseas Entities, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament or alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

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Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

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