



OFFICIAL REPORT
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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

invest £30 million of capital funding over the next five years to support delivery of the national islands plan.

Dean Lockhart: I thank the cabinet secretary for that response. It is interesting that she did not mention connectivity. In recent months, residents and small businesses across Scotland's island communities have lost millions of pounds due to disruption to multiple ferry services because vessels are operating beyond their scheduled service lives, as my colleague Jamie Greene highlighted.

Two new replacement ferries that were meant to service the islands remain unfinished on the Clyde, more than £200 million over budget and more than three years late, with no prospect of being in service any time soon. Will the cabinet secretary take this opportunity to apologise to island communities for the massive disruption? What assurances can she give today that it will not continue?

Mairi Gougeon: As I have outlined in my responses to previous questions about ferries this afternoon, the Scottish Government absolutely recognises the frustration of communities at the disruption and the impact that it is having. That is why, as I have reiterated, we are doing everything that we possibly can to build resilience in the fleet and mitigate some of those problems. We are supporting CalMac to maximise available capacity across the network and ensure that there is timely resolution of the issues.

We are also delivering new tonnage to support communities, and we are working with CMaI, CalMac, MSPs, community representatives and others to develop investment programmes for major vessels and small vessels. As I said previously, that investment amounts to more than £580 million over the next five years.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will try to get the supplementary questions in. They need to be brief, as do the responses.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I have called before for an island-proofed recovery. Will the cabinet secretary commit to timely guidance for the islands on life at level 0 and beyond?

Mairi Gougeon: Yes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That was commendably brief.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): To ask the minister how the Scottish Government will support Orkney Islands Council in its efforts to ensure that the people of Orkney will be able to benefit fully from the islands' renewables potential.

Mairi Gougeon: I am more than happy to engage with Orkney Islands Council on that. I hope to visit Orkney at some point soon, in line with the restrictions, and to have those conversations.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am glad that I allowed those supplementaries.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): The Scottish Government has failed our island communities. It has failed to provide the new ferries that are required and to maintain the ones that it has, which has led to the current fiasco. At a time when capacity is 35 per cent of what it would normally be, will the cabinet secretary commit to leasing the MV Pentalina, buying the ferry that has been identified by the Mull community and identifying further tonnage that will meet demand and create the capacity that is required on our islands?

Mairi Gougeon: The Minister for Transport set straight to work on that as soon as he was appointed. This afternoon, I have outlined repeatedly the measures that are being undertaken to do exactly what the member has outlined—the measures that we are looking to introduce in the shorter term to build resilience in relation to on-going investment. I reiterate to the member that the matter is a big priority for the Government and for the transport minister, who has gone straight to work on addressing the issues.

Sand Eel Fishing (European Union Quota)

8. Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government what action it will take in response to reports of Danish and Swedish boats intensively fishing for sand eels just off the Firth of Forth. (S6O-00016)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): The terms of the trade and co-operation agreement that was established between the United Kingdom and the European Union in December 2020 entitle those vessels to fish their quota in UK waters. Through the bilateral agreement for 2021, which was finalised last week, a total allowable catch level has been set for sand eel, giving EU quota to fish against.

However, given the importance of sand eels to the wider ecosystem and the subsequent benefit in aiding the long-term sustainability and resilience of the North Sea, it remains an overarching and long-held Scottish Government position not to support fishing for sand eel or other industrial species in our waters. I have therefore instructed my officials to consider what management measures can be put in place to manage activity in the most sustainable way possible.

Willie Rennie: That is very good news. The kittiwake population has been cut in half in the past 50 years, partly as a result of industrial sand eel fishing. In the past month, more than 20 Swedish and Danish boats spent days off the Fife coast hoovering up tonnes of sand eels for pig meal. Local fishermen and RSPB Scotland are very concerned about the impact on seabirds. A previous Government took action at Wee Bankie, and we need action now. I want the minister to think of the puffins and to set out the urgent action that will be taken on sand eels.

Mairi Gougeon: Absolutely. I appreciate the concerns that Willie Rennie has raised, and I completely understand the one regarding sand eels. The issue is the wider ecosystem and the impact that such fishing has on species whose numbers are depleting. That is why I have committed to looking at the issue as a matter of urgency, to see what measures we can put in place. I hope that Willie Rennie takes assurance from that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions.

Coronavirus Acts Report

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a statement by John Swinney on “Coronavirus Acts: seventh report to Scottish Parliament”. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of his statement. There should, therefore, be no interventions or interruptions.

14:49

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney): This is my first statement to Parliament to accompany the publication of a Scottish Government report on the coronavirus acts. I pay tribute to Michael Russell, who not only led the two Scottish coronavirus bills through Parliament last year but subsequently oversaw the publication of six reports on operation of the acts.

Today sees the publication of the seventh report on the coronavirus acts, so I will—particularly for members who are new to the process—take this opportunity to set out the context in which the reporting exercise takes place.

In addition to those in the United Kingdom Coronavirus Act 2020, the Coronavirus (Scotland) Act 2020 and the Coronavirus (Scotland) (No 2) Act 2020 contain extraordinary measures that were required for us to respond to an emergency situation. In recognition of the far-reaching and unprecedented nature of some of the provisions, the Scottish acts contain a number of safeguards. They include: that the relevant provisions in the acts automatically expire less than six months after they come into force—although the period can be extended by the Scottish Parliament for two further periods of six months; that the Scottish ministers have the power to bring provisions in the acts to an end earlier, when ministers consider that they are no longer necessary; and that, every two months, the Scottish ministers are required to report on the continued need for the measures and on use of the powers in the Scottish acts.

Over the past year, some of the two-monthly reports have recorded significant change in the status and operation of provisions, although some changes have been less significant. With the exception of the anticipated expiry of certain provisions, the seventh report is a relatively routine record of the status and operation, from 1 April to 31 May, of the provisions in the coronavirus acts. Nevertheless, for as long as the acts are in place, the Scottish Government will continue to meet its commitment to publish reports and give Parliament the opportunity to scrutinise them.